

BEYOND A 'GOD'S EYE VIEW' IN THE STUDY  
OF GENDER AND RELIGION  
WITH A CASE STUDY:  
RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND IDENTITY AMONG  
STRICTLY ORTHODOX JEWISH WOMEN

Chia Longman

Promotor: Prof. Dr. Rik Pinxten  
Co-promotor: Prof. Dr. Marysa Demoor

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*Only those occupying the positions of the dominators are self-identical, unmarked, disembodied, unmediated, transcendent, born again. It is unfortunately possible for the subjugated to lust for and even scramble into that subject position – and then disappear from view. Knowledge from the point of view of the unmarked is truly fantastic, distorted, and so irrational. The only position from which objectivity could not possibly be practised and honoured is the standpoint of the master, the Man, the One God, whose Eye produces, appropriates, and orders all difference. No one ever accused the God of monotheism of objectivity, only of indifference. The god-trick is self-identical, and we have mistaken that for creativity and knowledge, omniscience even.*

*Donna Haraway*

*From 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in  
Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective'  
(1991 [1988]: 193)*

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## INTRODUCTION

Following an introductory course on Religious Studies as a first year student in History, I was struck by the way Navaho Indians' holistic 'world view' differs so markedly from that of Western culture, rooted in a dualistic outlook inherited from Christianity. The insight that other cultures and peoples have so very different views of and 'ways of going about' in the world subsequently moved me to complete my graduation in the Comparative Science of Culture. Ever since, 'cultural differences' have been my primary and most passionate preoccupation. However, my Ma. thesis on the comparative study of gender in Western and native American contexts brought me to another and equally exciting terrain. For all the talk of the 'other' in cultural anthropology and postcolonial critique, I found that for decades the concepts of the 'other' and 'difference' have equally been fundamental in the continuous expanding fields of gender studies and feminist scholarship. This study then can, in many respects, be viewed as the temporary result of this search for links and convergences across these disciplines, 'religion' being its main subject matter. My main title expresses one of these convergences and captures the gist of my general findings. If comparative studies of culture and religion have shown us that Western thought and culture can largely be characterised by a 'God's eye view', then feminist epistemology has similarly identified this view as not only culturally bound, but deeply determined by that of gender.

My initial research question on the possibility of working towards a 'gender inclusive perspective in the comparative study of religion' led me to the realisation that as a field, to date religious studies can be viewed as remaining predominantly inattentive to questions of gender. On the other hand, I found that the research being done in feminist circles on religion, can be termed as 'theology', rather than 'religious studies', as a comparative and strictly 'scientific' discipline. These insights formed the starting point for my analysis whilst my main question shifted to the deeper reasons *why* a paradigm shift in the study of religion towards gender inclusiveness appears such an – using Marilyn Strathern's (1987) term – 'awkward' affair. Whereas the research questions will be explained in more detail towards the end of the first chapter, here I will be briefly outlining my perspective and starting points, in order to 'situate' myself as in a 'view from somewhere', opposed to the objectivist gaze 'from above', which can be seen as a mere replication of a 'God's eye view'.

Not being classically trained in any of the disciplines from which this thesis draws, - gender studies, cultural anthropology, religious studies, and Jewish studies – my approach is comparative and innovative in the sense that I have sought ways to argue that these fields can borrow fruitfully from each other, but that there are also many irreconcilabilities. Feminist critiques of the kind of objectivist methodology that reigns in many 'mainstream' fields of

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research have taught me that any project requires that the researcher can never be 'invisible', nor 'neutral', but is always 'positioned' and therefore must be held *accountable* for the knowledge s/he produces. This thesis can therefore be seen as a representation of over four years of the practice of what Donna Haraway (1991) calls a 'situated knowledge'. In this process I have continuously had to reflect and deal with the particular 'situated knowledges' produced by positioned others, of which this thesis is only a momentary account. So my problem not only concerns the meeting of disciplines, and the making of theoretical and methodological choices, but also the making of political and moral choices, which have continuously been conflicting and shifting throughout. The question of political and moral accountability is particularly problematic in the case of doing feminist research on non-feminist women, seemingly a contradiction in terms, and one to which I will frequently return. In my view, scientific accountability minimally requires defining and contextualising of statements, the justification of sources, references and choices, and also accounting for the possible limits, fallacies and lacunae.

My approach to the question of the relationship between religious studies and gender studies is therefore but one possible route of entry, where I have singled out a few possible hypotheses and broadened these on the basis of my background in cultural comparative and interdisciplinary work. Although my main perspective is that of feminist critique and scholarship *towards* the study of religion, I will also be working towards a critique of the first, and the benefits it might gain by broadening its perspective in order to incorporate the issue of cultural and religious differences. Whereas gender differences and the question of equality between women and men might be conceived almost irrelevant or bypassed from the contemporary Western point of view, I will argue and illustrate that, in the context of intercultural comparison, the importance of gender cannot be denied. And the same could be said of 'religion', seeing the little impact religious ideology, institutions and practice seem to have in modern liberal and secular democratic societies, in a global perspective and especially in the context of discussions on multiculturalism, the issue of gender and religion could not be more acute. My proposal for a methodological *de-colonisation* or *de-orientalisation* of feminist research (chapter four), is in this respect inherently connected to questions of globalisation, multiculturalism and the urgency of feminist transnational critique, as suggested towards the end of chapter eight and in my concluding remarks.

Whereas I will be returning to some of these questions in the final part of my account, the main objective of this thesis concerns the level of theory and methodology pertaining to the problems and possibilities in 'the engendering of religious studies'. The case study that covers the second part of the thesis is therefore foremost explorative and illustrative of a number of hypotheses set out in the chapters before, rather than an applied study of a sociological problem towards 'solving', or 'comparing' the problematic status of women in

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patriarchal-defined religious cultures. Nor does my empirical research that included a series of interviews held with women of a strictly Orthodox Jewish community, purport to be an ethnographical representation in the traditional sense. In function of my main hypotheses though, I do ultimately defend an anthropological approach as the best for the study of these women's religious lives. By limiting my analysis to the study of a Mediterranean and monotheistic 'world religion' of the book, however, and a religious community located within the Western part of the world, it is my contention to show that one does not have to look so far towards the 'exotic' in order challenge culturally bound assumptions. Having conducted research 'at home' concerning a religious tradition not so far 'removed' from Christianity, I show how the 'difference' of gender can even challenge anthropological assumptions about the kind and the extent of the differences between that of the 'own' versus the 'other' culture.

Not being an expert on Jewish history, life or religious law, this ignorance provided an additional challenge, in 'recovering' religion as it is practised in every day life, and from the strictly Orthodox Jewish woman's point of view. As I will show, this particular perspective is consistent with premises of feminist methodology, but is deeply problematic once juxtaposed with the insider/outsider debate in mainstream religious studies and discussions on the way to study religion in a non-essentialist way. In order to study women who are excluded from the texts, practice, and official positions in what is usually represented as the paradigmatic, official and public religious domain, the majority of my primary literary sources are therefore necessarily 'secondary'. As an 'outsider', I do not embark on any interpretations of religious scripture, or participate in discussions of doctrinal or legal accuracy, which is reserved as the 'religious activity' in itself for the subjects of my study. Any 'mistakes' from the point of view of a religious expert therefore, concern the interpretations of the scholars or informants under study, although the conflicts and inconsistencies *between* these various interpretations will receive my close attention.<sup>1</sup>

In the first chapter I provide an introduction to the concept of gender from the perspective of cross-cultural analysis, applying what I term a *feminist gender theory* approach. Opposed to what is generally referred to as French feminist theory, I will draw on recent American/British oriented theorising, which I argue is more conducive to empirically based and comparative social scientific work. However, as recent developments in feminist scholarship show, there are cross-fertilisations to be gained by transgressing the boundaries of the traditional humanities/social sciences divide. As for the concept of 'religion', I do not enter into any of the countless discussions on definition, and use the term 'religious studies' as a general heading for a field of scholarship that is sometimes also referred to as *comparative religion* and *the history of religions*, although there are similarly debates abound on the question of content and delineation of these terms. Rather, the main objective is to examine *how* the study of religion can be approached from the perspective of feminist gender

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theory and critique. Although my findings show that there may be far reaching implications for the question of definition, the formulation of a theory of religion in itself is not my primary concern. In general, 'religion' is understood here as in the context of religious *traditions* and living religious *communities*. Terms such as 'religious discourse' and 'religious practice' refer to the way 'religion' is used as a vehicle for the reproduction, negotiation, and dynamic of both individual and collective identity.

In a similar way, the first chapter looks to some instances in which the concept of gender is *used* - analytically and politically -, rather than providing any definitive or universally applicable answers to what it may *be*. For the sake of clarity, at this point I will include a remark on my usage of 'feminism', 'gender' and titles such as gender studies, feminist studies, and women's studies. I see no inherent differences in these different usages in order describe to a certain field or approach. Whereas one could argue that 'gender' includes 'the study of men', or that 'feminist' would be more 'political' than for example a women's studies approach, individual theoretical perspectives vary considerably, and are often independent of the specific title one applies to her/his research. The intricacies of some of these discussions and my own positioning and strategy will be elaborated further in the first chapter, and in particular, the way they are played out in the context of studying religion.

Chapter one thus briefly addresses some *conceptual* issues and debates in the contemporary study of gender. It furthermore provides an initial methodological framework to be applied in the following analysis of the problematic status of religion as subject matter in gender studies. My main research question on the problem of a paradigm shift of the mainstream study of religion towards that of gender inclusiveness, is reframed in terms of a deeper relationship of seeming incompatibility between religious studies and a feminist gender studies approach. Three main observations are put forward, suggesting that in the interconnections between these observations lies the relationship of in/compatibility. I ascertain that (1) the mainstream study of religion remains 'androcentric' from the perspective of feminist critique, (2) feminist gender theory has barely been integrated in the feminist study of religion, and (3) the feminist study of religion is marginalized in gender studies as an interdisciplinary field. In the following three chapters, which comprise the theoretical and methodological part of my account, I set out to analyse the interconnections between these observations in order to find out why an engendering of religious studies appears so dubitable.

Chapter two provides a *historical* overview of the relationship between feminism, religion and the Western academy. The purpose is to offer the contextual grounds of the way in which feminism enters religious studies scholarship at the height of the second wave feminist movement. Whereas feminist religious studies scholarship as such did not exist during what is generally called the 'first wave' of the feminist movement in the West, liberal feminist activism takes place in a society very much circumscribed by a

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religious worldview. During the second wave however, liberal equality feminism is secular and even anti-religious. Within mainstream Christian and Jewish religious denominations themselves, feminist critique draws on an equality paradigm, yet only meets slow gains due to the deeply patriarchal character of these religious traditions. Radical feminism on the other hand, is overtly anti-religious or otherwise alternative forms of 'feminist religion' develop opposed to, and outside of the mainstream and orthodox norms. Religious feminism in the form of 'theology' enters the academy, yet this is a difficult process due to the specific position of the study of religion in many universities and its ties to 'patriarchal' dominations.

This second chapter already offers some cues as to some of the main observations concerning the problematic relationship between religious studies and feminist scholarship. The critique of androcentrism in religious studies is at its most basic level impeded through the close relationship between the *study* and the *practice* of religion, the latter being patriarchal as guided by the ideology of essential and hierarchical sexual difference in Christian and Jewish traditions. This ideology simultaneously accounts for the problematic relationship between religion and feminism in Western society during the development of the second wave. Feminism is for the most part anti-religious, conceiving the religious domain as patriarchal at its core, a final bulwark against the emancipation of women to be overcome. 'Feminist religion' and the development of feminist *theology* on the other hand, that similarly draws on – albeit inverted - ideologies of sexual difference, is too heterodox vis-à-vis the practice of religious – patriarchal – theology in the academy.

In chapter three, the question is posed to what extent general typologies of the development of feminist *theory and methodology* have been applied in the feminist study of religion. Although feminist religious studies' scholars have formulated critiques of androcentrism in the mainstream, and subsequently started research 'from women's religious lives', a final stage of an epistemological critique towards deconstruction and 'transformation' take on a particular form. Typologies of feminist research in religion simply appear to replicate an earlier divide on the reformability of religious *tradition* (the reformists versus the revolutionaries or the reconstructionist position), rather than the reformability of the *discipline* itself. Therefore, feminist gender theory remains to be integrated in the feminist study of religion, which I argue, can be explained by its persisting *essentialist* tendencies.

I draw on the hypotheses of anthropologist/religious studies scholar Rosalind Shaw (1995), who attributes this essentialism to the mainstream discipline of religious studies. The essentialist character of the mainstream fosters a de-contextualised approach towards its subject matter, thereby inhibiting the possibility of any disciplinary transformation from the perspective of gender. Borrowing Marilyn Strathern's (1987) idea of the 'awkward relationship' between anthropology and a feminist approach, Rosalind Shaw argues that the relationship between religious studies and a

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feminist approach is even mutually 'toxic'. The problem lies in that the mainstream study of religion is predicated on a 'view from above' perspective on religious phenomena, employing two main definitions of religion: 'religion as scripture' and 'religion as *sui generis*'. Religion is conceived of as socially decontextualised, relegating questions of politics, power, inequality, and gender outside of the religious domain, and contradictory to premises of feminist scholarship and its insistence on a 'view from below'. The essentialism of the mainstream is furthermore carried on in feminist studies *in* religion of the reconstructionist kind, that similarly employ an essentialist notion of 'woman' or a feminised '*homo religiosus*'. This kind of research fails to effect a shift towards a deconstructionist and intersectional phase of scholarship that acknowledges the differences *between* women, as has been incorporated in the development 'from critique to transformation' in general typologies of feminist theory and methodology.

Whilst concurring with Shaw's main hypothesis on the character of the mainstream study of religion that impedes a feminist approach, I argue, however, that the issue of 'diversity' has not at all been neglected in the feminist study of religion. However, this shift towards theorising gender along multiple axes of gender, 'race', class, ethnicity, etc. has mostly taken place within the confines of one religious tradition only, that of Christianity or Post-Christian theo/alogy. Despite the focus on class, 'race', or cultural differences, *religious differences* themselves have not greatly been theorised from the perspective of feminist theory and methodology. This situation is not only characteristic of feminist research in general, but especially of the feminist study of religion as a distinct field of scholarship. The answer to the question why religious diversity is marginalized, I argue, is related to some other observations which underlie and account for the incompatibility between mainstream religious studies and feminist perspectives, and the subsequent im/possibility of an engendering of the first. Critiques of essentialism and calls for 'diversity' thus fail to meet the challenge of bringing the feminist study of religion into phase with contemporary developments in feminist theory and consequently inhibit any possibility of a paradigm shift of the mainstream.

In chapter four I take a closer look at some recent critiques attempting to account for the relationship of in/incompatibility, arguing some particular features of both religious studies and a feminist approach have been overlooked. In particular, the insider/outsider problem or the debate on essentialism/reductionism in mainstream religious studies is juxtaposed with feminist approaches. In the latter, boundaries between insider/outsider, theory/practice, but also the religious versus the non-religious point of view appear to be conflated. Typologies of the feminist study of religion discussed in chapter three are reassessed in view of the insight that there appears to be no epistemological distinction between the insider perspective – the practice of religion in terms of studies *in* religion or 'theology' – on the one hand, and the strictly scholarly outsider perspective such as in the mainstream study of

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religion's methodology on the other. In the feminist study of religion in which boundaries are commonly drawn along the lines of reformist or revolutionary divides, I show how there is no distinction between the critique of *androcentric methodology* and *patriarchal religion* as such. Moreover, from the perspective of contemporary feminist epistemological critiques on notions of objectivity and value-neutrality, the blurring of boundaries is celebrated rather than rejected.

Those scholars repudiating the feminist study of religion as a religio-ideological activity, can themselves be shown to be incapable of being immune to the instantiations of politics and ideology into their proposals for 'objective' scholarship. The problem is that in the mainstream study of religion, discussions on boundaries, and essentialism and reductionism are far from being resolved. Whereas the 'essentialist' approach with its 'view from above' and *sui generis* conception of gender inhibits questions of gender, the alternative reductionist approach that views the first as mere 'crypto-theology' is similarly problematic. For the reductionist approach rests on principles of objectivity and value-neutrality, equally suspect from the perspective of feminist epistemology. I argue towards some possibilities for a *de-theologisation* and *de-orientalisation* of religious studies through an alliance between debates on reflexivity and postmodern feminist critique. Concepts such as Donna Haraway's (1991) 'situated knowledges' may allow for a critique and refutation of the 'god trick' or the 'God's eye view', both in the sense of the omniscient 'modernist' objectivist perspective and in the sense of the religious point of view. Finally, once again I turn to feminist anthropology. Whereas here the 'difference' between researcher/researched stands central, a feminist anthropological approach to the study of religion and gender may in turn contribute to a further *de-orientalisation* of feminist theory and research in general.

In chapters five to eight I present the results of a case study, illustrative of the main hypotheses set out in the previous chapters concerning the relationship of in/compatibility between mainstream studies and a feminist gender studies approach. The problematic 'view from above' perspective is countered through an analysis of religious practice and identity among women in the strictly Orthodox Jewish community of Antwerp. My analysis of literature in chapter five first addresses the 'insider' perspective in feminist religious studies scholarship in Judaism, applying some of the axes of differentiation and typologies on gender and feminist research set out in chapters two and three. Then I turn to existing social scientific research – outsiders' perspectives - on strictly Orthodox Jewish communities. These I show to be androcentric, regardless of their focus on religious practice rather than religion 'as text'. Finally, I review some of the research on strictly Orthodox Jewish women, which I show to be lacking in the kind of feminist gender theory I alternatively propose.

## INTRODUCTION

In chapter six, an account follows of the historical, social and organisational information available for the strictly Orthodox Jewish community of Antwerp, focussing on the traditionalist congregation of the *Machsike Hadass*. In a reflexive mode, I describe the process of gaining entry to the field, finishing with an introduction of my main research questions and methods. My main objective is to find out how religious agency, or broader religious identity, can be characterised from the standpoint of the strictly Orthodox Jewish women I interviewed. This analysis takes place in view of these women's exclusion at the level of research and representation in what is generally seen as the paradigmatic forms of religious practice in Orthodox Judaism. In terms of methods, a comparative discourse analysis is applied, 'discourse' (both interviews, primary and secondary literature) being viewed as constitutive of particular subject positionings or situated knowledges with regards to gender and religion.

In chapter seven my analysis proceeds of the discourse my interviewees applied in their construction of gender. I conclude that although they largely replicate a two-sexes/two-genders ontology, founded on an ideology of sexual difference, gender is not essentialised into any one kind of discursive formation. Rather, gender difference is located in the realm of religious practice. This insight provides the basis from which to continue my analysis, whether an alternative perspective on 'religion' is possible from a gendered perspective *within* a particular religious tradition. The remainder of this chapter concerns an illustrative 'testing' of the first main hypothesis in accounting for the androcentrism of mainstream religious studies in its limited focus on religious 'scriptures and elites'. In their conception of religion, my strictly Orthodox Jewish interviewees emphasised the centrality of *orthopraxis* above doctrine and belief, embodied in religious law (*halakhah*), containing differential proscriptions for religious deeds and roles according to gender. Regardless of their exclusion from the 'scholars' society', and their exclusion or exemption from paradigmatic religious commandments for men such as Torah study and prayer, I nevertheless argue that strictly Orthodox Jewish women do have 'religious agency', primarily located in the domestic sphere and their mothering role.

In the final chapter, I attempt to disclaim a *sui generis* notion of religion, by moving beyond the religious practice from which strictly Orthodox Jewish women in my case study were excluded, in order to focus on those realms usually absent in mainstream representation. This involves both their 'official' religious role, as well as the realms which are more difficult to identify as 'religious'. In general, this analysis shows how the boundaries between 'religion and politics', the 'public and the private' and the religious from 'everyday life' altogether, can be deconstructed. I concentrate on three different topics, including the notion of woman as 'enabler', as an 'indirect' form of religious 'capital' or agency, and secondly the mother as the 'priestess of the miniature temple', involving the sanctification of domestic activities and the

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private sphere. Thirdly, one of the rare commandments exclusively incumbent on married women is discussed, the religious obligation of the maintaining the laws of family purity. Various kinds of personal and public discourse legitimising the laws are extensively reviewed, providing a contextualised analysis and attention to the workings of gender, power and control. Opposed to the public sphere of collective religious practice performed by men, the private, individual practice of the laws of *niddah* and ritual immersion are ‘politicised’ and appropriated as a symbol for collective religious identity. Women’s religiosity in strictly Orthodox Jewish communities itself becomes defined in sexual terms. Women’s bodies are seen as their own *Sanctum Sanctorum*, thereby functioning as vehicles for the gendered construction of communal boundaries and identity. Finally, the related gendered religious principle of modesty (*tzniut*) is interpreted as the very definition of female piety.

In order to be religiously observant and retain their identity as strictly Orthodox Jewish Jews, my interviewees necessarily insisted on gender role differentiation, prescribed by normative discourse in a traditionalist community that is patriarchal and ethnically defined. In order to remain the ‘same’, an increase in gender conservatism, stringency and isolationism takes place, opposed to the ‘outside world’ and its ‘permissive’ society. Thus in order to uphold tradition, this requires partaking in a resistance toward the sexual and gender politics of secular modernity. For most of my informants this involved reproducing the discourse and practice of women’s proper religious and moral behaviour, as a defining feature for women’s own religious identity, but also that of collective strictly Orthodox Jewish piety and identity.

Finally, I briefly reflect on the problematic notion of ‘fundamentalism’. I question to what extent the traditionalist religious community under study can be dealt with in more comparative feminist analyses of the notion of ‘women as bearers of the collective’ in many traditionalist and fundamentalist religious identity politics throughout the world. As various studies have shown, gender conservatism and segregation, and the regulation of women’s behaviour through notions of modesty and chastity, appear to be cross-cultural and cross-religious characteristics of these movements, whereby women are attributed the status of the ‘cultural reproducers’ of the group’s identity.

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<sup>1</sup> The spelling and translations of Hebrew and Yiddish words are borrowed from the literature in English and their glossaries that was used for this study. Although the spelling varies tremendously among authors, the transcription is usually applied as used by the author in question. Terms that recur throughout my account are spelt in the way they most often are in English, even though in this way I may not adhere to a uniform system of transcription throughout. For example, I write *halakhah* instead of e.g. *halacha*, but *Chabad*, in place of *Habad*.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE STUDY OF GENDER AND RELIGION: POINTS OF DEPARTURE

#### 1. A Millennial Fantasy: On the Verge of a Paradigm Shift towards Gender Inclusiveness?

Following a panel on 'Religion and Gender' organised by Ursula King (1995a) at the seventeenth congress of the prestigious International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) held in 1990 in Rome, a book carrying the same title was edited by King and published in 1995 (King 1995a). The volume *Religion and Gender* includes write-ups of contributions to the panel, an introduction by King on the current 'state of affairs', and an up-to-date literature overview of this field of research (King 1995b, 1997: 652). In her introduction, King looks to a 'paradigm shift' that upon closer inspection appears to be twofold. In the first place a paradigmatic transformation *within* the study of gender and religion itself is envisioned, whilst secondly, King clearly points to a broader paradigm shift of the 'mainstream' under the impact of crucial developments in the study of gender and religion. In the same introduction, King (1995b: 21) refers to an earlier paper presented at the fourteenth IAHR congress in 1986.<sup>1</sup> In this she had argued that a *feminist* perspective was still not part of the 'common horizon of religious studies', and the development of a truly inclusive framework for the study of religion would entail giving 'full space to the voices and perspectives of women'.

Whether any progressions at all would have been made during the course of almost a decade, when reading King's assessment (1995b: 2-3), one gets the impression – at least as far as the paradigm shift in its second meaning is concerned – that changes may indeed be in sight. Perhaps towards the end of the twentieth century the impact of *gender studies* on the contemporary study of religion may at last be becoming noticeable. In her own individual contribution to the collection of articles in *Religion and Gender* for example, King (1995c: 220) states that the study of religion by women and feminist scholars 'has not yet *sufficiently* transformed' the study of religion. In what way and exactly how the mainstream would have been already transformed is not specified in both articles, and shall be addressed later on in this chapter. If one could speak at all of transformation, then according to King this would in any case be a 'slow process', and the consequences of such a 'profoundly transformative effect of a basic paradigm shift' are hereto much less visible in religious studies than other areas of the humanities (King 1995b: 3).

So despite the apparent optimism and signs of hope which are unfortunately not illustrated any further, King professes that mainstream religious studies to date has mostly remained 'androcentric'. The steady increase of women scholars studying religion and the development of the

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feminist study of religion in all of its diversity notwithstanding, the mainstream for the most part remains completely untouched. At the same time, publications, prominent journals, international conferences on gender and religion – including panels dedicated to gender issues at prestigious mainstream events such as those of the IAHR – and even the incorporation of topics on ‘women and religion’ within university curricula have nevertheless continuously expanded. Separate courses within educational programmes in religious studies or theology departments have been introduced since the eighties, next to a steady increase in tolerance for and sometimes even the ‘integration’ of gender-critical perspectives or analyses within other fields within the humanities. However, all this has only had a limited or – depending on the viewpoint – belated impact on the mainstream study of religion.

In order to gain some insight into the reasons why in 1995 King can claim religious studies to be only or already on the verge of a paradigm shift, first an important differentiation needs to be addressed. This concerns the differences between ‘acceptance’, ‘tolerance’ and even ‘integration’ of gendered perspectives at a more structural level within the institution of the academy, opposed to a much more profound theoretical turn, in which any theoretical or empirical research project could no longer be accused of androcentrism, as gender inclusiveness would be the norm. At the structural level one can indeed think of the incorporation of courses in religious studies departments, whether these are compulsory or optional individual courses on gender and religion or limited to a few hours of lecture within a particular subject area. One could also refer to the publication of articles in the field of gender and religion in major mainstream journals and workshops, or even plenary sessions at international conferences, chapters in introductory course syllabi or general handbooks in the theory and methodology of religious studies. So even though it can be shown that a kind of structural or institutional gender inclusiveness is definitely on the rise towards the end of the twentieth century, King justifiably warns for the dangers of incorporating religion and gender as a ‘ghetto subject’, a term she borrows from a situation that developed in cultural anthropology as early as the seventies. In the guise of the ‘anthropology of women’, gendered critique was accepted as a sort of additional subject within the curriculum, thus ‘tolerated’, yet leaving mainstream anthropology largely intact.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the differences in approach or content, even when ‘gender’ instead of ‘women’ is given as a title to such a course – perhaps thereby hoping to attract both female and male students –, according to King (1995b: 25), such a course becomes to be seen as marginal within a disciplinary programme or ‘a merely contemporary concession to current intellectual fashions’.

King (1995b: 28) clearly envisions transformation of content when she holds that the ultimate goal of research and education in gender issues should be an altogether different critical perspective in all courses and study programmes in religious studies. That such a transformation of content should

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have far reaching implications or imply even a total re-conceptualisation of the discipline, may not be that surprising taking into account the critiques and sometimes the consequences feminist and/or gendered perspectives have shown to provoke for other disciplines of the humanities. However, the slow or delayed process, and therefore the ‘lagging behind’ of religious studies opposed to many other of these disciplines cannot be merely coincidental. The question is whether it is just a matter of taking that last step over the threshold, or that this delay in itself may be attributed to more serious incongruities between paradigms in religious studies and those of the study of gender.

In the second place a paradigm shift *within* the study of religion and gender can be problematised, where similarly a situation of more inclusiveness is aspired. Again, in the case of this sense of a paradigm shift, King only makes more demands than she can offer concrete suggestions, and again much more is at stake than at first sight appears. Where King spoke of ‘feminism’ and predominantly ‘women’ in 1986, the concept of ‘gender’ features prominently in her introductory article published halfway through the nineties (King 1995b). The mainstream not only appears to have shown ample attention to women and religion, but the feminist study of religion itself is primarily occupied with this category of ‘women’. According to King (1995b: 25), it is not just that the study of women has been marginalised in the study of religion, but ‘...the comprehensive study of gender as a category with even larger connotations has hardly begun’. This development must be understood within the context of the shift from feminist scholarship or ‘women’s studies’ to ‘gender studies’ in general. Additionally, it concerns the ways in which gender as a category or dimension of analysis and gender-related themes have become accepted and often integrated in the mainstream, its curricula and the institutions of various disciplines in the social sciences and humanities.

King (1995b: 1) sees gender studies as of yet as almost identical to women’s studies. In the tradition of gender studies nevertheless, she does make a plea for a constructionist approach that requires an analysis of both femininity and masculinity as interrelated concepts and realities.<sup>3</sup> While King refutes forms of gender polarisation or radical separatism which she attributes to some earlier and contemporary women’s studies approaches<sup>4</sup>, in her vision of gender inclusiveness and the means by which it is to be achieved, the separatism which she dismisses is nonetheless reified by appropriating the phenomenon of ‘men’s studies’ as the missing link. In spite of the insistence on an incorporation of ‘gender’, where the concept would enable a detachment of gendered symbolism and ideology from real life ‘biological’ women and men, King merely understands gender inclusiveness in the study of religion as the future incorporation of studying men and masculinity. The dangers of creating a new ‘false universalism’ - versus androcentrism – on the basis of only women’s experiences could then be solved through applying a more gendered perspective, which according to King (1995b: 30) must be left up to men:

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Women scholars, for fairly obvious reasons, concentrate their research on women; it is not their main task to critically investigate gender issues as they arise for men. Men have to do this for themselves.

It can not only seriously be questioned whether a re-conceptualisation of the study of women into that of gender through simply 'adding' men's studies is likely to happen. It is also questionable to what extent it can be justified to just 'leave it up to men' for the task, in the hope of an easy passage from a phase of 'integration' towards simply bringing male and female's gender issues 'into fruitful relationship with each other' as King predicts (30). The lagging behind of religious studies compared to other disciplines of the social sciences and humanities can also be illustrated here, with the fact that in the field of men's studies the study of religion does indeed seem to be limited, if non-existent, at least at this point in time. King goes on from this assertion to justify the temporary equivalence between gender studies and women's studies in religion. King thus suffices with a simple sum of 'women's studies + men's studies = gender studies', which indeed strikes as a rather easy solution to the problem. It is seriously debatable if a simple 'add men's studies and stir' will offer any remedy in as much as the method of 'add women and stir' has been abandoned as a solution in the struggle against androcentrism in the mainstream of various disciplines for some time now.

Another problem regarding King's vision of change in focus from women to gender in gender studies of religion is again related to debates on this same shift within feminist theorising in general, but as will be shown later is played out in specific and complex ways as far as the study of religion is concerned. Here it suffices to emphasise the role of the feminist project within such a paradigm shift. This can perhaps furthermore be linked to King's proposition of postponing true gender inclusiveness for the time being. If the impact of feminism in the field of the mainstream study of religion has altogether been minimal, then some temporary restraint may possibly even be wise. Firstly, there is no theoretical attempt whatsoever in King's introductory articles to delineate women's studies, or for example a focus on 'women's voices' or 'women's experiences' from a feminist perspective, feminist critiques of theory, etc. Within contemporary feminist theorising however, such confluences are far from evident. Relationships between 'women', 'gender' and 'feminism' and their respective affixes 'studies' are matter of debate regarding both the place and the consequences for the political-critical dimension toward both scholarship and social reality. Perhaps androcentrism is institutionalised too deeply in religious studies for a switch to a – less radical? - gender perspective. Of course King has no intention of losing this radical element, it all still revolves around structures of inequality and the unequal balance of 'power' in general. In her request for a paradigm shift, the adjective 'critical' is present in the demand for a more inclusive gender studies approach.

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As for a shift from women to gender in the context of a broader paradigmatic change in the mainstream study of religion, an interpretation in terms of a strategic move is similarly not unimportant. For only a gendered perspective can ever affect the mainstream and enable an escape from a ghetto of women's - or men's - studies (King 1995b: 23, 24). Here we see how the multiplicity of the notion 'gender inclusiveness' as applied by King carries with it a certain irony regarding the anticipated paradigm shifts. While gender inclusiveness would initially refer to the incorporation of the religious voices, experiences and perspectives of women, we see that the re-conceptualisation that follows involves an adding of the study of men, in which men and masculinity are problematised rather than appropriated as the invisible norm. The persistent marginalisation of feminist perspectives in the study of religion, as with other – or maybe even more so than in other – disciplines, can only be transcended when finally 'men' or 'masculinity' are incorporated. Both versions of the paradigm shift nonetheless carry the danger of de-legitimising the feminist political project, unless the emphasis on inequality, power and *societal* transformation remains upheld. The following quote does not leave any doubt as to King's (1995a: 18) 'utopian' position on this matter:

...the perspective of women's studies, of feminism and of more inclusively conceived gender studies, includes as an integral part a strong commitment to contemporary personal and social transformation. It is perhaps this utopian goal, the strong wish to transcend all gender discrimination and polarization, to seek a holistic life-affirming spirituality and build a new society, which is the creative source of the often provocative and intellectually daring stance found among contemporary feminist scholars. Feminism is both a new academic method and also a new social vision.

That a paradigmatic transformation of mainstream religious studies from a gendered perspective would automatically imply a social and thereby a *religious* transformation for the feminist study of religion is far from unequivocal however, and as will be argued later on, rather connotes one of the main *obstacles* for a paradigm shift. In the remains of this introductory chapter though, the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings, the contours, and the implications of Ursula King's assessment of contemporary study of gender and religion, and in particular the question of a paradigm shift from the perspective of gender will first be critically addressed. *Religion and Gender* published in 1995, including King's introduction, is to date still often referred to as one of the authoritative and rare readers reflecting the current standing and theoretical development in the research area of women, feminism, gender and religion. However, toward the beginning of the new millennium new readers including discussions on methodology are increasingly being published, pointing to what

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promises to be an exciting future for a field that currently appears to be in the midst of significant evolution.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, some of the arguments outlined above supporting the evaluation of the mainstream as androcentric may no longer be entirely valid, especially those referred to in structural terms. Despite its definite 'lagging behind' compared to other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, major international journals and publications in religious studies have recently shown to incorporate more and more contributions from and attention for gendered approaches. Most notable perhaps has been the publication of an entire special issue on 'gender and the study of religion' of the well-known mainstream journal *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, the journal of the North American Association for the Study of Religion, edited by Randi Warne and published in 2001 (vol. 13, nr. 2). This particular issue is in any case a novelty and beyond comparison to King's state of the art bibliography dating from 1995. However, as pointed out earlier, something like a 'special issue' can refer to toleration and acceptance, yet also a ghetto status, and the 'true gender inclusiveness' which King aspires to may still be far off the mark.

In an article in another 'mainstream' journal, *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* published in 1998, Randi Warne (2001 [1998]: 149-150) states that the past twenty years have seen considerable changes and that next to the explosion of publications on women and religion, the topic itself has gained 'sufficient respectability' as a speciality in the field of religious studies. Towards the end of the nineties it can even be added that women scholars, including those engaged in gendered or feminist approaches serve on the committees of important organisations and editorial boards of top journals. However, echoing Ursula King's comments that you cannot just 'add women and stir', Warne argues that androcentrism still has not been cured (150):

These changes might be taken to suggest that Religious Studies was well on the road to being successfully 'engendered,' and that gender-critical perspectives had found their place within the traditional academy and were now secure. This however, is a misreading, both of the situation and of the nature of the problem itself.

Although the mainstream may have occasionally been 'disrupted', according to Warne it has not been 'dislodged'. Scholarship may have 'decentred male privilege at the margins', but not at the centre, where androcentrism, the conflation of the male with the generic 'human' perspective and norm prevails. Warne's even more recent publications (2000, 2001) attest to more of the same; despite structural gain and a toleration on the margins, a gender-critical turn, in which gender would be integrated as an 'analytical category for how we think about religion, what we consider to be data, and what questions we bring to our studies' (2000: 249) has yet to be fulfilled in the academic study of religion.

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A paradigm shift then, has in any case not - or not yet – taken place in the mainstream in spite of the shift from ‘women’ to the concept of ‘gender’, which would promise to be more inclusive and offer a means of avoiding the ghetto-effect the ‘add women and stir’ phase caused. Regardless of the change in terminology, Warne’s assessment in fact does not radically differ from that of Rita M. Gross (1977) for example, formulated almost twenty-five years earlier during the very beginnings of feminist critique and scholarship in the academy. Here Gross accuses the mainstream of being androcentric instead of ‘androgynous’, a term which meanwhile is rarely used by the majority of feminist theorists, but strikingly similar in its context of critiquing the mainstream. A paradigm shift would involve ‘the transition from an androcentric methodology to an androgynous methodology’ (Gross 1977: 7), in which the male norm and the human are no longer collapsed, and women are not discussed as ‘other’, as ‘an object exterior to mankind’ (10). In Gross’s words (1977: 13):

I chose the word ‘androgyny’ for the alternative method and model of humanity because even the simplest meaning of the term – ‘both male and female’- involves the negation of all three components of androcentrism. ... Simply put, there is a fundamental reorientation of consciousness to the deeply internalized realization that, however similar or different men and women may be in a religious situation, however dominant one sex or the other may be, they both represent modes of the human. Therefore, information about and understanding of both must be a part of the data that goes into creating a human perspective on a human world, a model of religion, or an analysis of any specific religious situation.

In her later work, Gross (1993a, b, c, 1996) explicitly feminist perspective on religious studies is accompanied by the same emphasis on a paradigm shift in terms of ‘androgyny’, or a ‘two-sex or bi-sexual model of humanity’ (1993b: 296):

We need a basic paradigm shift from models of humanity and modes of research and thought that perceive males at the center and females on the edges to modes that perceive both females and males at the center and reflect the essential ‘femaleness-maleness’ of androgynous humanity.

The failure in effecting a true paradigm shift through the introduction of gender as an analytical concept in itself can in some ways be inferred from the very fact that it indeed warrants a ‘special issue’, paralleling earlier treatments of ‘women’ as a topic of special interest or expertise. This appears to be the case even if it concerns the special issue of an important mainstream journal, and is

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expressed by the editor Warne (2001: 151) herself: 'It is my fervent hope that the fact this is a "special" issue of this journal will one day be truly puzzling to future generations of critical, scientific, and academic scholars of religion'. The shift from 'women' to a plea for more 'gender inclusiveness' (or as some would perhaps still prefer, 'androgyny') as proposed by authors such as Ursula King and then most recently Randi Warne has thus enabled some toleration on the margins or furthered an entry into the mainstream of a more structural kind. However, even if a more fundamental shift in terms of epistemology or methodology in general has not been achieved, other voices have their doubts over what the benefits would be of such a 'gender-critical turn'. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1995: 5) for instance, is highly critical of what she sees as the emergence of a distinct approach in religious studies, termed as 'gender studies in religion':

This approach not only has emerged from within the academy but also does not position itself explicitly in a political women's movement for change. Instead it orients its discourses towards a 'scientific' mostly male audience and seeks to win its respect and approval as a serious intellectual malestream discipline.

Fiorenza's concern with the shift of women's studies or feminist studies to gender studies would be its de-politicising tendencies in its accommodation 'to the reigning scientist paradigm and abandoning [of] political concerns and practical connections with women's movements in society and church...' (6). In Fiorenza's view, the replacement of 'women' with 'gender' would be paired with a limitation to descriptive and functionalist accounts, bereaved of the possibility of making value judgements and thus closer to the ideals of objectivity and neutrality held in mainstream scholarship. Fiorenza is definitely no exception in this type of critique of 'gender theory' or the shift from women's studies to gender studies, which continues to be debated in feminist theory and scholarship across a variety of disciplines beyond that of the study of religion.

A complete account or even a concise summary of the developments in feminist scholarship during the last three decades which underlay some of the divergences of opinion, the conceptual and theoretical varieties and shifts referred to, would be impossible to achieve in one introductory chapter here. At least some clarification will be offered and choices will be made in order to be able to both contextualise and work towards a reformulation and pinning down of the main research question regarding the im/possibility of a paradigm shift. Up to this point it has already become apparent that the very idea of a 'paradigm shift' in the mainstream discipline of religious studies under the influence of feminist scholarship and critique can be understood in at least two different senses. This would furthermore be related to variable appropriations and understandings of and relations between concepts such as 'women',

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'feminism', 'gender'. The question similarly must be raised what the relationships and the differences are between 'women's studies', 'feminist studies, scholarship or theory' and gender studies.

It can already be stated that there are no clear-cut definitions of these terms, nor is there any intention of arriving at any such of a definition or closure. As argued in the introduction, I am of the opinion that conceptual and theoretical disagreement, debate and development are part and parcel of what 'feminist scholarship' is all about. Rather, the purpose of this introductory chapter is to merely review some lines of discussion or strands of feminist thought, selected in function of building the main arguments throughout the chapters. This selection and the way I bring some of these discussions together is based on personal choice, the temporary result of an ongoing study and reflection. The account is therefore what I see as the representation of my own practice of 'situated knowledge' about the original research question, a paradigm shift of the mainstream and the status of 'feminist scholarship in religion' today.

### **2. Constructing, Deconstructing and Reconstructing Gender**

This section will follow up on Fiorenza's (1995) remark about the 'depoliticising tendencies' implied by the introduction of gender as an analytical concept in the study of religion or the emergence of 'gender studies in religion', as opposed to an approach in the frame of women's, womanist<sup>6</sup> or feminist studies more specifically. In general, some positionings will be surveyed that provide a background to the assessment of Ursula King's vision of a paradigm shift towards gender inclusiveness in the first sense, that is - formulated as a matter internal to the field of feminist scholarship. Some new positionings will then be sought in order to raise some new questions regarding the status and the feasibility of a broader paradigm shift in its second sense, that of transforming the mainstream field of religious studies altogether. Already implicated in the following brief discussion of conceptual development and debate are questions and discussions of politics, epistemology and methodology that are not only relevant, but will prove to be central in providing an answer to the main research questions and further argumentation. These will then be gradually unfolded throughout the chapters to come, the remains of this first chapter merely providing some initial theoretical grounding and the directions of analysis sought.

*Political and Postmodern Appropriations*

In a lecture entitled 'Gender: The Short History of a Critical Term' held in 1999<sup>7</sup>, the eminent feminist theorist and historian Joan Wallach Scott introduced her talk with the 'millennial fantasy' of a nightmare scenario, in which biological determinism would once again rise to reclaim the concept of gender ('Dossier: over "gender"' 2000: 11). Even if it is as of yet too early days to state whether this millennial fantasy is likely to come true, it cannot be denied that the once so promising and liberating concept of gender is momentarily being re-appropriated in various contradictory and indeed, politically 'dangerous' ways. Once appropriated as a concept *against* biological explanations of women's subordinate status in society by feminist scholars (see below), in daily usage and common language, gender is increasingly being used as a 'politically correct' term. It is frequently applied in the context of what used to be referred to as 'women's issues' and additionally often just more of a polite way to refer to 'sex'. In both cases however, gender simply comes to stand for the latter term denoting what are understood as the biological (genetic, chromosomal, physical, etc.) differences between women and men.<sup>8</sup>

In accordance with Scott's observations, the influence of a 'new biological determinism' has come to replace the earlier hold of sociobiological ideas on the roles and status of, and relationships between women and men as two distinct group of human beings. This biological determinism is often present in the research practices of burgeoning disciplines in the current academy such as evolutionary and cognitive psychology, micro- and neurobiology, and the field of genetics, and has filtered into the mind of the public at large (e.g. Connell 1999). Both the 'backlash' against contemporary feminist critique where contemporary 'equality' is often taken for granted, and 'androgyny' and gender b(l)ending even celebrated, is simultaneously being accompanied by a renewed interest in dualistic thinking on what 'makes us different' in stereotypical – even if not necessarily hierarchical – terms in contemporary popular culture and daily practice.<sup>9</sup> The growing influence and vulgarisation of certain tenets of neo-Darwinian thought cannot be underestimated here, as new kinds of essentialism resurface and reclaim concepts. Ironically, one such a term is gender, which was originally introduced in defence of a social constructionist position on differences, roles, identities, and sexual preferences.<sup>10</sup>

Scott's recent concern whether gender would remain a useful as an analytical category in light of its recent usage in ways that threat to neutralise its political edge, has been shared by a number of feminist theorists and particularly feminist activists, critical of the way the concept has gradually become mainstreamed during the nineties in and outside of the academy. At the UN Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995 for example, grassroots development workers and women activists from the South launched a critique of the way gender has become institutionalised in gender

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development policy and practice (GAD). They argued that gender analysis had become limited to a 'technocratic discourse', no longer addressing issues of power central to women's problematic status and subordination. According to the convenor and panellist from a Pakistani organisation of one particular workshop, the focus on gender rather than women 'had become counterproductive in that it had allowed the discussion to shift from a focus on women, to women and men and, finally, back to men.' (Baden and Goetz 1997: 5-6).

In the same article discussing the heated debates, the confusion and contradictions surrounding the concept of gender at Beijing, Baden and Goetz (1997: 7) draw attention to the way the mainstreaming of gender in many fields of research has similarly resulted in a 'static and reductionist definition of gender (as woman/man) – stripping away consideration of the relational aspects of gender, of power and ideology and of how patterns of subordination are reproduced'. The reduction of gender even to a mere statistical variable as is often the case in the 'harder' areas of research within the economic, political, psychological, and social sciences, fortunately may not have taken place in disciplines in and nearer to the humanities such as anthropology and religious studies. However, similar concerns for the effects of mainstreaming gender are abound that question the process in which gender as an analytical category has gained more respectability and toleration. According to Baden and Goetz (1997: 6-7) this process has however also accompanied a loss of its 'allegiance' to feminist research, with the 'new players' not even being 'familiar with its basic texts, concepts and methodologies'.

Preceding these developments is the shift from women to gender *within* the field of feminist research, testified in the change of title of many prior women's studies departments or centres to that of gender studies. The renaming of journals, even outside of English-speaking countries, such as the Dutch-language *Tijdschrift voor Vrouwenstudies* that became the *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies* in 1998 also illustrate this trend. In the first issue of the latter, the reserves of several authors on this move are expressed, warning for the same risks and potential loss of an emphasis on power and inequality. These are crucial ingredients in any feminist analysis, yet potentially absent in gender research, the arguments goes. According to Joyce Outshoorn (1998: 5-6) (tr. from Dutch):

Part of my worries is the fact that gender does not necessarily automatically refer to power; only in certain theoretical contexts is gender seen as the result of power processes. Due to the neutral character of the term it is easily accommodated in a liberal discourse on sex roles and sex differences, making gender interchangeable with sex. Here the concept loses its critical sharpness. The insight that power works in creating a hierarchical gender difference and the asymmetry

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between men and women must not be lost: in the future the new journal must be evaluated accordingly.

The concept of 'gender' as distinct from 'sex' was first introduced in the emerging field of feminist research and critique by sociologist Ann Oakley (1996 [1972]). It was borrowed from psychologist Robert Stoller's earlier delineation of sexual from gender identity (in *Sex and Gender* published in 1968 in Oakley 1996: 159). Yet, the idea of femininity and masculinity being cultural or learned constructs, variable in space and time rather than determinate and inborn, reaches back to Simone de Beauvoir's (1976 [1949]) famous dictum in *Le deuxième sexe*, 'on ne naît pas femme, on le devient'. The 'sex as biological/gender as cultural' scheme evidently served feminist political critique. It opened opportunities, for it allowed feminists to envision political and societal change. Women's and men's roles and status in society could no longer be legitimised or universalised by appealing to what nowadays would be called 'essentialist' claims. Ann Oakley's book, and somewhat later anthropologist Gayle Rubin's (1997 [1975]: 32) idea of a 'sex/gender system', - 'a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention'- can be merited for the introduction of the sex/gender distinction in feminist theorising and research throughout the late seventies and eighties. A further highly influential and to date most appropriated elaboration of 'gender' as a useful category of analysis however, was undertaken by no one other than Joan Wallach Scott in 1986, the same scholar entertaining nightmarish fantasies some thirteen years later on.

Scott proposes an appropriation and definition of gender as an analytical concept involving two main propositions. First Scott (1996 [1986]: 167) sees gender as 'a constitutive element of social relationships based on the perceived differences between the sexes'. Secondly - influenced by Michel Foucault - Scott (169) claims that gender, power and politics are related in the sense that 'gender is a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated'. The first proposition involves four interrelated elements: that of symbols or symbolic representations; secondly normative concepts 'that set forth interpretations of the meanings of the symbols, that attempt to limit and contain their metaphoric possibilities'; thirdly the level of social institutions and organisations, from kinship systems to the political arena, and finally that of subjective identity.<sup>11</sup> Scott furthermore argues that this analytical model of gender construction can equally serve in discussions of class, 'race', ethnicity, etc.<sup>12</sup> Scott's model exemplifies and in practice has inspired the application of gender has something of a heuristic device or a lens through which to look and to critically address the general question of difference and power within society and ideology. As an analytical concept it questions how these come to be institutionalised as structural patterns and practices of inequality between women and men, themselves engendered through cultural ideologies of sexual difference.

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As Halsema and Schreurs (1998: 11) remark however, - and is echoed by those scholars critical of the way gender is often appropriated - regardless of the utility of Scott's first proposition and its multidimensional scheme, the second proposition involving the construction of gender as inherent in relations and understandings of power often remains undertheorised or is simply bypassed in many analyses. Related critiques of the way gender is often applied, point to how gender has become increasingly reified to the extent that it no longer functions as a strictly methodological tool of analysis. Stefan Dudink (1998: 8) for example, argues how 'the presentation of gender as a solution instead of as a means of reviewing the feminist tensions regarding its constitutive category of "women", results in a preliminary fixation of what rather should be a continuous reflection on these tensions'. Gender then becomes the 'final stage' of the 'constructionist project'. In a critical review of a number of efforts to theorise gender, including Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), Mary Hawkesworth (1997: 680-681) argues how in these works, gender is transformed from an analytical category into a causal force, conflating gender as *universal explanans*:

The heuristic tool is displaced as gender is accorded ontological status. It is described as the *cause* of certain beliefs about the world; the *force* that molds a plastic humanity, produces naturalized bodies, or imposes sexual dimorphism; the *determinant* of identity; the *process* that structures labor, power, and cathexis; or the *mental category* that structures a form of dichotomous perception. ... Although gender as analytic category can be invaluable to feminist scholarship in illuminating certain facets of social existence, it is a grave error to attribute explanatory force to gender.

Joan Scott's recent questioning of the concept she once defended so adamantly, concerns the current appropriation of gender which can partly be attributed to the way the sex/gender divide itself replicates dualistic oppositions between nature and culture or between body and the mind. Feminist theorists have been critiquing these very dualisms for some time though, a point to which I shall return. Problematic in the social constructionist emphasis on gender is the way in which one pole of the divide, sex or biology, has been undertheorised in feminist analysis, only to be capitalised by the 'hard' sciences and in the worst nightmare scenario fully in the process of completely encapsulating 'gender'.

At Beijing, next to the 'attack' on gender for losing its political edge and its connection to the question of women's inequality by certain feminist grassroots organisations from the South, a critique of the concept was launched from another corner and clearly motivated by wholly different concerns. Prior to the conference in September 1995, debates over the 'Platform for Action' arose concerning the very subject matter of the conference, when representatives from various Catholic countries in the North and South

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proposed a bracketing of the word 'gender' throughout the platform text. According to Baden and Goetz (1997: 11) this move represented an 'unexpected politicization of the concept "gender", which expressed, in part, aspects of backlash reactions to contemporary feminism'. The authors single out one among the many conservative and gender-critical papers circulated at Beijing (by a writer for a US conservative Catholic publication), refuting what is termed 'gender feminism', which was perceived as the threat of social constructionist reasoning for issues of sexuality and reproduction. The paper in question basically argues that in the implications of a definition of gender as social construction, roles and relationships between women and men are challenged, sexuality becomes 'fluid' and the value of the family and motherhood in particular are put into question. As Baden and Goetz note, the panic and – faulty – reasoning deriving from this conservative position concerns the perceived implications for the 'two conservative bogeys', homosexuality and abortion. By contrast, women's participation in public economy or in public decision-making roles were not particularly emphasised nor seen as particularly problematic by conservatives at the conference in general.

Central in this conservative reaction is the interpretation that social constructionism would simply imply a 'deconstruction of the body'. The same problem has notably also been one of the central concerns in feminist theory during the last decade in which the sex/gender distinction has increasingly become problematised and has unleashed much confusion and critique from different ideological sides in and outside of the academy. Exemplary is the controversy following the publication of Anne Fausto-Sterling's (1993) article 'The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough' in *The Sciences*, among Right-wing Christians in the US (Baden and Goetz 1997: 17; Fausto-Sterling 2000a: 19). In this article, Fausto-Sterling (1993) argued that the two-sex system dominant in Western society would be misplaced even at the level of biology. Instead, it should be expanded beyond the exclusive categories of male and female to include various forms of sexual difference, covering genital and genetic variation among 'intersexes', including 'herms' (hermaphrodites), 'merms' (male pseudohermaphrodites), and 'ferms' (female hermaphrodites). Moreover, Fausto-Sterling remarks, 'sex is a vast, infinitely malleable continuum that defies the constraints of even five categories', an argument which would be further elaborated in later research (2000a, 2000b). On top of the critique of 'gender' then, Fausto-Sterling's paper was appropriated by many conservatives who insisted the status of 'sex' in the Platform for Action for Beijing become clear, demanding the two-sex system and the existence of only two sexes be reassured (Baden and Goetz 1997: 17).

The fact that the confusion and critique surrounding sex and gender at Beijing took place and was often related to differences concerning feminism and the status of women on cultural or religious grounds, is one important factor to which I shall return. These particular debates however, were clearly

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provoked by and both reflective of problems and shifts in current feminist theorising regarding the sex/gender distinction. Problematic in its more recent reformulations, various strategies against essentialism appeared to have left the 'body' or the biological undertheorised, a point which Joan Scott recently brings to attention. What the debates furthermore show is the variety in which theories and terminologies of sex and gender have been interpreted and re-interpreted in order to serve diverse political ends in often contradictory and ironic ways. In a response to a recent lecture by Anne Fausto-Sterling<sup>13</sup>, feminist scholar Rosi Braidotti (2000a) Braidotti refers to another instance in which 'The Five Sexes' was appropriated in ways detrimental to feminist critique. Different from the condemnation of the conservative kind, here Braidotti shows how anti-essentialism can be used in defence of liberal individualism under cover of 'a quantitative kind of pluralism'. Thus the Brazilian writer Mario Vargas Llosa in one of his novels appropriates Fausto-Sterling's work on intersexuality and model of multiple categories of sex in what Braidotti (2-3) calls a 'conservative rejection of gender dualism for the purpose of phallic erotic pleasure'<sup>14</sup>.

In what strikes me as flawed argument, Vargas Llosa wants his cake and eats it too: his defence of multiple genders barely conceals the sexual dualism that is intrinsic to the definition of the individual and of individual rights, which he defends. This indicates to me that there is nothing inherently subversive or even transformative is at stake in this otherwise noble and erotic praise of multiple sexual pleasures. Fausto-Sterling's work has taught us that the numerical multiplication of gender options does nothing to alter the balance of power and the political economy of sexual dialectics, which is one of the motors of the phallogocentric regime. Moreover, I think that both sexuality and sexual difference are so central to the constitution of the subject, that they cannot be gotten rid of by merely swapping or reversing socially-enforced gender roles. It is instead the case that in-depth transformations or metamorphoses need to be enacted as a political and discursive practice.

Braidotti's critique and own work can be situated in a particular strand of feminist theorising which will be dealt with below. The concern for the loss of elements of power and inequality in Braidotti's critique has been a concern ever since the shift from 'women' to 'gender', as has been argued above. Initially introduced in a dualistic framework of (fixed) nature versus (constructed) hence malleable) culture, the sex/gender divide itself has undergone transformation under the influence of postmodern and/or poststructuralist critique in many strands of contemporary feminist theory. The publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990a) can without doubt be seen as authoritative in this phase of the social constructionist

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theorisation of gender.<sup>15</sup> The ‘Butler effect’ (Vasterling 1995) signals a paramount shift in feminist theory and has provoked further debate on the relation between feminist theory and feminist politics. The gender confusion caused by the postmodern deconstruction of ‘real’ notions of sex, gender and women has furthermore reached into various settings, contributing to some of the ‘counterproductive’ appropriations in both conservative and liberal modes.

Butler’s (1990a) refutation of the sex/gender distinction is grounded in a poststructuralist critique of the subject and identity<sup>16</sup> that questions whether ‘the natural facts of sex’ may themselves merely be the products of various hegemonic (scientific, juridical, political, etc.) discourses in the service of particular political interests. Butler’s (1990a) primary influence on consecutive feminist theorising has been the argument that if gender is culturally constructed and does not automatically follow from sex, then ‘sex’ is proven to be as culturally constructed as ‘gender’. Gender then refers to a ‘regulatory fiction’ or the ‘discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as “prediscursive,” prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts’ (1990a: 7). Drawing on Monique Wittig and Adrienne Rich’s ideas on normative heterosexuality or the ‘heterosexual matrix’, Butler states that ‘the “unity” of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory sexuality’ (31).

Again, clearly influenced by Foucault’s theory on the workings of power, the ‘body is not “sexed” in any significant sense prior to its determination within a discourse through which it becomes invested with an “idea” of natural or essential sex’ (92). In Butler’s interpretation, bodies ‘cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of gender’ (8). Another central concept in ‘Butlerian’ theory is that of ‘performance’ or ‘performativity’ (1993), referring to the discursive practices and acts of repetition through which bodies become engendered in order to present the illusion of fixed identity or an inner essence or core. Gender therefore is not something that someone *is*, but something someone *does* (Halsema 2000: 15), through the performance or continuous repetition of norms (the heterosexual matrix) on masculinity, femininity and sexual desire. Most controversial has been Butler’s usage of the phenomenon of drag, which she uses to illustrate the performativity of gender in *Gender Trouble*. Drag par excellence reveals the fictionality and imitative structure of gender identity, as it is ‘a parody *of* the very notion of an original’ (1990: 138). In effect drag shows that all appearances of gender, of femininity and masculinity are performances, or ‘stylized repetitions of acts’ (140) in themselves. Problematic in the subsequent reception of *Gender Trouble* was that the example of drag was emphasised to the extent that Butler was interpreted as if gender was always a performance in the sense of a playful act and drag the means by which gender identity could be playfully ‘subverted’. In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler takes on this misinterpretation and charge, firstly in an attempt to rethink the link between gender performativity and the

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materiality of the body and re-stress the perforceability of the heterosexual matrix (x):

For if I were to argue that genders are performative, that could mean that I thought that one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day; and then restored the garment to its place at night. Such a wilful and instrumental subject, one who decides *on* its gender, is clearly not its gender from the start and fails to realize that its existence is already decided *by* gender.

The eradication of the sex/gender distinction through a radical constructionist stance has nevertheless continued to be interpreted by many as a disregard or even outright denial of the body and materiality. The deconstruction of sex, the 'fluidity' of the body and the suggestion of a kind of voluntarism and playfulness regarding what were hereto considered certain and fixed essences and roles, have therefore been ideas that have been received and appropriated in various ways. Whilst for some an understanding of sex/gender that has been influenced by 'postmodern deconstruction' may delegitimise feminist politics (e.g., among feminists within the academy such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, but also the grassroots activists at Beijing), for others it may refer to an equally dangerous celebration of liberal pluralism and individualism (Braidotti). For many conservatives then again, deconstruction at both the levels of discourse (Butler) and biology (Fausto-Sterling) is perceived as a serious threat to traditional certainties concerning roles, identities and 'proper' sexual behaviour.

### *Gender Theory versus Sexual Difference Theory*

On the once so promising idea of gender as an analytical concept for feminist research has not only been cast doubt by various feminist researchers, including erstwhile proponents, wary of the way it is currently being claimed and de-politicised inside and outside of the academy. Towards the end of the twentieth century this questioning can also be contextualised in what seems to be a polarisation between two schools of feminist thought, that of the 'feminist gender theorists' versus the 'sexual difference theorists' (Foster 1999). Rosi Braidotti (1994a, 1994b, 2000b) is one of the important sexual difference theorists to have explicitly critiqued the 'hegemony' of the concept of gender in feminist theory and women's studies (2000b: 5), claiming that the notion has reached 'a crisis-point in feminist theory and practice and that it is undergoing intense criticism, both for its theoretical inadequacy and for its politically amorphous and unfocussed nature' (1994b: 49).

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Important in what Braidotti perceives as a crisis point is the conversion of what can be identified as previously relatively independent strands of feminist theorising, the first being the French or French-inspired strand and the second the gender theory of the Anglo-American tradition. As part of what can be viewed as a general shift in feminist theory, from the critique of patriarchy to a focus on difference and a reclaiming of women's perspective and experience<sup>17</sup>, French theories of sexual difference such as the 'écriture féminine' movement have flourished since the eighties. Theoretically, French feminist thought draws on various frameworks from linguistics, literary studies, semiotics, philosophy and psychoanalytic theories of the subject, focussing primarily on the links between language, representation, the symbolic and materiality in the differences between the sexes.<sup>18</sup>

From the perspective of sexual difference theory which is clearly rooted in a disciplinary orientation towards the humanities, 'gender' disregards the semiotic and symbolic in favour of an emphasis on material and social factors. Socialisation theories of gender for example that focus on the way the individual acquires a social gender identity and relates to other gendered individuals, have been criticised for their neglect of individual variance. Gender approaches have similarly been critiqued for disregarding the role of the unconscious and their reductionism of power relations to the mere description of the social roles assigned to women and men (Brouns 1995: 55; Scott 1995 [1985]: 156). As Braidotti (1994b: 50) notes however, the influence of broader cultural contexts and intellectual traditions runs deep. There is the mere fact that the term 'gender' belongs to the English language, the sex/gender distinction making 'neither epistemological nor political sense in many non-English, Western European contexts, where the notions of "sexuality" and "sexual difference" make much more sense'.

From the perspective of gender theorists then again, or at least those Anglo-American situated feminist scholars more inclined to empirically grounded research in the social sciences and humanities, both the textual emphasis, the idealism and the (biological) essentialism lurking in sexual difference theory have been highly problematic. From the perspective of feminist anthropology for example, the influence of psychoanalytic thought upon many French feminist scholars is particularly problematic (e.g., Lacanian psychoanalysis), as it assumes the primacy and original nature of binary sexual difference, - through universalisations such as that of 'phallo-logocentrism' - often deemed ethnocentric from the anthropological or cross-cultural point of view (Moore 1994b: 21). Braidotti (1994b: 56) describes the polemic at its extreme as follows:

...we came to two opposing claims: the argument that one needs to redefine the female feminist subject, which is reiterated by sexual difference theorists, is echoed by the contradictory claim of gender theorists, that the feminine is a morass of metaphysical nonsense and

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that one is better off rejecting it altogether, in favour of a new androgyny.

These two – albeit oversimplified – contradictory positions however, both circle around what can be seen as one of the central and persistent dilemmas of feminist research and politics, that of sameness or difference, or as Sandra Lipsitz Bem (1995) phrases it, the question is whether to ‘turn the volume down or up’ in order to dismantle gender polarisation and compulsory heterosexuality. According to Dudink (1998: 7) in the shift from ‘women’ to ‘gender’ this tension repeatedly occurs: ‘the fact that feminism is organised on the denominator ‘women’, the denominator it is simultaneously – at least in its undesirable and constricting effects – trying to undo’.

In the nineties however, the situation becomes more complex as cross-fertilisations across the divides have occurred among both gender theorists and what Rita Felski (1997: 4) calls a ‘second generation’ of sexual difference theorists writing in Europe, Australia and the US. The latter includes Braidotti herself, but also figures such as Elizabeth Grosz (1994) and Drucilla Cornell. Gender theorists previously neglecting the issue of sexuality have thereby applied poststructuralist thought, of which Joan Scott’s (1986 [1985]) definition of gender is a prominent and early example. This has been done in an attempt to provide a more intersectional account of the symbolic/semiotic, the discursive, the social and the material dimensions. Judith Butler’s (1990) deconstruction of the sex/gender distinction can be seen in the same light, yet it is problematic in its interpretation for a ‘disregard of the body’ as referred to earlier. The second generation of sexual difference theorists then again, continue to remain committed to the primacy of sexual difference, yet ‘seek to legitimate sexual difference as a foundational category of feminist thought while simultaneously emptying it of any normative or essentialist content’ (Felski 1997: 4). For Braidotti (2000b: 7) however, at the dawn of the millennium, gender remains ‘too polyvalent as concept to be really universally helpful’, as it does not sufficiently stress ‘the embodied female subject’, nor the question of feminist politics or agency (6):

I would like to try to reconnect the wilful agency required of politics with the respect that is due, both theoretically and ethically, to the affective, libidinal and therefore contradictory structures of the subject. Sexuality is also crucial to this way of thinking about the subject. Gender [sic] theory does not help me at all in this task.

Contra Braidotti, and in spite of the apparent crisis and (mis)appropriations of gender as a useful category of analysis narrated above, I would nevertheless argue that gender remains helpful precisely *because of* its great polyvalence which *allows for* rather than impedes ‘universal’ heuristic applicability. First however, I will return to the status of feminist research on religion regarding

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some of these issues, in view of the argument put forward earlier that feminist religious studies in many respects appears to be 'lagging behind'.

### *Feminist Gender Studies In Religion?*

Although some of the more recent cross-fertilisations between sexual difference theory and gender theory summarised above have been introduced in feminist religious studies, such as in the feminist philosophy of religion (e.g., Anderson 1998; Jantzen 1998; Klein 1995), feminist theology (e.g. Eriksson 1995; Gerhart 1995; Graff 1995), and feminist 'theology' or spirituality (e.g. Martin 2001), my contention is the following. Not only has gender theory failed to transform the mainstream study of religion (a paradigm shift in the first sense), but as of yet it has hardly been appropriated within the feminist study of religion (a shift in the second sense). Gender as a *concept* may be widely used, as it currently is in many areas of mainstream scholarship in the Anglo-American world or contexts of scholarship and publication in English. Yet, the application of *gender theory*, involving an array of perspectives and debates on epistemology, methodology and feminist politics, to use Ursula King's words, indeed, 'has hardly begun'.

Although some more specific arguments will be gradually put forward throughout the following chapters, my opting for and defence of a gender rather than a sexual difference approach in the first place revolves around the issue of tradition and disciplinary orientation as alluded to in the above account. From a social scientific perspective that places value on cross-cultural comparison and empirical research, I argue that a gender approach is better equipped for the study of religion. Firstly, it must be noted that women's/gender/feminist studies can be viewed as an interdisciplinary field par excellence, in as much as the 'discipline' of religious studies can be viewed to be poised between the humanities and social sciences, an important issue to which I shall frequently return. Feminist research challenges the rigidity – or what Chela Sandoval (2000 [1995]: 385) calls the 'current apartheid of theoretical domains' - of many mainstream disciplinary boundaries through cross-fertilisations and methodological borrowings that I consider highly productive and many of which I will be selectively drawing on.

In the framework of an engendering of religious studies however, I shall argue that the appropriation of gender as an analytical concept vis-à-vis the mainstream study of religion offers particular challenges that do not arise in the case of an orientation more towards the humanities. My objective thus differs significantly from the perspectives and appropriations of - predominantly - sexual difference theory as applied in more philosophical, theological or even literary (e.g., Clément and Kristeva 2001; Irigaray 1999) approaches as in the type of scholarship referred to under the heading of this paragraph. Moreover, it is my intention to eventually show how it is precisely the specificity of the

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subject matter we are dealing with – religion – which brings up these challenges facing any paradigm shift or the possibility of a gender-critical turn.

Ursula King and Randi Warne's assessments of the contemporary status of gender studies in religion aside, it can be stated that neither gender as an analytical concept, nor gender theory and methodology have been applied to any great extent in the practice of religious studies so far. As will be shown in the following two chapters, both 'feminism' and 'women' do continue to feature prominently in contemporary research, but little is there to be found on the dynamics of important theoretical debates on the notions of and relations between concepts of 'women', 'gender', 'feminism', 'agency', etc. of the likes only briefly touched upon above. If there is moreover, then there does not appear to exist much deep-going reflection on the possible implications of these debates for the study of *religion*.

Take Darlene Juschka's (1999) recent review article 'The Category of Gender in the Study of Religion' published in *MTSR* for example. After some fifteen pages of plain summaries on how feminist scholars have theorised gender, in works covering a vast time span and working in diverse areas as anthropology (Sherry Ortner 1974), philosophy of science (Evelyn Fox Keller), law (Catherine MacKinnon), film and literature studies (Teresa de Lauretis 1987), French materialist feminist theory (Christine Delphy 2001 [1993]) and postmodern feminist philosophy (Linda Nicholson 1990), Juschka concludes that this literature shows that there are several problems with the concept of gender at hand. These concern familiar arguments that have been referred to earlier, such as the sex/gender dichotomy and the way it replicates a problematic nature/culture divide, or the way gender has replaced the categories of women and feminism to a large degree, including in religious studies. Juschka (1999: 92) claims the following:

The intention of the category of women in the study of religion was/is to record women's participation that had, hitherto, gone unmarked. Feminist studies then entered the study of religion challenging ideological presuppositions and structures that demonstrated not only androcentrism, but sexism. Gender as a heuristic category seeks to analyze human behaviour, pretending to be neutral in a way that 'women' and 'feminism' are not. But is it neutral since when we say 'gender' we mean women and exclude the political. Why is it that if we pretend it is not about the political we are being neutral? Is it neutral to obfuscate oppression?

Juschka then goes on to make her case against gender analysis – for reasons that meanwhile ring familiar - in religious studies by critiquing the way gender is appropriated in two particular and recent texts. Juschka locates these publications in the area of religious studies, being John Hawley's *Fundamentalism and Gender* published in 1994 and Ursula King's *Religion and*

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*Gender* (1995a) that was extensively treated in the beginning of this chapter. The choice for Hawley might seem somewhat peculiar, as the study of fundamentalism generally is more of a novel and separate area and not so much at the centre of religious studies research. Moreover, this work has been criticised on several grounds from the perspective of other gendered approaches on the phenomenon of fundamentalism by now, including the kind of criticism which Juschka appropriates in defence of her case against gender.

Joan Mencher (1997: 5) in her general introduction to the volume *Mixed Blessings: Gender and Fundamentalism Cross Culturally* (Brink and Mencher 1997) for example, critiques Hawley for taking a masculine rather than a feminist point of view, for failing to pay attention to the way women themselves in daily practices and contexts deal with fundamentalist movements. Juschka is similarly critical of the way gender ideologies are the main focus in Hawley and that they are often de-contextualised according to a 'gender ideology continuum representative of Western epistemology' (95). This ultimately leads Juschka to the inevitable conclusion that as a category gender must be discarded as it is simply reified and treated ontologically. For Brink and Mencher (1997) however, equally adamant on a feminist approach that does not lose the subjectivity of and contextualisation of women, such critique does not necessarily or automatically entail a rejection of the concept of gender, as is attested in the very title of their book.

Ursula King's (1995a, b) appropriation of the category of gender is critiqued for some of the same reasons and particularly the way the concept and its relation to 'women' and 'feminism' is *under-theorised* as set out in the beginning of this chapter. In the end however, for Juschka both Hawley and King prove inevitable points: in gender analysis both the feminist edge is lost and the body and sexuality remain out of sight (104):

Gender as an ontological category of analysis separates off the historical and social aspects of sex and in this undercuts feminist arguments that seek justice for all women. Feminists do themselves a disservice by assuming this category that has historically been the means by which women have been oppressed. Our genders are not coats placed on the rack of the sexed body. We are sexed beings who have been caught up in the valuation of sex, whether as oppressors or the oppressed, and so sex as both historical and social construction requires theorization. Sex requires deconstruction and not reification as that which acts as the ground for gender.

At this point I would not only remark that again this is a misinterpretation of the way gender is used in current feminist gender theory, but especially draw attention to the fact that Juschka's discussion does not bear upon any of the implications of gender or feminist research altogether on the study of *religion*. The arguments advanced appear to cut across disciplines and concern feminist

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critique and scholarship in general, but do not offer any concrete methodological suggestions for the feminist study of religion in particular. Juschka's (2001) recent reader *Feminism in the Study of Religion*, which for perhaps the first time brings together important articles published in the field of feminist research in religion during the past decades, in its representative selection I think illustrates this point rather well.

In the first of five groupings of articles in the book, out of the six essays in total under the header 'intersections of feminist theoretical insights and feminist theory in the study of religion', only one article – by Randi Warne (2001 [1998]) – actually concerns such an intersection. The other five articles are more general articles in feminist theory (e.g. Ortner 1974), not concerning the study of religion in particular. The same ratio occurs in part five on 'feminist responses to theoretical issues in the study of religion'. Only one essay (Christ 1991) consists of such a response. Other essays are reprints of – nevertheless practically classic – essays including one on feminist standpoint theory (by e.g., Nancy Hartsock 1997 [1983]), and engagements between feminism and postmodern and poststructuralist theory (Judith Butler 1992; Kate Nash 1994), again none of which are individually concerned with religion. In fact, these lacunae I would argue characterise the general tenet of the whole volume. Out of some thirty-one essays supposedly dedicated to the topic of feminism in the study of religion, only approximately a third of the contributions concerns religion as its subject matter. If anything, this recent reader shows how the intersection between gender theory and methodology and the study of religion is only in its infancy, and continues to lag behind in comparison to other areas of research in many respects.

As always however, there are exceptions, of which Caroline Walker Bynum's (1986) general introduction to the reader *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols* (Bynum, Harrell and Richman 1986) can be considered a fine example. Published too long ago to be held accountable for not taking certain gender theory discussions into account, Bynum's (1986: 2) approach is nonetheless innovative in the way gender is applied as an analytical concept in the study of religion. For Bynum critically addresses the mutual implications of such a move, by asking: 'what it means to take gender seriously in studying religion and what it means to take religion seriously when asking questions about gender'. It is clearly stated in this introduction that the goal of the book is not to remedy the earlier neglect of women's religious lives (the 'add women and stir' technique) nor to critique or explain 'male dominance' in religious traditions as such (like in earlier work e.g., Sanday 1981). Rather, the focus is on both religion and gender as polysemic concepts, in a usage of the latter which bears much resemblance to Joan Scott's (1996 [1986]) multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary concept of gender contrived in roughly the same period. While the main area of interest is the meaning of religious symbols, the analysis is not limited to how religion relates to gender at the level of symbolism or ideology alone (as in Juschka's critique of Hawley above). Rather, the question

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is how religious symbols relate to genderedness and to people's experiences as gendered beings (2-3):

Gender-related symbols, in their full complexity, may refer to gender in ways that affirm or reverse it, support or question it; or they may, in their basic meaning, have little at all to do with male and female roles. Thus our analysis admits that gender-related symbols are sometimes 'about' values other than gender. But our analysis also assumes that all people are 'gendered'. It therefore suggests, at another level, that not only gender-related symbols but all symbols arise out of the experience of 'gendered' users. It is not possible ever to ask How does a symbol – any symbol – mean? Without asking For whom does it mean?

I think what Bynum is aiming at here, is a flexible, multi-dimensional understanding of the relationship of gender and religion, which incorporates different levels and questions the relationship between them. It furthermore points to what I see as different ways of potentially addressing these relationships in a comparative, social scientific way: How is religion experienced or constructed through gender? And conversely: How do religions construct gender differently? How does religion function as a *vehicle* for the production and reproduction of gender constructions and relations? In a sociological approach towards gender the emphasis will most likely lie on level of institutions and experience. William H. Swatos's (1994) volume of articles *Gender and Religion* for example, is divided into two parts, the first grouping contributions focussing on how gender relations affect women's exercise of professional religious functions, the second part dealing with the ways gender structures religious experience. Catherine Wessinger's (1996) volume is another example of research into the roles of women as leaders in mainstream Christian and Jewish religious institutions, from a historical and sociological-descriptive perspective. However, in the latter two works, the relationship between experience and practice on the one hand and ideology and symbolism from a social constructionist or feminist gender theoretical perspective does not stand central. Tessa Bartholomeusz's (1994) historical, anthropological and political study of the tradition of Buddhist female world renunciation in Sri Lanka on the other hand, is a fine example of a more interdisciplinary approach focussing upon both daily actual practice and the way this relates to political and religious ideology concerning women's roles in religion, but it again, conversely does not employ any gender theory.

Perhaps one of the rare exceptions to apply feminist gender theory in the social scientific and comparative study of religion is the work of Israeli anthropologist Susan Starr Sered (1992, 1994a, b, 1998, 1999a, b, 2001).<sup>19</sup> Whereas in some of her earlier work (e.g. *Women as Ritual Experts: The Religious Lives of Elderly Jewish Women in Jerusalem* 1992, *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women* 1994a, and 'Religious Rituals

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and Secular Rituals: Interpenetrating Models of Childbirth in a Modern, Israeli Context' 1994b), Sered's focus has predominantly been on the religious lives of women, later the concept of gender features much more prominently in her vocabulary. However, this is not to be seen as a mere change in terminology or the simple inclusion of the issue of masculinity or men such as Ursula King (1995b) proposes, but as a serious attempt to apply important discussions in feminist gender theory to the study of religion (e.g. Sered 1998, 1999a), appropriating gender in such a polyvalent manner as to allow an avoidance of the setbacks more disciplinary bound approaches carry.

In "'Woman" as Symbol and Women as Agents: Gendered Religious Discourses and Practices' (1999b), Sered emphasises that in analysing gender in religious systems two 'ontologically different sets of issues' are at stake (194). First of all there is the issue of actual *women*, real people having various degrees of religious agency within specific situations. Secondly according to Sered there is *Woman* as a symbolic construct 'conflating gender, sex, and sexuality, and comprised of allegory, ideology, metaphor, fantasy, and (at least in male-dominated religions) men's psychological projections'. The problem is that in much religious studies scholarship, these two distinct categories are easily conflated, a point which will be taken up again in the following chapters. Although there are additional reasons for this conflation to which I shall also be returning, one reason as also Sered claims, lies in the disciplinary perspective as was also denoted above. Whereas 'Woman' has mostly been the subject matter of scholars of religion situated in the humanities (Sered mentions goddesses, demonesses, myths, etc.), social scientists have been much more inclined to study 'women', such as in their religious roles and religious participation (e.g. the examples cited above). Sered's call is then for more cross-fertilisation between the humanities and the social sciences and moreover, where the intersection between cultural symbols and real people would become the focus of study (216):

Social scientists have a great deal to learn from the careful textual analysis that allows a historical view of religious development, detailed understandings of myths and symbols, insight into the power of religion to engage and motivate believers, and engaged depictions of human religious beliefs. At the same time, historians of religion have a great deal to learn from the study of social structure that gives meaning to texts and rituals, and that facilitates examination of human agency in context. The next round could fruitfully take a more subtle look at the interplay of myths, symbols, rituals, life experiences, resources, social contexts, and social structure.

Whereas Sered's focus is on 'women' here, it is definitely non-essentialist and akin to the constructionist and multidimensional gender approach such as that of Joan Scott. In her recent publications based on anthropological research on

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gender and religion, particularly that on religious practices in Okinawa, the only contemporary society in which women lead the official mainstream religion, the integration of gender theory is even more pronounced (1998, 1999a, 2001). Sered's theoretical borrowings and framework I believe, can be viewed as the result a sort of convergence between recent feminist anthropological theorising and feminist gender theory, including its appropriation of feminist poststructuralist thought and a deconstructive approach towards sex/gender. In chapter four I shall be taking a closer look at the methodological practicalities of such an approach when applied to the study of religion and gender. For the moment, I will briefly elaborate on the conceptual aspects, in order to argue further what appears to me to be a fruitful approach in the application of gender as a category of analysis in the study of religion, and one that crosses some of the disciplinary divides referred to above.

### *The Polyvalence and Practice of Gender*

Since the introduction of the concept of gender in feminist research and theory, historical and cross-cultural research par excellence have proven the variability in the ways femininity and masculinity are constructed in relation to each other. In anthropological research, which takes a comparative approach however, the question had been how upon the fixed biological categories of sexual difference, gender is constructed in culturally different or variable ways. So if the feminist anthropologist can be said to be primarily interested in the ways 'culture' (rituals, economy, kinship,...) is experienced and structured through gender, then an anthropologist in general would in the first place be focussed on the way gender is experienced through culture (Moore 1988: 9). For religious studies, the same 'two-way' question applies as was stated earlier.

In anthropology, after the phase of the 'anthropology of women', Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead's *Sexual Meanings* (1981a) can be cited as illustrative of the growing constructionist trend. Both gender and sexuality are treated as symbols, as parts of different possible gender ideologies. Additionally, different social contexts are delineated in which these cultural notions of gender and sexuality are given form, such as the realm of kinship and marriage, and especially the domain of prestige structures. Their work is still structuralist in the sense that male dominance - albeit in diversified forms - is understood to derive from their position in the public sphere. In their introduction Ortner and Whitehead (1981b: 1) suggest that: '... the natural features of gender, and natural processes of sex and reproduction, furnish *only a suggestive and ambiguous backdrop* to the cultural organization of gender and sexuality' (italics mine). However gender was culturally and culturally *variably* constructed, it still was understood to be connected to or arising from the evident and exclusive sexual difference between women and men. The problem

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however, was how and to what extent it was possible to argue that gender was *not* determined by biology.

A number of anthropologists noticed how the sex/gender distinction becomes untenable through the confrontation with cultures in which such nature/cultures divides do not make sense. Thus Sylvia Yanagisako and Jane Collier (1987, 1990) argue towards the end of the eighties that the sex/gender distinction as much as many other binary categorisations (nature/culture, public/private, practical/symbolic, production/reproduction) was simply eurocentric and part of a Western folk-model. The authors therefore severely question its universality and analytic utility. Yanagisako and Collier (1987: 15) question whether 'cross-cultural variations in gender categories and inequalities are merely diverse elaborations and extensions of the same natural fact' or (48):

... we suggested that feminism's next contribution to the study of gender and kinship should be to question the difference between women and men. We do not doubt that men and women are different, just as individuals differ, generations differ, races differ, and so forth. Rather, we question whether the particular biological difference in reproductive function that our culture defines as the basis for difference between males and females, and so treats as the basis of their relationship, is used by other societies to constitute the cultural categories of male and female.

Feminist anthropology since gender would develop at an analytical and theoretical level towards the study of gender instead of women, whereby the interrelations between women and men in the structuring of society, ideologies, economic systems and political structures could no longer be conceived of as a side-issue (Moore 1988: 6). That constructions of gender could take on variable forms was even expanded to an intra-cultural level, upon the insight that different or even opposing gender ideologies - depending on the context and the person - are possible within cultural wholes (Sanday and Goodenough 1990).

However, for decades anthropologists have been searching for analytical tools and concepts in order to understand phenomena such as transvestism or homosexuality that would be more in congruence with the native point of view. The 'berdache' phenomenon among the North-American Indians, an institutionalised role for (biological) men or women fulfilling roles that lie outside of the two gender categories, is often taken as illustrative of the existence of third or fourth gender categories in other cultures (Longman 1999a, b, 2002). Although they may not have explicitly questioned the sex/gender model, a number of anthropologists since the seventies has drawn attention to the way other cultures perceive the physical differences between people, that do not necessarily comply with the dichotomous classifications that dominate in the West (Kessler and McKenna 1978; Martin and Voorhies 1975). Thus

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feminist anthropologist Henrietta Moore (1993: 198) more recently argues that much ethnographic material suggests that:

...the differences between women and men which other cultures naturalize and locate in the human body, and in features of the physical and cosmological environment, are not necessarily those which correspond to the constellation of features on which Western discourse bases its categorizations.

For example, Moore refers to the Khumbo in Nepal who allocate social differences between women and men in the body as 'natural', but the female and male, flesh and bone are also located in all bodies. Research on many Native American societies has also shown that gender categories are often determined in terms of roles rather than sexual assignment or sexual preference (e.g. Jacobs, Thomas and Lang 1997; Roscoe 1998). As Susan Sered (2001: 153) argues on the basis of her own research among the people of Okinawa (1998, 1999a) and in referring to other societies, 'few traits are recognised as gendered; only external genitalia or pregnancy are perceived and acknowledged as essential differences, while other attributes and roles, even if they tend to be associated with men or women, are understood to be temporal or local rather than essential.' In many other cultures however, paradigms of sex/gender dualisms reign and are 'naturalised' beyond the individual body to aspects of cosmology and religious ideology, as is in most societies of the Mediterranean cultural type (e.g. Bourdieu 1990 [1980/1970], 2001; Delaney 1991).

The dichotomous sex/gender dichotomy thus becomes superfluous from the viewpoint of cross-cultural comparison and comparative historical analysis, as also testified in the various contributions to Gilbert Herdt's (1994a) *Third Sex, Third Gender*. As Herdt (1994b) argues in his lengthy introduction to the book, classifications of sex/gender show tremendous variety across space and time, from the medieval sodomite to the dominant ontology of a one-sex/two-genders model in pre-modern Europe as hypothesised by Thomas Laqueur (1990). Herdt attributes the dominance of the two-sexes/two-genders model that has governed Western thought in modern times to what he terms Darwinian 'sexual dimorphism', revealing an underlying reproductive paradigm of science and society, which to date is 'represented as if it were a uniform law of nature like gravity' (1994b: 26). This essentialist thinking continued under the development of sexology in the nineteenth century and is similarly replicated in its contemporary forms of essentialism/constructionism, biology/culture, sex as biological/gender as learned. Again, as Herdt (1994b: 31) argues, although critical learning theory and the emphasis on the social construction of gender have provided an 'antidote' to downright essentialism, 'this appearance is, like all varieties of essentialist and constructionist ideas, in part illusory because it assumes that learning gender identities takes place only with respect to the dimorphic two-sex system of male and female.' Moore's (1994: 15) argument,

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yet from an anthropological rather than a historical perspective is markedly similar:

Sex, then, as far as we understand it within the terms of western discourse, is something which differentiates between bodies, while gender is a set of variable constructions placed upon those differentiated bodies. It is precisely this formula which obscures rather than illuminates when it comes to the cross-cultural analysis of sex, sexual difference and gender.

Moore (1999: 153) has also noticed how some of this theorising on sex/gender – referring to Yanagisako and Collier, but Herdt can definitely be added here – is clearly marked by the entry of neo-Foucauldian thought into anthropology. Judith Butler's (1990) inversion of the sex/gender scheme is then exemplary of such a congruency between feminist poststructuralist thought and this kind of anthropological work. Moore thereby quotes this oft-cited passage by Michel Foucault (1990 [1978]: 154):

...the notion of 'sex' made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere: sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified.

What Foucault did for sex, Butler did for gender, as in her reading of Foucault, not only is binary sex the effect of a specific discourse, but so is gender. The distinction between the two therefore falls away.<sup>20</sup> The de-naturalisation and de-essentialisation, or deconstruction of sex/gender would then involve a questioning or unmasking of the radical contingency of the hegemonic discourses constitutive of these rigid constricting effects, or from the anthropological perspective the cultural embeddedness – and thus variability – of particular sex/gender systems or ontologies. Here, what Butler identifies as the 'heterosexual matrix' or 'compulsory heterosexuality' can be aligned with for example Gayle Rubin's much older 'sex/gender system' (1997 [1975]) or what Herdt (1994b) terms the Darwinian legacy of the paradigm of 'sexual dimorphism'.

However, in the deconstruction and de-universalisation of sex/gender, both in terms of feminist politics and strategies of resistance, and also the – equally politically informed – de-colonisation of Western schemes of thought and classification in their application to other (often non-Western) cultures and societies, the dethroning of the very concept of gender as a primary organising principle is also potentially implied. Earlier, some feminist concerns regarding the loss of political element have been referred to above, as others have

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signalled how at the level of theory and analysis 'gender' is reified in a problematic way, for instance as an *explanans* (Hawkesworth 1997), or the endpoint of analysis rather than a methodological tool (Dudink 1998). A recent 'postcolonial' critique offered by anthropologist Oyeronke Oyewumi (1998), nevertheless presents some additional important and challenging concerns. In a critical review article of 'Confounding Gender' by the same Hawkesworth (1997) mentioned above, Oyewumi (1998: 1050) criticises the way the author fails to incorporate a notion of 'culture', as is common among many feminist theories of gender:

Gender is first and foremost a cultural construct. As such, it is intelligible only in a cultural frame; any theory of gender, therefore, must be attentive to the fact that there are many cultures in the world and Western culture is only one of them. Thus any claims made on the basis of studies in one culture cannot necessarily hold true for other cultures and should not be universalized. Many Western theorists of gender seem to be impervious to the existence of other cultures; they make their case for gender from the narrow confines of the West.

So far Oyewumi's argument is consistent with my own comparative positioning on the necessity to theorise gender not only as culturally constructed, but indeed what is often overlooked from a eurocentric point of view, that gender is culturally *variably* constructed. This anthropological perspective on gender can to some extent be aligned with what has grown to be a more intersectional approach to gender. The construction of categories and identities often takes place through the intersection of multiple axes of oppression, apart from gender, being 'race', class, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. This insight can be attributed to developments in second-wave feminism. Women living in the Western world became highly critical of the way second wave feminism was often extremely limited in focus and exclusionary in its ignorance of the different experiences of women from 'minority' groups. Thus 'women of colour' in the U.S. claimed that their experience of subordination could not be attributed to 'male dominance' alone, but that sexism and racism were simultaneous experiences, unacknowledged by many 'white middle class heterosexual' feminists of the time.<sup>21</sup>

Currently, the emphasis on the intersections between categories of identity has often become simply a form of tokenism among many Western feminist theorists. It is this type of work that Oyewumi fiercely repudiates. The 'usual caveat about how other social identities such as race and ethnicity are important' (1051) is often included in such work. However, this does not prevent eurocentrism (or 'Westocentrism') in terms of universalist claims on the basis of empirical evidence limited to the Western world alone; Nor does it prevent generic notions of women and men, which in actual fact is limited to the experience of white women and men only, without qualifying these

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limitations of scope explicitly. Oyewumi then takes her critique of feminist gender analysis a step further, by referring to her own research on Yoruba culture of Southwestern Nigeria.<sup>22</sup> According to Oyewumi, no matter what social constructionist feminist theories of gender purport to be, they cannot escape biological foundationalism or determinism. From a cross-cultural perspective this arises from a very specific conception of seeing the word or a particular culturally based cognitive schema in which gender is an ontological category. Oyewumi's main thesis is that in the conceptual framework of the Yoruba by contrast, gender is 'absent' in both language and kinship categories. Categories are based on seniority and dependent on the speaker in any social situation. Concepts of power and authority are not gendered, nor do exclusive male or female social roles or identities exist. According to Oyewumi, the conclusion would be that if in the cognitive schema gender did not exist, neither would the social categories of 'man' or 'woman'.

Western feminists are therefore felt to be highly ethnocentric in the way they 'continue to seek gender and male dominance in other cultures without first establishing whether gender as a social category is transcultural' (1054). Oyewumi obviously raises some challenging issues for feminist gender analysis that behoves a further de-colonisation of its own grounds. In contrast to those feminist anthropologists (see above) who have been making similar points on the basis of empirical evidence on the way that bodies and identities are differentially constructed cross-culturally. For Oyewumi this must involve the eradication of gender as an analytical category in itself. Many questions can be raised regarding Oyewumi's radical stance, - and not only what this gender studies scholar would then be researching in the future. One wonders for instance also to what extent Oyewumi - focussing primarily on 'traditional language classification' - takes the impact of (post)colonial historical processes and globalisation on Yoruba society into account.

Oyewumi however, regrettably refuses to allow for a further sophistication and adjustment of feminist gender analysis on the basis of cross-cultural analysis. She thereby fails to precisely situate feminist gender theory in its own cultural, historical and theoretical context. In the light of Oyewumi's and other feminist anthropologists' insights into the way gender is variably constructed, I would at least argue that in any case, the alternative of *sexual difference theory* is too culturally bound. For it is even more problematic in cross-cultural or universal terms. Oyewumi however, appears to be arguing that gender theory can never 'escape' biological determinism, and moreover that it always necessarily involves the question of universal 'male dominance', a point with which I from a cross-cultural perspective tend to equally disagree. For instance, Oyewumi justly draws attention to the fact that Judith Butler's ideas put forward in *Gender Trouble* (1990) are limited to the context of Western society, but then fails to see that this is what Butler's theory precisely and blatantly is (1058):

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It is difficult to sustain Butler's notion that gender emanates from an imposition of compulsory heterosexuality if one looks at the category of the *hijra* in Indian culture or the female husband of the Igbo. From the Igbo standpoint, Butler, in order to sustain her narrative of 'compulsory heterosexuality,' obviously and mistakenly takes for granted the notion that sexual desire can be expressed only within the marriage institution. Many African societies organize marriage for reproduction but not necessarily to promote or support sexual desire between conjugal partners. In other words, there *are* institutionalized conjugal partnerships like the woman marriage that do not involve sexual intercourse. Believe me, 'gender trouble' is not universal.

Even if Butler had claimed that the heterosexual matrix were universal, this would not leave much room for ideas about the possibility of subversion and resistance that the same author favours so dearly. Oyewumi consequently fails to appropriate Butler's notion of compulsory heterosexuality for what it is from the perspective of cultural and historical analysis: a particular and therefore contingent discourse constitutive of a particular sex/gender system or cognitive schema that is currently hegemonic in certain parts of the world. Before turning to some other ways in which contemporary gender theory in the study of religion may profit further from the convergence – rather than the divergence – of feminist poststructuralist and anthropological perspectives on gender as analytical concept, some further answers to the challenges to gender that have been hereto screened will be discussed.

Joanna Foster (1999) offers such a defence or more of a 'clarification' of feminist gender theory in the face of some of the critiques by some 'second generation' sexual difference theorists<sup>23</sup>, which in the course of this chapter have been identified as one kind among criticism from many different angles. According to Foster, gender theory has been misinterpreted on three major grounds. First it has been accused of reifying a sex/gender distinction, (as also the case in Oyewumi's postcolonial critique). Secondly, the by now more than familiar critique of gender theory for its erasure of the category 'woman' and the consequential de-politisation is also misplaced in Foster's view. Finally, the accusation that gender theory would be more focussed on the material – it is assumed that Foster is referring to social, economical 'material' reality here, and not so much 'physical' materiality – to the detriment of the symbolic (as in sexual difference theory) in order to understand 'women's experience' would be unfair.

In the first kind of misinterpretation for example, gender theory is mistakenly conflated with gender role theory according to earlier paradigms of socialisation. Whilst the latter used to leave issues of sexual desire and embodiment untheorised, *current* gender theory according to Foster (1999: 437) 'in no way assumes that there is a fixed relationship between sexed bodies, desires, or identities' (438):

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There is a good deal of current gender scholarship that conceptualizes gender not as functional interdependent roles based on heterosexist notions of biological sex but as social processes or practices that are shifting, historical, and produced on multiple levels of social organization. Moreover, unlike sexual difference theory, such a perspective has generated empirical research on the ways in which social structures of gender are inseparable from other axes of domination and subordination.

It has already become clear what the benefits are of such an intersectional approach towards identity categories. From the perspective of both anthropological evidence as well as the critiques by feminists of colour on the problematic character of the categories of 'women' and 'sexism', a shift towards an intersectional approach allows for an analysis of the way categories are 'produced and reproduced within particular sociohistorical and political contexts as part of the production and reproduction of inequality' (Foster 1999: 441). I would argue that the idea that the element of feminist critique would be lost in a gender approach, very much lies in the way power (often overlooked in Joan Scott's definition of gender), and inequality are linked to identity, theorised and included in analysis. This in turn would imply a questioning of the notion of feminism itself, which under the influence of cross-cultural differences and increasing globalisation has moved far beyond the simple critique of the 'universal subordination of women by men'. Oyewumi's analysis – as many other anthropological material - offers a case in point here, as from the perspective of cross-cultural comparison, - hypothetically - gender systems may exist that do not imply notions of hierarchy or inequality. The question then becomes 'does difference necessarily imply hierarchy?'; a question that in the context of the history of Western feminism itself has been asked many a time.

An intersectional approach at least leaves more room to focus on the way categories of difference and identity such as gender, ethnicity, 'race', sexuality, etc., are continuously intertwined in processes of power, whilst an approach that attributes primacy or an ontological status to sexual difference becomes problematic from the perspective of cross-cultural comparison and multicultural reality today. Feminist anthropologist Kamala Visweswaran (1994: 75) for example, argues that a displacement of gender from the centre of feminist theory 'starting from a consideration [of] how race, class, or sexuality determines the positioning of a subject – not with being "women," but how women are different', does not necessarily de-legitimise the possibility of feminist anthropology or more comparative research.

Again related to the problem of sexual difference theory in cross-cultural contexts, but, in Foster's focus view to that of a social scientific perspective in general, is the accusation of gender theory supposedly

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disregarding the symbolic. Again I concur with Foster that the problem lies in the way sexual difference theorists often understand the 'symbolic', in limited terms such as that of semiotics, accusing gender theorists of undertheorising the role of language and meaning in the reproduction of domination. However, as Foster argues, in sociology a strand such as symbolic interactionism for example, also focuses on 'meaning', but more as a product of daily interaction between individuals than situated in language alone. Rather the 'symbolic' is much more broadly understood from the gender approach, and the challenge is to analyse the way it relates to other dimensions of gender and identity that can be viewed as more 'material'. Again and as Foster notes, the appropriation of psychoanalytic theory and the notion of the 'unconscious' as among sexual difference theorists is far less central in the social sciences.

The dichotomy between sexual difference theory and gender theory that has served as a way of delineating how gender as an analytical concept is proposed, is obviously greatly oversimplified. In many respects a choice between the two positions may even be seen as a false dilemma, as authors from both sides often draw from each other's work in many fruitful ways. The recent attempts by sexual difference theorists to become less essentialist and for gender theorists to focus more on sexuality and embodiment shows how currently cross-borrowings and convergences are on the rise. That some of the differences can be attributed to disciplinary divides (social sciences versus humanities) has been emphasised throughout. One last aspect of gender as an analytical category will be discussed in terms of its convergence with anthropology.

Both feminist anthropologists Henrietta Moore (1993, 1994a, b, 1999) and Susan Sered (1998, 1999a, b) have adopted Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) notion of gender as 'performative' in their anthropological work. As noted above according to Butler, the body is understood as 'performative' in the sense that the performing itself creates the illusion of a gender core. Butler thus critiques the sex/gender distinction by no longer focussing on the categories of identity themselves, but the actual processes that have led to the formation of these categories. While Butler sees this process in terms of a particular historical hegemonic discourse that is continuously repeated in the discursive practices of concrete women and men, this 'doing' or 'making' of gender is by no means entirely novel, and indeed as Moore (1994: 91) remarks, not even that 'revolutionary' from the anthropological point of view.

Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna in their *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* for example, (1978) see the 'world of two sexes' as the result of what people *do*, that is a social and interactive process in which individuals constantly make gender attributions. The authors even suggest that in cultures where third and fourth gender categories exist, the gender role one exercises (for instance showing an interest for certain occupational activities) may in fact form the basis for gender attribution. This is

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opposed to the possession of particular genitals which serve as the fundament for gender attribution and the 'natural attitude' towards sex/gender in the West (38). This perspective on the doing or making of gender, whereby gender (or sex) is no longer seen as the fundament - or in Butler's terms the 'origins' -, but as the particular result, depending on the context, in any case offers a fruitful way of the study of gender cross-culturally. The contingency of a dominant normative two-sexes/two-genders model can be shown, whereas it allows for an understanding of the processes or practices of gender construction in other places and times that are not founded in this particular paradigm.

Feminist anthropologists and feminist poststructuralist feminist theorists have not been the only ones to have been occupied with the 'deconstruction' of binary categories and the emphasis on practice/process. Feminist sociologists have also theorised the shift of gender from category to dynamic process, including Foster (1999), whose arguments concerning on gender theory have already been discussed. In a groundbreaking article entitled 'Doing Gender', Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) suggest that gender is not so much an individual attribute, variable or role - what Foster terms earlier gender role theory - but the product of the social doing of gender, the result of interaction between human beings. Gender is no longer seen as the result of a socialisation, but concerns a social and lifelong process of 'gendering'. When this praxeological vision of gender is then linked to the more layered models like Joan Scott's (1996 [1986]), gender can be studied as the product of social practices in all domains of social life, from the level of the individual (subjective identity) to institutions, the state and globalisation processes (structures) and the level of representation (symbols, images, etc.). According to Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1999: 5):

The concept of gender thus provides an overarching rubric for looking at historical, cultural, and situational variability in definitions of womanhood and manhood, in meanings of masculinity and femininity, in relationships between men and women, and in the extent of their relative power and political status. If one accepts gender as variable, then one must acknowledge that it is never fixed, but is rather continually constituted and reconstituted.

For Foster (1999: 444), this emphasis on the doing rather than the having of gender is furthermore an important difference with sexual difference theory that holds that men - carrying the Phallus - do not have a gender. Thus to theorise men as somehow removed from gender, 'is to ignore how masculinities are shaped in various social and historical contexts and to gloss over the ways in which different groups of men "carry the Phallus" in disparate ways and with what consequences'. Besides the construction or performance of men and masculinity, gender also offers a way of theorising the intersections with other identity categories or performances, such as 'race', ethnicity, sexuality, and

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class. What holds for gender as a constructed category, holds for these other categories in the same way. Different processes often work together and simultaneously: gender is always 'raced' or 'classed' and 'race', ethnicity and class are in turn always 'gendered' (see also 'Doing Difference' by West and Fenstermaker 1995; Barot, Bradley and Fenton 1999; Phoenix 1999; Yuval-Davis 1998).

From a feminist perspective gender will usually not be seen as a form of difference or a 'neutral' category, but always as a form of 'power' or an axis of social inequality next to 'race', class, etc. Gender is never constructed in a vacuum but within a field of other constructions of inequality producing 'multiple systems of subordination' (Dirks, Eley and Ortner 1994: 35, Collins 1999: 263). These theorisations of power, subordination and inequality and also politics are very much inspired by Foucauldian and Gramscian reconceptualisations of power and dominance. Feminist critique ever since the beginning of the second wave then again has maintained that the 'personal is political', arguing that the political and the workings of power are not limited to the institutional and public sphere, but operate in everyday relationships and practices. People do not just take on a particular role, but are continuously negotiating questions of power, authority and control over the definition of reality (Dirks, Eley and Ortner 1994). At the level of theory this reconceptualisation of power reappropriated in contemporary gender theory and social theory in general, can be ascribed to the work of Michel Foucault.

Central in neofoucauldian theory is Foucault's postulation that power must not be understood as a transcendental or universal urge (drift), or something that only belongs to repressive apparatuses. It is something that moves in social spaces and is not the prerogative of the powerful alone (Dirks, Eley and Ortner 1994). From thinkers such as Gramsci then again the idea is borrowed that the 'taken-for-granted' practices and assumptions make dominance seem natural and inevitable for both those in power as well as the subordinated. In gender theory, it is precisely the assumptions and practices concerning gender that seem 'natural' and do not necessarily accompany direct (physical) coercion. Thus as phrased by Glenn (1999: 13): '...contestations of race and gender hierarchies may involve challenging everyday assumptions and practices, may take forms that do not involve direct confrontation, and may occur in locations not considered political'. If gender-practices are seen as *power-practices*, then this leaves a broader interpretative frame in which is no longer thought in terms of (male) dominance or (female) victims in totally oppressive systems, but in which forms and gradations of power-processes *between* people can be conceptualised.

Rosalind C. Morris (1995) claims that the entrance of the notion of performativity into the anthropology of gender would have been doubtful in the absence of *practice theory*, ascribed to the work of mainstream anthropologists/theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau and Marshall Sahlins. As Morris (571) notes: 'Perhaps what made practice theory

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most attractive to constructionist anthropologies of gender was its promise to overcome the Manichean oppositions between the given (which is not here reducible to the natural) and the constructed, with a more dialectical sense of how what is socially constructed comes to have the force of the given in individual lives’.

Noteworthy here is Bourdieu’s (e.g. 1990 [1980]) work, such as his notion of the *habitus*, a set of structuring dispositions, ‘producing and produced by specifically embodied subjects’. In his typical style of moving beyond the objectivist/subjectivist divide in social science Bourdieu applied his theoretical framework to the study of gender, very much echoing the type of gender theory put forward in this chapter that has been developing for over a decade now. Especially his rereading of the construction of gender in Kabyle (2001) based on fieldwork in Algeria during a more structuralist phase (1990 [1980/1970]) can be seen as a fine example of the way compulsory heterosexuality, sexual dimorphism, the ‘natural attitude’, or what have you, - presumably deeply rooted in many Mediterranean cultures - is ‘performed’ at the level of cognition, and ‘inscribed’ or ‘somatised’ in bodily praxis, structure and ideology in a dialectical fashion. For example, Bourdieu (1997: 195-196) claims concerning gender in Kabyle and beyond:

...these objective gendered divisions inscribed in the social order of things become inscribed into bodies in the form of dispositions and become subjective principles of vision, cognitive categories through which individuals come to see and construct the world as meaningful, lived reality. Being issued out of the world, such schemata of perception are accorded with the objective order of things and incline us to take the world as given. This spontaneous agreement of the social structures and cognitive structures – when it occurs – is the basis of the doxic experience of masculine domination as inscribed in the nature of things, invisible, unquestioned.

Innovative, but using Henrietta Moore’s words again ‘not that revolutionary’ from the perspective of contemporary feminist gender theory. If gender theory is answering any charges from (second generation) sexual difference theory then this would be the question of embodiment and how the earlier sex/gender divide ‘neglected’ the one side of this mistaken dichotomy. Henrietta Moore (1994, 1999) in particular sees much potential in Rosi Braidotti’s ‘return to the body’, defined as ‘one’s primary location in the world’, being ‘neither a biological nor a sociological category but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological’ (Braidotti 1994: 4). From the perspective of cross-cultural comparison, the issue of embodied subjectivity as theorised in sexual difference theory still remains problematic though, in the way the influence of psychoanalytic thought renders the body and sexual difference ontological and primary status. In view of these

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developments and reshufflings of concepts and positionings, for Moore (1999: 168) there is all the more reason not to give up the sex/gender debate, albeit in a radically reconfigured way:

Bodies are the site where subjects are morphologically and socially constructed, they mark the intersection of the social and the symbolic; each subject's relation with his or her body is both material and imaginary. Sexed bodies cannot be comprehended either by arguing that all of sex is socially constructed or by arguing that there is a part of sex that remains outside social construction. Sex, gender and sexuality are the product of a set of interactions with material and symbolic conditions mediated through language and representation. We need to bring into connection and manage as a complex relation a radical materialism and a radical social constructionism. This what the sex/gender debate allows us to do.

Although it remains to be seen in what directions the type of gender theory Moore suggests will go, from the 'other' side some exciting new work is being done. In many respects it is offering a reclaiming of gender from the hands of the contemporary resurgence in biologism fearfully expressed by Joan Scott at the beginning of this subchapter. In *Sexing the Body*, historian and biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000b) draws upon both sexual difference theory (e.g. the work of Elizabeth Grosz 1994) and gender theory in order to propose a nondualistic account and interdisciplinary perspective of the body. On the one hand Fausto-Sterling argues that 'truths' about human sexuality are created by scholars (including biologists) and are reflective of political, social and moral struggles about cultures and economies (i.e. the constructionist, 'discourse' stance). On the other hand components of these political, social, and moral struggles 'become, quite literally, embodied into our very physiological being' (5). Thus the material (biology, anatomy, hormonal...) is 'real' and active, but bodily matter does not form 'a neutral, pre-existing ground from which to understand the origins of sexual difference' (22). Appropriating the image of a Möbius strip, Fausto-Sterling's own suggestion would then be to develop more interactive ways between the biological and the social of looking at the body.

As for Bourdieu's ideas on both embodiment and 'bodily practice', and especially since the recent English translation of *Masculine Domination* (2001), it also remains to be seen how feminist gender theorists will be further appropriating some of his insights, particularly in light of his unfortunate sometimes deriding and ignorant stance of contemporary feminist research.<sup>24</sup> Thus both Morris (1995: 572) and Sherry Ortner (1996: 3) comment on how regrettable it is that the issue of gender barely entered into the major works on practice during the late 1970s and early 1980s, regardless of the exciting work being done in feminist scholarship during the same time.

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In *Making Gender* (1996) Sherry Ortner sets out to both appropriate and critique practice theory from a feminist anthropological perspective, in which the problem of power returns to centre stage. In this rapprochement Ortner sees ways of transcending some of the recurring problems and binaries expressed in the notion of ‘making gender’ understood to contain a double meaning. On the one hand ‘making’ is aligned with a constructionist perspective on cultural categories and subjectivity derived from mostly French theorists with a focus on textual analysis and discourse. In its second meaning, the making can be that from the actor’s point of view, referring to the way the actor enacts, resists or negotiates the world, reproducing it, or producing something new (2):

The anthropological project in the fullest sense, as I see it, must always comprise both kinds of work. Studies of the ways in which some set of ‘texts’ – media productions, literary creations, medical writings, religious discourses, and so on – ‘constructs’ categories, identities, or subject positions, are incomplete and misleading unless they ask to what degree those texts successfully impose themselves on real people (and which people) in real time. Similarly, studies of the ways in which people resist, negotiate, or appropriate some feature of their world are also inadequate and misleading without careful analysis of the cultural meanings and structural arrangements that construct and constrain their ‘agency,’ and that limit the transformative potential of all such intentionalized activity.

Regarding a feminist-practice approach, Ortner argues that practice theory can precisely offer some cues of ‘restoring’ agency without reproducing the bourgeois subject that has been deconstructed in influential feminist appropriations of poststructuralist and postmodern theory. The forms and distributions of ‘agency’ are always culturally and politically constructed as in the constructionist perspective, yet this does not necessarily imply that acknowledging agency (or the absence thereof) would imply total voluntarism. In a feminist or subaltern-practice approach, the focus then comes to lie on moments of ‘slippages’ and ‘resistance’ in the social reproduction, the latter being more in the foreground of theorists like Bourdieu. According to Ortner (18): ‘whatever the hegemonic order of gender relations may be – whether “egalitarian,” or “male dominant,” or something else – it never exhausts what is going on. There are always sites, and sometimes large sites, of alternative practices and perspectives available, and these may become the bases of resistance and transformation’.

Ortner’s vision of an anthropological-practice approach both supports a notion of gender as practised or performed for gender theory as theorised by other social scientists and anthropologists introduced above, and already offers some methodological tools for the study of gender in both contexts of ‘discourse’ and ‘practice’ or agency which I argue may be highly useful when

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studying religion. As far as I am aware, Susan Sered has been one of the very few to attempt such an integrative framework, although her theoretical groundings differ substantially from the account I have built in this chapter so far. As Morris (1995: 573-574) notes, in the anthropology of gender two distinct tendencies can be discerned, one focussing on the anthropology of 'difference', the ways in which 'cultural orders construct gender and create subject'. Moore calls the second strand of thought the anthropology of 'decomposing difference', focussing on instances of ambiguity 'encompassing everything from institutionalized transgending in non-Western societies to specifically framed gestures of parody and transgression in North American theater'.

Sered's (1998, 1999a) work on gender and religion in Okinawa may be categorised in the second strand. Sered appropriates Butler's concept of gender performativity in order to argue that in the religious rituals in the egalitarian culture of Okinawa, gender performatives are few and gender is deconstructed rather constructed. Gender dichotomies are exaggerated in specific rituals and contexts in order to reveal gender to be an 'artificial category'. They are not being naturalised mitigating 'against the development of essentialist understandings of social categories' (1999a: 235). Sered's appropriation of feminist poststructuralist theory in this ethnographic study can be placed in what Morris refers to as the second major strand in anthropologies of gender, that focussing on 'real life' examples of gender subversion or transgression. Morris's (1995: 574) remark is therefore an important one, at first sight bearing affinities with Oyewumi's much stronger repudiation of the imposition of gender on non-Western societies. Yet I believe she foremost stresses the fact that feminist gender theory - as anthropological practice - must in any case be reflexive by continuously acknowledging itself as a particular 'situated knowledge':

Often, the production and decomposition of difference in other contexts is a kind of proxy subversion of the binary gender system that defines the anthropologizing culture. In this manner, ethnographies are as much about performing gender as are the cultures about which they speak.

Whilst Sered (1998) argues for the Okinawa that sociological localising and temporalising discourses rather than ideological discourses construct - or deconstruct - gender, she similarly stresses how in many societies the ideological link between sex and gender is precisely often a religious ideology. In many contemporary societies, religious discourse in fact remains one of the most forcible ideologies in sustaining patriarchy, with its 'uniquely persuasive ability to present ideas as true' (607). While this may not *universally* be the case, and as I in the course of this chapter have attempted to show, the challenge in the particular case study in this thesis will be to appropriate both contemporary gender theory and a feminist anthropology oriented towards

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practice within a 'Western' patriarchal religious context. Here, both a focus on religious practice *and* religious discourse will prove to be necessary in the study of gender and religion of an strictly Orthodox Jewish community 'at home'.

### 3. Points of Departure and Awkward Relationships

If the kind of gender theory offered in the preceding paragraphs has as of yet hardly been integrated in the contemporary feminist study of religion, then it might even be way too premature to discuss the issue of a broader paradigm shift in the mainstream, in the form of what Randi Warne (2000) calls a 'gender-critical turn'. What was identified as two kinds of a paradigm shift towards gender-inclusiveness – within gender studies and within the mainstream – in my reading of Ursula King's status quaestionis in the first paragraph, have shown to be related in the sense that the issue of feminist politics at stake. Those feminist scholars critical of gender as an analytical concept are precisely concerned for the way the term is being co-opted in the mainstream, thereby losing its political edge and a theorisation of power which is often and ultimately bypassed in gender analysis.

After more than three decades of expansion and the maturation of feminist scholarship, and the institutionalisation of women's or gender studies as an autonomous field, it could even be questioned if the general question of a paradigm shift of mainstream disciplines under the influence feminist critique is all that central at all. This questioning refers to further heated debates on complex issues such as of the 'mainstreaming' of feminism and gender issues, the canonisation of the relationship between feminist practice and academic feminism, and the meaning of feminist theory.<sup>25</sup> On the one hand the incentive for the development of feminist critique of the mainstream for being androcentric in not attending to issues of gender remains as acute as it was generations ago. The responses from the 'mainstream' are varied though, depending on the discipline in question, and often on the proximity of the paradigms in fashion with feminist work. The original justification for women's studies as an autonomous discipline being grounded in it being necessary as long as mainstream disciplines remained ignorant of gender, can no longer be seen in quite the same light. The situation has become increasingly more complex as feminist critique has evermore focussed on the question of epistemology, questioning the grounds for the production of knowledge and the existence of traditional disciplinary divides altogether.

Whereas this chapter has mostly dealt with gender as a concept of analysis, this focus has already immediately engaged with questions of epistemology, methodology and politics. They are inextricable from the conceptual discussions and will become the main focus of the chapters to come. In chapter two and three the trajectory will be that of 'feminism' in order to return to the concept of gender again in chapter four. Rather than providing any

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definite answers to these complex issues, in the anti-essentialist approach towards gender such as the one I propose, its situatedness, its feminist genealogy, and its temporality must be underlined. It is in this context that I do not enter the debate on the desirability of paradigm shifts of traditional disciplines as such. Nor do I see the necessity of offering any clear-cut definitions of, and divisions between gender studies, women's studies or feminist studies or what would be their proper subject matter. More important is the way these concepts are strategically applied and accounted for. This I have tried to do in my own vision of a particular, momentary - necessarily always incomplete - approach of feminist gender theory, embedded in a social scientific approach towards religion, which I will be gradually exploring and modifying further in the chapters to come. In my own opinion gender thus primarily provides a heuristic point of departure, carrying political and epistemological origins and implications, and precisely helpful because of this polyvalence - thus contra Rosi Braidotti's point of view, but by quoting one of her many eloquent definitions nonetheless (Braidotti 1994: 52):

...for the sake of precision I would define 'gender' as a notion that offers a set of frameworks within which feminist theory has explained the social and discursive construction and representation of differences between the sexes. As such, 'gender' in feminist theory fulfils primarily the function of challenging the universalistic tendency [of conflating the masculine viewpoint with the general] of critical language and the systems of knowledge and scientific discourse at large.

At the end of this introductory chapter, I return to the original problem of the im/possibility of a paradigm shift in the mainstream study of religion under the impact of gendered critique. Only recently has this problem been given some thought in an article by Randi Warne (2001), editor to an earlier mentioned special issue dedicated to 'gender' in *MTSR*. Warne wonders how it is that despite the fact that religious studies 'prides itself in being a scientific discipline', committed to the removal of all sorts of bias through the ideal of comparative and non-confessional scholarship, analytical engagement with gender is lacking and androcentrism prevails. Warne (2001: 147) suggests that a 'deeper reason' is involved which primarily points to the historical context in which *Religionswissenschaft* emerged:

The projects and practices of *Religionswissenschaft* were framed from the very outset within a series of assumptions about humanity and the hierarchical evolutionary ranking of groups within it, all given credence by the overlay of 'disinterested science'.

Warne briefly refers to the post-Enlightenment era in which a doctrine of 'separate spheres' relegated women to the private, domestic realm, a gender

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ideology that was at its height when Religionswissenschaften was born. Her comments on religious studies being a 'disinterested science' then refer to the way that androcentrism was 'inbuilt' in the discipline, with the male being the 'normal subjects' of study, and the study of females potentially distorting rather than contributing to more 'objective' results. The gender ideology in which the discipline arose, that of gender differences between women and men understood in complementary terms of public/private, reason/emotion, science/religion, thus framed and fed the context in which critique of androcentrism would be rejected under the guise of objectivity. According to Warne (148) therefore, 'insights and arguments from a woman-centred perspective will be scientifically dismissible as personal, emotional, and unreliable'. The paradox for anyone currently attempting to effect a paradigm shift would therefore be the following (149):

They can either accept traditional constructions of gender in religious studies as scientifically sound and unproblematic, thereby accepting self-definitions grounded in and deployed via the dual gender ideologies noted above, or they can challenge those constructions on the grounds of experience and self-definition, leaving themselves open to charges of self-interest and self-advocacy. It is a great irony that the high ground of scientific objectivity is claimed by those who are most invested a [*sic*] in a very specific Euro-North American masculine mode of its deployment.

The historical context and its dominant gender ideology that Warne refers to however, was the same context in which many other disciplines rose and thus to my mind cannot fully account for the present situation in which religious studies is impeded from making any gender-critical turn. Whilst my own angle in accounting for androcentrism in religious studies will definitely allude to some of the 'inbuilt' mechanisms of the discipline of which Warne briefly speaks – especially that concerning the problem of scientific objectivity versus self-interest and advocacy – I will be locating the relationship of (in)compatibility at the *intersection* of religious studies and a feminist approach. Thus the 'deeper reasons' for the 'lagging' behind or the seeming impossibility altogether of a paradigm shift of the mainstream are attributed to both internal features of feminist scholarship, of religious studies, but mostly in the *juxtapositioning* of these two fields of study.

In my assessment of the contemporary status of the study of gender and religion, three main observations can be ascertained. *Firstly* it can be stated that the mainstream study of religion is and remains androcentric from the perspective of feminist critique. Although this insight has been repeated throughout this chapter, - starting with the status quaestionis by Ursula King - this accusation will be studied more fully in the course of the following two chapters. *Secondly*, it can be argued that gender studies in religion, if at all existent under such a name, does not integrate, or in any case does not

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*sufficiently* take developments in contemporary feminist gender theory into account. This insight was argued in the current chapter, which already contained in it a particular positioning in feminist scholarship. This positioning simultaneously contained the seeds for an alternative methodology from the perspective of comparative social science, to be addressed more fully in chapter four and ‘tested’ by way of an empirical case study in chapters five, six, and seven. *Thirdly*, one important issue that so far has not been raised is the status of the study of religion within gender studies or feminist scholarship itself. If gender theory is little integrated in the feminist study of religion, then the latter has equally been neglected in gender studies as a purportedly interdisciplinary field. Thus, although the field of feminist theology and feminist spirituality is thriving and expanding as never before, this kind of research can be said to be ‘ghettoised’ itself in the field of gender studies. Few general readers in feminist theory or gender analysis contain contributions or exemplary texts from this field, despite the fact that more often than not, articles from all spectres from the social sciences and humanities and of late even natural sciences are represented. That the few exceptions then concern the work of women scholars from ethnic minority groupings – the so-called ‘women of colour’ – to whom spirituality is an indissoluble dimension of their ethnic identity, or the work on religion in non-Western cultures by feminist anthropologists is not entirely coincidental I believe. In this case, the deeper reason for this awkward relationship refers to the awkward relationship between feminism and religion in the context of Western culture and history *tout court*.

In a roundtable discussion in *JFSR* this problem has gained some attention – from the side of feminist religious studies scholars that is – where it is explicitly stated that there appears to exist ‘a lack of interest and/or outright suspicion’ among feminist scholars regarding religion and spirituality outside of this field (Townes 1998: 106). Michelle M. Lelwica (1998) argues this point through an analysis of antireligious currents in two best-selling exemplars of both popular feminist discourse (Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth* published in 1991) and academic discourse in Linda Nicholson’s *Feminism/Postmodernism* (1990). In Naomi Wolf’s liberal rhetoric religion is simply seen as the enemy of female liberation, any feminist consciousness being necessarily secular against and over the ‘false consciousness’ that sexist and misogynist religion would indoctrinate. In *Feminism/Postmodernism* by contrast, religion is more absent than overtly under attack, yet according to Lelwica the rhetoric haunts ‘like a ghost’ among the contributors to the book united in their postmodern critique of the Enlightenment pursuit of liberty and truth.

As noted above, Lelwica first emphasises how religion as a field of study is missing in the authors’ various lists of disciplines that have been affected by feminist and postmodern critique. Secondly, religion is absent in the catalogue of ‘variables’ that reflects the specificity of female gender identity, including the typical ‘class, “race”, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation’. In the decade that has followed the publication of *Feminism/Postmodernism*, I would

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argue that the by now standardised intersectional approach that takes these axes of difference into account, religion continues to remain absent most of the time. Thirdly Lelwica (116) argues, religion is missing as a subject of inquiry, and becomes apparent in the long lists of dualisms ‘that feminists and postmodernists alike are eager to deconstruct – mind/body, subject/object, individual/society, culture/nature – indeed, just about every binary under the sun except the seemingly insurmountable distinction between secular and sacred’. This absence or neglect is not coincidental Lelwica argues, but points to the way religion is held as suspect in its relationship to modernity, having ‘equipped the Enlightenment with its normalizing idioms and universalising claims’ (117). The feminist critique of mainstream scholarship attacking the latter on deep-rooted epistemological grounds, thus holds religion and science to be two sides of the same androcentric coin. Hence, the modern scientific ideal of objectivity which is the main focus of feminist postmodern critique is merely viewed in terms of continuity or a replication of the religiously oriented belief that true knowledge reflects a “God’s eye view” (117-118).

Here, Lelwica hits a mark I think concerning the problematic relationship between feminism and religion in Western culture in general. This becomes even more awkward when both are the frames of reference or subject matter of academic scholarship. To Lelwica’s critique that the authors in the book – which can be expanded to the sceptic majority of feminist scholars – have a rather monolithic view of traditional religion can be added the remark that this view is also a rather culture-bound and Western oriented perspective of religion. If feminist research is to become less parochial, less colonial and finally embark on taking into account cultural differences in the construction of gender and in the agency of women, then religion may be one of the most undertheorised but important issues to address. Religion needs to be taken more seriously in contemporary feminist scholarship, especially in comparative work. An outright rejection or silencing over as if religion were necessarily antithetical to women’s agency or feminist identity proves to be severely limited.

Without taking up these issues any further here, the following chapter will in any case shortly embark on the history of the relationship between feminism, religion and the academy in the west, if only as a way of setting some grounds. This chapter will necessarily only be briefly pointing to the particularity of this relationship, which obviously is in need of much more research than I can offer here. I conclude this chapter by putting forward my main thesis that in terms of the question of the im/possibility of a paradigm shift, the three observations I have hereto spoken of are all connected: it is precisely in the interconnection between these three observations that lies the seemingly incompatibility between religious studies and a feminist gender approach.

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<sup>1</sup> King, Ursula, 'Female Identity and the History of Religions', in: V.C. Hayes (ed.), *Identity Issues and World Religions*, Bedford Park: The Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1986, pp. 82-92.

<sup>2</sup> See chapter three for more on the relationship between feminist critique and the discipline of anthropology.

<sup>3</sup> See next paragraph for more on gender as an analytical concept.

<sup>4</sup> King hereby refers to the well-known controversial post-Christian feminist theologian Mary Daly, who will be referred to in more detail in chapter two.

<sup>5</sup> Examples are Darlene M. Juschka's (ed.) *Feminism in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (2001) and the not yet published (at the time of this writing) *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader* edited by Elizabeth A. Castelli and Rosamond C. Rodman, published by Palgrave and Arvind Sharma's (ed.) *Methodology in Religious Studies: The Interface with Women's Studies* to be published by the State University of New York Press in 2002.

<sup>6</sup> The term 'womanism' was coined by the novelist Alice Walker in the eighties and has since then been appropriated by many self-identified black feminists in the U.S.A., denoting a specific form of feminism that is highly critical of second wave 'white feminism' for failing to address questions of 'race', class and ethnicity. For the background of the term and the debate, see chapter three.

<sup>7</sup> Joan Scott's lecture was held at the invitation of Sophia, the Belgian Co-ordination Network for Women's Studies, and took place in Brussels on December 8<sup>th</sup> 1999.

<sup>8</sup> In the Dutch language 'gender' opposed to biological or physical sex ('sekse' or 'geslacht') is similarly gradually being incorporated in its English form in newspapers and policies. The original emphasis on gender as culturally constructed opposed to biological sex however, again is hardly emphasised, it becoming more of an intellectual or elite term, sometimes simply denoting anything to do with men or – more often – women's issues in general, but mostly simply in reference to biological sexual difference.

<sup>9</sup> Examples are the work by Desmond Morris, but also recent best-sellers such as John Gray's *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* series. There are also countless publications containing a kind of 'reevaluation of femininity' type of popular discourse through concepts such as 'emotional intelligence'.

<sup>10</sup> Although the focus will be on gender theory in this chapter and thesis, it must be emphasised that there are important links with the literature and developments in the field of sexual identity and sexuality. The essentialism/constructionism debate in fact owes much to the way this has been played out in the study of homo- and heterosexuality and the later development of fields such as gay and lesbian studies and queer theory in particular. The work of Mary McIntosh (1981 [1968]), Jeffery Weeks and Edward Stein (1990) are but a few prominent examples of this kind of work.

<sup>11</sup> Sandra Harding (1986) proposes a similar multidimensional model of gender that must study the interaction between three levels of gender: gender symbolism, division of labour or gender structure and finally individual gender. Another less known 'layered' model of gender has been proposed by the German social psychologist Carol Hagemann-White, who delineates four levels of gender analysis: gender as a social category, symbolic dichotomies of sexual meaning, gendered forms of behaviour and sexual gender identity (in Tonkens 1998).

<sup>12</sup> I will be referring to 'race' in brackets throughout the text. Whereas the term is rarely used in the European context, in the American and British literature I draw upon, it frequently features as a category of identity or axis of difference used to distinguish between bounded groups in terms of community and nation. I therefore understand the concept - like other categories - as a socially constructed category with no biological basis, despite the fact that it is used in for instance racist and biologist discourses.

<sup>13</sup> This lecture was held at the conference 'The Body in Culture: Corporeality in Social Practice' in Nijmegen (NL) December 13<sup>th</sup> 2000.

<sup>14</sup> According to Braidotti, the chapter in question is entitled 'The rebellion of the clitorises' in Mario Vargas Llosa's erotic novel *The notebooks of Don Rigoberto* published by Penguin Books in 1997.

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<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler is obviously not the only feminist theorist in the appropriation of postmodern or poststructuralist theories, nor the first and only to critique the sex-gender distinction. (For example, Stevi Jackson (1998) refers to the materialist feminist perspective of Christine Delphy (2001 [1993]) and Denise Riley's social constructionist position on the notion of 'woman'). Butler's work nevertheless can be said to have been most influential in 'gender theory' as practised in most English speaking countries, although Butler herself is clearly influenced by many French philosophers (Derrida, Althusser, Foucault), and French feminist philosophers such as de Beauvoir and Irigaray.

<sup>16</sup> See also chapter three.

<sup>17</sup> Chapter two deals with this shift in more detail.

<sup>18</sup> Notable adherents are Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva.

<sup>19</sup> Obviously Sered is not the only scholar to have applied gender theory in the study of religion from an anthropological approach. Joanne C. Watkins' *Spirited Women: Gender, Religion, and Cultural Identity in the Nepal Himalaya* (1996) is a fine example of how gender is applied as an analytical category in this kind of work. However, as far as I know, Sered is one of the few relatively widely known scholars to be actually working on the boundaries and intersections of gender studies, anthropology and religious studies, e.g. by publishing in journals in all of these fields.

<sup>20</sup> Foucault's work has been critically analysed many times in its usefulness for contemporary feminist theory. One example is Lois McNay's (1992) reading of Foucault's oeuvre. McNay argues that on the one hand his work has offered much for feminist theory, particularly in his theory of power and its relation to the body. On the other hand, Foucauldian theory remains problematic for feminist theory in its over-determination of the subject, and thus contains shortcomings in terms of normative and political questions of agency and emancipation. In his later – and more neglected – work on the 'technologies of the self', this view is somewhat counteracted, yet according to McNay in no way warrants a straightforward alliance with contemporary postmodern thought.

<sup>21</sup> For more on the background and literature relating to this movement of critique, see chapter three.

<sup>22</sup> Oyewumi, Oyeronke, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

<sup>23</sup> The works that Foster reviews are Rosi Braidotti's *Nomadic Subjects* (1994), Drucilla Cornell's *Transformations: Recollective Imagination and Sexual Difference*, New York: Routledge, 1994 and Tania Modleski's *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a 'Postfeminist Age'*, New York: Routledge, 1991.

<sup>24</sup> Despite the obvious convergence between Bourdieu's ideas on gender and masculine domination and contemporary gender theorising, in a lecture at Berkeley given in 1996, Bourdieu (1997: 201) simply equates 'feminism' in danger of being 'rendered inoffensive by its contamination with what is called in the United States 'postmodernism''. Notwithstanding the fact that in the many varieties of contemporary feminist thought and movements, groups of feminists withhold the very same critical position, Bourdieu rejects what he perceives as the domination of philosophy and 'deconstruction' in 'feminism', thereby taking one particular form of deconstruction and discourse analysis for all of contemporary feminist 'poststructuralist' or 'postmodern' gender theory. In the English republication of *Masculine Domination* (2001 [1998]) the omission of generations of feminist scholarship, while approximating many of the same conclusions is striking. The situation is illustrative of the awkward relationship between feminist theory and its place and legitimacy as in an autonomous discipline such as women's studies, and the relationship between feminist theory and 'mainstream' theory I believe. In the case of Bourdieu it cannot be denied that feminist theorists have looked more towards fruitful appropriations of his 'mainstream' theory (for optimistic and more sceptic readings of Bourdieu see e.g. Delhaye 1991; Lovell 2000; McNay 1999; Moi 2000; Vom Bruck 1997) than has been the case the other way round when the focus has been on gender issues. For instance, Judith Butler (1993, 1999) has critically engaged with the work of Bourdieu whilst the latter in *Masculine Domination* (2001: 103, n. 37) only refers to Butler in a few sentences concerning the familiar misinterpretation of the voluntarism of gender performance through drag, and a somewhat awkward footnote on Butler's rectification of the matter in her later work.

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<sup>25</sup> For example, see the recent interchanges in the new journal *Feminist Theory* following the publication of Liz Stanley and Sue Wise's (2000) article on the question how feminist theory should be defined and practised (Ahmed 2000; Ermath 2000; Humm 2001; Kapur 2001; Marchbank and Letherby 2001; Stacey 2001; Winter 2000).

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **SETTING THE GROUNDS OF AN AWKWARD RELATIONSHIP: PIONEERING WOMEN SCHOLARS AND FEMINIST ACTIVISM**

In this chapter, which takes a historical focus, the background is prepared for the analysis of the apparent incompatibility between religious studies and a gender approach, that will be the main subject of chapter three. In particular some initial insights will be gained, as to the intertwining of women's studies and feminist scholarship with the development of feminism outside academy on the one hand, and a different yet similar multiple positioning of the study and the practice of religion. First, the history of women scholars in religious studies will be briefly evaluated. This is methodologically illustrative of a type of feminist critique of androcentrism, to be fully explored in contemporary times in chapter three. A general and brief overview of the history of the relationship between feminism and religion in Western society follows, covering the periods of first and second wave feminist movement.<sup>1</sup> I will attempt to delineate the major dissimilarities in this relationship in these distinctive eras, but also those that can be attributed to the different socio-cultural contexts of the U.S. and Western Europe. The chapter concludes with an account of the way in which feminism enters religious studies scholarship in the academy at the height of the second wave.

The earliest feminist critiques of science and academic scholarship, followed by the emergence of 'women's studies' as a discipline or a distinct field cannot be understood, nor viewed outside of the socio-political context of second wave feminism or the women's liberation movement in Western Europe and the U.S. of the sixties and seventies. Minimally, the feminist movement in its main objective towards ending the subordination of women simply demanded concrete knowledge about women's lives and their situation of inequality. There was the hope that the academy or science could 'fill the gaps' in knowledge about women, but also provide some more definitive answers to and theoretical explanations for what was perceived as women's universal secondary status in society. The emerging practice of 'feminist research' was understood as the production of knowledge *about* women, carried out *by* women and *for* women (Stanley and Wise 1990). It was therefore explicitly political in that the kind of knowledge envisioned could be put to use in serving the goals of the feminist movement: to change women's lives and the transformation of sexist society.

The entrance of feminism into the academy as the 'intellectual arm of the women's movement' (Crowley 1999) and the development of feminist scholarship directed at 'filling the gaps' and the production of new knowledge thus simultaneously accompanied a suspicion towards the same academy. The

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academy and its practice of the acquisition and production of knowledge or science in general was also to be held accountable for the invisibility or exclusion of women as both subjects and objects of knowledge. This was initially expressed in what is usually considered to be another main characteristic of the burgeoning feminist scholarship: the exposure and elimination of androcentrism<sup>2</sup> and 'sexist bias' of the mainstream, which rendered women hidden, deviant, or conversely, conflated the male as the universal norm (Brouns 1995; Maynard 1998; Stacey and Thorne 1998 [1985]; Stanley and Wise 1990).

Although questions of epistemology were not explicitly addressed during this early phase, this second critique of the mainstream as *malestream* already carried with it the seeds of what was to become much more prominent, and elaborately discussed in later feminist theories, namely the question of objectivity and value-neutrality of scientific methodology and knowledge. The exposure of the links between science and politics had been underway in the form of an apparent crisis over the application of the positivistic paradigm in the social and behavioural sciences since the early seventies (Reinharz 1992: 423). Joyce McCarl Nielsen (1990) includes two traditions of thought that are illustrative of what she calls 'the postempirical crisis in knowledge' in the social sciences, that developed following the growing scepticism towards what was perceived to be the ideal scientific method of attaining objective knowledge.<sup>3</sup> The first of these, the interpretive or hermeneutic tradition questions the possibility of the positivistic paradigm in the study of social life by incorporating the subjectivity of the object under study into the research process. Although the hermeneutical method has been especially important in disciplines leaning towards the humanities such as cultural anthropology and religious studies, as Nielsen (1990: 9) argues, this form of research methodology to date provides a 'legitimate alternative' in the social sciences, despite the continuous dominance of objectivism.

The second tradition that characterises the postempirical crisis in knowledge was more directly aligned with the development of feminist scholarship as rooted in a general crisis of society and the rise of various critical social movements. Whilst alternative, more interpretative research paradigms were designed in response to the insistence of the immediate social relevance of social science, including grounded theory, participatory research and phenomenology (Reinharz 1992; Poldervaart 1990), critical theory (or the Frankfurter Schule) was the most explicit in the political accountability of scientific knowledge. Critical theorists not only included positivist science in their rejection of dominant ideologies such as capitalism that maintained social inequality, but considered scientific knowledge itself to be the very product of these social contexts and determined by the values endorsed by its practitioners. These challenges against the elitist character of both the institution of the university and the practice of science itself were often located in many a protest or liberation movements among students, blacks, the anti-war movement in the

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U.S., etc. The feminist movement was one movement among them, focussing on the question of inequality in terms of sexual rather than class or economical differences.

The feminist critique of androcentrism, sexism or ‘patriarchy’ in relationship to the academy was thus from its inception multi-faceted. On the one hand the institution of the academy and its production of scientific knowledge was held to be suspect in that it contributed and sustained the oppression of women and other unprivileged groups in society. On the other hand, it could also promise to serve the feminist movement once rid of all forms of both institutional and epistemological and methodological biases within academic disciplines. The demand for more knowledge *for* and *about* women in order to further women’s liberation thus went hand in hand with an epistemological critique. This initially involved the process of discovering and then exposing the ways in which knowledge that was produced rendered women invisible (androcentrism), or at worst was full of patriarchal bias that contributed to the reproduction of gender-based oppression in society. An obvious starting place for feminist academics to reflect was on their own position of women as scholars or scientists taking part in the particular historical institution in which objective knowledge was produced. This early form of feminist critique that explicated and problematised the under-representation of women at various levels within academic institutions indeed still forms a prominent place on the contemporary feminist agenda. However, the link between women as producers of knowledge and the methods and contents of this knowledge may not have been questioned in this stage of exposing and accounting for women’s inequality in patriarchal society and scientific representation as it is today.

### **1. A Feminist Historiography of Religious Studies?**

The growing feminist critique in various academic disciplines had special repercussions when it reached the field of religious studies, seeing the specific position of the latter in its close relationship with the practice of theology and religion in its institutionalised forms. Carol P. Christ (1992: 83) notes that for the U.S., where religious studies were not established as an academic discipline until the sixties, there was certainly no deliberate ‘conspiracy to exclude women and others from the founding of Religious Studies’. A substantial part of scholars in religious studies were, and still often are themselves affiliated with or working for religious institutions or seminaries. Consequently, not only are these scholars/practitioners limited in being representative of or studying mostly mainstream religious traditions present in the West such as Protestantism, Catholicism and Judaism. This has also implied an exclusive male perspective on these traditions, as at an institutional level these religions have always been male-oriented. Here it already becomes clear how the

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interweaving of the academic study of religion with – hegemonic – religious practices has led to the exclusion of women in institutional terms. Access to the scholarly study of religion was a priori barred on the grounds of an explicit religious ideology of sexual difference. This basic premise figures as one of the factors preventing or delaying feminist critiques of the mainstream, especially compared to other disciplines where the dominant doctrines of objectivity officially held gender *not* to be of any relevance for the scientific enterprise.

Ursula King (1995c) rectifies Christ's characterisation of religious studies as an academic discipline in the sixties for the European context. For the 'independent' study of religion, apart from denominational affiliations, better known under the title 'history of religion' in its broad application had been practised in Western Europe for more than a century. As for the participation of women in the development of the discipline until the second wave of feminist movement, a glimpse of Mircea Eliade's (1987) prominent sixteen volume *Encyclopaedia of Religion* forces us to conclude this would have been minimal. Besides the general 'invisibility' of feminist and women's studies in religion in the whole of this series<sup>4</sup>, King (1995c: 223) notes that of the privileged 142 scholars to whom a biography has been accorded, only four women have been added. Two of these in fact come from the discipline of anthropology (Ruth Benedict (1887-1948) and Barbara G. Myerhoff (1935-1985). Only two British women Jane E. Harrison (1850-1928), specialist in Greek religion, and Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941), the writer on mysticism, are among the chosen.

King's own study of 'forgotten' and invisible women from the history of religious studies, can itself be regarded as an exemplar of a way revealing androcentrism in the mainstream. Although this deals with a deconstruction of the male norm for the *historiography* in the study of religion, the apparent invisibility and/or absence of women researchers in past and present scholarship in any case testifies to the possible androcentrism in the 'canonisation' of a discipline. According to Stanley and Wise (1993: 217) histories are therefore always better seen as historiographies, their facts 'are highly partial and constitute elements of a framework stitched together by the preoccupations and intellectual concerns of the historian, not of "the past" itself'.

'*Woman Worthies*'

In *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (1991), and following up on *The Science Question in Feminism* (1986), feminist philosopher Sandra Harding proposes a framework in which the diverse ways in which science, technology and theories about knowledge in general can be analysed from a feminist perspective.<sup>5</sup> One possible avenue that can show the androcentrism or what Harding calls the sexism of mainstream science, is attending to the role women have played in the production of scientific knowledge. For Harding this level of critique is more in the line of reformation

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and correction rather than a more radical critique in view of the kind of real paradigm shifting she ultimately supports. However, the search for 'women worthies' in the history of men-dominated sciences in any case may lead to other steps in unmasking the 'false universalism' and the socially situated character of scientific scholarship.

With respect to religious studies, - apart from Ursula King's (1999c) 'A Question of Identity: Women Scholars and the Study of Religion' in *Religion and Gender* (1999a) discussed in the previous chapter - hardly any historical research into the extent of the contribution of women scholars or writers to the development of religious studies has been carried out.<sup>6</sup> King's own research not only shows how androcentric mechanisms and norms were applied such as with Eliade's *ER* in the selections of what is considered a valuable contribution. It also demonstrates how concrete structural barriers have been put in front of women in the past and more recent times. King notes that the *ER* does not mention two particular women scholars in the field of Buddhist studies, although they delivered considerable accomplishments and fundamental 'qualitative' work even according to the dominant norms of the time. Caroline Augusta Foley (best known as Mrs. C.A.F. Rhys-Davids) was a publisher, translator and contributor to more than twenty-four different editions of Pali-texts. Foley then succeeded her husband, the orientalist Thomas William Rhys Davids (1843-1922), founder and president of the Pali text Society in 1881 after his death in 1922, for some twenty years. Mr. Rhys Davids is nevertheless mentioned up to four times in the *ER*, despite only having nine publications to his name. King argues that the same negligence and omission holds for works such as Eric Sharpe's (1998 [1986]) overview of the comparative study of religions. Mrs. C.A.F. Rhys Davids is only mentioned once, (a reference to her presence at a particular conference), opposed to her husband who is brought up frequently as professor of the comparative study of religion in Manchester. In the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Papers from 1979 from the department at Manchester then again, according to King, Sharpe (1980: 33 in King 1995c: 230-1) does refer to C.A.F. Rhys Davids, suggesting that perhaps her contribution to the study of Buddhism was greater than that of her husband. C.A.F. Rhys Davids nonetheless only became a specialist due to her marriage to the professor in oriental studies, a phenomenon that Harding (1991: 22) refers to as typical for the few 'woman worthies' in most scientific domains of the past:

When scientific collecting and experimentation were primarily gentlemen's activities, daughters as well as sons could gain a scientific education in the laboratory out behind the kitchen. It is striking how many early women scientists were related to male scientists; they learned science from or were related to male scientists; they learned science from or were supported in their work by fathers or husbands

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who were also scientists. Indeed, it is difficult in many areas to find women scientists who were not mentored by male relatives.

The successor of C.A.F. Rhys Davids as president of the Pali Text Society, Isaline Blew Horner (1896-1981), may have been more of a completely 'self-made woman scholar'. Although a complete biography is lacking, King (1995c: 231-232) claims Horner directed the editing and translation of at least seventeen volumes of Pali texts by herself, next to the publication of many books and an international recognition for her expertise in Pali as a revisor of the *Copenhagen Pali Dictionary*. So even though Horner enjoyed considerable recognition in the field of Buddhist Studies for her merits regarding the Pali Text Society, there is similarly no reference to her in the *ER*. The few women who did gain access to a scientific or scholarly career, not depending on the ample opportunities through their husbands or other family ties then again, were women who came from the higher classes of society, possessing the necessary financial means and the time to commit themselves to such work. In Horner's obituary from 1982 she is not only acclaimed for the 'energy and time' she invested in the Pali Text Society, but also for her financial support.<sup>7</sup>

Harding (1991: 22-23) points to the fact that the social processes that determined and prevented access to the scientific field were not only gendered, but also circumscribed by class and 'race' differences. Even though the opportunities for men with less financial means and 'men of colour' who additionally faced racism were also slight, according to Harding they at least did more often succeed in gaining access to scientific higher education, than poor women or women of colour, even if their career prospects may have been limited. The individual achievements by 'women worthies' who did or did not work by the side of their husbands, or owed their positions to male family members, were obviously not necessarily inspired by what Harding calls a 'feminist consciousness'. They had to organise their lives in such a way that resembled that of the male scientist, where the impact of marriage and children would be less compulsive and not necessarily force them into choices for their families 'or' their careers.

The fact that these exceptional women were often forced to combat male prejudice in an environment that did not always take them seriously in itself can be reason enough to attribute them a 'feminist consciousness'. However, this is no guarantee their feminist consciousness may have been transferred to the actual content of their work, expressed in any kind of implicit or explicit critique of androcentrism. Publications such as I.B. Horner's *Women under Primitive Buddhism* published in 1930 were probably exceptions to the norm in terms of their subject matter. At best, the presence of 'women worthies' shows whether a particular discipline or field or study as an institution may have been sexist.

Whereas King (1995c) only pays attention to the structural patterns of androcentrism in her historiography of women pioneers in the study of religion,

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- many of which appear to be specialised in the field of Buddhist Studies – perhaps some contemporary feminist buddhologists can reveal some more on the content of the work of these pioneers. Rita M. Gross (1993) and Tessa Bartholomeusz (1994) both refer to I.B. Horner's work on women in Early Buddhism from 1930. Regardless of its status of being a 'classic', 'exceptional' (Bartholomeusz 1994: 12) or an 'important' (Gross 1994: 34) work on women in Early Buddhism, the book was recently only reprinted for the first time after more than seventy years. In Bartholomeusz's references to Horner, we gain the impression that however exceptional her work might have been, in retrospect, it must have somehow been motivated by what Sandra Harding has calls a feminist consciousness.

Apart from an analysis of the specific rules that guided the old order of Buddhist nuns, Horner would have studied the life histories of many members on the basis of their own religious poems, the *Therigatha*. Bartholomeusz (1994: 12) on Horner's work: '... the religious experience of women does not provide supplementary information about the experience of men; rather it is seen as truly representative of Buddhism and the Buddhist monastic community.' We furthermore read that the way was paved for Horner by other studies that 'were sympathetic to the woman's point of view' (ibid.). Bartholomeusz refers to C.A.F. Rhys Davids, and a certain Mabel Bode, who enquired into the lives of women leaders in early Buddhism as early as 1890.<sup>8</sup> C.A.F. Rhys Davids would have been the first to make a translation of the famous poems of the *Therigatha*-nuns, that was then published in 1909.<sup>9</sup> It is therefore difficult to straightforwardly attribute a feminist consciousness to these pioneers without further serious investigation into these publications and if possible into the lives of these pioneers. Additionally the *Therigatha* are not some obscure or unofficial source but are part of what is considered the official Pali Canon or the *Tipithaka*, the oldest collections of holy scriptures in Buddhism we know of (Cornille 1994: 119).

The women worthies in the history of religious studies indeed appear to be the individual exceptional women that Harding speaks of, who mostly through structural advantages, often via their husbands, were given the opportunity to deliver contributions to their field of study. Although in retrospect these pioneers can be attributed a great 'feminist value', and the negligence in mentioning their work in the canonisation of the discipline of religious studies cannot be overlooked, it is much more difficult to ascribe any form of 'feminist consciousness'. That these pioneers are primarily located in the field of Buddhist studies or Orientalism, can perhaps be explained through the relative absence of structural obstacles that were definitely present for the study of Christianity and Judaism, which Christ (1992) referred to regarding the institutional relationship between religious studies and theology.

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*Smaller 'Her-stories' and Structural Barriers*

Next to the woman worthies, Harding refers to the importance of not merely taking into account the exceptional achievements of a few special individuals in the history of scientific scholarship. The demand to abandon the so-called meta-narratives or grand histories, which only figure big names and events as the representation of 'history', is anyhow an important part of feminist critique, as it is for any kind of historical study. In Harding's proposal for a first possible critique of the androcentrism of science though, 'women in science' are seen in much broader terms than merely reinstating the 'women worthies'. The search for the 'lost' and 'forgotten' women of the past, one of the first directions of research typical for feminist history, entails a broadening of the historiography of science, including the contributions not only determined by androcentric norms. Research should not limit itself to the exceptional cases, but also include 'less public, less official, less visible, and less dramatic aspects of science in order to gain a better understanding of women's participation in these enterprises' (Harding 1991: 26).

Next to her attention for the women worthies excluded in the *ER*, King applies another historiographical method in order to retrieve the roles women played in the history of religious studies. Through the available documents (programs, proceedings) of the International Congress for the History of Religions held since 1908, King attempts to find out how many women were registered for the congresses and in which way they participated (simply accompanying their husbands or as individual participants). At the third congress of the IAHR held in Oxford in 1908, some 253 of the 599 members appeared to be women, the majority, 183 being registered independently and therefore not mere travel companions to their husbands. Of the 132 papers that were presented, only eight of the speakers were women and some twelve women performed as discussants of papers. So although 40% of those present were women, it can be assumed that most of them 'remained silent; they were present without being active participants' (King 1995c: 225). Despite the lack of active participation, this ratio of women participants has not been reached until the congress of 1985. At the sixth congress held in Amsterdam in 1950, only thirty individual participants were present of a total of 193, and only two papers were presented by women. Without drawing any definite conclusions or attempting to account for the differences in the women's relative presence and participation, when we compare these different historical epochs, the limited 'active' contribution nevertheless remains noticeable.

We can also wonder how 'passive' the women present actually were at the IAHR meetings. The contributions of women in science in terms of what Harding refers to as 'more preparatory work; next to the collection of data, and teaching assignments, cannot be underestimated and it was likely the case in the study of religion. A feminist query into the way 'contribution' is defined, again

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leads to the question of the structure of science and the academy itself, as it is the elites in both science and in society who have determined these definitions.

The fact that within religious studies, as in many other disciplines of the sciences and humanities, only exceptional or 'invisible' women have been active can for a great part be ascribed to the social structures that have made women's access to the academy difficult. First it was shown how 'objective' structural barriers were prominently present in religious studies, because of the close relationship between the disciplines of theology and the academic study of religion, the first of which women were excluded from because of their sex. Besides actual numbers, recent research shows how even today mechanisms of informal discrimination systematically prevent women from building an academic career comparable to men. Harding (1991: 29) mentions factors such as the devaluation of work by women, the exclusion of women from informal networks of men, etcetera.

As for the period during the first decade of the twentieth century, - and concerning the field of 'comparative religion' - a number of contributions by women are noted in the overview *Comparative Religion: Its Genesis and Growth* from 1905 by Louis Henry Jordan (special lecturer in comparative religion at the University of Chicago) (in: King 1995c: 224-5). Jordan includes the contributions of three women scholars, Agnes Smith, Margaret Dunlop Gibson and Jane Ellen Harrison, and pursues with the following remarks concerning the position of women in the discipline (Jordan 1905: 149-50 in: King 1995c: 224):

It is sincerely to be hoped that the example which these industrious ladies have set, whether Mrs. Adams or her more fully equipped successors, will now frequently be imitated, indeed, it may confidently be predicted that, under the vastly improved conditions which at present prevail, the example in question will before long be deliberately and strenuously emulated, why should not ladies of scholarly tastes, and possessed of the leisure and skill which this quest so rightly demands, apply themselves with patience and diligence to a solution of one or more of the problems which Comparative Religion unfolds?

King's (1995c) analysis of the literature shows that historiographies are never made neutrally, but that there are always mechanisms of selection based on underlying 'agreed' norms and criteria. These determine for example what is and what is not counted as 'science'. The few exceptional women worthies may or may not be mentioned and attributed recognition or honour. Retracing the role that women played in the history of a discipline is only one form of critiquing the androcentric character of a mainstream discipline. But with these criticisms Harding (1991) already takes a step towards an epistemological critique of what counts as science. Religious studies appear to share a number of features with other disciplines. One is that of the dominant gender ideology

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that justified a society in which gender is a fundamental 'structuring principle', sustaining the idea that 'science' was not for those of the female sex. Apart from the general structural obstacles for women and the lower classes and ethnic groups in general, religious studies do show a fluctuating success and access for women.

Simple generalisations on the processes of both inclusion and exclusion must be avoided, yet more important, a distinction must be made between the sex of the scholar and the content of her/his work, rather than simply projecting a notion of 'feminist consciousness'. On the other hand, and especially as far as the study of Buddhism is concerned, the limitation of interest for women by women cannot be entirely coincidental. Although showing an interest for 'women' and their place in a certain religious tradition could have been motivated by both personal, critical or even religious-critical reasons, these isolated examples, next to altogether 'gender-neutral' studies that these women conducted, do not show any form of challenge towards the discipline or the place of women as subjects or objects of research therein. Labelling these women 'feminist pioneers' or making these women 'visible' in order to show that women indeed participated in research in the past, perhaps shows that religious studies in the past were androcentric, but does not say anything whether or to what extent these women may have openly resisted this. It furthermore does not show whether they felt the discipline to be androcentric in terms of its content or whether they simply reproduced the 'mainstream' in their own work. Historiographical research from a contemporary feminist perspective in whatever discipline implies much more than simply 'rewriting' a canon. It must be understood as but one aspect of locating androcentrism, the relevance of which lies in contemporary feminist critique (King 1995c: 223):

It is important to research these data on earlier women's scholarly work, as the example of their struggles and achievements can enlarge our own consciousness, strengthen our identity as women scholars of religion, and provide additional role models and inspiration for younger women entering the discipline today.

Whilst in the former paragraph the focus was on the role of women in the academic study of religion, Christ (1987: 61) argues that for the U.S., - where the loosening of the relationship from the denominational context only started to develop a few decades ago - the institutional dominance by men of a religious tradition has directly influenced the access for women to this academic discipline. For the European context however, the study of religion has been understood to be a 'scientific' endeavour proper from a historical and comparative perspective and independent of theology, and has been practised for more than a century. King's (1995c) research shows that as far as the congresses of the prestigious IAHR are concerned, the presence of women visitors/participants has never been as numerous as in 1908. There where

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women worthies have paid attention to women as objects of study in their work, this appears to be in the field of orientalist studies and not in any of the Mediterranean religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity or Islam.

### 2. Religion and Women's Liberation until the Second Wave

In the following paragraph the period up to the second wave of the feminist movement will be viewed from a different angle, to show how the above suggested relationship between respectively the study of religion and the religious tradition itself concerning women can be tentatively understood. Whilst the impact of feminism as a social-political movement has been limited or just slow in the academic study of religion, compared to other disciplines in both the sciences and the humanities, a wholly different story can be told with regards to the development of religious traditions themselves in the West since the nineteenth century.

*The First Wave: Anglo-American and British Religious Feminism*<sup>10</sup>

*Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God*

Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906)

(in: Donovan 2000: 36)

*There is a Word sweeter than Mother, Home, or Heaven. That Word is  
Liberty.*

Matilda Joslyn Gage (1826-1898)<sup>11</sup>

Women were gradually pushed out of the official clerical structures and hierarchy after the first centuries of the development and institutionalisation of the Christian tradition. Although there were possibilities for leading a religious life or even playing a religious role, - outside of the heretic movements or monastic and mystical life - as was the case for the majority of 'common' men, women mostly remained subjected to the authority of the church. The contra-reformation and the revaluation of marriage brought some renewed recognition for protestant women, but this simultaneously meant a circumscription of their religious role to that within the private domestic sphere. In the nineteenth century, the religious participation of women in West-European and North-American Christianity had never been greater (Gross 1996: 33-34; Morgan 1999: 44). On the one hand an ideological-religious discourse developed that considered women as morally or spiritually superior, as the very embodiment of religious values. Yet the same discourse relegated them outside of the secular sphere of politics and economic life which remained an exclusive male domain.

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This emphasis on women's religiosity however, paradoxically did give many women the opportunity to move outside of their homes, enabling them to participate in charity events or even to travel to missionary posts abroad.<sup>12</sup>

Whereas religious issues did not take centre stage in the women's movement of the nineteenth century, the first feminist wave did include women who critiqued religious institutions. In turn, the position of women in broader society was linked to the patriarchal Christian cultural inheritance. The increased participation by women in the religious sphere and the opportunities this gave to women to develop themselves may have caused a more explicit 'political consciousness' (Banks, Olive, *The Faces of Feminism*, Oxford: Blackwell 1986, pp. 13-27, in: Morgan 1999: 45).

In the U.S., religion did initially play an important role in the development of American feminism. The nineteenth-century women's movement for equal rights had grown out of their participation in abolitionism or the anti-slavery movement. Many women committed to this protest movement had criticised other abolitionists who had reacted in a hostile way to the public role that they as women had taken on within the campaigns. Therefore, in the North-American context an analogy was drawn between the lack of equal rights for both slaves and women during the first wave of feminism. Speaking in public had never been allowed for women in both religious and political settings. It was a norm that prevailed in the liberal conceptions of citizenship that postulated a gendered division between the private and public sphere. This norm together with the general construction of femininity that was hegemonic in all spheres of life was crossed by the abolitionist sisters Angelina and Sarah Grimké who from 1836 onwards regularly held public speeches against the institution of slavery (Gross 1996: 36). From what Morgan (1999) calls a 'liberal feminist attitude' – against the religious establishment – the sisters spoke against the harsh reactions to their behaviour as 'unfeminine' or 'unchristian' (Gross 1996: 36), thereby rejecting the 'biblical ideals of the subordinate domesticated female' (Morgan 1999: 46). Sarah Grimké wrote that God did not differentiate between men and women in terms of morality (Grimké 1999 [1837], Letter II 'Woman Subject Only to God'):

Even admitting that Eve was the great sinner, it seems to me man might be satisfied with the dominion he has claimed and exercised for nearly six thousand years, and that more true nobility would be manifested by endeavouring to raise the fallen and invigorate the weak, than by keeping women in subjection. But I ask no favours for my sex; I surrender not our claim to equality. All I ask of my brethren, is that they will take their feet from off our necks, and permit us to stand upright on that ground which God has designed us to occupy.

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Grimké was one of the first to apply the natural rights discourse of the time and the appeals to religious equality in arguing against the subordination of women. In her textual analysis of biblical passages used to justify women's oppression, according to Donovan (2000: 29) she can perhaps be seen as one of the first in bringing critical thinking to Biblical exegesis which dominated nineteenth-century biblical scholarship. Coming from a radical Protestant tradition, Grimké rejected the necessity of (male) clerics as intermediaries and interpreters of the scripture, and also urged women to preach (Letter XIV 'Ministry of Women').

After the American delegates Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton at the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention in London had been forbidden to speak opposed to their male colleagues, they organised the famous Seneca Falls Convention eight years later. This convention is usually held to be the launch of the American women's movement. The Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions that was written for the occasion and subsequently ratified by the convention, similarly appropriates religious rhetoric of equality in creation and rights by God, in legitimising the political and social equality to which the movement aspired. The explicit link between religion and politics in this respect can be read in the final resolution by Lucretia Mott (Stanton 2001 [1887/1848]):

Resolved: That the speedy success of our cause depends upon the zealous and untiring efforts of both men and women, for the overthrow of the monopoly of the pulpit, and for the securing to women an equal participation with men in various trades, professions and commerce.

In the liberal feminist movement of the nineteenth century, religion thus played a role in the ideological battle for equality, and sometimes was even seen in terms of a counterforce in the liberation of women. Decades after the declaration, Elizabeth Cady Stanton in fact would take a much more radical position against the church, and in retrospect her way of argumentation is often viewed as a basis for the formation of twentieth century feminist theology. For in 1895 Stanton together with Matilda Joslyn Gage and a committee of thirty others would publish *The Woman's Bible*, a collection of critical commentaries on biblical passages concerning women. The writers did not aim to completely reject the Bible, but merely show that it was a creation of a certain cultural epoch harbouring both godly truths and culturally limited – androcentric – perspectives (Gross 1996: 37-38). In the *Woman's Bible* Stanton suggests that God is composed of both feminine and masculine elements, and in this she can be considered one of the first feminists to introduce the idea of an androgynous godhead. Furthermore, through advocating a prayer to a 'Heavenly Mother' and proposing a theory of the matriarchate (Donovan 2000: 52-54), Stanton's calls for a reinstatement and re-valuing of femininity echoes ideas which would again be taken up by feminist theologians almost a century later. During this time however, Stanton's propositions were not only rejected by most official church authorities but eventually by organisations within the women's

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movement itself, underlining its exceptional radical and perhaps anachronistic character at this time.

Matilda Joslyn Gage's *Women, Church and State* published in 1893, takes Stanton's critique of Christianity even further in radically opposing the Church as a system of 'organised robbery' that bereaves women of their rights, developmental abilities, judgement, consciousness and willpower (Morgan 1999: 46). According to Donovan (2000: 55) even though the type of discourse eventually employed by these authors would in temporary terms be referred to as more 'cultural feminist' than liberal feminist, it is nonetheless rooted in the natural rights theory and the 'Protestant emphasis on individual conscience' so typical of the time. The identification of the Church, the Bible, of Christianity itself with patriarchy in Gage's radical perspective, did not necessarily imply that Gage – and Stanton - were anti-religious. Their call for an androgynous or a feminine deity and their emphasis on women's special capacities and spirituality underlies their vision of an alternative religiosity rather than atheism.

The feminist movement within the religious domain itself in the nineteenth century concentrated on the issue of ordination and the struggle for access to positions of more responsibility and decision for women in particular Protestant circles. Since the seventeenth century there had been individuals and groups within Protestant Christianity that had defended both spiritual equality and ministerial equality for women. The Fifth Monarchists, and especially the Quakers, founded by George Scott, appropriated the unity of Christ in man and woman as the main argument in defence of ministerial equality, proclaiming women's right to 'speak' with arguments from the Bible (Bauman 1983: 36). Apart from these groups, movements in the margins of the official traditions developed such as the Seventh Day Adventists or Mormons and the Salvation Army (Cornille 1994: 61). Especially among the Evangelical groups there were openings for the acceptance of women as preachers, similarly appropriating religious rhetoric of equality between men and women and gender irrelevance as a means of justification. In 1853 Antoinette Brown was the first American woman to be ordained in the Congregationalist church under the passage from Gal. 3.28 'In Christ there is neither male nor female' (Morgan 1999: 44). Other groups such as the Methodists, the Unitarians, and the Universalists would gradually make ordination available to women, but this was not achieved without struggle and ultimately there were only a few instances where theory was put into practice (Gross 1996: 35). By the end of the nineteenth century at least the office of deaconess became available to Protestant women (Cornille 1994: 62).

Finally, women would play a prominent role in a number of North American sectarian movements, such as the Shakers and the Oneida community. Ann Lee (1736-1784), who originally was a member of the Quaker community, founded the Shakers in 1774 after a revelation following a period

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of strict asceticism. Lee was considered to be the female manifestation of Jesus Christ and God was seen and referred to in both masculine and feminine terms (Cornille 1994: 60). Nevertheless, one of her successors, Joseph Meachem, during the time of the further institutionalisation and expansion of the movements, would remain rather reticent about Ann Lee's role or the issue of women's leadership in general. According to Brewer (1986: 25): 'It seems likely that these omissions were made for the sake of the public Meachem hoped to reach, who perhaps would have nothing to do with a sect that professed belief in a female Messiah.' Among the Shakers gender equality was propagated through a compulsory celibate lifestyle, that simultaneously laid down limitations on the daily interaction between women and men. The Oneida community was founded by a man, John Humphrey Noyes (1811-1886) and even though this group also deviated from the dominant gender norms in the surrounding society, by acknowledging the masculine and feminine dimensions of God, in this community by contrast complete sexual freedom was permitted.

Less separatist and radical groups also deviated from these dominant configurations of gender. The Christian Science Movement and the Theosophy movement were both founded by women (resp. Mary Baker Eddy in 1821 and Madame Blavatsky) and allowed for participation and positions of leadership for women. All of these groups outside of the mainstream emphasised the masculinity and femininity of God (Gross 1996: 35), according to Morgan (1999: 45) a direct reflection of their strife for full spiritual and social equality for women. In the sectarian group of the Mormons then again, in spite of the image of God with his wife, the 'eternal mother', a patriarchal structure was kept in place and polygamy was permitted for married men (Cornille 1994: 61). According to Heinerman and Sharpe (1985: 9-10) though, polygamy was more important in the imagination and condemnation of the movement by surrounding society, whilst in practice no more than one in five men were polygamous and the practice was officially abandoned in 1890.

In Great Britain where the first feminist wave was primarily known as the 'suffragette movement', similar debates took place regarding positions of leadership for women within most denominations of Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism. Among the Methodists for example, women were granted permission to preach and educate, but the prohibition on ordination was kept in place. Like in the U.S., alternative routes were chosen and new religious movements were erected. In Britain at the turn of the century a similar interweaving between secular and ecclesiastical suffrage developed, which according to Morgan (1999: 45) was the context for the growth of an 'assertive Anglican feminism.' Prominent Anglican women who were barred from the institute and authorities of the church joined the parliamentary suffragettes in the hope that this would further a transformation of their religious establishment.

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From this brief summary of the changes and the diversity surrounding the position of women within and on the margins of the Christian tradition in the U.S. and G.B., a number of preliminary statements can be made concerning the relationship between the first feminist wave and religion. From the moment one could speak of a form of organised women's movement, it appears that the first feminist critiques by women formulated against patriarchal society, were directed at all segments of society, including institutes such as the church. Secondly, it becomes clear how influential the construction of gender and femininity within religious discourse was in determining the position of women in society. It is quite apparent how the Christian prohibition on or at least the great resistance to women 'speaking' in public was clearly applicable in all public and therefore political contexts and formed the very starting point for the emergence of the women's movement in the U.S. The strife for or resistance against institutional equality for men and women went hand in hand with an appropriation of gender ideology, that for the greater part was determined by religious discourse or symbolism, such as the relevance of the gender of Christ or God. The post-Enlightenment world-view and organisation of society based on the idea of natural rights and laws did not alter women's exclusion from positions of subjecthood, citizenship or authority. If anything, the identification of the public male sphere with rationalism furthered the development of an association of women with the private, the non-rational and the moral. All liberal feminists appropriated the Enlightenment discourse on 'reason', 'individualism' and 'freedom'. For some 'reason' and God were understood to be the same, whereas for others, women's liberation could not take place under the patriarchal Christian church, nor its ideology.

As for the internal dynamics of these Christian religious traditions and the emerging marginal movements considered sectarian groups by the dominant Christian denominations, there appears to be a significant correlation between gender equality and complementarity on the level of ideology and symbolism. In practice however, it is sincerely doubtful whether the ideal that many of these movements preached were always put into practice. Bauman (1983: 36-37) for instance, notes that concerning the Quakers, despite the admission of women to the ministry, 'deep rooted patterns of sexual subordination could not be overturned'. Regardless of the introduction of deaconesses in the majority of the Protestant churches towards the end of the nineteenth century, the function was mostly limited to caring activities and the relational abilities of women were prioritised and valued above positions of leadership (Cornille 1994: 62).

It was not until the second feminist movement of the twentieth century that the struggle for institutional gender equality within Catholicism and the Anglican and Episcopal variants of Protestantism commenced and for some continues today. In the debate on ordination for women theological arguments are invoked that can account for this discrepancy. In the Protestant tradition, the ministerial function is understood to be the practical representation of a prophetic function, whilst in the Catholic tradition the emphasis lies on the

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sacrificial and sacramental role of the priest as the true representative of Christ (Cornille 1994: 62-63). The construction of gender in the symbolic dimension is invoked here in order to justify the institutional organisation of gender.

### *Liberal Feminism: For and against Religion*

For many liberal feminists adopting Enlightenment ideals of reason, freedom and equality for all, rationality implied at least a sceptical, critical, anti-foundational approach to religion. For these feminist thinkers, religion or religious institutions were rejected as important tools for women's emancipation, and rather seen as major self-evident obstacles to be overcome. As Rosemary Radford Ruether (1999: 217) notes, 'liberalism challenged the traditional Christian doctrine of the "orders of creation," that interpreted class and gender hierarchy as "natural" and "divinely ordained"'. In referring to Olympe de Gouges, Ruether (1999: 218) also notes the very different relationship between feminism and religion in the U.S. compared to France: 'French feminism, influenced by revolutionary liberalism in the late eighteenth century and then by socialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has been predominantly secular. Religion has been seen, not simply as irrelevant, but as the enemy of women's rights, and indeed the enemy of progress toward social justice generally'. According to Ruether, this is furthermore also one of the main reasons Christian feminism and feminist theology has primarily flourished in the U.S. from the second wave onwards, where secularity and the influence of Marxism on the public at large has been much smaller than in France (218-219).

Olympe de Gouges (1748-1793) was quick to protest against the exclusion of women from the new rights for men and the citizen when she published *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*<sup>13</sup> in 1791 in the midst of the French revolution. In the declaration, which was to be presented to the National Assembly in order to demand women's admission, de Gouges argued for women's equality to men on the basis of the 'laws of nature and reason'. She defended women's absolute sameness in terms of intellectual capabilities and freedom by birthright. The transposition of the notion of 'sovereignty' from God to the state, making all 'men' equal on earth than merely before God, was embodied and finally realised in Rousseau's social contract theory in the French constitutional draft of 1791. This formed the very same basis/rhetoric to which de Gouges would recur in her plea for the incorporation of women.<sup>14</sup>

De Gouges's even more famous contemporary in Britain, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was inspired by the French revolution, and also applied the idea of natural rights in arguing for women's equality. For Wollstonecraft, reason, the grounds for moral judgement, accompanied spiritual growth which was as much the property of women as of men (Donovan 2000:

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25). Women should have the right to decent education in order to be allowed to grow into 'reasonable' beings. They should not be kept in ignorance, as explained in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* published in 1792 (Wollstonescraft 2000 [1792]):

Contending for the rights of women, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice. And how can women be expected to co-operate unless she know why she ought to be virtuous? Unless freedom strengthen her reason till she comprehend her duty, and see in what manner it is connected with her real good? If children are to be educated to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot; and the love of mankind, from which an orderly train of virtues spring, can only be produced by considering the moral and civil interest of mankind, but the education and situation of woman, at present, shuts her out from such investigations.

For these European thinkers, and following them the liberal feminists of the nineteenth century such as John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and Harriet Taylor (1807-1858) (who co-wrote *The Subjection of Women* published in 1869), the grounds on which they argued for equality, was ontological sameness between women and men. They favoured ideas of equal nature or intellect, or moral worth, although the prime goal was to attain freedom and equality within the public sphere, in public institutions in representative bodies or education. Religious rhetoric may have been used to buttress these arguments, but did not appear to play as central a role as was the case in American liberal first wave feminism or the Anglican feminism in turn of the century Britain.

In her account of the relationship between women and the state, Mary Evans (1997: 28) argues that the greater part of nineteenth and twentieth century feminism in fact has been characterised by struggles by women to negotiate the relationship between the gendered spaces of the public and the private. By the end of the nineteenth century, the industrialised Western world had witnessed campaigns for women's education, entry into professions, legal emancipation and the right to vote. All of these debates centred on women's access to the public sphere and its institutions. Apart from the sectarian movements within the U.S. and Britain, women's equality within the Church does not seem to have been one of the primary issues on the liberal agendas of feminist pioneers before the end of the nineteenth century. On the contrary, a religious rhetoric of sameness and the problem of institutionalised religion as such, were more important than the question of access. Morgan (1999) argues that in Britain, issues of women's ordination were aligned with the movement of the suffragettes, although in practice none of these battles would be won for

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many decades to come, unlike other struggles for measures of equality in most other spheres.

Thus women's admission to the ministry in the Anglican Church of Britain was not granted until almost a century later in 1992, and to this date the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy still refuses women's admission to the priesthood. It is therefore not very surprising that from a contemporary feminist point of view these facts alone would give religion the aura of one of the last 'patriarchal bastions' to be overcome. Yet at this point Evan's (1997: 28) reservation on women's plight for full citizenship can be repeated. Inclusion did not follow from the alteration of gendered assumptions:

...often institutional barriers fell before attitudes changed: for example, women were admitted to the medical profession long before (very long before) medicine's view of the female body was reinterpreted in anything like a female understanding. The case of the relationship of women to the law is analogous: women were allowed to practise as lawyers very long before the assumptions of the law about women were subject to any kind of feminist criticism.

In focussing on the first wave between 1850 and 1920 in the Netherlands in particular, Saskia Poldervaart (1991: 27-32) notes the differentiated impact of the industrial revolution and the accompanying social and economic transformations in the situation of women in the Western world. Different forms of feminism arose from the different contexts in which women from different classes of society were situated. Life was very different for the women of the bourgeoisie class of modern capitalist society, than for women in the workers class, who were increasingly forced into participation in the industrial production process and its appalling living circumstances. Accordingly, for the Netherlands, Poldervaart divides the women's movement in these times into a bourgeoisie and a socialist form. With liberal feminism being the dominant version of first wave feminism, Marxist and in general early socialist feminist critiques of society before their 'revival' in the sixties are often overlooked.

More often than not throughout socialist history, Engels's argument in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (orig. 1884) that the emancipation of women would automatically follow from a socialist revolution (Weedon 1999: 16-17), has been popular in diverting and dismissing any attention to gender issues. Beyond the broad activism of women within labour movements since the beginning of the twentieth century, a few important voices stand out such as the socialists, communists and anarchists, including the Russian-American anarchist Emma Goldman (1869-1940), the Russian revolutionary Aleksandra Kollontai (1872-1952), the German socialist Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) and the French anarchist Louise Michel (1830-1905) (Brouns 1995: 17). The vast majority of those inspired by Marxism saw first-wave feminism as 'a bourgeois deviation from the class struggle for a socialist

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revolution' (Weedon 1999: 17), although very often the same bourgeois model of the nuclear family and the women in basically domestic, supportive roles was replicated.

It need not be said that for early Marxist, socialist or anarchist varieties of feminism, religion was one major issue in which the mainstream and feminism agreed completely. Relevant in this chronology however, is to note that feminists like Goldman, not only politically strode for causes such as the improvement of the labour circumstances of working class women who were forced into the workforce outside of the home. Anti-liberal feminists like Goldman, in fact directly challenged forms of inequality, subordination and exploitation that take place within the private realm of marriage, the family and sexual relationships. Placing these issues on the political agenda was a radical divergence from their liberal contemporaries, thereby laying the groundwork for some of the central political and paradigmatic shifts during the second wave.

However brief this overview, it shows a very important point concerning what is often overlooked from a contemporary vantagepoint, namely that contrary to the second wave, first wave feminism was by no means exclusively secular. Especially in the U.S., although religion may not always have been the explicit focus of the demands of these pioneering activists, the movement itself took place at a time in which a religious worldview greatly guided people's lives and religious rhetoric was applied in justifying their subordinate status. Thus Bourdieu claims (2001: 85-86) that next to the family, the educational system, and later the state, the main agency of the church perpetuated the reproduction - objectively and subjectively - of the patriarchal order through the matrix of 'masculine domination':

...pervaded by the deep-seated anti-feminism of a clergy that was quick to condemn all female offences against decency, especially in matters of attire, and was the authorized reproducer of a pessimistic vision of women and womanhood, it explicitly inculcates (or used to inculcate) a familialist morality, entirely dominated by patriarchal values, with, in particular, the dogma of the radical inferiority of women. In addition, it acts, more indirectly, on the historical structures of the unconscious, notably through the symbolism of the sacred texts, the liturgy and even space and time (the latter marked by the correspondence between the structure of the liturgical year and the farming year). In some periods, it has been able to draw on a series of ethical oppositions corresponding to a cosmological model in order to justify the hierarchy within the family, a monarchy by divine right based on the authority of the father, and to impose a vision of the social world of women's place within through what has been called 'iconographic propaganda'.

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Many feminist activists too used both the doctrine of natural rights together with the same religion and scripture to argue for women's equality, whereas a few others rejected Christianity as hopelessly patriarchal in favour for alternative forms of gender inclusive or even feminine spirituality. In movements of religious feminism itself, women's access was argued as it concerned other patriarchal institutions in life. This included a rejection of the way the division between the public and the private sphere relegated women to the latter. So although they were often seen to embody moral and religious values, they were excluded from the very institutions that produced and reproduced these very ideologies.

### **3. The Second Wave: A Fissure?**

When one of the main objectives of the first feminist wave – giving a voice to women in the public sphere through the right to vote – was accomplished in the U.S. and in most European countries during the first half of the twentieth century, 'women's resistance' decreased gradually, at least in the organised form of a socio-political movement.<sup>15</sup> The shortage of labourers in the reconstruction of the European countries after the wars did not prevent the resurgence of the ideal of the mother who stays at home (Poldervaart 1991: 35). Traditional gender patterns and socio-economic differences were reconfirmed, the structural relations of dependency between women and men were prolonged.

The 'domestication' of women in the fifties furthermore implied a very low participation of women in positions of leadership, including in the institutionalised religious domain which retained its patriarchal organisation. The consequences of the second feminist movement throughout the Western world in the sixties would ultimately be felt in the religious sphere. The relationship between feminism, politics and religion evidently changed due to the position of religion in society which itself had altered. It would therefore be unthinkable to speak of an 'intrinsic alliance between religious and political equality' as was characteristic for American feminism of the preceding centuries. The demand for having a voice, for the right to speak, would be broadened to encompass a general or even universal problem in which women were seen as subordinated as a historical group or whole category of persons. The issues given priority in the political struggle for equality between women and men were those of sustained inequality in the political-economic sphere in general, such as equal pay for the same work, or even the right or the ability to work at all. The increase in divorce rates and the higher level of education that girls began to achieve in the fifties and sixties would contribute to economical independence that had become both a necessity and an aspiration for many women. On the one hand the second wave movement continued the struggle for access to positions and possibilities that were previously were restricted to men,

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in the spirit of the older dominant liberal feminist demand for individual freedom, choice and equality. Other forms of feminism opted to concentrate on other issues, employing different forms of rhetoric concerning the structural causes and possible solutions for 'the problem that has no name' (Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* first published in 1963).

Friedan and her liberal companions pursued their struggle against the social inequality of women by linking it to the image of women and the dominant constructions and representations of femininity in the post-war West. The image of the woman as the 'child-woman' (Poldervaart 1991: 36), as dependent and inferior, linking domesticity and passivity to being a woman and the general extrapolation of the problem to level of psychological mechanisms, showed that in order to rid social inequality, deeper roots would have to be exposed. The rediscovery of *La deuxième sexe* by Simone de Beauvoir (1976 [1949]) in the sixties for example, with its precise analysis of the woman as the eternal 'Other' in history and as a contemporary discernible 'fact', but also at the level of the psyche, in mythology and narratives, inspired the second wave as a movement of resistance on many fronts. The movement thus broadened and deepened its critique against so much more than the imbalances that were propagated in equality discourse and thought.

Contrary to the first women's movement, the second feminist wave, - next to many other protest, civil rights and anti-colonial movements - took place during and was fed by a climate in which all traditional authorities were thrown into question, including the institution of the church. In feminist equality discourse religion did not feature prominently, but at an ideological level it was seen as but one patriarchal element that contributed to the subordination of women, in whatever way this subordination had to be explained and combated. In this era of increasing secularisation and the decreasing influence of religion on every day life in general, both Christian ideology and the church as an institution were perceived as a Western inheritance characterised by male dominance. Next to many other institutions and ideological systems of thought, Christianity was merely seen as a 'cultural product' invented by men (de Beauvoir (1976 [1949]: 18, transl. from Dutch):

Legislators, priests, philosophers, writers and scholars have all zealously and stubbornly set out to prove that the subordinate position of women was the will of heaven and brought along advantages on earth. In the religions, thought up by men, this will to conquer is reflected; men have crafted their weapons against women drawing from the legends about Eve and Pandora. They have used philosophy and theology to their own ends as is attested in quotes from Aristotle and Thomas of Aquinas.

This rhetoric shows a stark contrast with that of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott of the first American civil women's movement. There, religion had played a fundamental part of the protest and had been used in defence and

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legitimisation of the equality between women and men. The second feminist wave on the contrary, can be characterised as a wholly secular and an anti-traditionalist movement, directed at the eradication of every single form institution and ideology dominated by men.

The struggle for equality by women also took place in an era of a movement towards increasing 'sexual freedom'. Sex and sexuality were an explicit part of the changes in terms of morality during the sixties: '...by the end of the decade sexual codes had changed, "permissiveness" had arrived and the explicit discussion of sexuality had become the *lingua franca* of the West' (Evans 1997: 5). The 'sexual revolution' in the sixties, accompanied by the invention of the contraceptive pill, propagated an increase of freedom of sexuality for women and men, pulling it out of the sphere of reproduction but also morality. This freedom was contrasted to a past of sexual 'repression' and a puritan morality that for the greater part was ascribed to the hold of Christian ideology and institutional control. The issue of sexuality would become central in the anti-liberal versions of feminism in the early seventies.

In an analysis of the bankruptcy of the dominant liberal version of Western feminism up to 1968, Chris Weedon (1999: 13-16) accuses the failure of the liberal model to take 'the body and its meanings' into account. Well-known feminist writers from the second feminist wave like Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer (*The Female Eunuch* published in 1970) would reach a broad public, yet according to Evans (1997: 15-16) can be situated in a long tradition of liberal Western feminism reaching back to Mary Wollstonecraft. The emphasis lies on the inclusion of women as full citizens in the tradition of Enlightenment thought, focusing on equal opportunities within existing social relations within the public sphere. Thus in the liberal-feminist vision the separation between the private and the public sphere that is typical of modern liberal societies is not questioned, and the private sphere is seen as an ungendered space of individual freedom and choice.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, both Friedan and Greer wrote for a predominantly white, heterosexual highly educated middle class audience. From the seventies onwards alternatives to the liberal feminism of the second wave developed. These anti-liberal strands shared the same main objectives in the struggle against the subordination of women on the basis of sexual difference, yet were more diversified in their strategies, including in their localisation of the causes for and the diverse contexts in which 'sexual inequality' originates and persists.

### *Discovering Patriarchy*

In the early seventies a number of books were published differing significantly from the likes of Friedan and Greer's liberal feminism, and also introducing a number of concepts and even slogans which would become central analytical tools in the further development of second wave feminism. Kate Millet in

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*Sexual Politics* published in 1971, considered by some to be one of the founding texts of the second wave feminist movement (Andermahr, Lovell & Wolkowitz 1997: 199), was among the first to make use of the notion of 'patriarchy'. The concept of patriarchy allowed for a broadening and universalising of the scope of 'male dominance' to all possible locations of existence, including literature, myth, theory and ideology in general.<sup>17</sup> 'Sexual politics' take place in every kind of human interaction or area of life, whereby 'patriarchy' is seen as the overall organising principle that results in oppression on the basis of sexual difference.<sup>18</sup> The discovery and acknowledgement of this 'root' of women's subordination and its pervasiveness was accompanied by slogans such as 'the personal is the political' and 'sisterhood is powerful'<sup>19</sup> which would come to symbolise diverse forms of non-liberal feminist thought and activism.

The slogan of the personal being political in fact both made visible and deconstructed the division between the public and the private, the unquestioned axiom of the structure of contemporary society according to the liberal viewpoint. Whereas liberal feminist concerns had been issues such as the vote, and later equal pay, equal political representation etcetera., feminist action groups in the seventies increasingly came to emphasise inequality within the family, demanding that child care, abortion and rape were in fact highly political affairs (Brouns 1995: 13). The former disregard for 'the body' and all kinds of issues pertaining to patriarchal power dynamics within the realm of sexuality and procreation became central in the later development of radical feminism. The public/private divide as expressed in the sexual division of labour (domesticity and production versus reproduction) was a primary issue for various kinds of socialist feminism that evolved even further from their first wave predecessors.

Another classic feminist publication of the early seventies *The Dialectic of Sex* (published in 1970) by Shulamith Firestone (U.S.) for example, theorised patriarchal oppression by identifying women as a class. Firestone saw the sexual division of labour being the ultimate and primary cause for the rise and development of the class-system in capitalist society (Weedon 1999: 18). Most socialist feminist theories would not go so far to as to privilege patriarchal over other types of oppression, but fundamental was their attention to and reconceptions of 'women's work'. For example, the insight was strained that domestic labour or the labour of reproduction, besides production, was a necessary requisite to the survival of capitalism.

Those who did privilege oppression on the basis of universal sexual difference over all other possible forms of oppression could be included in what was to be termed radical feminism, a strand of feminist theory and activism that insisted on the primacy of patriarchy in society. In the radical feminist perspective, women's oppression by men through mechanisms such as violence, heterosexuality and reproduction is centralised, whereby men as a group are held to be the oppressors of women (Maynard 2001a [1995]). The

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greater part of second wave feminist activism such as the shelters for women, rape crisis centres, women's groups and organisations and protests against the representation of women in the media were also inspired by radical feminist critiques. As put forward above, a novelty for second wave feminism opposed to earlier and contemporary liberal perspectives, and playing a crucial part in radical feminism, was the emphasis on the body as first and foremost central to sexual politics. The radical feminist approach to women's oppression was a politicisation of the body. It was regarded as the very site of difference, patriarchal violence and exploitation at every kind of level. Yet radical feminist politics also sought to reclaim 'control' over the female body, often formulated in issues pertaining to women's sexuality en reproduction.

Next to the campaigns against male power over the female body such as in sexual violence, pornography, and other forms of representation such as beauty contests, the sexual revolution of the sixties had furthermore made it possible for the reclaiming to take place in a very positive sense. The celebration of the female body as a source of empowerment and strength became the prerogative of a number of feminist authors, and it is usually in this context that religion re-enters genealogies of second wave feminist thought. The focus on women's difference rather than equality is central in the radical feminist perspective. In what is often referred to as cultural feminism, the focus lies in the stressing and exploring of women's cultural creativity as radically different and separate from that of men. The psychoanalytically inspired work by French writers of the *écriture féminine* (such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous) that articulates the distinctiveness of female or feminine language or imaginary is then usually located in this strand of thought, whereas the work of Adrienne Rich is taken as an example of radical lesbian feminism. Mary Daly (especially in her work from the seventies onwards) is then exemplary of American radical feminist or even separatist feminist critique, but also one of the pioneering second-wave feminist scholars on religion and spirituality, and will therefore be discussed later on.

In the broad public opinion in the West, to date 'feminism' has often been identified or even altogether conflated with radical feminism. The focus is sometimes even exclusively on radical lesbian feminism, which aligned and broadened the radical feminist critique of patriarchal sexual politics with an attack on the institution of heterosexuality itself.<sup>20</sup> This identification can also be attributed to the differing degrees of gender separatism which characterise much radical feminist thought and were typical of many forms of political protest and action during the second wave. Even within the diverging variants of radical feminism though, attitudes differed towards the actual meaning of the central tenet of sexual difference. Many took a more social constructionist position, drawing back on de Beauvoir's idea of the differences between men and women as the product of society, whilst for others the centrality of the female body gained an absolutely foundational status, 'rooting patriarchy in biology'.

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All kinds of second wave non-liberal feminist theory shared some main characteristics that in any case made them differ significantly from previous critiques of male dominance in Western society. This not only included a transformation of the conception of the 'political' tied to the centrality of the female body and its presumed control by men. The introduction of the notion of patriarchy in an attempt to locate and describe the nature and extent of the control over women and their oppression however was applied in very universalistic terms, to become one of the main subjects of critique in the eighties. The idea of the universal oppression of women by men accompanied the premise that *all* women shared in this oppression, and were therefore potentially united in feminist resistance through popular concepts such as 'global sisterhood'. In general, second wave feminism is therefore often understood as the period in which for the first time difference, and particularly *sexual difference* became theorised, opposing the paradigm of 'sameness' which underlies early and contemporary forms of liberal feminism.<sup>21</sup> Stated even more broadly, according to Evans (1997: 16) it was identified for the first time that:

...sexual difference has far more profound effects on human thought than has so far been imagined: it was not, therefore, a question about what men thought, but how men thought. The second issue identified at this time was the assertion that differences of gender manifested themselves in all aspects of behaviour.

### *Second Wave Religious Feminisms*

#### Post-Christian Feminisms

As for the role of 'religion' and feminist critiques thereof during second wave feminism in the late sixties and early seventies, initially the subject appears almost absent as an issue and in the rhetoric in comparison with the earlier liberal struggles for gender equality. For the radical feminist, 'religion' in the Western context was often simply identified as one of the major ideological institutions supporting patriarchy. However, times had changed, and due to the process of secularisation and the place of feminism within other anti-authoritarian and anti-traditional movements of that period, religion itself was losing importance in day-to-day society. Feminism and the development of feminist theory within the academy have been for the major part a wholly secular enterprise. Although the problem has not received much attention, to this date it is accurate to state that religion has by and large been 'neglected' by Western secular feminism and feminist theory in and outside of the academy (Andermahr, Lovell & Wolkowitz 1997: 189; Lelwica 1998; Ruether 1999: 219-20).

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As was referred to earlier, a further important distinction to be made according to Ruether (1999) concerns the differential impact of second wave feminism on the relationship between feminism and religion in the United States versus Western Europe. This distinction would reach back to first wave feminism, where particularly in France, both liberal and socialist feminism have been exclusively secular. For Ruether this would also be one of the main reasons Christian feminism and feminist theology has primarily flourished in the U.S. from the second wave onwards, where secularity and the influence of Marxism on the public at large has been much smaller than in France (218-219).

In the U.S. however, at the height of second wave feminism, the first feminist attack on institutionalised Christianity ever since Stanton was launched by the Catholic Mary Daly (1968) who had been inspired by the work of Simone de Beauvoir (1976 [1949]). In many respects this critique raised many of the questions some of the first wave pioneers had done, as at this point the work of figures such as Stanton was virtually unknown (Ruether 1998: 209). In 1968 Mary Daly published *The Church and the Second Sex* in which she vigilantly set out to expose the misogyny of Christianity. The book was to be followed by a succession of publications that have been highly controversial outside and in the feminist movement and scholarship. In her reading of de Beauvoir, Daly draws attention to the way the author de Beauvoir fiercely argues how Christianity has served as an instrument in the oppression of women, on the one hand creating a 'delusion of equality', yet on the other, 'exalting and sanctifying' her in an unrealistic way.

In de Beauvoir's view the church also entertained a double morality, holding that women were by nature inferior, tainted by sinfulness and sexuality to be controlled within the patriarchal family in the service and in adoration of men. Through excluding women from the Church hierarchy, the church would have contributed significantly to 'the process of inculcating inferiority feelings and cause [ing] psychological confusion' among them (Daly 1968: 23). The tendency to equate the male sex with the divine, would explain the way many religious women in the past (e.g. many mystics) often appear neurotic or even sado-masochistic in their behaviour and religious practices. Daly concurs with many of de Beauvoir's critiques yet also argues that there are many promising elements in Christian thought and an adequate cure must be sought for the 'nature of the disease'. Besides the 'expulsion of the demonic myth of the eternal feminine in theology' (151), Daly pleads for an eradication of the discrimination of women at all levels, including the question of women clergy. Central in Daly's critique is that the (Catholic) Church cannot be seen as separate from the broader society and change must follow upon the total problem of the emancipation of women and the cultural climate of the time. Concerning the ordination of women as priests for example (166):

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It is essential that those who are concerned with relations between the sexes in the Church give serious attention to this modern development in the direction of democratization and specialization. When the emphasis is shifted away from symbolic roles which are identified with fixed statuses of life and toward functional roles freely assumed on the basis of personal qualifications and skills, away from caste systems and towards specialization based on ability, there will be hope for realization of that higher level of dialogue and cooperation between men and women which we seek.

Thus in *The Church and the Second Sex* Daly claims there are signs of optimism and there may be alternatives which do not involve the 'self-mutilation' in de Beauvoir's account. A commitment to a 'radical transformation of the negative, life-destroying elements of the Church as it exists today' (179) requires both hope and change. Daly's call for more equality would soon radically alter however, and evolve towards a radical feminist paradigm of difference in her following work. If anything, particularly Daly's work testifies to the apparent incompatibility between feminism and religion, because for decades now, this radical feminist has been viewed as utmost controversial by non-feminists and feminists alike, especially for her often radical separatist stance.<sup>22</sup>

In 1971 Daly moved beyond critique and finally broke with the Catholic Church. After preaching the first sermon ever to be held by a woman at Harvard's Memorial Church, entitled 'The Woman's Movement: An Exodus Community', Daly simply walked out and invited others to follow (Clark and Richardson 1977: 264-5; Gross 1996: 40). This move not only signalled Daly's break with the institutionalised Catholicism, but would also represent the beginning of what would become a total distancing from Christianity altogether. After *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* published in 1973, Daly's publications in the seventies and eighties, culminated in both radical feminist universalistic (*Gyn/Ecology* 1979)<sup>23</sup> and radical feminist separatist publications (see Ursula King's (1995b: 7) critique of Daly's dismissal of gender studies as 'blender studies' in her autobiography *Outercourse* published in 1992).

Daly's move away from institutionalised Christianity would also mark the beginnings of a particular strand of what could be called 'feminist religion' or conversely 'religious feminism', best known under the title of the feminist spirituality or the Wicca movements. According to Gross (1996: 40), the movement was 'officially' launched with foundation of the 'Susan B. Anthony Coven No. 1' on the winter solstice by Zsuzsanna Budapest, 'convinced that the feminist movement needed a spiritual dimension'. Feminist spirituality as an outgrowth of second wave radical feminism, can indeed in itself be regarded one of the most radical forms of feminism. Its goals are highly anti-patriarchal,

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and it is ontologically founded on the principle of sexual difference, often reclaiming and celebrating the female body and/or female imagery.

In Post-Christian forms of feminist religion, women's experience and feminism itself becomes the 'primary theological norm' (Christ and Plaskow 1979a: 195). Sources for spirituality and theology are sought in contemporary literature (e.g. Christ 1979), dreams (e.g. Goldenberg 1979) or female-centred religions of the past, such as in ancient traditions of witchcraft and Goddess worship. In the 'womanspirit movement', with writers and activists such as Zsuzsanna Budapest (1979), Starhawk (1979) and Carol P. Christ (1979a, b), the Goddess is 'reclaimed' as a central symbol. Women's sexuality or 'birthing power that connects women to nature and the life and death forces of the universe, and the sense of wholeness that emerges from recognizing women's connection with all waxing and waning processes are celebrated as fundamental to the religious life' (Christ and Plaskow 1979a: 197).

### Ordination Debates: Struggles for Religious Equality

On the whole, the gains of second wave feminism in the religious sphere are best known in terms of women gaining access to 'mainstream' existing religious institutions through a paradigm of equality and usually measured by the degree to which ordination for women has been achieved. For non-Orthodox strands of Judaism and the many Protestant and heterodox Christian denominations that had not already accepted women's ordination in the nineteenth century, the issue of women's equality in leadership roles was first often placed on the agenda in the post-war period, and then accelerated with the onset of the second feminist movement. During the Assemblée of the World Council of Churches in Evanston in 1954 a 'Department for the Co-operation between men and women in the Church' was founded. According to Catherine Cornille (1994: 62) however, the issue of the ordination of women was mostly left in the hands of local churches, as was the case for the Protestant churches in Europe.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century in many Protestant churches the possibilities and religious occupations for women had increased, while functions such as theologian and pastoral worker had been added to the profession of deaconess and religious teacher that had been introduced in the previous century. Whereas the Second World War dramatically put a halt to any similar developments in the increase in women's religious institutional professions in the Jewish tradition, Freund (1997: 92) notes that for Protestant denominations in Germany at least, the absence of men had allowed for an increase in women pastors who had taken on all of the free tasks. In the Calvinist churches the discussion on women's ordination was directly linked to discussions on women's right to vote. Towards the end of the sixties the

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admission for women to become fully ordained was granted (Cornille 1994: 62-63).

It was in the fused Lutheran Church in America that a woman first was ordained to become minister in 1970 (Elizabeth A. Platz), followed by the Episcopal Church in 1976. None of these changes occurred easily without struggle or serious debate. The Episcopal church had voted not to ordain women three years earlier, whilst in the following year eleven women were ordained priests in Philadelphia by sympathetic bishops, only to be officially recognised by the Church hierarchy in 1976. Individual priests however are still allowed to refuse to ordain women (Gross 1996: 41). Similarly, the Lutheran Church in the U.S., has had to put much effort into the prevention of women's discrimination at all theoretical and practical levels within the Church. Much controversy surrounded the first elections of Lutheran women bishops in Europe and the U.S. during the nineties (Freund 1997: 92).

The declaration at an ecumenical level in 1974 acclaiming the positive gains of those churches that had already accepted women priests and stimulating others to follow (Freund 1997: 93), was therefore not immediately followed by all denominations. Whilst mainstream protestant denominations now do ordain women – the most recent addition being the Church of England in 1992 – (besides some conservative strands and individual churches), theoretical changes have not always been followed by immediate practical acceptance of women as leaders within the Church hierarchies.

Finally, on 22 May 1994, Pope John Paul II published the controversial *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, in which the declaration prohibiting the admission of women to the sacramental profession of Roman Catholic priest from 1976 (Inter insigniores) was confirmed by placing the issue outside of the church's authority. This resistance towards changing gender ideologies and structures in all other domains of modern society throughout the West have been differentially debated and explained as the expression of the deeper fundamental character of Roman Catholicism, or of much more fundamental problems regarding gender and Roman Catholic theological anthropology (Freund 1997: 70-71). Others, like Mark Chaves (1997), see this resistance more in the context of a symbolic battle, or what could be termed the 'identity politics' of many religious movements in modern society. There the advancement of women is looked upon as a threat to the survival of 'tradition' and communitarian identity. In any case, and as already illustrated in the previous chapter and to which I shall also be returning, reactionary trends are evident everywhere. Ruether (1987: 233) refers to the Protestant fundamentalist groupings in the U.S., who have 'dusted off the historic arguments of male headship as the order of creation and women's subordination as an expression both of nature and of divine punishment for the sin of Eve'. By refusing to 'adapt' to change, especially the type fuelled by the women's movement since the seventies, the Roman Catholic Church had explicitly opposed the feminist movement. Besides denying women positions of leadership in the public

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religious sphere, this opposition has also been most vehement on the issue of women's reproductive rights. Nevertheless, Catholic feminists have not given up on the objective to reform Catholicism from within, the Woman-Church movement (founded in 1983 in Chicago) being a prominent example of organised resistance (Gross 1996: 44).

### Jewish Feminisms

Whereas the scholarship on both Western first and second wave feminism and religion has mostly concentrated on that of the Christian tradition or conversely its absolute adversaries, during the early seventies the development of a separate Jewish women's feminist movement in the U.S. has also been accounted. The Jewish Feminist Organization (JFO) only survived for two years (1974-1976) and according to Ellen Umansky (1999: 179), since then no comparable 'unified, international or national Jewish feminist movement' has existed, with the possible exception of the Israel Women's Network. At this point the inter-religious differences between the Christian and the Jewish traditions as to their relationship to feminism come to the fore. Whereas both 'Christian feminism' or feminist versions of Christianity - no matter how diverse the content of these generalising terms - are always characterised by both feminism and religion, in the case of for example 'Jewish feminism', both a secular and a religious type of movement can be envisioned. Jewish feminism could also refer to a feminist secular critique of Judaism as a patriarchal religious tradition, whilst the same move in the other case - a secular Christian critique of Christianity - would be impossible and in se secular. We can furthermore assume that what it means to be a Jewish feminist in Israel or to be a Jewish feminist in the U.S. may entail two different things. Here not only the geographical context is determining, but also what it is to be a Jew does not take on the same levels of meaning as its Christian counterpart.<sup>24</sup>

In 'religious' Jewish feminist critiques of Judaism as a religious tradition however, similar developments and divergences can be detected when compared to the impact of second wave feminism on Christian denominations. The different impacts and gains of feminism for denominations within the Christian tradition, i.e. the Protestant versus the Roman-Catholic traditions or the competing strands within Protestantism can be viewed as parallel to the differences between various strands of Judaism. These had precisely developed in the context of the confrontation with those other traditions and the survival of Judaism as a living religious tradition within a broader non-Jewish modern society in Europe since the Enlightenment. From the contemporary traditionalist perspective on Judaism, it could be argued that the schisms amongst Jews resulted in the very development of strands of Judaism which themselves actually became 'religions', yet adapted to the very model of current Christianity.<sup>25</sup> The fact that 'Judaism' or the Jewish tradition has been and

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particularly in the twentieth century has become much more than a 'religion' in the sense that Christianity can be perceived as such, also needs to be taken into account when viewing the wholly different impact of the second wave feminist movement on Jewish communities throughout the west.

The first known feminist critiques of Judaism do focus on the same fundamental patriarchal legacy that had historically pervaded religious 'doctrine' and institutional structures. Rachel Adler's 'classical' text from 1973 'The Jew who wasn't there' in fact shows many similarities to Mary Daly's (1968) earliest critique of the sexism of Christianity. Writings such as these were not only among the first in their 'discovering of patriarchy' of their religious traditions, but also in that they functioned as precursors to the following divergent strands of feminist critique that developed in dealing with religious patriarchy. Thus Susannah Heschel (1995 [1985]: 4) a posteriori describes the reactions to Adler's (1995 [1985/1973]) first feminist critique of Judaism: 'Yet Adler's moderate position has been denounced as too radical by Orthodox opponents, and too modest by feminists'.

Adler discovers patriarchy in Jewish law and practice (halakhah), where women are viewed as mere 'peripheral Jews'. Besides their exemption or exclusion from all-important male religious commandments, women's major mitzvot and their religious role appear to be only in the service of their husband, family and the broader community. In Adler's view they therefore function as a mere 'tool' for men in order to enable them to fulfil their own mitzvot or religious obligations. The religious commandments women are expected to fulfil, are then always connected to 'some physical goal or object' (15). In Adler's critique however, the fundamental problem in the case of the 'woman problem' in Judaism is only presented, precursoring later answers and suggestions: 'The problem is how to attain some justice and some growing room for the Jewish woman if one is committed to remaining within halakhah' (16). Although in her later work, Adler does not go so far as Daly as to denounce Judaism as 'hopelessly patriarchal', Umansky (1999) does place her on par with the likes of radical Jewish feminists such as Judith Plaskow (1991). In short, the insight that 'the "otherness" of women, evident in Jewish liturgies and texts, cannot be remedied through piecemeal halakhic change, for the halakhic system in and of itself is one that presupposes the otherness of women' (Umansky 1999: 187).

The 'woman question' in Judaism cannot entirely be located in the context of second wave feminism, as issues formulated in terms of women's inferior status in Judaism in fact date back to the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> That genealogies of the relationship between feminism and religion by feminist religious studies scholars such as Rita Gross (1996) do not elaborate extensively on Judaism in the context of first wave feminist critiques of religion can perhaps not entirely be attributed to the privileging of the Christian tradition.<sup>27</sup> As for many other non-Christian and non-Western cultures and ideologies in general, even for second wave feminism, Heschel (Heschel 1995

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[1983: 5]) notes that feminism in general has for the most part been experienced as 'antithetical' to the 'interests of contemporary Judaism'. The above noted changes in the definition and strategies in the preservation of Jewish identity and the Jewish community also took place in the sixties and seventies, where 'feminism was perceived as a threat to Jewish survival'.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, in the nineteenth century, those strands of Judaism that attempted to adapt to principles of the Enlightenment and social and economic changes that were taking place within modern society, did in fact take on the issue of women's equality within their religious institutional frameworks.

Liberal or Reform Judaism for instance, first put the issue of women's equality on the agenda as early 1846, declaring 'the holy duty of emphasising pertinently the full equality of the female sex' (Cornille 1994: 37). Only a handful of individual women were able to distinguish themselves however Denise Carmody (1987: 201) notes, and the 'bulk of women continued to be limited to the domestic sphere. Actual changes followed gradually with the admittance of women to the choir, and particularly the eradication of the Morning Prayer in which God is thanked for not making man a woman. In 1851 the mehitza was abolished and in 1875 girls were admitted to the Reform theological seminary, the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. Birth rites and a parallel ritual to the bar mitzvah ceremony were introduced. The marriage ceremony was adapted as to give women a more active part in the ceremony. Finally liberal Judaism also abolished the menstruation laws for women. Although none of the female students at the Hebrew Union College would have sought ordination, according to Carmody (Ibid.) the issue of women as rabbis was discussed in 1921.<sup>29</sup>

In Conservative Judaism, which had developed in a reaction of resistance to the rates of adaptation of the liberal variant to modern society, this pace was mirrored in the extent to which the status of women would be adjusted. Rather than abolishing the Morning Prayer, it was altered by eradicating the word of thank to God for not being created a woman. Women were similarly permitted to be included in the minyan, to be called to receive aliyot (recite blessings before and after the Torah reading in the pulpit), and to enjoy the bat mitzvah ritual for girls. Reconstructionist Judaism, which was founded in the 1930s, worked towards women's equality and women were accepted by the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RCC) in Philadelphia when it first opened in 1968 (Umansky 1999: 184). The degree and rate at which women's access and full participation in male dominated religious rituals and the institutional framework developed, did so from the paradigm of sameness and gender equality in a liberal feminist sense. The actual role of the feminist movement in these changes is nonetheless debatable. The strands most susceptible to changes in modern society or 'assimilationist' such as liberal Judaism were also those that went the furthest in achieving this kind of gender equality. Nevertheless, for most branches of non-Orthodox Judaism, full equality defined as women's access to the highest positions in the religious

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institutional hierarchy would not be achieved until the beginnings of second-wave feminism during the seventies.

From the perspective of the liberal paradigm for equality, as Gross (1996: 41) notes, the gains of the twentieth century feminist movement for religious institutions are often measured by both the rapidity and the extent to which women would gain the right to be ordained within their particular denomination. As described in an earlier paragraph, during the nineteenth century this was only accomplished in these denominations and especially those religious sects which as such countered doctrines and structures of mainstream churches, including their gender ideologies.

The historical developments pertaining to women's equality within the liberal strand of Jewish religious institutional frameworks by and large seem to have taken place independently of the impact of secular liberal feminism on the religious sphere. Umansky (1999: 183) for example, notes that the decision to admit women into the American Reform rabbinate 'predates the second wave of U.S. feminism by approximately ten years'. However, the first woman rabbi (Sally Priesand) was not to be formally ordained until the height of second-wave feminist critiques of Judaism in 1972 (Cornille 1994: 37).<sup>30</sup> Reconstructionist Judaism followed by ordaining Sandy Eisenberg in 1974 (Gross 1996: 42). Feminist critique and activism therefore has certainly functioned as a catalyst in gaining women's access to formerly male dominated institutional positions since the seventies. Even in the case of Liberal Judaism however, official equal access has to this date not guaranteed actual equality in leadership positions, with the Hebrew Union College only having two full-time members of the rabbinic school faculty (Umansky 1999: 183).

In Conservative Judaism, direct feminist criticism of the exclusion of women from religious leadership did take place. A women's movement called *Ezrat Nashim* demanded full equality for women in religious observance at the annual convention of the Rabbinical Assembly in March 1972, including their admission to the Jewish Theological Seminary's rabbinical and cantorial programs (Cornille 1994: 38; Umansky 1999: 184). These demands were met after years of difficult debate, and in 1979 women were officially accepted to the rabbinate. The first Conservative woman rabbi (Amy Eilberg) was only ordained in 1985. *Ezrat Nashim* were also active and present at a national conference entitled 'The Role of Women in Jewish Life' held in 1973, followed by a second conference a year later where the international umbrella organisation JFO (see above) was formed. Although JFO only existed for two years, a number of more local groups directed at the gaining of equal access for women in religious participation and leadership roles have flourished in the U.S. ever since.

Outside of the U.S. and Israel, there is only one other context in which the feminist movement can probably be held countable, if only in an indirect manner in terms of the debates generated on gender roles and gender equality in the broader modern society: the admission of the first woman (Jacqueline

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Tabick) to the rabbinical programme of the Leo Baeck College in London, U.K. in 1971 (joint British Reform and Liberal). As Umansky (1999: 185) notes on the impact of the feminist movement in these issues of women's ordination, in any case: 'open discussion about women's role in society and within the Jewish community [...] have been fuelled at least to some extent by an awareness of issues that feminism has raised in England, North America, Israel, and elsewhere in the world'.

### **4. The Birth of the Feminist Study of Religion**

However slight or fragmented our knowledge on the participation of women in the academic study of religion during the earlier part of the last century, at the beginning of this chapter it became clear that it is difficult, and probably anachronistic to speak of any 'feminist' scholarship within this field. Additionally, this scholarship can be considered apart from or non-related to the development of the relationship between feminism and religion in the general social, religious or even political field during what is considered the long-stretched phase of first wave feminist movement. The second-wave feminist movement accelerated some of the demands that liberal feminists had been putting forward for centuries. The struggle for ordination can in this sense be seen as a continuation of the struggle for the right 'to speak', that is by appealing to the right for equal access to various mainstream religious institutions which had been reserved only for men for centuries. On the other hand, the entrance of feminism into the academy and later the institutionalisation of feminist critique and women's studies would also reach the field of the study of religion, both theology departments and the general field of religious studies scholarship. The close relation between religious institutional practice within denominations and theological seminaries, together with the advancement of women's position vis-à-vis the religious domain and their demand for access to formal positions of institutionalised power, led to the development of various kinds of feminist theology within and outside of the academy.

Opposed to first wave feminist religious activism therefore, the relationship between feminism and religion takes a turn from the sixties onwards. In line with the general pattern of the influx of feminism into the academy, disciplines and departments of theology and religious studies are could not remain unaffected. Feminist religious activism itself comes to be expressed through the medium of scholarship, primarily in the form of feminist theology, but as will be argued in the following chapter, also in the form of feminist religious studies. To bring an account of the relationship between religion and feminism from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, is therefore not only to deal with religious feminism in the form of struggles for equality or difference in the religious institutions, in alternative movements or

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the work of individual writers. It also involves the work by women theologians and religious studies scholars within - or often working in the margins of - the academy.

In most contemporary genealogies of the feminist study of religion for the U.S. context (e.g. Gross 1996; Morgan 1999), Mary Daly's *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968) and particularly the early work of Rosemary Radford Ruether, including *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (1974) are often considered to be exemplary or even the launch of feminist theology and religious studies' scholarship. Valerie Saiving's (1979 [1960]) essay 'The Human Situation: A Feminine View', first published in 1960 is considered to be a classical example of early second wave feminist critique of androcentrism in both theology and religious studies scholarship. The reach and therefore the impact of all this work was not to be felt until during the latter part of the seventies. Hence Saiving's essay is reprinted in well-known editions such as Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow's (1979) *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*. This volume was another important and to date widely used reference work in feminist religious studies courses that took stock of much of the work that had not reached broad audiences until the latter part of the seventies.

As women located within various disciplines in the academy began to critique and reflect upon women's inferior or unequal status in society and personal life, bringing these questions into their fields of research, so women in theology and religious studies courses began to discover the 'patriarchal' nature, sexism or androcentrism inherent in their religious traditions, religious studies scholarship and curricula. Thus Rita M. Gross (1996: 45-46) reflects upon her struggles during the late sixties, being one among but a handful of young women enrolled in the religious studies programme at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Gross also claims to have been mostly unsupported by mentors concerning questions of feminism, women and religion, and very uninformed, remaining ignorant of some of the early work published by Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether, presently considered as 'pioneers' in current feminist religious studies' scholarship. When several women began to ask feminist questions in their theological or religious studies departments during this period, they often worked in isolation of each other. They had not heard of some of the work that had been done before them. They did not know their 'foremothers', that is those women Ruether (1998: 209) and King (1995c) call both first wave Christian activists in the U.S. or religious studies women scholars in the U.K.

Carol Christ (1992: 84) points to similar experiences as Gross's, being only one of two women enrolled in the Yale University graduate programme in religious studies in 1967. Christ was also one of the few with a Bachelor of Divinity, which until that time had been an ordinary route to a doctorate in religious studies, yet obviously quite pointless for women to pursue. As was argued at the beginning of this chapter, there were structural obstacles for

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women to the field of religious studies, which in the U.S. especially had persisted into the second half of the twentieth century. Even when formal structural obstacles were removed, discriminatory practices continued. Ruether (1998: 210) notes that in the case of the first women to graduate as Masters of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School, 'school officials were reluctant to give the only two women in the graduating class the top honors that they had earned, on the grounds that this would put the men in a bad light'. After continuously being 'rebuffed' upon wishes to enter doctoral programmes at Catholic universities in the U.S., in the early sixties Mary Daly had to go all the way to Europe to obtain a doctorate in theology (Ruether 1998: 216). According to Daly, the University of Freiburg in Switzerland was the only university in the world that allowed women to obtain the highest canonical (acknowledged by the Catholic Church) degrees at the time (Korte 1997: 110).

Whereas the impact of feminism during the seventies had been felt in many major Christian and Jewish denominations, and was often most explicit in the struggle for women's ordination, feminist theologians and religious studies' scholars similarly began to meet and jointly structure their concerns. A first official meeting of women theologians and religious studies scholars took place in 1971 at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) in Atlanta, Georgia where the Women's Caucus – Religious Studies, chaired by Carol P. Christ and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza was founded (Christ 1992: 84; Gross 1996: 46). Later a Women and Religion Working Group was formed, chaired by Mary Daly, which became a regular section of the annual AAR programme from 1972 onwards. According to Gross (1996: 47) the consequences of these events for the further development of feminist religious studies were paramount:

Before the meeting [the AAR meeting of 1971], isolated, relatively young and unestablished scholars struggled to define what it meant to study women and religion and to demonstrate why it was so important to do so. After the meeting, a strong network of like-minded individuals had been established, and we had begun to make our presence and our agenda known to AAR and the SBL.

As for the newly founded Women and Religion Section (ibid.):

Many feminist scholars, including myself, presented their first academic papers for the Women and Religion Section at these meetings. Especially in the early years, these papers were eagerly collected and published, becoming the nucleus of the courses on women and religion that we were beginning to teach. Readings for such courses were then very scarce, a problem we certainly no longer face.

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Much less is to be found on the structural situation and beginnings of women theologians and religious studies scholars in the European context. Despite the much older tradition of religious studies as an autonomous discipline (or history of religion), King's (1995c) historiographical research showed how women's 'official' participation in the development of the modern study was low. Her analysis of the attendance figures, programmes and proceedings of the International Congresses for the History of Religions held since the beginning of the twentieth century, shows that proportionally, participation and contributions by women at the Congress held in Amsterdam in 1950 (the year the IAHR was actually founded) was less than that in Oxford in 1908. The numbers for the 1975 XIIIth Congress held in Lancaster show an improvement, but still there were only ten women paper-givers of a total of 184. Considering the mid-seventies appeared to be the formative period for feminist religious studies scholarship in the U.S., one may have expected this U.K. conference to have shown some parallels. But according to King (1995c: 226), even in its content the proceedings do not reflect any progress:

The Lancaster Congress theme was 'The nature and destiny of man', but little initial reflection on this theme is found. The papers remained locked in an entirely androcentric perspective in treating the theme, and no attention was given to gender differences in either the arrangement of the sections, the content of the papers (with one single exception on 'Women in Greek rituals' by I. Chirassi-Colombo) or the methodological reflections.

Concerning feminist theology in Western Europe, Rosemary Radford Ruether (1998: 179) claims that due to the differential context, this did develop relatively late compared to the U.S., not fully until the eighties, and even then was also influenced greatly by existing North American work. In Germany for example, Ruether argues how both liberal and neo-Orthodox Protestant theologies were largely gender-conservative in post-war Germany. Since the sixties the well-known theologian Dorothee Sölle had critiqued both these forms of theology, developing a much more political form, dedicated to justice and social change. Sölle did not make the explicit link between this liberationist theology and feminism until the eighties though, although Ruether (182) argues 'the questions she had been asking as a political theologian were along the same lines as the critique and reconstruction of theology being formulated by feminists'.

Turning to Catholic feminist theology in Western Europe, Ruether (190) claims that the largest developments have been limited to those countries which are predominantly and historically Protestant. In Catholic areas by contrast, such as France, Italy and Spain, even into the late nineties, there would be 'no real conversation between feminism and theology'. This situation in fact is held in place in many a theological faculty in these countries. In the Protestant

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countries of northern Europe, Catholic feminist theology has developed since the early years of women's liberation, with prominent figures such as Kari Elisabeth Børresen in Norway and Catherina Halke in the Netherlands, who was appointed to the first chair in feminist theology in Europe (1983). Linda Hogan (2001) speaking as a contemporary feminist theologian in the European context includes figures such as Elisabeth Gössmann and Kari Børresen along the likes of Daly and Ruether active in the very early years of the feminist critique of both the exclusion of women from the church and the sexism and misogyny inherent in Christian theology. Børresen's *Subordination and Equivalence*, first published in 1968, was pioneering in that it attempted an analysis of the image of women according to the theologies of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

In this chapter I have presented a *historical* perspective on the relationship between feminism, religion and the academy, by using the chronology of what is often referred to as the 'waves' of feminist movement in Western society. This overview has been necessarily concise and selective, depending on the availability and existence of the relatively little research that has been conducted on this subject. Whereas the greater part of contemporary feminist movement and scholarship since the beginnings of the second wave feminism has generally been regarded and identified as wholly secular, first wave feminist critique – especially in the U.S. – was inherently linked to the religious ideology which circumscribed the 'world view' in the culture and society of the time. As for the scholarship on religion conducted by women, in Europe a number of women may have been active in the field of religious studies in particular fields (orientalism), but the work of these 'woman worthies' (Harding 1991) cannot necessarily be regarded as feminist scholarship. So although there may have been women scholars in religion and there were a number of religious feminists active during this phase, there was no feminist religious studies scholarship as such.

Apart from a few notable exceptions, first wave feminist writing can be characterised as liberal in orientation, striving for and based on a paradigm of both ontological sameness and equality in the public sphere. Religious rhetoric often forms the background of or is actively used in the struggle and argumentation of this pioneering work. However, both the 'radical' exceptions that were rejected by the feminist movement at large and the liberal critiques remained unknown for many early second wave feminists compelled to 'reinvent' the feminist critique of patriarchal religion during the sixties.

In the second wave by contrast, the relationship between feminism and religion becomes more diversified and complex. Liberal equality feminism is for the most part entirely secular or even anti-religious. In mainstream Christian and Jewish denominations themselves feminist activism is influenced by the liberal paradigm of equality in the broader society, yet meeting tough resistance compared to the gains in the political and social sphere. In the development of

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radical feminism religion is perceived as patriarchal at its core. On the other hand, radical feminist ideologies and movement is celebrating the ontological difference of women develop that propose alternative forms of feminist religiosity outside and opposed to mainstream and orthodox norms. For this kind of 'feminist religion', feminism and 'women's experience' is the primary source for the construction of new kinds of spirituality.

Religious feminism slowly but surely enters the academy in the form of feminist theology. A generation of religious studies women scholars is thereby 'doubly handicapped' in integrating feminist critique into their work due to the gendered structural difficulties that characterise the study of religion in many universities. Radical feminist theologians (e.g. Daly) who question and even reject normative patriarchal traditions by virtue of their radicalism only just 'hang on a thread' to the academy.

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<sup>1</sup> In the discussion of the first feminist wave, the focus is exclusively on Christian and Christian-based religious movements and feminist religious activism in the West. This choice depends on the available literature but is also motivated by the objective of delineating the general historical context in which feminist religious studies scholarship ultimately developed and is discussed towards the end of the chapter. Jewish religious feminism is therefore only discussed in the context of the second wave feminist movement as it is only at this point general literature on the history of feminist religious studies begins to pick up on religious traditions other than Christian feminism. This is not to say that there was no Jewish feminist 'religious' activism as such before the 1960s. For an account of the relationship between gender, religion and Jewish identity in the context of the history of assimilation in Western and Eastern Europe and the U.S. in the modern Era, see Hyman 1995.

<sup>2</sup> For a more elaborate discussion of the critique of androcentric scholarship, see chapter three.

<sup>3</sup> As Nielsen (1990: 4) herself notes, the social sciences in their formative years borrowed a particular model of the 'scientific method' (appeal to empirical evidence, experimentation, use of inductive and deductive logic) from the discipline of physics, that in itself was not representative of all the divergent methodologies found in other disciplines called 'scientific'. Sylvia Walby (2001) for example argues how the rejection of science by many feminist theorists is often based on caricatured or out of date conceptions, and proposes to retain the 'scientific method' based on a concept of the social based on 'networks' in support of a feminist knowledge project. In a reply to Walby, Sandra Harding (2001) then again claims that Walby's article is exemplary of a typical misreading of her feminist standpoint epistemology that by contrast does not reject science, but rather seeks to maximise its methods and rationality through the integration of pro-democratic ethics and politics as aspects or elements of evaluative criteria.

<sup>4</sup> The omission of contemporary feminist study of religion in the *ER* is discussed in chapter three.

<sup>5</sup> Although in Harding's work 'science' usually refers to both the physical and social sciences, her epistemologies have also been widely applied in other areas of scholarship in the humanities, not usually understood to be 'science' in the strict sense of the term. Here however, 'science' is understood in its broad meaning, referring to all forms of academic research.

<sup>6</sup> This in contrast to many other disciplines, where the history of women scholars has been registered earlier and more extensive. In history for example, but also in anthropology many women have played an important role, with well-known figures such as Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead (see e.g., Behar and Gordon 1995).

<sup>7</sup> In anthropology, Elsie Clew Parsons can be referred to as one of the exceptional women to have an academic career, even becoming president of the American Ethnological Society in 1923. Parsons did

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come from a wealthy family though, and was thus able to finance her own research and that of many other anthropologists, including Ruth Benedict (Lamphere 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Mabel Bode, 'The Women Leaders of the Buddhist Reformation', in: *Transactions of the 9<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Orientalists*, London, 1892, pp. 341-343. This is based on the commentaries by Buddhagosa on the *Anguttara Nikaya* from the fifth century and Caroline F. Foley, 'The Women Leaders of the Buddhist Reformation', in: *Ibid.*, pp. 344-361, for Dhammapala's translation of Buddhagosa's commentaries on the *Udana*, the *Vimana Vatthu*, the *Peta Vatthu*, the *Theragatha* and the *Therigatha* (in: Bartholomeusz 1994: 205, n.35).

<sup>9</sup> Mrs. Rhys Davids, tr. *Psalms of the Early Buddhists: I. Psalms of the Sisters*, London: Pali Text Society, 1909 in: Gross 1993: 322, n. 59. Together with the translations by K.R. Norman, tr. *The Elders' Verses: II Therigatha*, London: Pali Text Society, 1971, these two translations were brought together by the Pali Text Society as *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns (Therigatha)*, Oxford 1989.

<sup>10</sup> As the dominant focus in the available international English literature is limited to the situation in the U.S. and the U.K., this chapter will also be limited to portraying these two contexts.

<sup>11</sup> Sally Roesch Wagner, Executive Director of the Matilda Joslyn Gage Foundation (<http://www.pinn.net/~sunshine/gage/mjg.html>) claims this motto by Gage might have been used in reaction to the truism of the day, Frances Willard's motto 'The sweetest words are mother, home and heaven.' (Personal communication with Sally Roesch Wagner).

<sup>12</sup> This kind of activity, as with all other beginnings of organised feminist movement in general concerned women from the higher classes who could afford to participate in these activities and whose productive role in housework had diminished since the Industrial Revolution (Poldervaart 1983: 25-26).

<sup>13</sup> The declaration was politically and academically ignored during subsequent centuries (Schröder in: de Gouges 1989: 57)

<sup>14</sup> In practice however, this period that is usually conceived of as a fundamental break with the feudal absolutist system of the past and a delegation of power to the people, can also be characterised as a form of continuity when viewed from the standpoint of women. Whilst 'man' became equal on earth rather than merely before God, this fundamental move nonetheless retained its highly patriarchal framework. The feudal Salian law of the royal family, in which women were excluded of the succession to the throne, thus functioned as the same ideology guiding the declaration of men's- and citizens rights, presented to the king by the three estates of the National Assembly in 1789 (Schröder 1989:58). Every freeborn man became a citizen of the state, a participant of 'sovereignty' that would concede from man to man, from the monarch to the men's assembly, from father to son, and so on. It could also be argued that rather than abolished, this patriarchy was transformed into *fraternity*, replacing a system where the king (as the personification of the Father) had ruled over other men and women to a situation of equality amongst men within the public or political sphere.

<sup>15</sup> For an overview of the data that shows when women's right to vote was achieved over the whole world, see 'Women's Suffrage: A Chronology of the Recognition of Women's Rights to Vote and Stand for Election', <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/suffrage.htm>, pp. 1-3. This overview shows that even the developments within different Western countries were not parallel. New Zealand for example was the first country where women were permitted to vote (1893), with other countries following like the Scandinavian countries, the U.S.A. and the Netherlands in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Women did not acquire active voting rights in Belgium until 1948, and other European countries that did not give women complete active voting rights until the second half of the twentieth century were Hungary (1953), Switzerland (1971) and Portugal (1976).

<sup>16</sup> See also the contemporary feminist scholarship on citizenship and its problematic historical foundations in the gendered private/public divide, e.g., Lister 1997; Prokhovnik 1998; Yuval-Davis and Werbner 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Millet argues her case by an analysis of how male writers such as Freud, D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller sustain patriarchy their writings. In this respect Millet does only focus on a Western understanding of 'high culture' which does put Millet on par with Germaine Greer's work, both writers being linked to the academy (Evans 1997: 9-10)

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<sup>18</sup> The concept of patriarchy has been used in a myriad of ways by feminist thinkers (see Fox 2001 [1998]), some using it in very general terms as the a-historical and universal system of male dominance (e.g., Kate Millet). Others have conceptualised it more as a particular system, a characteristic of society, parallel to a mode of production such as capitalism (e.g., Christine Delphy). For other feminist writers, the focus has been on patriarchy as primarily connected to relations of sexuality and reproduction, whereas those focussing on patriarchy as a 'sex/gender system', have drawn attention to the connection between ideology, psyche and social structure in more historically variable terms (e.g., Nancy Chodorow 1997 [1979]).

<sup>19</sup> This was also the title of a collection of essays by Robin Morgan published in 1970 (in: Evans 1997: 11).

<sup>20</sup> The critique of the institution of heterosexuality was to be elaborately theorised in the eighties and later even integrated into the poststructuralist feminist theory of Judith Butler (1990, 1993), see previous chapter.

<sup>21</sup> Besides socialist and radical feminism, the issue of difference would also prominently figure in feminist appropriations of psychoanalysis, starting with Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* published in 1975, and Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* published in 1978. Feminist interpretations of Lacan and 'French feminism' in general is founded on the idea of sexual difference (Irigaray, Cixous), as is the second generation of contemporary feminist theorists influenced by these authors (Braidotti; Grosz), and previously discussed in chapter one.

<sup>22</sup> According to Madsen (2000), Daly has 'hung on a thread to the academy' for thirty-odd years now for consistently 'blowing exuberant raspberries at the Vatican, Boston College, and the keepers of the patriarchal flame generally'. Only recently has Daly been suspended altogether from Boston College for her policy of teaching only female students in the classroom and male students in independent study.

<sup>23</sup> For a critique of Daly's universalistic assumptions, see Uma Narayan's (1997) feminist postcolonial critique in chapter three.

<sup>24</sup> The complexities of this debate and the multiplicity of the term of Jewish identity will be fully treated in chapter five.

<sup>25</sup> For more on the history of the development of different 'denominations' in Jewish religious practice, see chapter five.

<sup>26</sup> As for other religious traditions, in Judaism religious women have also historically often played important roles in the reform of the tradition and women's role. For example, Hannah Solomon who founded the 'National Council of Jewish Women' in 1893 united women from different schools of Judaism in order to ameliorate humanitarian goals. Lily Montagu was the first chair of the 'World Union for Progressive Judaism', founded in 1926, in order to revitalise Judaism through a full participation of women in religious life (Comille 1994: 39).

<sup>27</sup> The problem of the way feminist theology and religious studies scholarship has primarily focussed on Christian and post-Christian religiosity and for the greater part has failed to include the analysis of other cultural and religious traditions will be discussed extensively in chapter three.

<sup>28</sup> The critique of Western feminism by postcolonial thinkers is discussed in chapter four, whilst the perception of feminism by traditionalist Jewish women and the broader context of identity politics involved will be elaborated on more fully in the case study in chapters seven and eight.

<sup>29</sup> More information on the gender roles in traditionalist Jewish law will follow in chapter five, seven and eight.

<sup>30</sup> Comille (1994: 42) notes that in fact the first woman to graduate from the Berlin Academy for the Science of Judaism received ordination in 1935. However, she died in a concentration camp in 1940, never to attain leadership over a liberal Jewish community. It could therefore perhaps be argued that the great wars of the twentieth century and particularly the holocaust obviously arrested any developments pertaining to women's status, as these were not perceived as the most crucial factors in the rebuilding and mere survival of religious Judaism during the post-war period.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **A 'VIEW FROM BELOW'? AGAINST AND BEYOND ANDROCENTRISM IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION**

In this chapter, the focus shifts from the feminist movement to contemporary feminist scholarship on religion, turning to questions of *methodology* rather than history. The first objective is to show how feminist theory and methodology has been applied in the feminist study of religion, and in what way this research has evolved further from the initial critiques of androcentrism that characterised an earlier phase of feminist scholarship. After an introduction on some commonly employed general typologies of feminist research and theory, the question is posed whether these are reflected in the development of the feminist study of religion, and secondly, whether a same basic methodological turn from 'critique to transformation' has taken place. Although feminist scholars in religion have eloquently analysed androcentric presuppositions and have subsequently set out to reform androcentric methodology through research that 'starts from women's religious lives', overall, this scholarship has left the mainstream study of religion unaffected and inattentive to questions of gender.

Moreover, a large part of this contemporary scholarship can be characterised as *essentialist* in being analogous to other areas of feminist scholarship in their earlier 'additive' phase. According to Rosalind Shaw (1995), this essentialism can substantially be attributed to the mainstream study of religion which she feels, is similarly essentialist in its 'view from above' perspective on religious phenomena. On the one hand, Shaw's hypothesis on the incompatibility between religious studies and a feminist approach is concurred with. However, in the final part of the chapter it is shown that Shaw's call to integrate 'diversity' to bring the feminist study of religion into phase with more recent developments in feminist research and theory has to a certain extent been heeded, but only in particular and limited ways. That a theorisation of *religious* differences or diversity is marginalised and absent in the feminist study of religion, in turn points to even deeper factors underlying the incompatibility that can account for the im/possibility of a paradigm shift of the mainstream.

#### **1. Feminist Theory: The Shift towards Questions of Epistemology**

In the previous chapter it became clear that although there may be some general agreement among contemporary authors on the division into varieties of feminism and different strands of feminist thought, there are no clear-cut niches into which this diversity can be categorised. Such typologies are constructed in

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hindsight, and are never 'neutral'. They are designed in a certain epoch reflecting a particular position which itself needs to be taken into consideration. Often typologies take the appearance of 'evolving schemes', or follow dialectical principles, implying that one strand is a reaction, therefore 'better' or in a developmental stage further than the last. One can ask for example whether Donovan's (2000) usage of the term 'cultural feminism' for what is identified as a certain branch of feminism during the nineteenth century (belonging to the first wave), is anachronistic. Is it accurate and fair to project the framework of a much later movement into the past as some sort of predecessor? It was also shown that situating the relationship between feminism and religion into such schemes is by no means straightforward. Figures such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton can be placed into multiple and seemingly conflicting frameworks, depending on developing or altering positions within an individual's lifetime.<sup>1</sup>

As for typologies of second wave feminism, although the labels may have increased, Andermahr, Lovell and Wolkowitz (1997: 38) for example claim that for early radical, socialist, marxist, and liberal feminisms much more was shared, cutting across the strict distinctions these labels suggest. The overlaps in the categorisations of authors tend to increase as additional labels such as existential feminism, materialist feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, lesbian feminism, black feminism, spiritual feminism, ecofeminism, etc. are created, precisely in the attempt to account for the vast diversity and nuances in both earlier and more recent lines of thought. Mary Maynard (2000 [1995]: 295) brings attention to and expresses her concern for many of the confusions arising from these kinds of labelling, making explicit that 'there is no real consensus as to which categories are the most meaningful, how many there are and which writers are to be located within each.'

What Maynard (1998; 2000 [1995]) calls the 'Big Three', denoting liberal feminism, marxist or socialist feminism and radical feminism, is indeed often employed as the standard classification of both feminist political movement(s) and their concurrent theoretical frameworks. The tripartite scheme is standard currency in women's studies textbooks and literature on feminist theory. As noted in the previous chapter, the entrance of feminism into the academy meant early feminist scholarship and the work within the developing field of women's studies was explicitly focussed on analytically mapping and attempting to account for what was perceived to be the universal oppression or subordination of women in society, history, and knowledge. The underlying key question for this move was in what way it could directly serve the ideals of the feminist movement. Initially - though immediately problematically - classifiable as 'liberal', 'radical', or 'socialist' explanations and possible solutions for the problem of women's status were central in women's studies scholarship. However, in the following development, feminist theories came to draw on various broader existing theoretical frameworks into the meanings and significance of sexual difference underlying the problem of inequality between women and men. As argued in the first chapter, these frameworks were often

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disciplinary bound. They included socialisation theories such as Sandra Bem's gender-schema-theory, psychoanalytical theories such as Nancy Chodorow's (1997 [1979]) usage of object-relations theory, or so-called 'French feminism' influenced by Derrida and Lacan. Finally, many feminist variants of poststructuralist, postmodern and postcolonial theories have flourished during the last two decades, and will be elaborately discussed later on.

A way of summarising the meanings of the earlier categorisations is by their organisation along a main axis of 'sameness or difference' in the theorisation of sexual difference. Referred to as perhaps one of the central debates in second-wave feminism, Brouns (1995b: 44) suggests the difference-equality debate touches one of the central dilemmas of feminism in general (also brought up in chapter one). Sometimes typified to as the 'minimalist/maximalist' debate (e.g. Lehman 1994; Maynard 2001a [1995]), the positions taken are always both and simultaneously theoretically and politically invested. In the classification of the 'Big Three' for example, liberal and socialist feminism can be understood as organised on the premise of equality. The basic argument is that women and men are fundamentally the same. The differences between them are seen as the mere result of unequal treatment to be solved by equal rights in primarily the political or economical sphere.

Radical feminists – and consequently cultural, spiritual and many psychoanalytic feminist theories - on the other hand prioritise the differences between women and men as ontological or essential. Women's 'difference' cannot and must not be adapted to the dominant masculine norm but should be re-valued in its own right. As alluded to in chapter one, in feminist research and theories the problem recurs in terms of a fundamental dilemma in a variety of discussions such as the sexual difference/gender theory debate, essentialism versus social constructivism, and theories and politics of identity. The tension touches the very justification of women's studies as an autonomous discipline, and more recently knows structural parallels in fields that have developed from women's studies such as lesbian theory and queer theory.

In an introductory overview applying the familiar classificatory approach, Rosemarie Buikema (1995) distinguishes between three 'strategies and theoretical positions' in the development of feminist theory: theories of equality, difference, and deconstruction. Buikema thus appropriates what I called above the major axis and tension underlying other categorisations, yet adds a third 'stage' to her scheme. This more recent perspective is described as having been influenced by poststructuralist and deconstructive theories that challenge the binary oppositions in an attempt to 'transcend the equality/difference position' of the previous lines of thought.<sup>2</sup>

More in line with Maynard's criticisms of rigid and imaginative categorisations noted above however, Buikema (1995: 4) also adds that there are overlaps and simultaneity. The theoretical approaches developed 'do not follow each other chronologically in the sense that the birth of one theoretical

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framework marks the death of the other.' The impossibility of situating approaches from a position that is itself outside of one framework or another, is attested by for example the way Buikema - in contrast to Broun's categorisation above - identifies 'de-Beauvoir-related radical feminist social analysis' as a major form of equality feminism. 'Emancipatory theorists', yet also 'radical feminists' such as Kate Millet then are located in a paradigm of equality.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Buikema's own perspective is that of feminist cultural studies which concerns issues of representation in the nineties in particular. Buikema therefore in retrospect categorises equality feminist approaches in their presuppositions of the 'universal human subject', and ascribes to their analyses a vision of texts as 'more or less faithful reflections of reality'. This kind of evaluation typically arises from a postmodern, poststructuralist framework appropriated in current cultural studies scholarship. Under 'difference', the 'metaphor of the female voice' as expressed in the so-called *écriture féminine* by French feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray is included. As Buikema (1995: 11) notes however, this strand can also be understood as heavily influenced by poststructuralism 'representing a link between theories of sexual difference and theories of deconstruction'.

In an introductory article to women's studies, Mary Maynard (1998: 250) shortly presents another series of three 'broad and interconnected phases, each influenced by the current stage reached in theorising about feminist knowledge'. Maynard calls the first the *recuperative phase*, the stage of 'adding' women into existing knowledge that took place in the humanities and social sciences, the women who had been silenced, stereotyped, marginalised or anyhow misrepresented in mainstream scholarship. According to Maynard this type of research was often directly influenced by feminist politics and was aimed at introducing women's lives, experiences and perspectives into academic scholarship. In contrast, the second *reconstructive phase* went beyond 'adding women' into existing knowledge. It generated new areas of research, concepts and theories. The new topics according to Maynard centre on the body, sexuality, the private sphere, next to theoretical discussions on 'patriarchy' and the relationship between different forms of power and inequality. Finally, the *reflexive phase* refers to the way feminist theory has been confronted and had to deal with a number of critiques. These concern feminist theory's universal pretensions and own biases resulting from the unquestioned position of speaking as women who are privileged as white, Western, and heterosexual. This critique regarding the 'diversity' of women's experiences was initiated by black women from the U.S. and U.K. signalling the exclusion and often racism implicit in women's studies, yet also from other excluded 'others' on grounds of sexual orientation, disability, age, etc.

The development, increasing sophistication, yet also the institutionalisation of feminist theory and the development of women's studies as a discipline for more than three decades now have become ever more reflexive in the sense that

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debates on the meanings, the function and the boundaries of feminist theory itself have become paramount.<sup>4</sup> Women's studies and of feminist research was originally held to be a product *for* the women's movement, in that the demand for knowledge about the lives of women was in view of transforming society, so as to end the subordination of women. Meanwhile it is seriously questionable whether contemporary 'feminist theory' – or better feminist theories – meets this demand in any straightforward manner. The meaning of feminist theory has most definitely shifted away from 'explaining women's oppression' or even knowledge that could instantly serve the political goals of feminism. This shift has been towards a focus on ways of methodologically grounding feminist research and finally epistemological questions surrounding the production of knowledge and its complex and deep relationship with politics and power as such. Besides the well-known critique of grand theory, meta-narratives, and monocausal or universalistic explanations of women's status, postmodern feminist theory in particular seems to repudiate many of the basic presuppositions and ontologies that formed the very impetus for women's studies scholarship. The linguistic turn has implied the 'deconstruction' of the very categories such as 'patriarchy' and 'women' that grounded earlier feminist critique.

In the course of these developments and processes of further institutionalisation, the original understanding of feminist or women's studies scholarship as 'research on, with and for women' (Kelly, Burton and Regan 1994: 29) or 'on, by and for women' (Stanley and Wise 1990: 21) has gradually made way for another kind of feminist scholarship. Current feminist scholarship concerns much more meta-theoretical reflection and competing understandings of what constitutes feminist research and feminist knowledge, or what is subsumed under titles such as 'women's studies', 'gender studies', and 'gay studies'. This 'race for theory' is simultaneously being criticised for being detached from feminist practice and politics. Worse, it is 'high theory', with complex jargon that is not even useful for the women's movement, the argument goes. In this context, the question of politics and debates on the relationship between feminist theory inside and outside of the academy, the academy and activism, or the 'theory/practice' issue have returned and continue to take centre stage (important works discussing these issues are Butler and Scott 1992; Nicholson 1990).

Many recent classificatory schemes of feminist research perspectives and theoretical frameworks indeed seem to replicate this recent shift towards the question of feminist epistemology. Perhaps the most influential typology of feminist research perspectives, which is also often adapted as a means to characterise subsequent phases in the development in all areas of women's studies scholarship, is Sandra Harding's (inter alia 1986; 1991) delineation of three main feminist epistemologies.<sup>5</sup> Harding calls these three paradigms respectively *feminist empiricism*, *feminist standpoint epistemology* and *feminist postmodernism*. These epistemologies or theories of knowledge ground

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methodologies of feminist research. In Harding's definition - and in appropriation by others like Andermahr, Lovell and Wolkowitz (1997: 134) or Stanley and Wise (1990: 26-27) -, 'methodology' comprises both 'epistemology' and 'methods'. Methods are referred to in its narrow meaning of research 'techniques'. 'Methodology' is therefore understood to be much broader, denoting a general 'perspective' on the theory and analysis of how research should be carried out.

Harding's threefold scheme in a way also provides a mapping of the answers that developed in reaction to the insight that mainstream sciences could not easily be transformed under influence of feminist critique and that 'perhaps the fundamental problem was epistemological' (Harding 1991: 19). In both *The Science Question in Feminism* (1986) and *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women's Lives* (1991), Harding provides a broad sequential account of feminist critiques of the sciences. The account presents distinctive lines of feminist research that are structured according to an underlying and shifting axis, framed in the form of a question that gradually changes from 'the woman question in science' to the 'science question in feminism'. The 'woman question in science' asked what women wanted from the sciences and their technologies. The 'science question in feminism' signifies a more radical move in that in Harding's view the answers provided by various feminist research programmes to the first question did not succeed in solving the problem of androcentric bias and sexism in science. Thus the 'science question in feminism' follows from the doubt that bias and sexism can be easily corrected and 'science-as-usual' can be reformed at all: can a science and its underlying epistemology that is apparently so deeply involved in distinctively masculine projects possibly be used for emancipating ends?

In the suggested shift from 'reform to transformation', Harding distinguishes between five areas of feminist science criticism or five research programmes 'each with its own audience, subject matter, ideas of what science is and what gender is, and set of remedies for androcentrism' (Harding 1986: 19). The first three can be located under the 'woman question' or the reform perspective. These consist of (1) analyses of women's situation in science; (2) the sexist misuse and abuse of the sciences and their technologies; and (3) sexist and androcentric bias in the results of biological and science research. In *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women's Lives* (1991) the first line of research centres around the issue of equity and women in science and covers distinctive focuses, such as the recovery of women's - undervalued - contributions to science, structural obstacles to achievement and mechanisms of discrimination and issues of access and education.

As with the first line of research, for the second, Harding looks at how feminist critique has fruitfully revealed the way sciences have often only benefited few, and have in fact been used in the service of sexism, racism, homophobia and class exploitation (e.g. in oppressive reproductive technology, management of domestic labour, gender discrimination in the workplace,

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medicalisation of homosexuality, ecological destruction). She nonetheless finds it inherently problematic. Neither an analysis of women's situation in science, nor uncovering the way science has been used and abused, challenges the idea of the value neutrality of science as such. The issue of responsibility is deflected once the results of 'pure scientific inquiry' are 'released' into society. The third line of critique however, does take on this challenge. Androcentrism and sexism are revealed present within the practice of science and in the research process itself, from the level of the selection and definition of a research problem, but also the concepts, hypotheses, research design, and the collection and interpretation of data (1991: 40). Examples of feminist research that challenge these kinds of 'bad science' that have only taken men's activity and belief as paradigmatic, are for example alternative studies of evolution such as the 'woman-the-gatherer'- challenge to the man-the-hunter model<sup>6</sup> or Carol Gilligan's critique of the androcentrism in Kohlberg's theory of moral development (1982, 1997 [1977]). Inherent in this third line of feminist research however, is what Harding already alludes to as the problem of objectivity. If so-called objective and value-neutral sciences are in fact shown to be masculine-biased, the question arises how these forms of 'bad science' can be distinguished from 'science-as-usual' (1986: 22-23):

But if problems are necessarily value-laden, if theories are constructed to explain problems, if methodologies are always theory-laden, and if observations are methodology-laden, can there be value-neutral design and interpretation of research? This line of reasoning leads us to ask whether it is possible that some kinds of value-laden research are nevertheless maximally objective. For example, are overtly antisexist research designs inherently more objective than overtly sexist or, more important, 'sex-blind' (i.e. gender-blind) ones? And are antisexist inquiries that are also self-consciously antiracist more objective than those that are not?

The questions Harding asks of the types of feminist research according to her own categorisation already signal the epistemological shift towards the 'science question in feminism', which is reserved for the final two feminist research programmes in Harding's sequence. The fourth line of research interrogates the 'sexual meanings of nature and inquiry', appropriating techniques of literary criticism, historical interpretation, and psychoanalysis in order to be able to 'read science as a text'. Metaphors used in early modern and contemporary science are central to the way so-called value neutral methods of inquiry and models of nature are conceptualised. These metaphors nonetheless reflect deeper social meanings, and particularly gender politics, such as the typical dichotomies of objectivity versus subjectivity, reason versus emotions, mind versus body, attached to constructions of masculinity and femininity in a hierarchical fashion.

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Finally, the fifth research area covers the three distinct feminist epistemologies introduced above. These are representative of different responses to the problem of androcentrism in mainstream science and ways of approaching the paradoxes for feminism in having to deal with the relationship between clear political agendas on the one hand, and the notion of scientific objectivity on the other. The first, *feminist empiricism* holds that sexism and androcentrism in mainstream science are simply social biases that lead to 'bad science'. For the feminist empiricist, bad science can be corrected by 'stricter adherence to the existing methodological norms of scientific inquiry' (1986: 24). Harding immediately criticises this kind of feminist 'reform', as it contains the epistemological paradoxes that were noted for some of the feminist critiques of science categorised under 'the woman question in science.' The problem according to Harding, is that while at first sight feminist empiricism may seem appealing, for it does not question 'science-as-usual' and therefore stands to be accepted more easily by the mainstream, it in fact 'deeply subverts empiricism' (1986: 25). Whilst for the empiricist the social identity of the researcher should be irrelevant to the research process and its results, feminist empiricists are in actual fact arguing that women as a group are more likely to produce unbiased and objective results than men. Harding furthermore notes that while androcentric bias is usually to be found in the choice and definition of a research problem, empiricism holds that methodological norms only apply to the 'context of justification' (testing of hypotheses and interpretation of evidence), not to the 'context of discovery'.

*Feminist standpoint epistemology* is clearly influenced by marxist philosophy and as an approach was first developed by figures like Dorothy Smith (*The Everyday World as Problematic: a Feminist Sociology* published in 1987), Nancy Hartsock (1997 [1983]) and Hilary Rose. The central idea is that women from the position of and by virtue of being subjugated, can offer more complete and therefore more adequate understandings of the world than the partial and therefore distorted or false perspective of men in the position of domination. Standpointism takes the implications of the critiques on 'bad science' in feminist empiricism a step further and offers its solution to the epistemological paradox by arguing research must not just include, but must actually 'start from women's lives'. However, this starting point is not to be conflated with the meaning of *feminist standpoint* (1986: 26):

Feminism and the women's movement provide the theory and motivation for inquiry and political struggle that can transform the perspective of women into a 'standpoint' – a morally and scientifically preferable grounding for our interpretations and explanations of nature and social life. The feminist critiques of social and natural sciences, whether expressed by women or by men, are grounded in the universal features of women's experiences as understood from the perspective of feminism.

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As with feminist empiricism, Harding already alludes to the inherent tensions within standpoint epistemology from the perspective of the subsequent type of feminist epistemology. *Feminist postmodernism* holds that both feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint theory are not radical enough. Both ‘still adhere too closely to damaging Enlightenment beliefs about the possibility of producing one true story about a reality that is out there and ready to be reflected in the mirror of our minds’ (Harding 1991: 48). In *The Science Question in Feminism* (1986) Harding describes feminist postmodernism as an ‘agenda for a solution’ to the feminist paradox of epistemology, compared to the ‘two-relatively well-developed solutions’ of feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint theory. In *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women’s Lives* (1991) Harding attempts to build upon this suggested agenda, by inquiring further into the tensions and possibilities postmodernism holds for feminism, thereby drawing on the proliferation of feminist postmodern theories that developed from the late eighties onwards, and to be discussed in a following chapter. As was the case for the other typologies of feminist research discussed earlier, Harding’s different epistemologies are also presented here as ideal types. In later work, and spurred by many an appropriation, yet also critiques or ‘misreadings’ of these perspectives, Harding attempts to rework her scheme, seeking alliances and more syntheses between different positions (e.g. 1991, 1993, 1998).

### **2. Situated Typologies of Feminist Research in Religion**

Harding, Maynard, and Buikema’s typologies are but a few examples of the many ways in which contemporary introductions to women’s or gender studies have provided overviews of the development of feminist theory or ways to categorise different types of feminist research. All typologies are grounded in and depart from the feminist insight that mainstream academic practice and theory marginalises or otherwise misrepresents women, and that the consecutive stages are representative of the evolvment in the various answers provided to the challenge of ridding this androcentrism. The first phase in all three schemes – equality, recuperation, feminist empiricism minimally share an underlying idea of the possibility of rectifying mainstream discipline towards a ‘successor science’, through what is commonly referred to as ‘adding women’. Men and women are perceived as the ‘same’, and women’s exclusion can be remedied by bringing them back into the picture in order to attain a more complete or ‘objective’ picture of reality.

In Harding’s view of standpoint epistemology, women’s lives must function as a starting point for research. The following stage – difference, reconstruction, feminist standpoint – then builds on the insight that the corrective ‘adding’ stage does not suffice to counter male bias and

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androcentrism. Putting women, 'women's experience' and their 'difference' at the centre entails a broadening of the field in terms of research questions, concepts, theories, methodologies, etc. Finally, the third and very recent stage – deconstruction, reflection, postmodernism – have the most in common between Harding, Maynard, and Buikema's schemes. Clearly all three authors are referring to the same 'postmodern turn' that has greatly determined the development of feminist theory and research since the early nineties. The epistemological shift is taken to its fullest in that both notions of sameness and difference are deconstructed together with the idea of objectivity. As Stanley and Wise (1993: 190) comment upon typologies like Harding's, one must be careful in acknowledging that these only constitute models, and are not literal-representational accounts of a limited number of epistemological possibilities: 'Typically feminists who are allocated to one of these positions actually encompass in their work elements of all three...'

Considering the commonalities and overlaps between the general typologies of feminist theory and research presented above, the main question I will ask is to what extent these are reflected in or applicable to the development of the feminist study of religion. Secondly, if so, it can be asked whether in the feminist study of religion a same basic shift from 'critique to transformation' towards an eventual epistemological shift can be detected. A brief review of the literature will furthermore show that in the search for an answer to these questions, new insights shall be gained pertaining to the question of the paradigm shift and the factors underlying the apparent incompatibility between feminism and mainstream religious studies.

*General Classificatory Schemes*

In the introduction to a status quaestionis of research in the field of women and religion published since the beginning of the eighties, June O'Connor (1989: 101) claims that feminist research in religion has grown and that besides the question of women as subject matter in religious traditions, a second area is concentrated on the issue of approaches and methodology:

These questions arise out of an interest in what we know and how we know it. They come from a sensitivity to and criticism of the andocentric manner in which the traditions generally have been studied and, more fundamentally, the andocentric manner in which many traditions have been shaped and formulated.

This claim appears to be consistent with the general development within feminist research as outlined in the typologies above. For implied in this claim is the question not only *what* sort of knowledge or experience concerning women's lives or women's inequality must be included or 'added' in

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mainstream disciplines, but *how* to acquire this knowledge and furthermore what the implications are for the discipline, to what extent it must be transformed or whether transformation is at all possible. More recently, the argument that the development of the feminist study of religion has shown to have far-reaching epistemological and broader methodological significance is echoed in Ursula King's (1995b: 21-22) introduction to the collection *Religion and Gender*<sup>7</sup>:

The feminist paradigm in religious studies is one of transformation. Its critique of the traditional sources and content of an established field involves an alternative vision which transforms both the subject matter and the scholar at the same time.

At first sight, these statements seem to suggest that the general scheme 'from critique to transformation' as present in the typologies that chart the general development of feminist theory may be equally applicable to feminist research in religion. In an article on this very question of epistemology in the same volume (1995), June O'Connor even makes use of Sandra Harding's (1991) standpoint theory in making the argument that epistemological shifts in the feminist study of religion have taken place. From a phase of including women through the 'retrieval and recovery of ignored or suppressed voices', O'Connor claims the field has moved beyond integrative to more transformative work. Women's lives only function as 'a starting point', yet additional questions, new models and concepts, ways of collecting data and interpreting findings, and in the end, complete new 'paradigms for thinking' necessarily follow.

King (1995b: 22) presents the methodological process of critique to transformation beginning with 'a hermeneutics of suspicion vis-à-vis traditional sources and methods', followed by a 'critical deconstruction and reconstruction of the key elements of the discipline, eventually resulting in its transformation'. Other recent authors have provided typologies of feminist research in religion that attest to a similar basic pattern of shifting epistemological grounds. In her typology of feminist theology for example, Linda Hogan (2001) distinguishes between a first phase of critique of the discipline for its gender blindness, and secondly a historical and textual 'excavation' that seeks to retrieve women's ignored or forgotten religious roles. Finally Hogan points to a stage of 'reconceptualising the discipline', including its theological concepts and doctrines. In *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* published in 1990, Anne E. Carr (in King 1995b: 13) then again envisions a third stage of transformation in terms of gender inclusiveness. In King's summary of Carr's scheme that borrows from both feminist history and feminist philosophy, the first stage in the feminist study of religion involves 'the deconstruction of error', and the second 'the reconstruction of reality from a feminist perspective'. The third stage must work towards the 'construction of

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general theories', 'a unifying framework which may be developed around a more inclusive gender system'.

Another typology that often functions as a broad frame of reference is that by Constance H. Buchanan (1987), who wrote a section on 'women's studies' in the well-known and authoritative Macmillan *Encyclopedia of Religion* edited by Mircea Eliade. For Buchanan, women's studies or feminist scholarship in religion takes gender as its primary category of analysis in the study of religion. Opposed to the typologies by Carr and King, gender therefore does not function as a means to distinguish consecutive phases of research. Rather, Buchanan offers distinctions between related research directions along the lines of the familiar notions of *critique* and *reconstruction*. One of the main purposes of feminist scholarship involves the *recovery* of women's historical and contemporary experience. On the basis of this the recovered experience and perspectives of women, women's studies can then 'offer *critiques* of religious and cultural traditions, while at the same time making the experience and perspectives of women the starting point for the feminist reinterpretation and *reconstruction* of both religion and culture' (Buchanan 1987: 433) [italics mine]. In Buchanan's view, women's studies is not simply concerned with 'adding knowledge', but must build a methodological basis for developing a 'more adequate understanding of the whole of human experience'. However, consistent with the above typologies, the reinterpretation of women's religious experience in the past and in the present serves as a 'resource for contemporary theology' (436):

What distinguishes feminist theologians from women's studies scholars in disciplines outside religion is their view that the key to women's becoming creative forces in their own lives, in society, and in culture lies in the act of making and articulating their own religious meaning, of formulating their own theological problems and religious vision.

Finally, another popular typology by June O'Connor (1989: 102) is markedly similar. O'Connor distinguishes clearly between three areas of questioning and research on women and religion under what she calls 'the three Rs of rereading, reconceiving, and reconstructing traditions'. *Rereading* can be summarised as the quest of gathering information on women's religious agency. The traditions and their sources must be reread, not only by focussing on women's voices, but also on their absence or silence, and by finding the reasons for this exclusion or marginalisation in the material under study. Under *reconceiving* women in religious traditions, the focus remains on the recovery of women's religious agency; yet, 'the retrieval and the recovery of lost sources and suppressed visions' (103) requires expanding traditional methodological tools. O'Connor refers to two examples, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's New Testament exegesis that applies methods of social history and historical-critical biblical hermeneutics and secondly Carol Christ's interest in reconceiving religion

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through marginal or 'heretical' sources.<sup>8</sup> The third area of questioning concerns *reconstruction*, which in O'Connor's scheme involves two tasks. One option involves the reconstruction of the past 'on the basis of new information and the use of historical imagination' and secondly 'employing new paradigms for thinking, seeing, understanding, and valuing' (104). Reconstruction hereby refers to actual theological reconstruction, whether the 'rethinking of a whole tradition from a feminist perspective' such as the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether, or the 'thea-logy' as practised by 'scholars of the goddess'.

Although these typologies share a general sequence of initial critique of androcentrism followed by a general phase of retrieving, centring or departing from women (in terms of experience, voice, roles, etc.), the authors have different conceptions of a following and final stage, apart from the insight that it involves far-reaching epistemological transformation. It does not always become clear if the process of reconstruction or transformation is envisioned vis-à-vis the mainstream field of religious studies – the long awaited paradigm shift of the androcentric mainstream – and moreover, whether the transformation of the *discipline* of the study of religion or the transformation and reconstruction of the *religious tradition* – theological reconstruction - itself is envisioned. I furthermore argue that the basic structure of these typologies, whether they claim to represent the development of the broad field of the feminist study of religion, research in gender and religion, or more explicitly focus on feminist theology (Hogan 2001), to a great extent merely replicates a much earlier and somewhat controversial typology. This typology was originally introduced in what is to date considered one of the main reference works in the feminist study of religion.

### *The Great Divide: Reformists and Revolutionaries*

One of the first and until date perhaps best known overall means of classification in the feminist study of religion has been the so-called reformist versus the radical or reconstructionist/revolutionary divide. According to Rita Gross (1996: 52) this dichotomy of positions already began to emerge since the very first second-wave feminist critiques of patriarchal religion, but was not fully explicated in terms of a classificatory scheme until the publication of Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow's (1979a) *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* in the late seventies. The distinction the authors make in their introduction to the collection of articles that follows forms the very basis for the organisation of various contributions to the book.

In the introduction (1979b) to the reader, the editors frame the tension that underlies what they see as a development into two distinct directions of feminist theology during a decade of scholarship. This tension follows from the answers different authors have given to the question whether and which sort of

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feminist theology can truly contribute to the liberation of women. Following an initial period of the discovery of sexism within and the critique of the patriarchal religions Judaism and Christianity, some feminists have opted to remain within their religious tradition, yet dedicate themselves to what they see as a possibility of reform. The general argument of the reformist position goes that, despite the historical development of sexist interpretation by dominant religious institutions such as the church and the synagogue, religious tradition holds some kind of essential core or truth that is non-oppressive or expressive of 'freedom' in relation to gender. Christ and Plaskow (1979b: 10) call this strand *reformist* feminist theology, analogous to the Reformation of Christianity of the sixteenth century. The articles included in the book grouped under the heading of reform, have in common that they remain within the boundaries of the normative religious tradition.

By contrast, the editors call those thinkers revolutionaries, who refute biblical traditions as hopelessly patriarchal, sexist and 'beyond repair', calling for women to discover and participate in new forms of feminist religiosity, theology and spirituality. Included under the heading of revolutionaries are feminists who may call themselves post-Christian, post-Jewish, pagan, witch, Goddess worshipper, or members of the Womanspirit movement. Christ and Plaskow furthermore claim that the term 'revolutionary' has its problems and should not be understood as more 'radical' than the reformist option. Subsequent authors have nevertheless often appropriated this term in describing the distinction (e.g. Morgan 1999: 48). According to Gross (1996: 109), Christ and Plaskow's categorisation did provoke some negative criticism among many 'reformist' scholars. It was perceived that the 'revolutionary' position appeared to be accorded more value, or was suggested as a step further in the feminist critique and transformation of religion than those feminist scholars in the process of attempting to reform the biblical religious tradition with which they wish to remain affiliated.<sup>9</sup>

One underlying developmental axis familiar to general typologies of feminist theory explained earlier, does tend to underlie the categorisation, and is explicated in the same introduction by Christ and Plaskow. The reformist position is aligned with the 'call for equality in religious rituals and symbolisms' (1979b: 13), whilst 'those whose theological or spiritual reflection is primarily rooted in the women's movement, especially in consciousness-raising groups, more often call for an at least temporary ascendancy of women and the female principle'. Although the equality-difference axis by no means coincides with the reformist-revolutionary dichotomy, the first tend to be in favour of a model of equality, of equal participation of women and men in religious communities (e.g. Ruether, Fiorenza, Gross and Plaskow). Followers of the Goddess propagate difference through female religious symbolism (e.g. Starhawk, Budapest) yet vary on the issue of gender separatism and/or exclusivity for women concerning religious rituals and community.

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Christ and Plaskow insist that lines cannot easily be drawn between the different categorisations they propose, nor do they claim that any one option is better or further evolved than another. However, both the title and the organisation of the book, including the articles contributed by the authors themselves (Christ 1979a, b; Plaskow 1979) suggest that the authors position themselves within a more post-Christian and post-Jewish framework. Divided into four parts, the first consists of some of the early critiques of the sexism of Christian theology (Daly 1979 [1971]; Ruether 1979 [1972]; Saiving 1979 [1960]). The second section (The Past: Does it Hold Future for Women?) is organised as if the feminist authors in this collection of articles logically take the next step in moving beyond a stage of critique. The main objectives consist of the rediscovering of the hidden history, the *herstory* of women's religious experience through the reinterpretation of both canonical scripture (Fiorenza 1979), yet also 'heretical' materials considered outside of the authoritative canon (Stone 1979). The third section then respectively covers articles with a reformist approach towards theology and ritual, although in their introduction to this section, the authors note that there are both continuities and overlaps with the first two parts in so far they all express a commitment to change rather than altogether jettison normative tradition. The final section by contrast, brings together a number of essays – including one by Plaskow and two by Christ – that repudiate biblical religions and are all committed to the construction of new feminist religious traditions, thus belonging to what the authors have termed revolutionary feminist theology.

In the beginning of this chapter, it was pointed out that many typologies of feminist theory coincide with stages of development in feminist research or women's studies as a discipline and these are often presented in a developmental sequence according to dialectical or even hierarchical principles. I furthermore argued that at another level these typologies must always be viewed as 'situated' and that at closer inspection, many overlaps, continuities and contradictions might exist. In the case of the feminist study of religion as a distinct area of research, it was shown that these arguments similarly apply, yet that there are additional particularities in the various schemes when they are mapped according to the more generic developmental schemes of feminist theory discussed earlier. Although they appear to follow the pattern towards an epistemological shift, the relatively recent typologies do not seem to borrow any of the contemporary feminist theoretical developments regarding deconstruction, reflexivity and debates over postmodernity. Regarding the transformative or reconstructive phase that many of these typologies speak of or anticipate, it is not entirely clear whether a transformation of a disciplinary nature or a religious nature is at stake. I finally argued that many of these typologies therefore do not significantly differ from Christ and Plaskow's early categorisation of 'the great divide' in feminist research in religion, and consequently, that their classification of critique-reform-reconstruction in fact

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to date functions as a paradigmatic organisational axis in the field. Before the implications of this insight are analysed further, the minimal 'steps' shared by this and the more recent typologies shall be 'retraced', yet in line with the argument that these steps are not so much sequential in a chronological frame. By way of example, a number of approaches within the field of the feminist study of religion will be discussed in more detail, as new questions will be raised.

### 3. Against Androcentrism: Critiquing Male Bias

Whereas the early work by feminist scholars in religion such as Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether is considered classic for being critical of androcentrism and sexism in religious tradition, that of Valerie Saiving, Rita Gross and Carol Christ can be appropriated as exemplary for the unmasking of androcentric *methodology* in religious studies scholarship. Valerie Saiving's essay 'The Human Situation: A Feminine View' ([1960] 1979) originally dates from a period before the onset of second-wave feminism. Its republication in Christ and Plaskow's monumental *Womanspirit Rising* (1979) gave this article the status of one of the first feminist charges of androcentrism in the mainstream study of religion, in this case the overwhelming prevalence of male bias in Christian theology. The way Saiving (1979: 25) positions herself in the very first paragraph of this article and argues that such a positioning has far reaching consequences for the practice of a discipline, can be perceived as a feminist strategy of situated knowledge *avant-la-lettre*:

I am a student of theology; I am also a woman. Perhaps it strikes you as curious that I put these two assertions beside each other, as if to imply that one's sexual identity has some bearing on his theological views. I myself would have rejected such an idea when I first began my theological studies. But now, thirteen years later, I am no longer as certain as I once was that, when theologians speak of 'man,' they are using the word in its generic sense. It is, after all, a well-known fact that theology has been written almost exclusively by men. This alone should put us on guard, especially since contemporary theologians constantly remind us that one of man's strongest temptations is to identify his own limited perspective with universal truth.

From the perspective of women, Saiving goes on to criticise the theologies of Anders Nygren and Reinhold Niebuhr for the way the male is taken as the normative model for humanity and religious experience. By focussing on the concept of the original sin, Saiving argues that these scholars unjustly universalise a male conception of sin as 'pride' or 'will-to-power', opposed to the perspective of women in which sin is experienced as self-abnegation rather

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than pride. Saiving's essay has been both exemplary and inspiring for subsequent feminist scholarship in the study of religion, pertaining to what was later called the 'question of androcentrism'. Only later did Saiving (1976) and Rita Gross (1977a) explicitly identify the exposure and critique of androcentrism as one of the primary tasks of feminist scholarship. Here, both Saiving in her later article (published in *The Journal of Religion* in 1976) and Gross explore the fundamental 'question of androcentrism' in general terms. Saiving focuses on religious studies, and Gross on the history of religions rather than theology, albeit both departing from the presupposition that all disciplines are affected by the problem of male bias and false universalisation.

In Gross' (1977a) vision of a paradigm shift of the mainstream history of religions from an androcentric methodology to an androgynous methodology<sup>10</sup> the history of religions is considered highly androcentric, due to the fact that one standard, the male norm, is taken for the human norm. While this human norm is taken to be generic, covering both male and female, in actuality women are not considered as requiring any study, as it is implicitly presumed that 'to study males is to study humanity' (9). Thus *homo religiosus* in fact turns out to be an 'abstract concept', masking the reality that only *vir religiosus* is the subject matter for religious studies research. However, for Gross the most problematic characteristic of the androcentric paradigm is that for those instances when women are discussed – which cannot entirely be avoided due to the obvious sex differentiation and gendered symbolism which exists in most religious and cultural traditions – they are studied and represented as specific cases that divert from the normative, i.e. the generic masculine. Women are then curiously 'discussed as an object exterior to mankind, needing to be explained and fitted into one's worldview, having the same ontological status as trees, unicorns, deities or any other object that must be discussed to make experience intelligible' (10). Borrowing Simone de Beauvoir's notion of women as 'other', Gross argues that in the mainstream history of religions, when women or 'feminine imagery' does function as subject matter, they are only dealt with in so far that they relate to *vir religiosus*. Women or femininity are only perceived at the level of the symbolic, the exterior, as objects only from the perspective of the males under study, not as religious subjects in their own right.

Both Saiving (1976) and more recently Carol P. Christ (1991) have taken on the task of drawing on the work of the master himself of the contemporary history of religion, the late Mircea Eliade, in order to show how the discipline can be characterised as androcentric. Although these feminist critiques analyse two wholly different works in different periods of Eliade's oeuvre, focusing on different aspects of his accounts, both literally claim that his androcentric assumptions are structured at a 'deep level', and therefore only detectable in a critical feminist reading.<sup>11</sup> Saiving draws attention to the contradictions in Eliade's *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* published in 1965. In this work which women's initiation rites and their specific 'sacrality' are not

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entirely ignored, but nonetheless considered deviant from the male structure of initiation which is then considered the generic human meaning of initiation. Eliade's interpretations are both inconsistent and thoroughly androcentric in that on the one hand he sees female initiations as referring to a specific sacrality of women, associated mysteries of conception, birth, fertility, etc. In the context of men's initiation rites then again – covered much more extensively – women are simply portrayed as 'profane'. One major problem in these interpretations according to Saiving is the probability that the ethnographic data upon which Eliade makes his generalisations itself is full of androcentric bias regarding women's sacrality and profanity. However, regardless of this problem, Eliade's own interpretations remain androcentric in that the cross-cultural generalisations he makes regarding male initiation, - undergoing physical ordeals, conquering death and spiritual power, and other elements which Saiving sees as primarily associated with aggression, conquest and domination - are then universalised as the human paradigmatic form of initiation. This generalisation then deeply contradicts what Eliade himself had concluded to be typically feminine sacrality (associated with life, fecundity, etc.) (190):

If, in short, to become really human involves deliberate destruction of one's ties to the mother, the body, the earth and its creatures, life itself – if this is what is required of me, a woman, in order to participate in the sacred (which is to say, to become a genuine human being), then I, along with all other woman, am excluded from full participation in the sacred and in real humanness – unless of course, I am willing (and somehow able) to cease being a woman. It may be true, as Eliade asserts, that women have their own form of sacrality. From the viewpoint of women, this conclusion is scarcely trivial; nor should it appear so to scholars in religious studies.

Saiving goes on to argue that in unmasking such androcentric presuppositions, further questions can be raised, such as the general evolutionary paradigm underlying Eliade's universalistic, transhistorical interpretation of male sacrality. Saiving suggests that this understanding may also be distorted and initiates the hypothesis that perhaps the sense of the sacred in precivilisation may have been closer to the kind that Eliade attributes to female sacrality, such as the affirmation of life and nature for both women and men.

An analysis of Eliade's three-volume series *A History of Religious Ideas* published in 1975-85 by Carol Christ (1991) provides another example of the deconstruction of androcentrism in the mainstream study of religion. Christ's article is not only interesting because it concerns work of the same authoritative scholar in the field of the history of religions, but also because Christ – inadvertently – follows up on Saiving's hypothesis on religion in prehistoric times. As with Saiving, Christ notices the way that at first sight Eliade does include women and feminine sacrality in his account of the origins and history

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of Western religion during Palaeolithic and Neolithic times, in this case even corroborating some of the insights in the feminist scholarship on this period which has grown considerably since the publication of Saiving's article. A feminist critical reading however, leads Christ to conclude that androcentric assumptions reign, as in the interpretation of the data 'man the hunter's' religious contributions and male symbolisms are not only emphasised and valued far above those of women-gatherers. Additionally, in uncovering androcentric assumptions, Christ also shows how culturally specific assumptions are falsely universalised (85):

Eliade leaves the reader with the impression that aside from a few indecipherable 'figurines,' Paleolithic religion was a male affair, an interaction between (male) hunters and a (male) Lord of the Wild Beasts. Could this be because Eliade finds the alleged symbols of hunting religion, including the projectile weapon, sacrificial death, blood communion, and worship of the male supreme being repeated in later patriarchal religions, most especially in Christianity? And because images associated with the female symbolize the dangerous flux of things which he finds antithetical to the sacred?

For the Neolithic period, Christ is even more critical of Eliade's lack of enthusiasm for and neglect of archaeological material and other research that suggests women had socioreligious roles and Goddesses were central religious symbols. Christ finds Eliade's rhetoric on the subsequent Indo-European religions and societies suspect in which the 'violence of the warrior and conqueror' is valorised. Finally, Eliade's interpretation of classical Greek religion is taken to task, where again the choice of sources is highly selective (androcentric texts), women are absent and patriarchy is valorised.

### **4. Starting from Women's Religious Lives**

The insight that women were absent or otherwise misrepresented or conflated with 'man' as the generic human in research provided the grounds on which to start asking new questions that 'started from women's lives'. These questions had methodological implications in the sense that a shift took place beyond the phase of critique and recuperation from 'what we know' to 'how we know'. The development of standpoint epistemology (Harding 1986, 1991) based on the work of Nancy Hartsock (1997 [1983]) and Dorothy Smith (*The Everyday World as Problematic: a Feminist Sociology* published in 1987) showed how in order to start from women's lives, often one had to look in places and subjects that had not been considered relevant or ignored in mainstream scholarship. Women's work and activities in the domestic private sphere was one such a topic and space that had been greatly neglected and let alone problematised in

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the mainstream. For the study of religion, parallel repercussions on issues of methodology – how we know - similarly took place.

Beyond the level of critique, feminist religious studies scholars have been 'starting from women's lives', researching women's 'difference', their 'agency', 'experience' and their own 'voices' in the realm of both religious texts and lived traditions. King (1997: 653-654) mentions two major and related clusters of inquiries. The first looks at women's *role and status* as it is prescribed by religious traditions, their scriptures and teachings. The second concerns the *image* rather than the role of women, which focuses on their representation in religious language and thought. However, as King remarks, this level of research still deals with mainly androcentric material. As far as patriarchal religious traditions are concerned, for the feminist religious studies scholar this approach is methodologically problematic – and in many ways analogous to feminist historical research – as the data is often limited to what men have believed, taught and propagated about women and femininity rather than what women themselves may have experienced or said. Starting from women's lives, moving from the study of women as 'objects' to 'subjects' of religion therefore has methodological consequences.

For historical and theological research, the retrieval of women's religious experience and lives requires alternative methodologies of interpreting women's absence and retrieving women's voices. As pointed out earlier, for feminist theologians this process then precisely involves a reconstruction of religious tradition itself. Positions diverge on the limits to which the creative reinterpretation must go (the 'great divide'), as locating women's experience may involve looking outside of the normative tradition. Taking 'women's experience' as a basis for a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' confronts feminist biblical scholars with a paradox, for they must 'defeat the Bible as patriarchal authority by using the Bible as liberator' (Morgan 1999: 54). Retrieving women's religious voices in non-canonical sources for example, may lead to a questioning of normative religious tradition. Those who repudiate normative tradition altogether for being 'hopelessly patriarchal' and partake in the construction of alternative feminist religions often cannot find a place at all in mainstream theological and religious studies departments (e.g. Mary Daly and Carol Christ).

In religious studies scholarship that takes a more comparative approach and is not limited to the study of Christianity or Judaism, the textual focus remains methodologically problematic. Serenity Young's (1993) well-known anthology of sacred texts *by and about* women at least is up front in making explicitly clear that the focus is on scripture rather than women's actual status in religious life. The book includes excerpts from selected scripture itself, and by way of introduction these are repeatedly situated in their historical context. As the title makes clear and despite Young's (1993: xvii) acknowledgement that the vast majority of the religious texts that have been written by men and for men 'convey an astonishing variety of religious expressions', at least an

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attempt has been made by the compiler to locate the much rarer texts written by women. These include a variety of texts such as the well-known Christian medieval mystical writings by women, but also biographies of Sufi women under the chapter 'Islam', poems and biographies of Buddhist nuns, the work of a Confucian woman scholar, stories of Taoist female sages and more memoirs, folktales, life stories, songs, poems and the like, by women in different religious traditions. Young does not limit herself to normative sources, but includes folk and fairy tales, in order to reveal the 'little tradition' or the level of popular religion – existing in primarily oral cultures -, in which the participation and sometimes even positions of authority are in the hands of women. Such an expansion of what counts as legitimate sources for religious expression or agency is even carried forward to include what Young terms the 'texts of tribal peoples', for which she turns to excerpts from the publications of anthropologists. These include recordings of stories by women and conversations by both women and men from a number of Native American tribes on any themes relating to the role of gender in creation stories, medicine women, and girls puberty rites.

As Rosalind Shaw (1995: 68) remarks in her article however - to which I shall shortly return - the strand of feminist scholarship that simply 'presents accounts of "women who wrote texts too"', does not fundamentally challenge the dominant approach in religious studies which focuses on religious scripture. In her article on androcentrism in the history of religions, Rita Gross (1977) had claimed that from the methodological point of view it is irrelevant whether the religious ideas and practices studied – the data - were androcentric and that the real issue involved combating the androcentric presuppositions of the researcher. However, the fact that the data often misrepresent or simply exclude women's religious subjectivity has profound methodological consequences for the feminist religious studies scholar who is set upon starting research 'from women's lives'. In her introduction to *Women in World Religions*, Katherine K. Young (1987: 2-3) claims that from the perspective and methodology of the phenomenology of religion, 'we cannot avoid the androcentric text which muffles our stethoscope and prevents us from hearing the heartbeats of real women':

We now know better than to think that women have always been of marginal importance, but as historians who must labor against the constraint of textual evidence we have less opportunity than anthropologists and other interpreters of contemporary societies, who document women's actual lives, to recover the feminine perspective.

Young's perspective on the study of religion – even that of a phenomenological or history of religions approach – as limiting its data to that of religious texts and its method to that of textual analysis may be seen as an example of feminist empiricism in that it does not in any way challenge the methodological

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presuppositions of the mainstream discipline. Pat Holden (1983) by contrast suggests widening the scope in order to bring into focus the everyday religious experiences of ordinary women. Although many religions are male dominated, they repress and restrict women, and reinforce female stereotypes, the discussion can be widened by 'considering how women perceive themselves and their roles within varying religious systems' (Holden 1983:4). In order to achieve such a broadening of scope, historical, textual and anthropological methods of analysis are often required.

Besides the more descriptive overview women-in-religions type of publication to be discussed later on, a limited number of cross-cultural approaches on 'women and religion' do not limit themselves to the method of textual interpretation that dominates religious studies methodologies and otherwise inhibits the study of women's religiosity in many a tradition. The volumes *Women in Ritual and Symbolic Roles* edited by Judith Hoch-Smith and Anita Spring (1978a) and *Women's Religious Experience* edited by Pat Holden (1983) for example, between them include articles on both women in the Abrahamic religious traditions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam<sup>12</sup>), other world religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism<sup>13</sup>, but also papers on female religiosity in African societies. As the latter concern religions with little written tradition, women's 'lived' participation in myth and ritual, or spiritual possession for example is discussed.<sup>14</sup> In Hoch-Smith and Spring's (1978b: 1) introduction to their volume, it becomes clear that the choice of the contributions is motivated by a focus on both 'representations of women in sacred scriptures and ritual roles for women within those religions...'. The articles themselves are not divided along lines of analyses of female metaphors or female role prescription within sacred scriptures in the 'world religions' on the one hand, opposed to accounts based on actual ethnographic research into religious roles and rituals for women - such as midwife, healer, doctor, medium, etc. - in religious contexts without scripture on the other hand. The editors claim the contributions centre on 'theoretical or ethnographic relationship between feminine metaphor in religious and symbolic systems, female ritual and social roles, and beliefs about female sexuality' (12). The focus therefore is not so much on feminine metaphors or imagery itself, but the way women (and sometimes also men) react or utilise these metaphors, or how certain symbols are contested, within or sometimes on the boundaries of institutionalised religion.

Other contributions share the emphasis on religious practice and participation by women rather than the 'scripture or religious elites' focus of mainstream religious studies methodology. Women are viewed and studied as religious specialists in their own right, often in ritual roles such as healers, midwives, spirit mediums, etc. Hoch-Smith and Spring's (1978a) collection in general shows how in order to move beyond androcentrism and to focus on women's religious agency, the study of religion must look towards alternative sources and methodologies. However, as an anthropological work, the editors

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do not explicitly state this kind of critique on the mainstream study of religion. The method of combining symbolic analysis with ethnography within the anthropological context then is not novel. In this case, merely the subject matter is new, as the editors (1978a: v) claim their collection to be ‘unique to anthropological literature, which has for the most part considered only images and roles of men in religious expression’.

A final and equally exceptional example of an edition of cross-cultural research into women’s religious lives, is Nancy Auer Falk and Rita M. Gross’ (2001) third edition of *Unspoken Worlds: Women’s Religious Lives*. Whereas the first edition published in 1980 limited its contributions to what the editors now call an ‘artificial distinction between “non-Western” and “Western” religions’, the new edition included a number of articles treating Christian and Jewish women’s religious.<sup>15</sup> However, in contrast to the literature mentioned above, the editors clearly situate themselves and their book in the discipline of religious studies, motivated by the androcentric character of the mainstream that leaves a ‘skewed and incomplete picture of women’s religious lives and roles’ (xv). In order to avoid the methodological androcentrism that often follows from the ‘hasty rationalization’ that the neglect of women’s practice and experience is based on what is perceived as their lesser prominence in – especially as official leaders, recorders and shapers of – religions, the editors refuse to offer a book ‘about how religions view women’ (xv-xvi):

To offer a new vision, our volume had to take up women’s lives; it had to place women in center stage – as men had been placed so often in the past – and to meet them as subjects, not objects, with their own experiences and aspirations. We had to create an understanding of women’s own enterprises, whether the world around them defined these as ‘in’ or ‘out’, respectable or shocking. We had to show that women have their own perspectives and claims on religion, even in systems in which men have traditionally done most of the acting and talking. If our authors discuss men’s ideas about women, they needed to show how such ideas actually affected women’s efforts and religious options.

The search for contributors soon showed that ‘our fellow historians of religion could not command materials on women’s religious lives in enough different areas of specialization to give us a volume with the range that we had hoped to achieve.’ The editors were compelled to turn to area specialists and particularly cultural anthropologists. The result is that *Unspoken Worlds* contains an array of essays, both on contemporary and historical women’s religious lives, contrasting sections on women practising religion through ‘extraordinary callings’, such as Hindu gurus (White 2001), Korean shamans (Harvey 2001), an East African diviner (Binford 2001), but also integrative patterns whereby women’s religious life supports and validates women’s everyday and domestic concerns.

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An important consequence of broadening the scope of religious traditions as well as the methodology beyond textual analysis to the study of daily practice through anthropological research, is that women's religious agency can be brought to the fore and differentiated according to cultural and historical contexts where gender relations and relations of power may be structured in multiple ways. Whereas a textual emphasis in the study of women's voices in certain patriarchal religious traditions – save theological reconstruction – may render women altogether invisible, an anthropological focus at least enables a focus on the way women perhaps enact their prescribed role as members of their religious community. Questions can be posed such as whether women 'accommodate' patriarchal norms and control, and find a space in which to lead religious lives, or whether they overtly or covertly find room to resist or escape these norms. Moving beyond the so-called male dominated world religions allows for a comparative perspective on religious traditions where gender roles may be more balanced, where religiosity is different yet on equal terms for men and women, or where gender may even be irrelevant at the level both religious practice and soteriology. Another exceptional example for feminist scholarship on the boundaries of religious studies/anthropology is that of Susan Sered, mentioned in chapter one. Sered's *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women* (1994a) for example, is a comparative study of research into religions throughout the world where women are both the majority of the leaders and the majority of the participants in religious traditions. These include both normative major religious traditions, strands co-existing or intertwining with mainstream male-dominated religions, or independent and sectarian movements throughout the world. This kind of feminist religious studies scholarship is rare but in any case exemplary for the kind of work that moves the attention to women's religious agency and even power through an anthropological methodology.

**5. The Problem of Essentialism and the 'View from Above'**

*'Essentialism' indicates a belief in the existence of fixed and essentialist properties which often invokes 'biology' or more loosely 'human nature' as the supposed basis of these. The subject is seen as located within, indeed defined by, a fixed set of attributes treated as innately physical, intellectual or emotional, and thus derived from the essential properties of body, mind or emotions. [...] Our view is that 'essentialism' is precisely an invention, the construction of a site of 'différance' [...] and thus of competing forces jockeying for control, and not the discovery of something innately 'there'.*

Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1993: 208-209)

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Since the eighties, the feminist study of religion has considerably grown and become ever more diverse. Many cross-fertilisations have taken place, influenced by the general insight in feminist scholarship that interdisciplinarity is often required in the study of gender issues. They cannot be addressed through the methodologies traditionally employed in many disciplines. Many feminist studies in religion also look to and borrow insights from developments and theories beyond the central issues in religious studies and theology, from feminist literary theory, feminist anthropology and feminist philosophy (Knott 2001). I will shortly be addressing some of these more recent developments that show many optimistic signs. However, in the framework of the typologies of feminist research and theory presented in this chapter, it was argued that for many feminist scholars in religion, a methodological and epistemological shift involves the process of reconstructing religion itself, simply replicating an earlier pattern from the seventies. Additionally and as postulated in chapter one, whereas postmodern critique and deconstructionism, so central in this epistemological shift for many areas of feminist research, have also entered the feminist study of religion in both theological and literary forms, *gender theory* for the most part remains to be integrated.

One of the main reasons for this particular lacuna I suggest lies in the particular relationship between feminism and the study of religion that can be characterised by the notion of *essentialism*. Due to its persistent essentialist tendencies, the feminist study of religion appears to be 'lagging behind' compared to other areas of feminist research. For the most part it fails to make many of the methodological and epistemological shifts signalled in general typologies of feminist research and theory. Before turning to some examples of the way this essentialism has been addressed and attempted to be solved in the feminist study of religion, I will go back to the main research question concerning the paradigm shift of the mainstream from the perspective of this feminist scholarship and critique. It is precisely due to the inherent essentialism of the *latter*, a number of feminist religious studies scholars argue, that gender inclusiveness is unattainable and androcentrism prevails.

Echoing Ursula King's assessment (1995) in *Religion and Gender* discussed in chapter one, Randi Warne (2000, 2001 [1998], 2001) repeatedly claims that towards the new millennium the mainstream study of religion has still failed to make that gender-critical turn. There remains a ghettoisation of religious studies which takes women or gender as its primary focus, and as Warne (2001: 148) claims an 'exoticisation' of the same. Women and religion are seen as 'additive' or topics of special interest aside to supposedly neutral mainstream studies. This furthermore results in a kind of 'non-reciprocal academic bilingualism' whereby gender-critical scholars are expected to be proficient in both their own field and that of the mainstream, whereas mainstream scholars are not penalised for remaining gender-blind.

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Although their comments are brief, both religious studies scholars Rosalind Hackett (2000) and Kim Knott (2001) allude to the character of the religious studies in explaining the im/possibility its engendering. Thus Knott (2001: 4) claims that although there is more awareness for gender issues, 'many scholars have not yet seen how singularly transforming the lenses of gender are in understanding religious phenomena'. According to Knott, there 'remains the need to recognise that religion is contextual and squarely rooted in power relationships'. Hackett (2000: 238) similarly points to the importance of *context* as it appears to be the missing link in the prospect of any kind of gender inclusiveness: 'The heritage of phenomenological comparativism and a predilection for the irreducibility of "religion" in the history of religions has not served the study of gender well, in that it has fostered a generalized, essentialized, and decontextualised view of religion'. That both Knott and Hackett are religious studies scholars working on non-Western religious traditions (Knott on Hinduism and Hackett on African religions) and both employ anthropological methodologies in order to empirically research religious phenomena is an important factor which may have contributed greatly to their assessments, I suspect. However, I turn to another religious studies scholar/anthropologist who has to my knowledge most elaborately reflected on this issue, and whose hypothesis I shall build upon further in accounting for the problematic relationship between religious studies and a feminist approach.

In a short but insightful article 'Feminist Anthropology and the Gendering of Religious Studies', Rosalind Shaw (1995: 65) suggests that the problem of eradicating 'male bias' in religious studies in view of a disciplinary transformation may entail 'nothing less than the dissolution and reconstruction of the discipline itself'. In my reading of Shaw, the root for the incompatibility would lie in the fundamental and inherent epistemological and methodological properties of religious studies as an autonomous discipline that – analogous to the comments by Knott and Hackett - fosters a *de-contextualised* and *essentialist* approach to its own subject matter. In making her case on the problem of disciplinary transformation from the perspective of gender, Shaw looks to the relationship between the discipline of anthropology and a feminist approach. As I have already suggested, it is precisely towards this particular discipline that the study of religion and gender must ultimately turn. Shaw's borrowings will first be dealt with in more detail.

In an attempt to account for the problems of a disciplinary transformation of religious studies from the perspective of feminism, Shaw (1995) borrows the popular notion of an 'awkward relationship' coined by anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (1987). Strathern introduces the phrase in order to designate the mutual relation of 'mockery' existing between feminism and the discipline of anthropology. Strathern's characterisation of the dissonance between these 'neighbours in tension' does not so much function within a broader critique as if both perspectives would constituted distinct paradigms in the Kuhnian sense. Rather, the dissonance is located in their

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research practices, most poignantly expressed in a differing conception of the researcher's relationship to his/her subject matter. Considering the extent to which this notion of 'awkwardness' has been borrowed as a designation of the conflicts between feminist approaches and the mainstream, within (e.g. Harvey 1998; Walter 1995) and even beyond the discipline of anthropology, it is not an exaggeration to emphasise the fact that Strathern had two very specific branches of feminism and anthropology in mind. This involves a radical variant of feminism and what she terms a more recent, 'innovative approach' in anthropological theorising. In the following brief characterisation of the similarities and the tensions between both forms of scholarship however, especially regarding 'feminism', the focus is on the general, in order to contextualise Rosalind Shaw's borrowing of these dilemma's for the case of the study of religion.

Whilst on the one hand it could be argued that anthropology has been relatively open or 'tolerant' towards feminist scholarship, Strathern and others (e.g. Moore 1988) have pointed out how this has precisely contributed to a 'ghetto' effect. In this process, the anthropological study of women or gender becomes a mere specialisation and leaves the mainstream 'untouched' by feminist critique. Anthropology and feminist scholarship seem to share many methodological features such as an interpretative framework, or the privileging of qualitative research that has been prominent in most forms of feminist research and in both traditional and modern anthropology in general. On the other hand, it can also be argued the greater part of anthropological practice is at least implicitly informed or even founded upon a critical perspective or awareness of power inequalities, in the sense that anthropologists since the mid-twentieth century have endorsed what Micaela di Leonardo (1991) calls a 'liberal ideology of cultural relativism.' Anthropology always 'necessarily involves a critical engagement with western science and social theory' (Harvey 1998: 73). Included in this stance has been a relativisation and thus implicit critique of Western standards, morals and knowledge and therefore of the presumed superiority of Western culture, as but one possibility among other peoples of the world. The similarities and tensions between feminist scholarship and anthropology are multifaceted. Reflexive or self-critical epistemological premises that reign in more recent 'innovative' or postmodern anthropology for example, again appear to be aligned with recent feminist critique, although in practice this form of 'awkwardness' has even turned into an almost hostile affair (see next chapter). As Strathern notes, these close neighbours are on the one hand both comparable in the sense that they are interested in promoting and sustaining 'difference.' Yet their diverging conceptions of 'difference' (along gender *or* cultural lines) yet again contain the seeds for mutual tensions and mockery.

Strathern explains this mutual mockery in terms of the feminist scholar's and the anthropologist's relation to their subject matter, in their differential conception of the 'other'. Set upon the endeavour to challenge the unjust

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misrepresentation and appropriation of 'women's experience', in Strathern's interpretation of the radical feminist perspective, the 'construction of the feminist self' requires a non-feminist other. This non-feminist other is conceived of as 'patriarchy', often simply concretised as 'men.' The main focus of any kind of feminist inquiry, including that of the feminist anthropologist, is therefore *gender* – or for the radical feminist 'women' -, or more concretely, forms of oppression and inequality that are minimally structured by gender differences. For the anthropologist on the other hand, the other is the *cultural* other, with whom 'difference' is similarly established and held in place. However, this other is 'not under attack' as in the case of the feminist patriarchal other. On the contrary, if anything is 'under attack', especially in innovative anthropology and certainly anthropology informed by postcolonial critique, it is the traditional anthropological 'self'. The self is under attack that has traditionally laid claim to be able to translate and interpret experience, representing the 'other' to the extent that the unequal power relations from colonial times are reiterated in the process of knowledge construction.

The innovative anthropologist in particular attempts to radically rectify these forms of orientalism, hoping to achieve a full collaboration with the informant. This is aspired through numerous experimental techniques of dialogue or multiple authorship. The goal is to make explicit and include the ethnographer's own participation, experience and voice in this ideal form of mutual dialogue between cultural others. Regardless of these more recent shifts under the influence of postcolonial critique and also poststructuralist theory, the liberal ideology of cultural relativism of which di Leonardo (1991) speaks reaches back further than both these epistemological turns in many disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. Any form of feminist critique is most likely suspect and incompatible with anthropology's tradition of scrutinising Western assumptions and the imposition of Western political ideals, or the passing of moral judgement on other cultural traditions or communities. The ethics in anthropology rather lie in collaboration by giving the other subjectivity or presenting the 'native's point of view'. As Strathern (1987: 290-291) phrases the tension:

...if such feminism mocks the anthropological pretension of creating a product in some ways jointly authored, then anthropology mocks the pretension that feminists can ever really achieve that separation from an antithetical Other which they desire. From a vantage point outside their own culture, anthropologists see that the very basis for the separation (from the antithetical other) rests on common cultural assumptions about the nature of personhood and of relationships. If women construct subjectivity for themselves, they do so strictly within the sociocultural constraints of their own society. The establishment of self must endorse a worldview shared equally by the Other.

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In Rosalind Shaw's (1995) reading of Strathern's awkward relationship between feminism and anthropology, the emphasis lies on the question of viewpoint in the differential relationship of the researcher to its subject matter in both disciplinary approaches. Anthropology is currently struggling to effect an epistemological shift from a 'view from above', the context which enabled the production of anthropological knowledge in unequal power relationships between the (Western) anthropologist and (often colonised or 'Third World') informant. However, for the feminist scholar, 'a view from below' or a subordinate standpoint from which to proceed is simply taken for granted. In Shaw's (1995: 66) words:

While anthropology 'mocks' feminism from its advantaged position for cultural critiques of Western social forms, then, feminism – from its own assumed standpoint of the subordinate's perspective – mocks anthropology. Anthropology can never really achieve its desired perspective of the 'view from below' until Western anthropologists have a stronger voice in its reinvention [...].

The awkwardness between anthropology and premises of feminist scholarship are replicated in feminist anthropology, which can be conceived of as 'a hybrid beast'. For the feminist anthropologist simultaneously has to deal with and focus on problems of inequality of gender, yet also ethnocentrism, racism and (post)colonialism. The feminist anthropologist is therefore caught between differential viewpoints on and the primacy of issues of gender difference *and* cultural difference. In assessing the relationship between feminism and the history of religions however, for Shaw the situation is somewhat different, and the perspective of any kind of paradigm shift of the mainstream therefore even grimmer. At first sight, and in line with anthropology, the history of religions<sup>16</sup> is similarly renowned for features in common with feminist research practice, such as the methodologies of hermeneutics and phenomenology, and an emphasis on the importance of empathy and interpretivism. In practice however, the mainstream history of religions mocks feminist scholarship by merely being empathetic in the sense that 'lived religious experience' is located in a seemingly collective, undifferentiated and thus ungendered religious subject, represented as the generic *homo religiosus*. In Shaw's argument the mockery only goes one way though. As opposed to developmental shifts and efforts in (innovative) anthropology, the history of religion is predicated upon an exclusive 'view from above' perspective on religious phenomena. Feminist scholarship that is predicated on a 'view from below' does not so much deride, but according to Shaw can only 'collide' with, and is therefore practically antithetical to the mainstream history of religions.

More so than in the case of anthropology, and besides the question of viewpoint and cultural or political critique, the 'view from above' perspective in the mainstream history of religion is identified by Shaw through two main

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definitions of religion. These appear to be so paradigmatic and foundational of the discipline as to be completely irreconcilable with feminist scholarship. The first, the understanding of 'religion as text', is arguably not necessarily an issue of definition but more of a methodological approach whereby in practice religion is studied primarily through religious scriptures. At this level of Shaw's argument, the incompatibility with feminism appears to be framed and seen as a consequence of this particular feature of religious studies scholarship (68):

Understandings of 'religion as scripture' tend, for example, to privilege (a) religions with texts, and (b) scholarly elites within scriptural religious traditions who claim the authority to interpret texts (and from whom women are usually debarred.) The religious understandings of those excluded from authorizing discourses of textual interpretation are implicitly discounted and relegated to a 'lower' level.

Feminist religious studies endorsing such an approach are thus made impossible through the absence or denial of women as religious subjects. As argued earlier however, this appears not to be so much 'deliberate', but a consequence of the fact that the religious traditions mostly under study are themselves patriarchal, their scholarly elites usually being men. The understanding and the study of 'religion as/through text' can - and has been - critiqued from other corners than that of feminism, for its effect of resulting in parallel forms of a priori methodological exclusion. A view from above approach that privileges religions with texts automatically excludes or under-privileges the study of religions that lack religious texts, or at least where religious texts may function differently. A well-known defining feature in the history of the discipline itself has been the emphasis on the so-called 'world religions', starting with the Mediterranean religious traditions. Additionally, the study of world religious traditions other than, yet modelled after the text-focussed methodologies applied to Western traditions such as Judaism and Christianity can be critiqued as instances of orientalism (Balagangadhara 1993; Pinxten 2000; Smart 1996).

Besides the text-focus, the elite-focus can similarly be held accountable on other, albeit related grounds than feminism. By defining or looking to the centre of the religious tradition as only those with the authority to construct, interpret, 'handle' and even broader, *implement* textual religious discourse, not only women are 'relegated to the periphery'. Broader than Shaw claims, regardless of gender, the vast majority of self-identified adherents to a religious tradition or members of a religious community, both women and men are excluded or peripheralised as subjects of religious studies inquiry. This would exclude what is often referred to as 'popular religion', the religion practised by 'common' people and often as part of their ordinary everyday lives.

The second main feature of the 'view from above' perspective in mainstream religious studies scholarship according to Shaw (1995: 68), is the employment of a *sui generis* concept of religion, 'in which religion is treated as

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a discrete and irreducible phenomenon which exists “in and of itself.” The *sui generis* claim of the ‘uniquely religious’ which can only be understood and studied ‘on its own terms’, in Shaw’s view runs counter to feminist scholarship and its ‘view from below.’ Arguably, more than the ‘religion as text’ approach nonetheless, the *sui generis* claim which reigns in the mainstream, in effect excludes any possibility of an integration of the study of gender and power in the study of religion. For in the *sui generis* understanding, the ‘distinctively religious’ itself is conceived of as socially *decontextualised*. Any questions of politics, power, inequality or gender are at best seen as secondary or as side-issues to the study of religion, but in themselves are not part of, nor do they constitute religion. Religious studies remains essentialist and therefore decontextualised in its ‘view from above’ perspective, thereby ‘effectively insulated’ from questions about standpoint, privilege, and power, which by contrast are part and parcel of what feminist scholarship is about.

With power being irrelevant, according to Shaw (70) one is left with ‘either meaningless accounts of “religious gender roles” (“men do this; the women do that”) or with disconnected descriptions of female deities (“add goddesses and stir”’). What Shaw appears to be critical of in current gender studies in religion is the kind of ‘additive’ feminist or women’s studies scholarship that focuses on women or femininity, - be it at the level of social reality or religious imagery and ideology - that can then again be characterised as essentialist in terms of gender. This dominant strand of feminist religious studies according to Shaw can be seen as in a position analogous to that in which the ‘ghetto’ feminist anthropology found itself in the 1970s. However, in contrast to feminist anthropology, feminist religious studies have failed to leave their essentialist ghetto and to have any substantial impact on the mainstream. The capacity of feminist religious studies for disciplinary transformation is thereby currently ‘cramped by hangovers from mainstream religious studies which some forms of feminist religious studies have carried with them’ (73). In feminist religious studies scholarship, as in many forms of feminist spirituality and theology (Shaw refers to the reconstructionist work in Christ and Plaskow 1979a), a ‘universalised female spiritual essence’ and an essentialist female collective subject or ‘feminized homo religiosus’ lives on.

Viewed of in terms of the typologies of feminist research and theory presented earlier, feminist studies scholarship in religion in Shaw’s perspective would still be caught in a phase of centring yet essentialising women’s experience and difference. This strand of scholarship fails to make a shift towards a *deconstruction* of the notion of ‘women’ in terms of acknowledging the *diversity* amongst them, towards a more constructionist type of gender theory that employs a more intersectional approach towards power and inequality as introduced in chapter one. Stanley and Wise (1993: 208-210) for example, locate features of essentialism in three types of discourses within feminism. One such a discourse presumes that there are ‘womanist qualities untainted by the patriarchal order, which lie beneath or behind the levels of

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falsity and deformation'. This position is often associated with both strands of sexual difference theory and French feminism (chapter one) but also forms of radical and cultural feminism (chapter two). The second type of essentialism uses a notion of 'woman's oppression' which assumes that all women are 'subjugated for the same reason/s by the same means to the same extent across all cultures and history within patriarchy' (chapter two). Finally, essentialist feminist discourse perceives unity in its object of enquiry, women: 'Seeing 'Women'/women as united by certain characteristics is treated as essentialist because supposedly deriving from perceiving a fixed coherent set of properties as constituting women' (210).

The essentialist phase in which much feminist religious studies scholarship is caught and therefore incapable of achieving any impact on the mainstream however, according to Shaw can itself be greatly ascribed to the very character of the mainstream discipline and its 'view from above'. Although Shaw in the space of her article does not reflect any further on this, or suggest there would be any concrete solutions or likelihood of the possibility of any paradigm shift of the latter, she does make a general plea for a deconstruction of essentialism in feminist study of religion. This plea would be in accordance with what has been understood as a more recent stage in the typologies of feminist research methodology, among which the need to theorise women's diversity instead of the presumed essentialist commonalities between them.

## **6. Deconstructing Women through 'Diversity'**

### *The Differences between Women*

Rosalind Shaw (1995) argues that many strands of contemporary feminist religious studies employ an essentialist notion of the category 'woman', which is out of phase with developments towards de-universalisation and growing critique from diversity which has become commonplace in the vast majority of feminist scholarship within and across other disciplines. For Shaw, feminist religious studies find themselves in a 'ghetto' comparable to the much earlier essentialist phase of the anthropology of women, isolated from and ignored by the mainstream discipline of anthropology. However, as noted, they are also incapable of developing further or having any impact on the mainstream due to sharing some of its fundamental features, such as the already referred to *sui generis* claim (Shaw 1995: 73):

Currently, few feminist scholars in any discipline assume a universal 'female reality'. That many scholars in feminist religious studies are an exception to this derives, I believe, from the universalizing and essentializing tendencies of the discipline's mainstream.

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The critique of the unitary category 'woman' or the possibility to speak of universal 'women's experience' which Shaw accuses the contemporary feminist study of religion of failing to incorporate into its theoretical frameworks, is nowadays commonplace in most fields of feminist research. This critique can be located within the unmasking of the distinct white, middle class and heterosexual character of feminist movement and scholarship that was initiated during the first decades of the second wave. Many lesbian feminists, feeling marginalised or betwixt and between both gay liberation and the women's movement were highly critical of the norm of heterosexuality embedded in second-wave feminist thought. Theories were developed on notions of lesbian experience and identity, such as Adrienne Rich's concept of 'compulsory heterosexuality', understood as a system or institution central to women's oppression above that of 'patriarchy'.<sup>17</sup>

Another major direction from which the question of the differences between women in second wave feminist movement and feminist theory evolved, can be understood as the heterogeneous rubric of 'non-white' or 'non white/Anglo' (Lugones and Spelman 1983) feminist critique identified under various headings such as 'black feminism', 'women of color', 'third-world feminism', 'Chicana feminism', etc. The term 'black feminism' or better the plural 'black feminisms' can be used as a general term for those feminisms in the U.S., U.K., and sometimes even in referral to any 'non-Western' or 'non-white' type of feminist movement and theory that unmasks and strongly challenges racism and ethnocentrism, including that present in 'white' feminism. The term 'black' is problematic in defining these forms of feminist resistance and identity politics in that in the U.S. it is generally used in referring to African-Americans only, with Asian-Americans, Latinas and Native Americans often being referred to as 'people of color' or sometimes 'Third World people'.

In the British context however, 'black' has traditionally been applied as a political rather than a 'racial' category by Asians, Africans, Afro-Caribbeans and in general 'non-white people' (Andermahr, Lovell and Wolkowitz 1997: 18-19; Kanneh 1998: 86; Maynard 2001b [1994]: 436; Nain 2001 [1991]: 348). 'Women of colour' as a generic, inclusive and explicitly political term became widespread upon the publication of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Colour* in 1979, an anthology presenting a diversity of contributions and definitions of non-white feminist resistance and identity in the U.S., edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga (Kanneh 1998). It is nonetheless sometimes used for all non-white women other than those from African descent who are then called blacks, yet at other times as an all-inclusive category referring to both. Other U.S. scholars apply the term 'third world women' (Sandoval 2000 [1995]) interchangeably with women of colour, and have expanded the category during the nineties (Mohanty 1991: 7):

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It is a sociopolitical designation for people of African, Caribbean, Asian, and Latin American descent, and native peoples of the U.S. It also refers to 'new immigrants' to the U.S. in the last decade – Arab, Korean, Thai, Laotian, etc. What seems to constitute 'woman of color' or 'third world women' as a viable oppositional alliance is a *common context of struggle* rather than color or racial identifications. It is third world women's oppositional *political* relation to sexist, racist and imperialist structures that constitutes our potential commonality.

Central in the critiques formulated by black feminist<sup>18</sup> activists in the early seventies in the U.S. was the argument of the simultaneity of different yet related forms of oppression black or coloured women endured. White feminism had omitted to include the question of racism into their theories of oppression and inequality. Although historically many black women in the U.S. had always partaken in struggles against oppression and inequality, it was not until the seventies that gender inequality became to be an important issue for many black women. Following the gradual gains of the black liberation movement many women began to problematise sex-discrimination among black men (Brewer 1992: 65). In the context of the academy, both the institutionalisation of black studies<sup>19</sup> and women's studies marginalised the experience and study of African American women, until some of the writings by black feminists became to be noticed in feminist scholarship. Titles of publications by black feminists of the early eighties such as *Ain't I A woman: Black Women and Feminism*<sup>20</sup> and *All the women are white, all Blacks are men, But some of us are brave: Black Women's Studies*<sup>21</sup> in the U.S. and 'White Women Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood'<sup>22</sup>, attest to the marginalisation of black women in feminism. Their experience of 'triple oppression' called for analyses of inequality to deal with racism, sexism and classism as interlocked, and mutual reinforcing systems of oppression. Thus bell hooks (1984: 1) exposes the racism, classism and sexism in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* as applicable to 'the plight of a select group of college-educated, middle and upper class, married white women – housewives bored with leisure, with the home, with children, with buying products, who wanted more out of life'. Hooks sees sexism as an institutionalised system of domination, yet affecting women in different ways. According to hooks, sexism is always itself imbricated in racial hierarchies, which in turn can be related to class relationships in capitalist society (1984: 3).

Aída Hurtado (1996: 9) claims that despite the abolition of slavery in the U.S., and the periods in which black women's experience could not easily compare to the expectations of white women's behaviour and the construction of white womanhood, even till date the difference of the relationship of white women to white men and of women of colour to white men persists. The differential conditions in which most black women are in a subordinate status compared to most white women is firstly expressed in their low economic status

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and concrete material situation. They are mostly employed in low-paid service occupations, historically with much less opportunities for intellectual work and higher education, and far removed from the call for work as liberating and a road to economic self-sufficiency in liberal 'bourgeois' white feminism (Collins 1990; hooks 1983). One of the most fundamental slogans characterising white second wave feminism, 'the political is personal', has similarly been applicable to many black women's oppression and grounds for resistance. Middle- and upper-class white feminists have critiqued this distinction on the basis of being excluded from the public sphere, yet experiencing oppression in the so-called non-political personal or private sphere. According to Hurtado (1996: 18) however, by contrast working class women of colour have continuously experienced state intervention into their private lives through welfare programmes, the restriction of reproductive rights, the criminal system, etc.:

White feminists' concerns about unhealthy consequences of standards for feminine beauty, their focus on the unequal division of household labour, and their attention to childhood identity formation stem from a political consciousness that seeks to project private sphere issues into the public arena... Feminists of color focus instead on public issues such as affirmative action, racism, school disintegration, prison reform, and voter registration – issues that cultivate an awareness of the distinction between public policy and private choice.

Whilst white feminists campaigned for the right to free abortion and contraception in the seventies and eighties, for many black women contraception and sterilisation enforced by the state provoked an altogether different formulation of the demand for reproductive rights (Weedon 1999: 161). The white feminist 'attack' on the family has similarly been critiqued by black feminists who have defended the black household as a space of resistance and solidarity in the face of racist society (hooks 1984; Maynard 2001b [1994]; Nain 2001 [1991]). Black feminist activists and scholars have therefore been severely critical of the way feminist movement and feminist theory has often been racist and has completely neglected black women's issues, promoting false ideals of universal sisterhood based on the 'notion of a generic woman who is white and middle class'. Collins (1990: 6) illustrates how important feminist research which sets out to unmask androcentric theories excluding women's experience and subjectivity, to show how it too excluded many black and working-class women's experience, as the samples rely greatly on middle-class white women.<sup>23</sup>

Apart from this growing critique upon black studies and women's studies, both critical of the exclusionary practices and biases of mainstream academic scholarship, black women's resistance has taken many forms. Important in this resistance has been their reconceptualisation, and the reclaiming and celebration of black women's history and experience. This has

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included rediscovering and reinterpreting the work of Black women writers and intellectuals of the past, the reinterpretation of histories of oppression but also positive interpretations of women's resistance, agency and subjectivity. Similar to the variation and developments within white feminist scholarship, black feminist work has also included endeavours to emphasise black women's 'difference', the construction of black female traditions, and a 'black female aesthetics' (Weedon 1999: 161). Hurtado (1996) remarks how the struggle for consciousness and the process of (re)claiming or (re)constructing an identity has also diverted from that of many white feminists' trajectory. Consciousness of exclusion and oppression begins early in life for many black women or women of colour whose political and structural marginalization is the condition of their lives.

In contrast to white women, the building of identity and community is different for black women who can refer to historical moments of tradition, community and cultural roots invested with empowerment before colonisation, slavery and subjugation. The problematic position in many women of colour's relationships to both their own communities, where they also experience oppression and sexism as women, and simultaneously their confrontation with exclusion and racism from white privileged men and women, shows how the (re)construction or (re)invention of identity is not a straightforward task. For lesbian women of colour, exclusion in both their own and white communities takes on another level, as the case of interethnic or interracial identities similarly problematise the search for acceptance and a the sense of belonging to a community (e.g. Cherríe Moraga (1998 [1983]), as a half Chicana, half Anglo, and a lesbian).

The distinctiveness of what Patricia Hill Collins (1990: 9) – borrowing Foucault's term – calls African-American women's 'subjugated knowledges of Black women's culture and resistance', has also involved challenging white feminist epistemologies. Besides the redefinition of intellectual formats, against traditional classifications and boundaries between activism and scholarship, or 'thought and action' (Collins 1990), including non-academic forms such as oral traditions, Hurtado (1996: 28) suggests that while women's studies has focussed on the production of *knowledge*, feminist theory by women of colour by contrast has been sceptical of knowledge construction without *wisdom*.<sup>24</sup> Presently the work of black feminist writers such as Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, bell hooks, Hazel Carby, Barbara Smith, Patricia Hill Collins and Chicana feminists (of Mexican descent living in the U.S.) such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga and María C. Lugones, Patricia Zavella and many other feminists from non-white, other 'ethnic' or 'racial' backgrounds or colour in both the U.S. and the U.K. has been included in many a women's studies curriculum. Feminist theory has increasingly acknowledged the importance of including 'race', class, sexual orientation, but also age, (dis)ability, etc. as categories of oppression, intersecting with sex/gender as an axis of oppression. However, critiques of exclusion and mere tokenism of 'the holy trinity' of

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'race', class and gender (Weedon 1999: 169) in much contemporary feminist theory continue (see also chapter one).

While many feminist theorists may acknowledge the importance of taking the differences between women and the different systems and effects of oppression into account, the question of actual integration, beyond the mere additional lesson on 'women of colour' in women's studies classes for example remains problematic. At the level of feminist epistemology, as Sandra Harding (1990: 194) notes, 'adding women of colour' to existing - feminist - theories and analyses brings with it just as many terminological, conceptual and political problems as the 'add women and stir' approach did when applied to mainstream androcentric theories and frameworks. According to Hurtado (1996: 6) when contemporary white feminist theorists do give attention to writings by women of colour, 'they either fit [them] within the existing white frameworks or claim that writings by feminists of Color, while descriptive are not theoretical.' Chela Sandoval (2000 [1995]: 380) similarly claims that what she calls 'US Third World feminist criticism' is often understood as 'a demographic constituency only... and not as itself a theoretical and methodological approach that clears the way for new modes of conceptualizing social movement, identity and difference'.

At the same time, towards the end of the twentieth century, debate among black feminists or women of colour is developing regarding the possibilities of alliances between these different feminisms in their relation to postmodern theory. Finally, the emphasis on the differences between women and the critique of essentialist understandings of sex/gender, 'race', sexuality, etc., the constructed nature of categories of 'blackness' and 'whiteness' has been carried through with the development of feminist strands of postcolonial theory. The debate on 'difference' and on the way multiple forms of oppression between different 'categories' of people exist has enabled both profound self-critique and a further development of feminist scholarship. The reconceptualisation of feminism and feminist theory in a global context beyond the boundaries of the West is increasingly becoming central to any contemporary form of feminist theory that must therefore deal with much more than the problem of androcentrism for a certain group of women in a certain place of the world.

To what extent does Rosalind Shaw's assessment and critique of the failure of contemporary feminist research in relation to move beyond the employment of a unitary and essentialist category of 'woman', actually refer to the destabilisation of the category through the notion of 'diversity'? Has essentialism been tackled through an acknowledgement and theorisation of the intersections of dimensions of oppression, as in the movement within feminist theory that problematises the differences between women and foregrounds the diversity of women's experience as summarised above? Albeit somewhat later and maybe less extensive than in other areas of feminist research, the issue of

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'difference' has nonetheless gradually been taken on in the feminist study of religion. The diversity of women's religious experience has certainly been an important issue ever since the publication of anthologies such as *Womanspirit Rising*, which not only covered internal debates and directions in the feminist reinterpretation of religion, but also included more than one religious tradition (namely both the Christian and the Jewish religious tradition).

The early participation of both Christian (and Post-Christian) and Jewish (or post-Jewish) feminist scholars in the field of feminist research in religion, has allowed for an attention to the diversity of women's experience, at least the religious diversity of two major Abrahamic traditions practised in the contemporary U.S. The main interpretative framework that organises the contributions in *Womanspirit Rising*, the reform-revolutionary divide, is nevertheless already somewhat problematic in its application to even Judaism as a close neighbour to Christianity. This becomes apparent in the general introduction to the part on reformist interpretations, which differ substantially in Christian and Jewish religious tradition (Christ and Plaskow 1979a: 134):

Since Judaism is a religion of ritual, law, and study, rather than theology, creed, and doctrine, Jewish feminists have devoted their efforts not so much to defining and overcoming the patriarchal structures of Jewish thought as to criticizing specific attitudes toward women and to working for the full incorporation of women into Jewish religious life. Feminist contributions to the reconstruction of tradition most often focus on creation of new rituals. (Hence the absence of a Jewish article in the last section.) Even those Jewish thinkers who are most theoretical frequently express a practical concern.

As described in a previous paragraph, the last section of *Womanspirit Rising* culminates in the feminist revolutionary approach in constructing new feminist religious traditions that totally abandon what are held to be 'hopelessly patriarchal' biblical traditions. Apart from Judith Plaskow's own contribution, - that is introduced as more on the threshold between a reformist and a revolutionary stance - a Jewish revolutionary feminist religious reconstruction appears to be problematic, which the authors attribute to the primacy of ritual above theology in Judaism. This insight however, is not problematised any further, nor does it appear to have raised any questions on the organisational, epistemological framework that underlies the book, with feminist theology understood and defined from the perspective of the context of only one tradition - Christianity. Furthermore, this insight - or its possible consequences - does not appear to have been raised in the greater part of the development of the feminist study of religion in the following decades.<sup>25</sup>

As a Jewish feminist and one of the pioneers in the feminist study of religion in the U.S. since the early seventies, Judith Plaskow brought attention to the diversity and differences between women, much in the line with the

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critique from women of colour on feminist theory and research developing during the same period. In referring to Naomi Goldenberg's critical reading of Mary Daly's understanding of 'sisterhood', Plaskow similarly warns that the feminist critique of androcentrism by male theologians must not entail a false universalisation of the experience of women (Plaskow 1977: 27):

I would argue, that is, that the real impact of our criticism of the universalizing tendency of much theology should send us delving more and more deeply into the experiences of all kinds of women – black women and white women, middle class women and working women, Jewish women and Christian women, and so on. This is the only way to avoid the pitfalls of a 'universal' analysis of women's experience which is really an analysis from the perspective of the dominant (white middle class) group. It is also the way to educate ourselves to the genuine diversity of women's experiences, experiences which are necessarily diminished and falsified when reduced to a single theme.

Almost a decade and a half later, in a book dedicated to the feminist reconstruction of Judaism, the need to repeat similar words points to the persistence of the problem of the concept of 'women's experience' and negligence of the differences between women, even *within* the boundaries of a religious tradition (Plaskow 1991: 11-12):

The problem with the phrase 'women's experience' is that it implies uniformity where – even if we restrict ourselves to Jewish women – there is great diversity. ... It is too easy for one dominant group – in this case, the North American Ashkenazi Jew – to define women's experience for all women, forgetting that even Jewish women's experience is a great tapestry of many designs and colors. Since no woman's work can ever include the whole tapestry, each must remember she speaks from one corner, the phrase 'women's experience' qualified by a string of modifiers that specify voice.

So a call for attention to the diversity of women and the dangers of essentialising and universalising women's experience, in terms of a minimal *presence* of religious diversity – albeit limited to Christianity and Judaism – can be detected in the voices of some authoritative scholars in the feminist study of religion since the very beginnings. To a certain extent, the same can be said for issues of 'colour' and class diversity. Whether this has accompanied any epistemological or methodological changes remains another question, which will be dealt with after first taking a closer look at another type of literature that does incorporate a kind of diversity, the 'women-in-religions' genre...

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*Diversity and Methodology: The 'Women-in-Religions' Genre*

Although one can certainly not speak of a dearth of anthropological or cross-cultural research on women in different religious traditions (see above), the 'women in different religions' type of publication in religious studies usually remains at the level of description and introductory overview. The 'women in...' type of book – usually limited to the so-called world religions – often consists of consecutive chapters (by different contributors) dealing with women's status within officially institutionalised religious traditions (e.g. Cornille 1994; Klöcker and Tworuschka 1997). The problem with this type of literature is that it often remains highly superficial. The individual articles often cover a whole time span from the very emergence of tradition, ending with the position of women within the tradition today, including the gains or setbacks of feminist voices within the tradition. The very set-up can be called essentialist in that an a-historical, universal category of 'woman' is employed. This kind of work also fits in with Shaw's assessment of feminist approaches carrying hangovers from the mainstream in the reification of a collective religious subject viewed from above, in this case the feminised *homo religiosus*. Additionally, a textual emphasis in many of these collections is by far the dominant approach, overlooking not only the differences between women, but also the whole question of lived religious experience and practice and female religious agency.

The type of literature on women and religion discussed earlier revealing the androcentrism of mainstream religious studies as in the understanding of 'religion as text', by employing more social scientific oriented methodology to study women's religious agency, does not quite employ an essentialist category of 'women' as the type of publication referred to above. However, apart from acknowledging the necessity of employing alternative methodologies in order to recover or recentre women's religious experience or agency, diversity remains undertheorised even in this work (e.g. Holden 1984; Atkinson 1985 in Parvey 1987). Again diversity is limited to the level of the presentation in the form of separate contributions on women and religion, however diverse the case studies taken as whole often are. The differences that inevitably emerge between women or perhaps 'feminine imagery' in the different religious contexts that form the subject of inquiry may then function as material for cross-cultural comparison as to women's status in religion and society in general. Whereas the earlier, primarily anthropologically oriented or influenced publications among these (e.g. Hoch-Smith and Spring 1978; Sanday 1981), frequently pose the question for comparison in the search for correlation and universals on 'women', cross-cultural analyses such as these are nowadays rather rare. In general, feminist research has abandoned this type of question on discovering the universals of women's status altogether, precisely in view of the danger of overgeneralisation on the issue of women's status or subordination and woman as a universal category of analysis.<sup>26</sup>

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In Caroline Walker Bynum's (1986: 4) introduction to another well-known volume, *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols* (Bynum, Harrell and Richman 1986) the author explicitly makes clear that although the focus is on women's - or better on gendered - religious experience, the question of 'remedy[ing] the earlier scholarly neglect of women by examining and comparing woman's religious experiences across cultures' is not the main purpose of the book. As an important reference work in the area of the feminist study of religion, even if for the sake of the argument on the integration of diversity it can formally be categorised among the 'women and religion' genre, the theoretical perspectives in Bynum's introduction are definitely indicative of a shift as was alluded to in chapter one. Bynum furthermore claims the volume does not attempt to discuss the extent of or explanations for male dominance in religious traditions, - the type of question providing the very impetus for earlier feminist scholarship<sup>27</sup> - and similarly refuses to endorse the hypothesis of universal sex asymmetry and its implications as an a priori.<sup>28</sup> The theoretical framework guiding *Gender and Religion* therefore differs from the other works in the genre under discussion. The influence of feminist theory<sup>29</sup> is much greater and gender as a cultural construct is the primary category of analysis<sup>30</sup> and at least functions as a point of departure for the different contributions, rather than a more essentialist or untheorised notion of 'women' or the 'feminine', let alone questions of oppression or universal subordination. This volume and the way in which in the introduction an attempt is made to integrate insights from feminist and gender theory into the study of religion, until recently has been perhaps one of the first, but as remarked in chapter one, regrettably also one of the rare attempts to undertake such an endeavour.

Since the late eighties through to the present, the women-in-religion anthology genre continues to be widespread, including a popular series (McGill Studies in the History of Religions) of volumes edited by Arvind Sharma and Katherine Young.<sup>31</sup> As becomes clear in the introduction (Young 1987) to the first book *Women in Religions* (Sharma 1987) and was pointed out in an earlier paragraph, the research stance is entirely that of the history of religions methodology and phenomenology. The religion-as-text approach is prioritised, regardless of admitting to the constraints such an approach brings for focussing on women's agency within the patriarchal religious traditions of the world. Most of the essays by different contributors in the book follow the familiar pattern of the religious studies approach, describing the 'role of women' throughout the ages in a particular religious tradition through an examination of the earliest or ancient texts sometimes ending with observations on reform for women within the religious institution or practice in modern times.

Apart from some remarks on religious studies methodology, Young's general introduction does not contain any references to feminist theory or methodology, nor is the concept of gender applied. Although the problem of recovering women's religious agency and 'women's religious lives' within such an approach is noted, the volume thus remains at a descriptive level, apart from

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an attempt to account for the rise of patriarchal world religions based on existing models suggested in earlier cross-cultural research (such as that of the already mentioned Peggy Reeves Sanday 1981). In the introduction to one of the more recent volumes in the series, *Feminism and World Religions* (Sharma and Young 1999), cross-cultural comparison or generalising models are absent (Young 1999). Instead, in the introduction a brief overview is presented of 'intellectual trends' (from Romanticism to Deconstruction and Postcolonialism) and the way 'feminism' has borrowed or critiqued these different theoretical perspectives. The short summaries contain hardly any references (apart from mentioning the names of some 'French feminists' under the rubric 'deconstruction') and there is barely any reflection on the way these perspectives are appropriated in the individual contributions.

In short, we can concur with Rita Gross's (1996: 57) description that the majority of the women-in-religion anthologies hereto mentioned are merely 'information gathering exercises'. They do not incorporate feminist theoretical concerns such as the importance of the category of gender and the questioning of 'women' as a universal, unproblematic category of analysis, including the issue of the 'difference' between women that has become so central since the early eighties. The only diversity is that at the level of the presentation of information about different religious traditions next to one another, and sometimes by way of introduction or conclusion then brought into a general framework of cross-cultural comparison on the question of women's universal status or universal subordination. Thus, it is reminiscent of an earlier phase of the 'anthropology of women'

*From the Differences within to the Differences across...*

Judith Plaskow's (1991) call to theorise and integrate the diversity among women in terms of differences between them along the axes of 'race', class and sexual orientation has effectively been heeded in one particular area of the feminist study of religion during the last two decades. The growing attention to diversity itself however, has mostly taken place and therefore been limited to what can easily said to be the most dominant strand of feminist religious studies, that of the Christian tradition. What was already a diverse field with conflicting views and varieties of theologies since the very onset of second wave feminist critique, has become even more diverse through the critique from women against the exclusionary white, middle-class and heterosexual character of Christian feminist movement and theology.

In the North American context, from this critique by black feminist Christian women, the movement of 'womanism' has emerged. The term was coined by the writer Alice Walker and first introduced in the collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* published in 1983 (Kanneh 1998; Smith 1998; Thomas 1998). That the boundaries between

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secular opposed to religious feminism evident in white second-wave feminism are not so easily drawn in the case of non-white forms of feminism becomes apparent in the literature regarding the meaning of womanism in its relation to black feminism. Reflecting on the diversity of the contributions to the important volume *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* edited by Moraga and Anzaldua and published in 1983, Kanneh (1998: 87-88) refers to the 'spiritual visions' underpinning many of the essays in their attempt to formulate alternative forms of feminist identity. In their glossary of feminist theory, Andermahr, Lovell and Wolkowitz (1997: 19, 238) for example, simply equate womanism with black feminism, including figures such as Alice Walker and Audre Lorde as central to this movement in general terms. Walker would have rejected the term feminist altogether precisely for its exclusionary connotations in favour of womanism, articulating the particularity of black – or referring to her own background that of Afro-American - women's experience, history and community. A womanist is 'to feminist as purple is to lavender' in Walker's definition (Collins 1990: 22; Gross 1996: 52; Smith 1998: 2), yet also (Smith 1998: 2):

...bold, brassy, 'universalist',... committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. A womanist is also – thoroughly erotic: 'A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually' and exultantly 'Loves music. Loves Dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk Loves Herself. Regardless'.

Womanist theology and Christian social ethics often draw on sources by black women writers who do not necessarily see themselves as theologians or ethicists – bell hooks and Audre Lorde for example (Martin 2001 [1993]). The spiritual elements in the (re)construction of black feminist identity in their work nonetheless forms the inspiration for the development of what is called a distinct womanist theology. Womanist theology shares with black feminism or feminism of colour the general feature in that it both 'associates and disassociates itself from black (male) theology and (white) feminist theology' (Thomas 1998: 4). Opposed to separatist forms of white feminism, such as the Feminist Spirituality movement (Sered 1994: 27), through its attention to 'race' and class, womanism is universalist or inclusive in being committed to the liberation of all women, men and children who are all oppressed under hegemonic white patriarchy. Womanist theologians such as Dolores S. Williams critique black liberation theology for ignoring the experience of black women and for its disregard of the sexism of the Bible and Christian tradition (Ruether 1998: 231). The challenge of womanist biblical interpretation is thus a critical hermeneutics of all ideologies of dominance and subordination, focussing on the marginalisation of both women and men (Martin 2001 [1990]). At the same time, as with the institution of the family, the black church is to

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seen to have functioned as an important institution of survival for black people, yet according to womanist theologians it is also accountable for often excluding and exploiting black women.

Mujerista theology has developed as a distinct form of feminist theology among Hispanic or Latina Christian feminists living in the U.S.. Mujerista theologians such as Ada María Isasi-Díaz (2001 [1993]) similarly critique much of the liberation theology from Latin America for not taking sexism into account. Isasi-Díaz has described mujerista theology as dedicated to liberation and salvation as two aspects of the same process, as a communal practice and not an individual affair for groups of Hispanic women in the U.S.. For Isasi-Díaz, mujerista theology is not limited to theoretical reflection or a strict disciplinary method by theologically educated professionals, but must be theology 'placed at the heart of Latinas daily life' (2001 [1993]: 506-507). Together with Chicana activist Yolanda Tarango, Isasi-Díaz has used a praxis-oriented methodology, by collecting retreats by Hispanic women that 'interconnect storytelling, analysis, liturgizing and strategy.' More independent of Catholic or Protestant churches, mujerista theology also turns to women's traditions of popular religion, mixing popular Spanish Catholicism, Amerindian and Afro-Caribbean practices (Ruether 1998). Finally, Asian American Christian feminists like the Asian Women's Network (since 1984) have been organising themselves in the U.S., and a group of Asian American Women in Ministry and Theology have started to write their own feminist theologies (Gross 1996: 55; King 1994b: 15-16).

A glance at the tables of contents ever since the first issue in 1985 of the internationally authoritative *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, edited by Judith Plaskow and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, would suggest that the issue of 'diversity' and its integration into the field of the feminist study of religion has by no means been a peripheral affair. From its very inception, almost every issue has not only contained contributions on religious traditions other than Christianity, but also on womanist, Asian, mujerista and lesbian theology. Besides individual articles, various issues often contain 'special sections' (e.g. 'Asian women theologians respond to American feminism' in 1987, vol. 3, nr. 2) or 'roundtables', with various participants commenting on each other's pieces on topics such as racism, anti-Judaism, womanism, mujerista theology, etc.

Periodical roundtable discussions in the journal have also focussed on the issue of methodology, and although issues of androcentrism in mainstream religious studies and theology, feminist theory and practice, and the notion of women's experience have often been central in these dialogues, the issue of women's diversity has repeatedly been voiced and included as central to these debates. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (1985) for example, emphasises the importance of social analysis in the feminist study of religion, which she directly relates to the necessary inclusion of black women's voices towards feminist scholarship that must be 'inclusive and holistic in its approaches' in

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order to overcome racism, eurocentrism and classism. As a post-Roman Catholic feminist from a Reform Jewish background, Patricia Shechter (1987) citing Audre Lorde's famous statement 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house', calls for feminist religious scholarship which must look to 'alternative, non-traditional "tools" – sources, methodologies, processes'. Giving life stories as a starting point for feminist theologising and theologising, Shechter refers to work by Alice Walker, Monique Wittig, Audre Lorde, Winnie Mandela, Sojourner Truth, Mother Ann Lee and others as life stories which can be seen as theological texts and starting points. In the same roundtable discussion, Kwok Pui-lan (1987: 100) concurs with Shechter's plea to begin theology with the stories of women's lives. However, Pui-lan is also critical of the way Shechter easily lumps together some names, claiming 'the danger of today is that it has become fashionable to quote a few sayings from women-of-color without acknowledging our differences of race, class and culture'. For Pui-lan, herself an Asian Christian woman, in the feminist critique of androcentric paradigms, attention must be paid to the 'harsh reality' of Third world women, towards a liberation from 'a very parochial understanding of Christianity'.

Finally, in a roundtable celebrating the tenth anniversary of *JFSR* (1990), not one contribution omits the issue and importance of the diversity between women that has ever increased over the last decade. María Pilar Aquino (1995) claims feminist theoretical models must still make sure to be accountable to the interactions of 'race', culture, class and religiosity, whilst Sheila Greeve Davaney (1995) applauds the move to a more historicised subject, attending to the differences between women above presuppositions about unitary and of an essentialist nature. Nantawan B. Lewis (1995) employs the concepts of 'dewesternisation' and 'decolonisation' in calling for a reassessment of the approaches that have claimed purportedly to 'integrate and interpret the experiences of women of color'. Central to many of the contributions in this issue however, - next to warnings of tokenism or women of color or poor women as mere 'addendums' to feminist analysis - is also the question of multicultural perspectives, transversality, commonality and alliances among women. Judith Plaskow's (1995) response in particular, is suspicious of 'postmodern' approaches that celebrate multiple subjectivity and fragmentation in which 'real power differentials' may become obscured. The danger that 'the differences between differences can become homogenized' must be avoided and work towards solidarity is advised.

Diversity as in the differences between women practising or writing feminist theology has also expanded and become more known in the form of scholarly publications in the West in a cross-cultural *global* context. With the publication of a collection of articles from feminist theologians from 'Third world' countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, editor Ursula King (1994a) attempts to make the work available of women from different countries and colours, beyond that of U.S. women of colour. According to King (1994b) in

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her general introduction, although black women's criticism against both sexism and racism has become crucial for the development of feminist theology in the U.S., the intersections of gender, 'race', and class have also become widely debated among feminist theologians in the Third World. King describes the 'cross-cultural connections' and the development of a 'feminist consciousness among Christian women' on a global scale that has evolved. This is partly due to the many initiatives of several Christian world organisations, such as the World Council of Churches (WCC). Separate conferences, networks and publications<sup>32</sup> of women theologians from all over the world have grown since the issue of sexism became a more prominent theme of the agenda of The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT founded in 1976) and women's participation has greatly increased throughout the eighties and nineties.

Although King's attempt to represent what may be understood as a recent global form of diversity among feminists, referring to and suggesting the promise of cross-cultural connections and transnational alliances across the differences between feminist activists and scholars in religion throughout the world, an important caveat is to be taken into account.<sup>33</sup> In spite of all the diversity which is suggested in King's general endeavour and introduction, this diversity itself takes place within the context of one particular form of theology, that of the Christian religious tradition. King refers to this in her introduction in the following way (1994b: 4):

The term 'feminist theology' can be understood both in a broader and more narrow sense. It has been applied to the work of Jewish and Christian feminists and also to writings on new forms of feminist spirituality. I do not use the term in this wider sense, but apply it more narrowly as referring to the experience and reflection of Christian women from the Third World. However, these women belong to many different Christian churches and work closely together in an open, ecumenical, sisterly spirit.

A concise review of the attention for and the integration of the differences between women as a crucial step in the development of feminist scholarship and theory in the last two decades within the specific area of the feminist study of religion can be summarised as follows. Basically, the women-in-religion genre of publication focuses on 'diversity' in the cross-cultural sense: studies of different religious traditions and the role of women or the 'feminine' therein are brought together. However, more recent feminist theoretical insights on notions of essentialism, difference and comparison are for the most part lacking and diversity remains at the level of description or presentation. On the other hand, the critique initiated by lesbian women and women of colour in the U.S. and the U.K. against the exclusionary white, middle class and heterosexual character of feminist activism and theory was in fact taken up at an early stage in the

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feminist study of religion as an emerging field of scholarship. Both anthologies and especially the contributions and dialogues in the important *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, show how the differences between women and the intersections of gender, class, 'race', sexuality were and continue to be seen as important and not mere additive issues in the field.

It is possible that this process of integration and cross-fertilisation was facilitated compared to other fields of feminist scholarship, due to the role of religion and spirituality which appears to be a prominent issue in many black feminist writings. As was extensively argued in chapter two, second-wave feminism has for the greater part not only been exclusionary in matters of 'race', class and sexuality, but it has also been dominantly secular and often strongly anti-religious. Taking into account that feminist research in the area of religious studies may be more open to the work of women of colour, such as womanism or *mujerista* feminism, another suggestion can be made. It can be questioned whether the very problem of the integration of the 'critique from diversity' into Western feminist scholarship which continues to the present also rests on the question of difference in terms of secularity and religiosity, besides culture, ethnicity, 'race', 'etc.'

However, the most important insight hereto gained regarding the acceptance and integration of diversity among women is the following. Both in the case of women of colour living in Western countries, and in more recent attempts to bring in the global dimension of women's differences into feminist scholarship on religion, 'diversity' has been theorised in only one particular way. With the exception of some attention to Jewish feminism in the U.S. and various individual contributions in *JFSR* throughout the years, diversity itself has been defined mostly in Christian or post-Christian terms. Despite the focus on class, 'race', or cultural differences – whether in the context of minorities, migration or in transnational contexts – *religious differences* themselves have not been greatly theorised from the perspective of feminist theory and methodology, not only in feminist research in general, but *especially* within the feminist study of religion as a distinct field.

One of the rare voices to be heard on this very issue is that of the well-known feminist religious studies pioneer, Rita M. Gross. In *Feminism and Religion* (1996), Gross argues that feminist scholarship and theology should become genuinely cross-cultural, and should attempt to look beyond the horizons of Western religions and their precursors in the Ancient Near East or pre-Christian Europe (56-57):

In my view, the single greatest weakness of feminist thinking about religion at the beginning of its third decade is that so much of it is primarily Western, and even primarily Christian. ... Understanding diversity *among* religions is at least as important as understanding diversity *within* religions. ... Of all the calls to affirm and appreciate diversity, the call for genuine, serious cross-cultural interreligious study

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and thinking in feminist theology and scholarship has been the least heeded.

Only very recently have there been some signs that this issue will be taken more seriously and be a matter for theoretical reflection within the field. In another roundtable discussion 'Feminist Theology and Religious Diversity' in *JFSR* (2000), the same author has attempted to initiate a debate in a provocative essay entitled 'Feminist Theology: Religiously Diverse Neighbourhood or Christian Ghetto?' As a feminist Buddhist 'theologian' and scholar of comparative religion, Gross laments the exclusion and negligence of non-Christian perspectives in feminist theology, expressed at the level of academic forums and positions within the academy (73):

Yet as the world becomes more aware of and sensitive to diversity of all kinds, the feminist theology movement, like much mainstream (or malestream, as some feminists would say) theological writing and education, is oblivious to the reality of religious diversity and acts as if all theology were Christian theology.

The situation is particularly ironic, as in Gross's experiences in many forums for interreligious dialogue (such as the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies) much attention is paid to gender issues, yet Christian women and Christian feminists remain uninterested to participate, retreating ever more in a institutionalised Christian feminist 'ghetto'. As one of the pioneers, Gross furthermore claims that initially feminist religious studies scholarship was truly committed to include all forms of diversity, with Christian and non-Christian feminist scholars (such as Judith Plaskow, Carol Christ and Naomi Goldenberg) as central figures of the movement. In other words, even if the development and further institutionalisation of feminist religious studies scholarship may have followed general trends in feminist theory towards cultural, 'race' and class diversity, attention to religious diversity itself has decreased considerably.

Despite the observation that developments in feminist theory and methodology – from diversity through to postmodernism - have definitely been taken on in the feminist study of religion, this appears to have been limited to and taken place within predominantly one religious tradition. Even if all kinds of debates on differences and diversity take place at a global level, these do not cut across different religious contexts themselves. Gross does not delve deeper into the reasons why this is the case, although both the discourse in her essay and some of the reactions to it do contain some clues that require further analysis. As I will argue in the following chapter, the answer to the question why religious diversity is marginalized, is directly related to some other observations which underlie and account for the incompatibility between mainstream religious studies and feminist perspectives, and the consequent im/possibility of a paradigm shift of the first under influence of the latter.

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter two under 2. Religion and Women's Liberation until the Second Wave The First Wave: *Anglo-American and British Religious Feminism*.

<sup>2</sup> Another possibility in distinguishing between these two strands is Iris Young's (from an essay 'Humanism, Gynocentrism and Feminist Politics' published in 1985). She divides of feminist theory into humanist feminism and gynocentric feminism. Eriksson (1995: 16-17) characterises this scheme as 'a shift from claiming equal treatment and possibilities for women compared to men, to claiming equal value for the two genders.' Humanist feminism hereby refers to a first phase of the differences between women and men as socially constructed and a source of oppression (the equality option), whereas gynocentric feminism focuses on the differences themselves which conversely are seen to be 'the seeds of women's liberation'.

<sup>3</sup> See chapter two, under 3. The Second Wave: A Fissure: *Discovering Patriarchy*, where Kate Millet is placed under the strand of *anti-liberal*, radical feminist sexual difference thought.

<sup>4</sup> For recent discussions see e.g. 'Interchanges' in the first issue of *Feminist Theory*: Ahmed (2000); Ermarth (2000) and its third issue in which Stanley and Wise (2000) call for an autocritique and transformation of the current status of feminist theory. See also the replies to their article in 'Interchanges' such as Humm (2001); Marchbank and Letherby (2001) and Stacey (2001).

<sup>5</sup> Although initially designed for the social and natural sciences, Harding's classification of feminist epistemologies has been widely applied in all kinds of academic scholarship, including the humanities.

<sup>6</sup> This work includes Slocum, Sally, 'Woman the Gatherer: Male Bias in Anthropology', in: R.R. Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975, pp. 36-50, in: di Leonardo (1991: 7), and Tanner, Nancy and Zihlman, Adrienne, 'Woman in Evolution, Part I: Innovation and Selection in Human Origins', in: *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 1, nr. 3, 1976, pp. 585- 608, in: Nielsen (1990: 16) and di Leonardo (1990: 7), and Sarah Blaffer Hrdy's *The Woman That Never Evolved* published in 1981. See also Hrdy's more recent feminist challenge to the prevailing androcentric bias in evolutionary biology in *Mother Nature: Natural Selection and the Female of the Species* (1999).

<sup>7</sup> See the beginning of chapter one for more on Ursula King's *Religion and Gender*.

<sup>8</sup> See Christ's 1979a and 1979b and her more recent work such as 'Rebirth of the Goddess' (2001).

<sup>9</sup> According to Gross (1996: 108), the same authors partly retract their earlier distinction between reformists and revolutionaries, in an answer to this criticism in *Weaving the Visions: Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* published a decade after *Womanspirit Rising* in 1989.

<sup>10</sup> See also chapter one, under 1. A Millennial Fantasy: On the Verge of a Paradigm Shift towards Gender Inclusiveness.

<sup>11</sup> Surprisingly, Christ does not refer to Saiving's article, regardless of the fact that they are both concerned with the exposure of general androcentric bias in Eliade's work. Christ in fact arrives at similar conclusions concerning the (over)emphasis on aggression in Eliade's theories of religion, even though the religious traditions under study vary significantly (see further).

<sup>12</sup> Contributions on the Christian tradition in both volumes include the interpretation of female imagery in Scottish Pentecostal churches (Maltz 1978), the position of women in Scottish Evangelical churches (Borker 1978), the religious participation of Mexican women (Arnold 1978) and an article on village women in the Greek Orthodox Church (Rushton 1983). Papers on Judaism include an article on a women's Sabbath service in the U.S. (Prell-Foldes 1978), sex roles among Eldery Jews (Myerhoff 1978), women rabbis in Liberal Judaism (Neuberger 1983) and women, custom and halakhah (Jewish law) (Webber 1983). In Holden's (1983) volume, one paper deals with Islamic women's gatherings in Turkey (Tapper 1983).

<sup>13</sup> AmaraSingham's (1978) article deals with the representation of women in Sinhalese Buddhist myth and in Holden, the theme of women and Hinduism is explored by Leslie (1983) in ancient Indian texts and by Thompson (1983) on fertility and worship in a Hindu village.

<sup>14</sup> Articles focussing on women and religion in Africa are those by Spring (1978) on spirit possession in Zambia, spirit mediumship among Black South African women (Middleton-Keim 1978), Yoruba

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female sexuality (Hoch-Smith 1978), the participation of women in masking societies in West Africa (Tonkin 1983) and women and 'little spirits' among the Nyole of Uganda (Whyte 1983).

<sup>15</sup> Campbell (2001) discusses the late Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. Neudel's (2001) study concerns the development of an unusually egalitarian Jewish congregation, the Upstairs Minyan of the University of Chicago Hillel Foundation during the early decades of the women's movement. Ross' (2001) article focuses on Victoria Way DeLee, an African American civil rights activist from South Carolina. Strasser (2001) describes the struggle of the Catholic nuns of the Püttrich convent.

<sup>16</sup> Although Rosalind Shaw focuses on the 'history of religions' as a discipline, her arguments hold for what I refer to as 'religious studies' in general, which covers what is referred to as the history of religions or the field of comparative religion (see introduction).

<sup>17</sup> See also chapter one under: 2. Constructing, Deconstructing and Reconstructing Gender: *Political and Postmodern Appropriations*

<sup>18</sup> Both 'black feminist' and 'women of colour' will be used as generic inclusive terms.

<sup>19</sup> bell hooks (1984: 39) refers to eminent political thinkers such as Franz Fanon, who in his *Black Skins, White Masks* published in 1967 omits sexism altogether in discussing oppression only in terms of the relation between the white male colonisers and colonised black men.

<sup>20</sup> By bell hooks, first published in 1982. The often quoted phrase 'Ain't I a Woman?' comes from a speech made by the black feminist activist Sojourner Truth at a women's rights convention in Ohio in 1851 (Collins 1990: 13-14):

The man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold into slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

According to Patricia Hill Collins (1990), this phrase expressed the contradictions in the term 'woman' and challenged the very standards of what being a woman meant. In modern terms, it refers to a 'deconstruction' of the concept of woman, hence the actuality of the question for black feminists during the second wave who were confronting similar questions and posing the same critiques vis-à-vis white women's struggles against oppression.

<sup>21</sup> Edited by Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott and Barbara Smith, New York, The Feminist Press, 1982.

<sup>22</sup> Hazel Carby in: Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies (ed.), *The Empire Strikes Back*, London: Hutchinson.

<sup>23</sup> Examples are Nancy Chodorow's work on sex-role socialisation (1997 [1979]) and Carol Gilligan's research on women and moral development (1982, 1997 [1977]).

<sup>24</sup> Another difference in many Black feminist writings which may contribute to the difficulty and unease with their integration or acceptance by white feminist theorists is also any emphasis on spirituality, especially in womanism: see further.

<sup>25</sup> See also chapter four, under 1. Feminist Studies in/of Religion: *Transgressing Sacred Boundaries: Interdisciplinarity and Interreligiosity*

<sup>26</sup> An exception is the already mentioned *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister* by Susan Sered (1994a) that seeks to compare women's status in different religious traditions. However, the focus is on female agency and power instead of women's oppression, which had been the dominant focus in earlier work.

<sup>27</sup> Bynum refers to Peggy Reeves Sanday's (1981) *Female Power and Male Dominance* as a classic example.

<sup>28</sup> Bynum (1986: 5) hereby refers to Ortner and Whitehead's (1981) *Sexual Meanings*, whom she claims have 'devoted their attention to what they call the 'hegemonic (male-biased) ideology' and have avoided the question of women's perspective.

<sup>29</sup> In Bynum's (1986: 8) introduction, the choice for French feminism, is made 'which focuses on the fact and experience of genderedness, rather than with American feminism, which focuses on cause'.

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<sup>30</sup> ‘...all the chapters in this volume share with cultural anthropology and with recent feminist psychology an emphasis on the distinction between gender and sex. [...] Gender is the term used to refer to those differences between male and female human beings that are created through psychological and social development within a familial, social and cultural setting. All human beings have gender as well as sex, and this gender is culturally constructed’. (Bynum 1986: 7)

<sup>31</sup> These include *Women in World Religions* (Sharma 1987), *Today’s Women in World Religions and Religion and Women* both published in 1994, *Feminism and World Religions* (Sharma and Young 1999) and most recently a book on *Women Saints in World Religions* (Sharma 2000).

<sup>32</sup> A well-known example is the Asian Christian theological journal *In God’s Image* first published in 1982 (Gross 1996: 55; King 1994b: 13).

<sup>33</sup> Although King does not mention any of the general and recent feminist theoretical discussions on global feminism and transnational feminist practices, the book itself can definitely be seen to be aligned with these trends in recent feminist scholarship. The movement and perspectives will be discussed later.

**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**DE-THEOLOGISING AND DE-ORIENTALISING THE FEMINIST**  
**STUDY OF RELIGION: INTRODUCING A REFLEXIVE AND**  
**POSTCOLONIAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH**

In this chapter I will argue that there may be additional, and deeper reasons underlying the problematic relationship between feminism and the study of religion, and in particular the im/possibilities and stakes in the engendering of mainstream religious studies than those put forward in the recent literature such as Hackett (2000), Joy (2000, 2001), Shaw (1995) and Warne (2000, 2001, 2001 [1998]). Although Rosalind Shaw's diagnosis of the character of the mainstream as a priori inhibiting the possibility of a feminist approach is concurred with, additional epistemological issues underlying the incompatibility will be identified. These will be shown to be directly related to Shaw's diagnosis of the essentialist character of the feminist study of religion, the genealogy of which was fully elaborated by way of the typologies presented in the previous chapter. I will argue that the ways these critiques of essentialism and calls for 'diversity' that have hereto been put forward as necessary steps in the feminist study of religion vis-à-vis contemporary developments in feminist theory, or even as a possible solution to the central problem of the engendering of the mainstream, ultimately fail to meet these expectations. A closer look will be taken at some of these recent critiques attempting to account for the incompatibility between religious studies and feminist scholarship. I will argue how and why some particular features inherent in both feminist scholarship and religious studies as a discipline, that contribute to the 'toxic' relationship between, them have been overlooked.

In particular, the insider/outsider problem or the debate on essentialism/reductionism in mainstream religious studies is juxtaposed with feminist approaches in which the boundaries between insiders/outsider, theory/practice, but also the religious versus the non-religious viewpoint are conflated. The question becomes whether a feminist study *of* religion instead of *in* religion is conceivable at all. The chapter proceeds with a close inquiry into some features of 'postmodern' feminist epistemology that underlie the problem of the 'transgression of sacred boundaries', but also where some possible solutions can be found for a further *de-theologisation* and *de-orientalisation* of the feminist study of religion. I turn to postcolonial critique and concepts such as 'reflexivity', 'situated knowledges', and 'deconstruction', which I feel may aid in transcending the essentialism/reductionism debate. The final part of the chapter therefore returns to the question of diversity, but here in the context of the differences between researcher/researched. I argue that it is this kind of diversity which is desperately in need of further theorisation in the feminist study of religion from the perspective of a social science, rather than a

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confessional point of view. Again, I support that we must look to feminist anthropology for inspiration, in which this form of diversity stands central.

**1. Feminist Studies in/of Religion**

*In these tempting views, no insider's perspective is privileged, because all drawings of inside-outside boundaries in knowledge are theorized as power moves, not moves towards truth.*

Donna Haraway (1991 [1988]: 184)

In order to build my case further, I will first return to the question posed: of Rosalind Shaw's (1995) assessment of the failure of contemporary feminist research in religion to move beyond the employment of a unitary and essentialist category of 'woman'. My review of the literature in the previous chapter however, showed that 'diversity' in its most current meaning in feminist theory as the methodological and epistemological debate on the differences between women, is by no means absent in the feminist study of religion. What Shaw calls the 'universalizing and essentializing tendencies' of contemporary feminist religious studies therefore do not refer to the kind of diversity discussed above. Nor, I argue, will this kind of diversity, which has functioned as an antidote, or as 'deconstructive' of the universalisation of the category of 'woman', or the essentialism of 'women's experience' in other areas of feminist scholarship, be likely to provide a solution to the existing problem of essentialism that Shaw is referring to. In her article, Shaw identifies the problem of essentialism and notions such as that of a 'universal female reality', by briefly pointing to one particular type of writing in the area of feminist religious studies, namely that of feminist spirituality or 'thealogy'. The work of Carol Christ is taken as exemplary<sup>1</sup>, for regardless of Christ's critique of androcentrism in mainstream religious studies such as the *homo religiosus* of Mircea Eliade<sup>2</sup>, Shaw (1995: 74) argues that in 'replacing God the Father with God the Mother', Christ is in fact simply universalising 'a female spiritual essence in which all women participate' (74-75):

Christ's approach – to use her own experiences of reconstructed goddess rituals as the basis for her interpretation of prehistoric goddess worship ... - is no less totalizing. ... Through such appropriation of the experience of women in other times and places, a feminized *homo religiosus* lives on.

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As noted earlier, Shaw attributes this form of essentialism which lives on in a particular strand of the feminist study of religion, and more generally what was identified as the revolutionary approach in the typologies set out in the previous chapter, to the inherent 'view from above' character of the mainstream study of religion on the undifferentiated religious subject. However, I will argue that by directing her accusation of essentialism towards strands of feminist religious studies which apply a feminist revolutionary - or what I will call a 'reconstructionist' - approach, unaffected by the call for 'difference', Shaw is only touching upon the surface of what may be more fundamental epistemological problems underlying the thesis of incompatibility. Moreover, these problems and the accusation of essentialism, apply to more than just this specific branch of feminist religious studies.

Contra Shaw, I put forward that the reason feminist reconstructionists have a great tendency to be essentialist is not so much because mainstream religious studies is so essentialist, but because these feminist scholars are in fact *practising* rather than studying religion. The universal woman is thus upheld for religious/ideological/feminist reasons, whereas Eliade's universalising framework is *supposedly* done for scientific reasons. All the more relevant is Shaw's final plea for a feminist religious studies which 'incorporates differences between women, and in particular between the researcher and the women she writes about' (1995: 75). As argued towards the end of the previous chapter, the feminist study of religion has not only failed to theorise the *religious* differences between women; 'difference' in the context of the researcher-researched relationship is an issue which is desperately in need of further elaboration and thought. For 'difference' viewed from this angle raises some challenging questions when juxtaposed with the well known 'insider/outsider debate' within the mainstream, such as the distinction between theology and researching religion from a non-religious perspective. Next to the 'view-from-above' thesis formulated by Shaw, I suggest that this particular juxtaposing also underlies the situation of incompatibility between the mainstream and feminist approaches. From the position of the non-religious feminist researcher, the reformist/reconstructionist divide turns out to be different sides of the same (religious) coin. That reconstructionist or reformist perspectives should therefore be essentialist is not surprising. After all, they are *religious* viewpoints.

### *Against Reconstructionism*

I build my argument by taking a critical look at two articles which were quite independently published in the same year (1999), in two prominent mainstream religious studies journals, and by two well-known scholars in the area of feminist religious studies scholarship in North America. The first is a review article of Rita M. Gross's introductory book to *Feminism and Religion* (1996),

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entitled 'Having Your Cake and Eating It Too: Feminism and Religion' by Katherine K. Young (1999b, 1999c). Young is also known as co-editor with Arvind Sharma to the popular 'women-in-religion' series (McGill Studies in the History of Religions)<sup>3</sup> discussed earlier, and the *Annual Review of Women in World Religions* (published since 1991). The second article to be discussed is by Marsha Aileen Hewitt (1999). This is not a review article, but nonetheless again concerns a highly critical reading of the work of Rita Gross, in this case focussing on her *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (1993a). In particular, its first appendix 'Here I Stand: Feminism as Academic Method and as Social Vision' (1993b) in Gross's book is referred to. It includes some of Gross's ideas on methodology in the feminist study of religion, which are also discussed in her following book *Feminism and Religion*.

Both Hewitt and Young are deeply concerned with, and outright reject what they see as a grave fallacy in the feminist study of religion, when what should be the feminist scholarship of religion proper is conflated with 'advocacy' (Young), or 'ideology formation' (Hewitt) in both religious and feminist terms within the academy. Hewitt's (1999: 47) main concern is to 'mark those areas where feminists in the study of religion run into danger of converting ideology critique into a new ideology when reconceiving religious traditions'. Young (1999b: 168) argues that 'the impact of feminism on the history of religions amounts to nothing more or less than the attempt to transform an academic discipline into a secular worldview in the guise of a religion'. Both authors draw on the work of Rita Gross (1993a, b, 1996) to make their case, and in particular the way Gross 'reconstructs' Buddhism from the perspective of feminist analysis and critique. However, their sharp criticism is equally directed at the same area of feminist religious studies scholarship Rosalind Shaw claims to be 'essentialist', that was categorised under the rubric of 'revolutionary' or 'reconstructionist' approaches earlier (feminist spirituality, Goddess studies, post-Christian theo/aology, etc.).

Hewitt draws on Marx and Engels's notion of 'ideology critique' in proposing a feminist critical theory of religion that 'both inquires into and exposes the ways in which religious traditions harbour mechanisms of power that result in the subordination and oppression of women without attempting to erect a new theological interest' (1999: 51). Such a feminist analysis must further necessarily consider religion as a cultural phenomenon that informs, mediates, underlines, sustains and reproduces dominating practices and relations throughout the larger social fabric, both religious and non-religious (52). At first glance, Hewitt's understanding is compatible with Rosalind Shaw's that a gendered approach towards religion is not possible viewing religion as *sui generis*, non-reducible to its political, social, and historical matrix. Hence, the suspicions of both authors towards feminist reconstructions of religion, such as post-Christian and feminist spirituality, and that of the kind proposed in Rita Gross's *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (1993).

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According to Hewitt, Gross who refuses to take a reductionist approach to study religion, is incoherent in arguing that religion ‘occupies some ontological position beyond culture’ (52). Gross does this, in a typical reconstructionist manner, in order to argue that Buddhism is somehow authentically feminist at its core. Hewitt notes that this move is similar to a number of ‘feminist religious thinkers’ within Christianity, who maintain that Christianity originally harboured a egalitarian, non-sexist teaching and vision, both for which there is no conclusive evidence. Agreeing with Hewitt’s analysis up to this point, problematic nonetheless, is *the way in which* it is concluded that these scholars in religion are ‘mistaken’ in importing external ideologies (here feminism) into religions, ‘hereby rendering them unrecognizable’ (55). Hewitt sees Gross’s reconstruction of Buddhism, as an attempt to transform Buddhism into a modern Western feminist philosophy, an instance of what she calls mere ‘ideological colonisation’ (57).

My impression is that Hewitt is paradoxically drawing boundaries around the very category she deems necessary to place in its wider matrix when it comes to the question of women. The question is, what is counted as the true religious tradition at any place and time that Hewitt is referring to, and from whose perspective? Hewitt speaks of ‘Christianity’ and ‘Islam’ as unitary traditions, in the very type of rhetoric that makes a gendered approach impossible according to the arguments Shaw put forward (e.g. ‘religion as scripture’). In spite of her anti-essentialist approach, I shall argue, Hewitt still holds on to a ‘view from above’ perspective of religion, seen as influencing all other social and political phenomena, but itself to be ‘untouched’ by the very same context it is inextricably bound to. This is further shown in statements within her critique such as: ‘Thus feminist reconstructions of religion unreflectively strive to engender traditions into conformity with an external, independent, political, and ethical set of values and goals which have arisen from, and be formed by, very different contexts than the religions themselves’ (60). Regardless of Hewitt’s insistence on a contextualised view of religion as a cultural phenomenon, connected to, and bound to other social phenomena, Hewitt obviously has some difficulties with the reconstructionist approach in somehow going *too far*.

The same line of reasoning can be deferred from Katherine Young’s (1999b) critique of Gross’s methodology and feminist reconstructionist approach. Again, an a priori idea of ‘true’ religion or the religious ‘phenomenon in its own right’ (182), underlies the critique of feminist interference and the illegitimate trespassing of separate domains (1999b: 181):

Because feminists are creating a new worldview, I suggest, their role is functionally equivalent to that of religious founders. And when feminists systematically explore their new worldview, they do so as the functional equivalents of theologians – which is why feminist ‘revisioning’ or ‘re-imagining’ (as in the ‘Goddess’ and ‘Sophia’ movements) have been

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called 'theology' (*thea* referring to goddess, *theo* to god). But, as I observed at the beginning of this review, the new feminist religion is religious only on the surface. Lurking beneath it is an implicit secular value system related to feminist politics and psychology.

As suggested above, problematic in both Young and Hewitt's critiques is not so much their observation that scholars like Gross are injecting feminist secular values into their vision of religious tradition, (re)constructing rather than critically studying and analysing religion itself. This I concur, is an important insight, on the one hand 'obvious', yet one that has been barely addressed or problematised in feminist religious studies' scholarship so far. The problem with these critiques I find, lies in the particular manner in which both authors have a problem with feminist reconstructions such as these. The point is that is not so much a question of proving reconstructionist approaches false or 'mistaken', as these studies can be viewed as *internal* to the practice of religion. For these scholars are foremost conducting – or constructing - theology. Both authors in fact come to the conclusion that scholarship such as that of Gross is the 'conflation of the study of theology, the religious point of view, and the study of religion' (Hewitt 1999: 58). My argument is that the main problem with the reconstructionist approach is not so much its heterodoxy towards whatever is conceived of as the authoritative, cumulative, or even 'true' religious tradition. This I view as a matter internal to theology or a religious debate. Especially problematic is that approaches like these *claim* to be religious studies (of the feminist kind).

The question where lines can or must be drawn between the religious and the non-religious viewpoint, or between theology and religious studies proper is scarcely matter of debate within the broad field of feminist studies of religion. Boundaries are often drawn quite differently, as was shown in the previous chapter. Although many typologies of the feminist study of religion can be shown to follow classifications of development in feminist theory and research more generally, in the literature reviewed, it was argued that it is not at all clear exactly how the direction of the stages from 'critique of androcentrism' to 'epistemological transformation or reconstruction' is conceptualised by many an author. For those scholars taking a reconstructionist stance, the basic distinction between the reformist and the revolutionary or reconstructionist approaches first introduced by Christ and Plaskow (1979a) serves as a developmental scheme, opposed to other feminist theologians committed to reforming their religious tradition 'from within'. However, it was also noted that in the more recent literature on the status of research on religion and gender (e.g. King 1995b) regarding 'reconstruction' or 'transformation' as a fundamental epistemological problem vis-à-vis the mainstream study of religion, any clear positioning whatsoever is missing whether a paradigm shift of a scholarly discipline, or *religion itself* is envisioned. In short, in what is generally understood to be subsumed under the title of the feminist study of

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religion, any distinction between the insider perspective, the *practice* of religion in terms of studies *in* religion or 'theology' on the one hand, and the strictly scholarly outsider perspective such as in the mainstream history *of* religion's methodology, falls flat. A distinction between feminist studies *in* religion and feminist studies *of* religion appears not even to exist. Further questions to be raised therefore, are *why* this is the case and *whether* at all such a distinction is conceivable.

### *Critiquing Androcentrism or Patriarchy?*

Assessing a status quaestionis of the field of feminist religious scholarship from the viewpoint of the insider/outsider distinction and debate throws an entirely different light on some of the directions in the existing scholarship dealt with in the previous chapter. More often than not, there appears to be a complete blurring of boundaries, and sometimes one that is explicitly defended as a methodological feature of feminist scholarship. In a recent article for example, feminist anthropologist and religious studies' scholar Fiona Bowie (1998: 40), claims to follow feminist standpoint theory, since 'it is important to situate the subject within the discourse rather than to speak in false abstractions'. Bowie's insistence on 'situating the subject' and more 'self-reflexive writing' appears to be linked to a view of blurring the boundaries between theology and the study of religion, attested in statements such as the following (41):

While I was seeking to explore methodologies that transcend a straightforward insider/outsider approach to the study of religion, and to break down the stereotype that the religious studies specialist engages in detached phenomenological description of others people's religions, whereas the theologian engages in catechesis within a faith context, the influence of personal history in determining individual perceptions and praxis became apparent.

In accordance with the basic typologies of the feminist study of religion outlined in the previous chapter, Bowie furthermore claims that after and besides the focus on women's experience, symbols and female agency as a corrective approach to androcentrism, feminist work must also look to the way in which subjects are studied (43):

Faced with constructs of knowledge that privilege the masculine and define subject boundaries according to a patriarchal dichotomizing of experience (science versus religion, theology versus feminist theology, high art versus popular culture, women's studies versus 'real' subjects, and so on), women scholars are well placed to start asking pertinent questions of accepted paradigms. Discovering their own agency and

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listening to women's experience and knowledge, women scholars pose a profound challenge to the rhetoric both of objectivity (in religious studies) and of accepted revelation (in theology).

Underlying Bowie's view of the way feminist studies in religion should proceed, I believe, are precisely the debates surrounding issues of objectivity, reflexivity, positioning and politics, which play a central part in the shift towards the question of epistemology in feminist theory and scholarship introduced in chapter three. Evident in Bowie's rhetoric are also postmodern tendencies with a clear emphasis on deconstruction, especially of all kinds of dualistic thought as in the quote above. Before I turn to the question of the impact of postmodernism and poststructuralism on feminist theory and scholarship in relation to the question of boundaries in the feminist study of religion in more detail, some more examples will serve to illustrate how an insider position is automatically implicit, or sometimes explicitly implied in the field of feminist religious studies.

Returning to the initial critique of androcentrism in the mainstream history of religions by feminist scholars in the seventies, Rita M. Gross (1977a) was among the first to formulate the problem as a basic yet fundamental issue of methodology and call for a shift towards a more inclusive 'androgynous' perspective.<sup>4</sup> The focus of Gross's critique in the article discussed earlier, appears to be not religion itself but the way the discipline of religious studies proceeds in an androcentric manner. Gross's implicitly assumes that this androcentrism can be corrected once the biases underlying categories and methods of research are uncovered. In the previous chapter it also became clear how in various typologies of the feminist study of religion, after critique and correction, finally 'transformation' should follow. However, in these typologies, the phase of transformation appeared to apply to religion itself rather than the discipline and its methodology. Exemplary is perhaps June O'Connor's (1989) classification of the three Rs of 'rereading, reconceiving, and reconstructing traditions'.<sup>5</sup>

Sue Morgan's (1999) overview of feminist approaches in a general reader on the study of religion is another clear and recent example of how the feminist study of religion may imply the feminist transformation of religion, the very type of conflation writers such as Hewitt and Young oppose. To begin with, the article is included in a volume, which apart from one contribution entitled 'Theological Approaches', according to the editor limits itself to non-confessional, viz. 'outsider' approaches (Connolly 1999: 2):

In terms of religious affiliation, all the approaches described in this volume, with the exception of the theological, are essentially (though not always entirely) 'outsider' approaches. That is, they do not assume a religious commitment on the part of the investigator; they can be adopted by the religious and the non-religious alike.

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Morgan's (1999: 42) introductory sentence to her contribution suggests this classification would be accurate:

The feminist approach to the study of religion seeks nothing less than a critical transformation of existing theoretical perspectives through the introduction of gender as a primary category of analysis.

In the second paragraph however, again the question arises what the object of feminist critique and transformation is (42-43):

The term 'critical transformation' indicates the two distinct but related aspects of the feminist approach discussed throughout this chapter. The critical dimension confronts religion with its historical perpetuation of unjust, exclusionary practices that have legitimated male superiority in every social domain. The transformative aspect subsequently reappropriates the central symbols, texts and rituals of religious traditions so as to incorporate and affirm the neglected experiences of women. For some feminists, the magnitude of the critical task has rendered hopeless the potential for transforming religion. ... Whilst many of their critical insights will be referred to, this chapter will focus primarily on the methodological approaches of those women who have opted to work for change or reform within their respective religious traditions.

Again lines are drawn between reformist and reconstructionist approaches towards the feminist study of religion, whilst both approaches can equally be viewed as insider perspectives, committed to the study of religion in order to – in varying degrees – reform or transform it. There appears to be no difference between the critique of *androcentrism* in the study of religion on the one hand, and the critique of *patriarchy* in religious traditions on the other. For the feminist scholar of religion, the steps to be taken may vary in terms of which path to choose; yet both points of departure, destination and the overall route is without doubt a religious one.

In her earlier article on androcentrism by contrast, Rita Gross (1977) made clear that the distinction between androcentric methodology and patriarchal religion is an important one. Gross emphasised that from the methodological point of view in the history of religions, the fact whether the religion under study was, or was not male-dominated or androcentric in its teachings, the level of 'data' itself was irrelevant opposed to the questions asked and the presuppositions underlying these questions and methods. What Gross in hindsight was aiming at, was what Sandra Harding calls feminist empiricism. This refers to the feminist demand for the inclusion of women as the data for empirical research in order for this research to be more inclusive –

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covering all of humanity and not just half – or in Harding’s view of science proper, to attain more rather than androcentric ‘false’ objectivity. Although Gross at this stage does not discuss the notion of objectivity, her goal of transforming mainstream scholarship at the level of its presuppositions and methodology is clear. Not only will the ‘women in religion’ approach ultimately fail to solve the problem of androcentric methodology, the marginalization of women within religious traditions or particular religious contexts does by no means warrant their exclusion at the level of correct and complete analysis.

In Gross’s later writings on methodology (1993b; 1996), - the focus of harsh criticism by Hewitt and Young – she to some extent carries on a distinction between methodology and subject matter in her delineation between women’s studies and feminism. Under women’s studies, Gross includes ‘feminism as academic method’, whereas ‘feminism as a social vision’ is defined as the perspective of feminist philosophy. Her own feminist reconstruction of Buddhism (1993), Gross explains as follows (1993b: 291):

The women studies perspective is more relevant to historical discussions while the perspective of feminist philosophy is more relevant to the post-patriarchal reconstruction of Buddhism. Though the values and insights of these two perspectives are intertwined and closely linked, they are not identical. The women studies perspective is less radical, claiming only that scholars must include women in their data base if they wish to claim that they are discussing humanity (rather than males). Feminist philosophy in its many varieties proposes reconstructions of current religions and societies to render them more just and equitable to women, and thereby, also to men.

Apart from the issue of terminology on women’s or feminist studies, the distinction Gross wants to make is clear, although the initial focus on the past (historical discussions) versus the present (post-patriarchal or the future) does somewhat divert the issue of the reconstruction. As repeatedly emphasised elsewhere however, in this particular text on feminist methodology, Gross acknowledges the existence of a distinction that must apply to the study of religion as an academic discipline. This is expressed in statements such as ‘feminism as academic method does not inherently entail any social philosophy regarding what women’s position in society should be’ (298). In her book *Feminism and Religion* (1996: 21) the same distinction is defended: feminist scholarship ‘only entails a requirement to study women thoroughly and completely’, as an academic method, ‘not a socio-political perspective’. In her review article of the latter, Katherine Young (1999b: 169) draws attention to the inherent contradictions in the distinction Gross makes, and particularly one that she does not apply to her own - reconstructionist – ‘analysis’. Young’s focus of critique however, evidently and equally accompanies her own personal views

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on both terminology (especially the meaning of 'feminism'), and how the study of religion should be undertaken:

By her [Gross's] own definition, 'women's studies' clearly refers to scholarship. 'Feminism,' on the other hand, clearly refers to advocacy. The term 'feminist scholarship,' therefore, is an oxymoron. Why introduce the latter when the term 'women's studies' would suffice? Gross's preference for the term 'feminism' even in connection with scholarship indicates that her goal is not scholarship at all but what could be called informed advocacy - that is, feminist transformation of society and its religions.

In particular, Young is annoyed with the way Gross, as a trained scholar of the history of religions, on the one hand propagates its methods of description and interpretation opposed to the evaluative and normative elements of theology and ethics, yet at the same proceeds to conflate these two distinct approaches and disciplines. Next to above distinction between women's studies and feminism, Young refers to certain passages in Gross's book in which the traditional or standard features of the academic study of religion are defended. These include phenomenological methods of employing *empathy*, which entails the 'bracketing' of one's own worldview, values, and preconceptions. Young refers this technique as *epoché*, the need to 'imaginatively enter' the phenomenon under study, or more precisely to – temporarily - enter the perspective of the insiders.<sup>6</sup>

Young goes on to argue that Gross does not hold on to her own distinction between description based on empathetic understanding and evaluation, which in turn is tied to her understanding of objectivity and value-neutrality. In Gross's opinion, – and that of many other feminist scholars of religion to which I shall return – although empathetic understanding and neutrality should precede evaluation (1996: 12), complete value-neutrality is impossible to achieve. This insight may furthermore be viewed as a consequence of the uncovering of pseudo-objectivity in the form of androcentrism, the very kind Gross has shown to apply to mainstream religious studies scholarship (12):

Being objective and neutral when discussing controversial issues does not mean being value-free. On closer inspection, 'objectivity' often turns out to be nothing more than advocacy of the current conventions and not a neutral position at all. Some perceive feminist scholarship as adversarial because it challenges such conventions; still, feminist scholarship can claim to be more 'objective' than male-centred scholarship, because it is more inclusive and therefore more accurate.

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Young's (172) critique of what she sees as the inherent contradictions in Gross's account is the way in which she 'tries to have it both ways', by both what Young refers to as the 'deconstruction' of objectivity on the one hand, yet retaining it as a historian of religions, 'but only when it suits her'. Young's critique furthermore suggests that she suspects that Gross's denunciation of the false objectivity and neutrality of 'current conventions' in male-centred scholarship not only refers to androcentric worldviews, but also patriarchal religions:

She [Gross] suggests that male scholars (and their supporters) consciously create the illusion of objectivity, because their real purpose is to *advocate* traditional religion (presumably because it 'excludes' women and serves their interests). Even though 'some' (presumably, these same men and their supporters) consider feminism adversarial because it attacks them and their religion, according to Gross, feminism is actually more 'objective' simply because it pays more attention to women – even though it usually pays exclusive attention to women on the dubious grounds that just as women have been ignored in the past, now men can be ignored [*italics mine*].

Hence, Young sees Gross's approach as containing a double standard, with bias being considered 'illegitimate when it comes from 'sexist' authors but perfectly legitimate when it comes from feminist authors' (175). The quotations from Young so far also make clear that her problem with Gross's approach is not only its conflation of a scholarly discipline with advocacy as such, but particularly *feminist* research and advocacy, of which Young obviously has both limited knowledge and an overgeneralised viewpoint, conflating 'feminism' with popular radical feminism and gynocentrism.<sup>7</sup> In her own view of the study of religion as an academic endeavour that is not conflated with advocacy, Young's suggestions would in fact be to fulfil Gross's own 'original' project of distinguishing women's studies from feminism, description from evaluation, the 'church from the state', the 'university from the public square', and at least hold on to the ideal of objectivity. Young wishes to remain true to the traditional methods of *epoché* and *empathy* employed in the phenomenological approach and the history of religions, claiming the methods themselves must not be blamed for ignoring women (182):

There is a reason why scholars have clearly distinguished the history of religion from theology and ethics. By bracketing out questions of existence or nonexistence and truth or falsity, they have tried to avoid prefabricated interpretations and thus to see this or that phenomenon in its own right (including the categories offered by insiders). This does not rule out discussions of power relations or gender. Nor does it rule out

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the possibility of writing *additional* works on ethics or theology [italics mine].

Marsha Hewitt's (1999) arguments that lead to a proposal for a 'feminist critical theory of religion' that does not conflate the academic study of religion with theology or any other 'religio-ideological activity' are markedly similar to those of Young. As noted above however, Hewitt's focus is primarily on Gross's reconstruction of Buddhism itself (1993a) in order to only then reveal its – misplaced – theoretical underpinnings. Hewitt is particularly adamant and persistent in her condemnation of the usage of feminist methodology and theory in the construction of new ideologies (what Young refers to as 'advocacy'). Similar to Young, and also not until the final part of her essay does Hewitt state that these feminist reconstructions of religion are not so much 'wrong' or should be forbidden, yet should be reserved for *adherents* rather than scholars in religious studies (62).

In the tradition of the disciplines of religious studies or history of religions that delineate themselves from theology, this would logically entail that feminist reconstructions of religion and their perpetrators as 'insider perspectives', potentially form part of the *data* or provide the subject matter for the religious studies' scholar.<sup>8</sup> From the outsider viewpoint that must refrain from evaluation therefore, movements such as that of the Goddess, feminist spirituality, theology, and any postpatriarchal (re)construction of religion, need not be and logically should not be condemned nor applauded. The contradictions lurking in both Young's and Hewitt's accounts however, is that their condemnation of these movements for not being scholarly is so fierce that it becomes suspect and questionable if the authors harbour any additional motives. Particularly Hewitt's choice of a reconstruction of an Eastern religious tradition by a Western feminist, where the attempt to reconcile two independent ideologies could not be more far-fetched, strikes me as not being coincidental. Young similarly focuses on those feminist religious practices that are the most removed from 'authentic' tradition. It would be interesting to know if according to both Young and Hewitt *reformist* theological feminism must share the same fate.

If feminist reconstructions and feminist critical theories (Hewitt) or women's studies (Young) of religion are distinguished by the refusal of the latter two 'to study religion from a religious or theological point of view' (Hewitt 1999: 62), then surely reformist feminist perspectives must also be excluded, as here also both theological and feminist interests are advocated. Or are these perspectives less 'heretical' as they are not going so far as to be – I quote – 'colonising religious traditions by refashioning them in a feminist image'? (Hewitt 1999: 61). Again, further elements in Young's argumentation lead to the same suspicions. In her condemnation of Goddess studies and feminist spirituality, and as cited earlier, Young (1999b: 181) claims that the role of these feminists is 'equivalent to that of religious founders', them acting

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as the 'functional equivalents of theologians'. Again the author appears to have major problems with feminist reconstructions of religion, which I suspect are related to more than just the fact that these approaches claim to be religious studies, or claim to belong in the context of the academy. As outsiders, these authors appear to show very little empathy and do seem not very willing to 'temporary enter' into an insider's stance. My impression is that both Hewitt and Young are in turn themselves condemning these movements for *ideological* reasons, for implicit in their critique is an understanding of what the 'true' religious tradition is and how it can be delineated from the secular, untouched by feminist critique.

I repeat that I do not disagree with Hewitt's conclusion that theories such as Gross's are in fact religious enterprises themselves, on the contrary. My point is that this then must hold for a variety of areas, feminist and non-feminist. By visualising only this type of research however, one gets the impression to be drawn in a religious debate, with the enemy not just being bad research but bad religion. In the process, however unconsciously or maybe unintentionally, the reification of an – androcentric - a priori construction of what is and is not accepted as 'religion' and 'tradition' takes place.

*Between Objectivity and Advocacy*

The conflation between the critique of androcentrism in the discipline of religious studies, in theology and in religion itself, is evident in much of the literature discussed in chapter three. For Ursula King (1995b) for example, the question of a paradigm shift in the study of gender and religion is itself related to the epistemological challenge which feminist approaches to the study of religion bring with them. In borrowing June O'Connor's (1995: 48) argument that feminist work must be much more than 'investigatory', but truly 'transformative', the insider/outsider conflation is clear in King's (1995b: 22) proposal: 'The feminist paradigm is one of transformation. Its critique of traditional sources and content of an established field involves an alternative vision which transforms both the subject matter and the scholar at the same time'. Although feminist reconstructionist scholars themselves may reject reformist approaches for obvious religio-ideological reasons, overviews such as that of King and many of the other typologies or classifications of existing scholarship in feminist religious studies that were reviewed, simply treat the different directions as varieties and possibilities internal to the field. The *JFSR* is once again exemplary of a 'tolerance' for difference and diversity by including both theological contributions and sociological analysis.

It is of course by no means necessarily the case that in envisioning the impact of decades of feminist scholarship, all writers would consider the transformative potential of the latter in terms of reconstructing religion in the revolutionary post-patriarchal sense. However, it does become clear that an

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alternative view of epistemology, including the meaning of 'objectivity', insider/outsider, science/politics and other divides, is minimally included in any possible vision of change as radical as a paradigm shift. In order to 'catch up' with the developments in feminist theory and other areas of feminist research in general, it is but unavoidable that the question of epistemological transformation is increasingly being addressed in feminist religious studies scholarship. According to Carol P. Christ (1992: 87) for example:

The challenges posed to the field of Religious Studies are profound and substantive. They cannot be addressed by the simple addition of a book here and a course there, nor by time at annual meetings, nor by the hiring of one or two women in departments. The study of women and religion questions the established priorities in the field, and *foundations of the religious which are studied*, and the notion that the study of religion is and should be objective and value free [italics mine].

That the epistemological and broader methodological transformation includes both the critique of androcentrism in mainstream religious studies, and patriarchy in religion, is similarly expressed by Ursula King (1997: 650):

Women scholars in religion are developing a different kind of methodology where the *researcher's existential participation and commitment* enter into the interpretation of what is being researched and call into question much of the assumed 'objectivity' of previous methods, thus inviting a new reflection on what religion is about and for [italics mine].

The crux of the issue is that in the feminist critique of the notion of objectivity and value-neutrality in religious studies as an academic discipline, an undermining of the 'phenomenological/confessional division' (Bowie 1998: 42), or the blurring of boundaries between the insider and the outsider point of view, between religious studies, theology and religious practice is implied. According to the scholars who propagate this viewpoint, a feminist study of religion that does not set out to reform or reconstruct religious tradition to the benefit of women, would not even be worthy of its feminist name. Womanist Emilie M. Townes (1995: 129) for example, claims that 'feminist studies in religion attempts to articulate a theoretical critique of cultural hegemony through a call for the re-imagining of the roles of men and women in religious practices as well as in secular society'. In discussing the problem of forging a paradigm shift of the study of religion and theology after some fifteen years of feminist scholarship, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1985: 74) is convinced that a paradigm shift in the study of religion and theology would entail a shift 'from an androcentric to a feminist construction of the world, religion and theology':

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If the so-called value-free stance and patriarchal institutions of the academy guarantee the structural perpetuation of the androcentric-dualistic paradigm, then we have to ask what kind of institutional bias and research strategies or methods the feminist paradigm needs to create in order to overcome androcentric dualism and to support women in our liberation struggle. How can the *JFSR* contribute to such a shift from an androcentric to a feminist paradigm of scholarship in religion and theology? How should we realize our commitment to women's struggle for liberation in editorial policy, process, and content? How can we move from scholarship *on* women and religious symbol systems or traditions to scholarship *for* women in our struggles for social and religious change and liberation?

The feminist critique of objectivity that would necessarily accompany a dissolution of the dualisms of androcentric scholarship, according to Fiorenza (1985: 73) is furthermore linked to a feminist deconstruction of the divide between *theory* and *practice*:

We have critically analyzed and discussed androcentric language, symbol systems and concepts as well as patriarchal societal and religious structures. We have defined ourselves vis-à-vis organized biblical religions and theologies as radical or reformist feminists, as postbiblical feminists, as scholars of religion, as promoters of Goddess religions or as feminists committed to Jewish or Christian traditions. Although in theory we have criticized dualistic mindsets and oppositions as well as searched for nondualistic and holistic alternatives, in actuality we have been in danger of perpetuating them among us. It seems to me that one of the roots or our inability to overcome the dualistic mindset and perspective in women's studies in religion is our acceptance of the academic division between theory and practice.

What the authors above share with some of the current debates in feminist theory, and what substantiates their defence of the blurring of boundaries, is a critique of many of the epistemological and methodological underpinnings of traditional mainstream/malestream scholarship that claimed – false – objectivity, universalism and value-neutrality. Well-known feminist scholars of religion like Fiona Bowie, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rita M. Gross are fulminating against the idea and possibility of 'detached phenomenological description' by the non-involved scholar. They not only favour the inclusion of women's experience and subjectivity, but also of the scholar's values, and commitment, to the point of advocacy. In line with postmodern feminist epistemology, they believe that the individual life history, positioning and subjectivity of the scholar her/himself affect the subject matter under study to the degree that objectivity becomes not only impossible but undesirable. None

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of the scholars cited however, to any great extent refer to any feminist theory in which the debates on epistemology and politics have taken and are currently taking place.<sup>9</sup> In a recent article in a special issue on ‘gender and the study of religion’ in the well-known ‘mainstream’ journal *MTSR*, Rita M. Gross (2001: 225) defends the transgression of boundaries as a ‘feminist scholar-practitioner’ of religion on the basis of what she sees as the impossibility of separating her own scholarship from her views on spirituality and politics:

My scholarship as a comparative scholar of religion, my life as feminist, and my spiritual practice as a Buddhist are not three separate aspects of my experience, sealed off from each other in separate compartments of my brain and my being, but an integrated mosaic whose different parts are always interacting with and affecting each other.

Gross’s (2001: 234-235) questions the ‘conventional division of labour between “religious studies” and “theology”’, which rests upon the insight that supposedly neutral and objective scholars of religion are ‘in fact, fully invested in maintaining a self-serving androcentrism, which dictated what data they saw and how they interpreted them’. This leads her to conclude that scholarship ‘*always* hides and includes a normative position, a worldview, and a set of values...’ (1996c: 311). Gross does not seem to give up the notion of objectivity however, and redefines it in terms of that at the least one’s values and interests must be declared openly. Furthermore, in Gross’s view, a distinction between women’s studies and feminism is ultimately unattainable, as intersection and interpenetration cannot be avoided, in as much as ‘descriptive and normative approaches to religion or feminism’ can initially, but not *ultimately* be separated (Gross 1999: 192). As explained above regarding other work by Gross (1996), this type of ‘engaged scholarship’ which ‘moves over the borderline from descriptive studies to world-construction’ (1993b: 312), is clearly a source of frustration for those who remain committed to clear distinctions between insiders and outsiders, like Katherine K. Young (1999b; 1999c).

In a lengthy ‘Postscript’ to the compilation *Feminism and World Religions* (Sharma and Young 1999), Young (1999d) makes her case for maintaining the distinction between women’s studies and feminist advocacy on the presumption that it is related to a particular view on the insider/outsider epistemology. Thus Young (1999d: 279) begins her postscript by claiming that ‘insiders to the world religions have made important contributions to discussions of religion. But some feminists claim that *only* insiders can legitimately discuss their own groups.’ Again, references are completely lacking, but it can be guessed that Young is referring to and then generalising upon the insight that feminist scholarship must ‘start from women’s lives’. What is seen as the basis for numerous debates and directions in feminist theory, for instance the idea that experience, positioning and the subjectivity of

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the scholar will affect the research process, Young (280) reduces to an essentialist-biologist view that 'feminists have argued that only a woman can describe adequately the experience of being a woman.' In the field of religious studies Young notes the situation is complicated further by what appears to be the stance of 'women scholars' - that is feminist women scholars - that insiders must additionally be defined in terms of what Young calls 'culture'. For the sake of my argument, I would add here that 'religion' would suffice. Concurring with Young that there indeed is a problem at hand, I have tried to show by contrast that feminist scholars in religion simply appear *to be* insiders. Thus, the conflation is assumed, rather than that feminist scholars of religion would proclaim - which rarely occurs - that they *must necessarily be* insiders to the religion they are studying as Young suggests.

However, on the basis of what Young sees as the feminist pollution of the traditional phenomenological-descriptive method in religious studies as a proper academic discipline, all forms of feminist scholarship, feminist theoretical debates - and feminism itself I might add - are thrown overboard. Rather, they are not even consulted by Young in the first place. They are reduced to what Young terms 'subjective epistemologies' which abandon rationality and create the impression that 'anything goes'. Young asks for example 'can it really be claimed that insiders are always correct?' (279), and demands that there 'should be some academic forum for testing statements made in the name of feminism' (284). The problem with Young's argument is that in applying these questions and demands to the discipline of religious studies and its status as a scientific, objective discipline which she so adamantly defends, equally complex problems and issues arise to which I shall return. For the moment, I will argue that in Young's failure to see many feminist religious studies' scholars just for what they are, that is 'insiders', coupled with a fierce rejection of feminism in the academy *and* in the public domain, Young equally cannot 'escape' her biases, values, and positioning, and is herself importing 'politics' into her scholarly work.

As with Marsha Hewitt's (1999) critique of Rita Gross's reconstruction of Buddhism (1993), Young appears to be annoyed with the way some feminists are corrupting religious traditions and is thereby herself participating in a religio-political debate. Upon the debate between 'feminists demanding religious reform and feminists demanding religious revolution', Young (1999d: 294) comments the following:

At the moment, some feminists are trying to establish indirect worship of 'the Goddess' *within* Judaism and Christianity. After so many Jewish and Christian, ethos-building centuries, it surely makes sense to expect goddess-oriented 'reformers' with any integrity to establish their own religious communities.

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Young (295) warns that ‘historians of religion... might consider the possibility that some new religious movements are actually secular ideologies masquerading as religions’. The author thus not only appears to have – personal, political or religious? – problems with what some (feminist) ‘insiders’ are doing, but with the fact that these movements may not even be really religious. The question is how can this be determined according to the phenomenological method that sets out to understand and describe the insider’s viewpoint, whilst ‘bracketing’ one’s own preconceptions? Young furthermore has the following opinion on what religious adherents or ‘insiders’ of real religions should do (ibid.):

It requires the members of religious communities to examine carefully the scope for reform in the name of justice (and men, as I will argue). Justice presupposes, however, a much deeper understanding than commonly found so far of the complexity and ambiguity involved in any study of gender (including both biological and cultural asymmetries). We must learn to view the world through both the ‘female eye,’ as it were, and the ‘male eye.’ When this is done, seeing from both points of view altogether, we begin to see stereoscopically. Only on this basis, I think, can we develop a worthy gender ethic for the future. The ocular analogy can be extended, of course, to all groups in relation to their counterparts.

Regardless of her limited view of feminist scholarship and a denunciation of feminism as gynocentrism, what Young is doing here is in fact ‘advocating’ a particular kind of feminism, or ‘gender feminism’ if you like, for which the politics and scholarship are meanwhile abundant, and advocating so in both the academic, public and religious domain. It appears to me that she does not adhere to the very distinctions between women’s studies and feminism, between scholarship and advocacy or between ‘detachment’ and ‘proselytization’ which she herself adamantly defends. The contradictions are all the more peculiar when taking into account the book in which Young’s postscript is published. *Feminism and World Religions* (Sharma and Young 1999) co-edited and introduced by the same author is in fact a collection of articles from women from different ‘world religion’ traditions (including one on Buddhism by Rita M. Gross), all clearly and explicitly written from the perspective of feminist religious insiders. The question to be asked therefore, is why Young has not stuck to the usual descriptive women-in-religion type of anthology in the first place, if this is all a ‘women’s studies’ or ‘gender studies’ approach to the study of religion can possibly be. In short, is such a thing as an ‘outsider’ feminist studies *of* religion conceivable?

Marsha Hewitt’s (1999) critique of the conflation between feminist ideology or advocacy and the academic study of religion is similarly based on a refutation of feminist reconstructions of religion. She also takes a political

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stance by not dismissing feminism in its entirety. As shown above, Hewitt repudiates taking the 'the religious point of view' which she conceives of as the 'methodological instantiation of ideology in the academic process' ... 'reinscribing ideology, since one is advocating on behalf of a particular interest' (1999: 58). Hewitt also faults scholars like Gross for their viewpoint on the study religion as itself a religio-ideological activity. As with Young however, in trying to avoid a theological viewpoint, Hewitt's apparent claim to a feminist commitment and proposal for an alternative viewpoint becomes highly problematic.

Accusing Gross of her pretence to be engaged in a 'dialogue' between feminism and religion, Hewitt states that dialogue 'allows the "other" to be while working as a critical tool to uncover the attitudes and conceptualisations of, and about, women, demonstrating how these notions affect and reflect the lived experience of women' (60). First the question can be raised what Hewitt exactly means by 'letting the other be'. Presumably this refers to the object of religious research, which in this case can mean either the oppressor or the oppressed woman. The first perhaps broadly incorporates religious ideologies, texts, institutions, practices, etc. and the people that construct and/or use them to the disadvantage of that category of humans designated as 'women', a category which is not specified any further. These texts, events or people need to be read or described, observed, analysed and somehow be left 'as they are'. I question how such an approach can simultaneously remain – or indeed, pretend to remain – both critical, yet merely descriptive, and finally, even claim to be feminist.

Opposed to Young, who – in an inconsistent way - dismisses the notion of feminism altogether, Hewitt proclaims a feminist critical theory of religion, borrowed from Marx's notion of ideology critique, that examines 'the ways in which religions interact and intersect with non-religious dimensions and thereby produce and sustain various forms of domination' (49). This inquiring into and exposing of ideology can also apply to counter-discourses, which themselves can become new forms of ideology (50). So Hewitt's objective of showing that feminist reconstructions of religion are not feminist critical theories of religion – regardless of whether they themselves claim to be this – can also be viewed as an example of a feminist ideological critique itself. The issue at stake again however, is which implications Hewitt's conception of feminist critique and analysis may have for any other forms of non-theological feminist studies of religion or their possibility tout court.

Following her rejection of feminist reconstructions of religion, Hewitt is clearly not entirely content when she states that a feminist critical theory will 'have to settle' with the analysis and exposition of sexism and oppression when it comes to religion (62). Does this entail that serious feminist scholars in any kind of field will have to settle with mere description or, does this only pertain to the study of 'religion'? We can assume that Hewitt most likely strongly opposes the oppression of women (or any other human beings) and would

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prefer the world we live in to be very different. The only solution to the dilemma is to hold on to an isolated entity or construct called 'religion' that cannot be influenced from the 'outside', yet does continuously penetrate other social and cultural realities. Only the influence of the former into the latter can be described, whereas presumably the advancement of women and transformation of society in general is desired and pursued, where the researcher herself cannot claim to be external to or positioned to as an 'outsider'.

In order to avoid the instantiation of ideology, Hewitt similarly decides the 'other' must remain the same in the name of tradition. As I have noted above, this move is not altogether consistent, as the power of 'religion' pertains to many spheres of society, where the transformation of inequality is probably viewed as justifiable. This can only be conjectured however, because Hewitt is reticent on the practical purposes any feminist ideology critique of religion may serve. I claim that Hewitt's attempt to be more scientific and less ideological is not achieved by limiting herself to a mere exposition of sexism and staying at a level of description. At first sight her proposal may even seem depoliticised or for some maybe not even feminist because real change, for real women, is not envisaged. It can equally be questioned how any kind of research into 'inequality' and the dynamic of power in general, whether critical theory, feminist, etc. can ever be viewed as non-ideological. Or non-political in the sense of claiming the description and analysis of power as an academic process does not affect or import or construct towards social and thus even religious reality. What could the purpose be of locating and exposing sexism and for whom, and how can this in itself be viewed as a non-ideological undertaking? Furthermore, how can the feminist anthropologist for example, claim to objectively *know* that certain cultural practices - that may or may not be sanctioned by ideology - are harmful to women? Which are the criteria to determine subordination or suffering and who gets to determine them? With these questions I hope to make clear that for feminist research, and according to a feminist critique of science for any form of research, it can be argued that politics already are implicated at an epistemological level.

In short, the problem with Hewitt's analysis is not so much her perspective on the relationship between religion and politics as subject matter, which she does acknowledge by expanding her definition of 'politics' by politicising all spheres of human activity, including religion. What I question is her attempt to distinguish politics from *theory* when it comes to the feminist study of religion. The consequences of the insider/outsider or science/(crypto-)theology debate within mainstream religious studies, paradoxically leaves the feminist scholar with the choice between being a 'religious feminist' or to contend with a restricted version of a feminist theory of 'religion', the latter which I have shown to be equally politically invested.

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*Transgressing Sacred Boundaries: Interdisciplinarity and Interreligiosity*

The problem of confluences and the blurring of boundaries has not completely gone unnoticed by some feminist scholars in the field, although as I have noted, some of the underlying stakes and issues have barely been addressed. Moreover, the transgressing of boundaries appears to take place in both directions, as pointed out by feminist sociologist of religion, Linda Woodhead (2001). In discussing what Woodhead calls second wave feminist scholars engaged with 'spiritualities of life', - that is feminist theologians and goddess scholars like Daly, Christ, Plaskow, Goldenberg and Starhawk - she (2001: 71-72) notes how this theological work draws on methods from religious studies:

Such studies epitomize an approach that has become typical in this field, and that employs techniques typically associated with the scientific study of religion within a framework of commitment and even advocacy of the forms of spirituality described. Like studies of Christianity made by second wave feminist theologians, these second wave studies of spiritualities of life therefore combine a theological - or 'theological,' as followers of the goddess prefer to say - agenda with more 'scientific' methods of exegesis and interpretation which may leave many sociologists feeling a little uneasy. The distinction between science and theology is blurred too by the fact that the spiritualities of life which are the subject of these studies tend to be highly reflexive and to be shaped in part by an awareness of work in the scientific study of religion.

Woodhead refers to the way Carol Christ draws on anthropologist Clifford Geertz's (1966) definition of religion in defence of, and in the construction of Goddess spirituality. The interdisciplinary nature of feminist research and the way even 'reformist' or less radical feminist theologians draw on methods outside of the boundaries of classical theology and exegesis was noted in the previous chapter and shows how the blurring of boundaries goes both ways. In an overview of the intersection between sociological and feminist hermeneutics in Biblical scholarship, Patricia Dutcher-Walls (1999) shows how feminist biblical scholars not only draw on non-traditional sources and methods from disciplines such as archaeology and cultural anthropology, but also how this is often shaped by and in turn shapes 'current hermeneutical and/or activist feminist agendas' (448). Referring to the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza for example, Dutcher-Walls (450) notes that her historical reconstructive and theologising work:

...is an example where a project in social history is motivated consciously by articulated modern feminist concerns in a struggle against patriarchal domination and for gender equality. The

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reconstruction is in turn employed to further these same goals in current hermeneutics, theology and practice in the church.

In a roundtable discussion in *JFSR* – a journal especially renown for its embrace and openness to all possible sorts of feminist religious studies scholarship – there is much talk of the need to de-essentialise the notion of ‘women’s experience’ and incorporate diversity as was noted in the previous chapter. Miriam Peskowitz (1995: 112) hints that this may include more forms of difference and diversity beyond those along cultural or even religious/non-religious divides:

This fact of difference and dissent is, simply, but not simply, a starting point for today’s feminist studies of religions. I mean to call this endeavour feminist studies *of* religion, not feminist studies *in* religion, to re-emphasize feminist scholarship on non-Christian topics, to stress feminist work that is critical of religious authorities in a wide variety of ways, and in order to raise questions about the absence from this forum of feminist scholars of religions such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, as well as those feminist scholars who treat Christianity not theologically but as a historicized religion that demands critical attention.

Peskowitz calls for an expansion of the horizon of the feminist study of religion to include more diversity, among which the incorporation of religious diversity, which has most explicitly been formulated in an essay referred to earlier by Rita M. Gross (2000). In the different contributions commenting upon Gross’s plea for religious diversity which together constitute a special Roundtable Discussion in this recent issue of *JFSR*, it can be inferred that such an expansion would *minimally* involve a ‘de-theologisation’ of feminist religious studies. Whereas most of the commentators appear to agree that feminist theologians should be much more open to religious diversity apart from just intra-Christian diversity, Gross’s starting point of ‘theology’ becomes problematic. This I believe, is related to the problem of the insider or religious viewpoint assumed in such an endeavour. Grace G. Burford (2000: 87) for example, comments upon the etymological roots of ‘theology’ (as *theos*, ‘god’+ *logos*, ‘discourse’), questioning if this would entail a limitation to monotheistic religions or ‘theisms’ of the world religions:

If we are to carry out the kind of all-inclusive conversation about religions Rita calls us to engage in, we must either go with this expansion of the term, or find another term to use that would include (theistic) theology and creative, systematic thought within non-theistic religions. ... I would prefer the latter option: to find a more inclusive term. We need a way to refer to this activity that falls somewhere between the supposedly objective ‘academic study of religions’ and the

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theistically loaded 'theology.' The exclusion within feminist theology Rita calls attention to in her essay unfolds all the more easily when this enterprise goes by an inherently exclusive label.

Susan Sered's (2000) comments upon Gross's essay refer to the same limits and inherent ethnocentrism in the usage of the term 'theology'. Drawing on her own research on the religious life of Jewish women, Sered (2000: 107) notes that *ritual* rather than theology predominated among the religious groups she studied<sup>10</sup>:

The silencing that Rita Gross notes, then, is not so much a matter of privileging truth claims as a matter of privileging certain religious genres and barely recognizing others. The issue, as I see it, is that of honoring a certain kind of conversation, the vocabulary and syntax of which are tied to certain elite, western, Christian discursive frames.

Gross's wish to achieve religious diversity within feminist theology movements and scholarship, and which has been exposed at various moments in this chapter, is that this goal is to be achieved for (feminist) religio-political reasons. She (2000: 76) demands for instance that 'we religious feminists need to return to our original inspiration – the desire to overcome the monopoly of one voice on the process of creating theology and to open the forum to a diversity of voices.' That such a plea is far from evident in the context of not only cultural, but especially religious diversity emanates from various comments on the essay. Gross (77) herself points to the stakes involved from the religious or insider's point of view, by Christian feminists and Christian theologians alike:

It is so easy for Christian feminists to ignore religious diversity probably because so many Christians do not take non-Christian religions seriously and do not regard their practitioners as equal partners in religious life and in the quest for meaningful answers to life's dilemmas. Behind this lack of consciousness regarding the significance and value of non-Christian perspectives lies the specter of a long history of exclusive Christian truth claims and the tremendous suffering wrought upon the world by such claims. ... One might hope and expect that feminist theology, with its sensitivity to diversity and to the pain of exclusion, would be among the leading movements to condemn exclusive truth claims in religion and to manifest a different, religiously diverse stance.

Grace Burford's (2000) doubt whether 'even feminist Christian theologians will be so willing to abandon exclusive truth claims' and her questioning of Gross's demand that seminaries and schools of theology should refrain from 'othering' non-Christian religions hits the mark, I suggest: 'How can Christians stop "othering" non-Christian religions without ceasing to be Christians?' (89).

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Gross's plea for feminist studies in religion to include religious diversity would on the one hand require a de-theologisation, and perhaps even a deconstruction of the truth claims of the religious viewpoint. Yet this plea can be located and interpreted only in the context of *interreligious* dialogue. In this particular call for the expansion of the feminist study *in* religion, for the inclusion of both cultural and religious diversity, once again the methodological debate is simultaneously limited to that of the religious point of view.

In the previous chapter the question was asked whether the incorporation of 'diversity' would provide a solution to the failure of the feminist study of religion to move beyond essentialism, following an assessment of the field by Rosalind Shaw (1995). A review of the literature showed that attention to the class, cultural, sexual, 'etc.' differences among women and its methodological consequences for the feminist study of religion for some time now are being debated in various publications and forums. A persistent form of essentialism nevertheless perseveres, which Shaw attributes to the inherent character of the mainstream study of religion and its 'view from above' approach to religious phenomena. Concurring with Shaw that the 'view from above' approach with its emphasis on 'religion as text' and 'religion as *sui generis*', in this chapter, I have nevertheless argued that Shaw's accusation of feminist reconstructionist approaches for being 'essentialist' is made for the wrong reasons. This points to an additional and much more fundamental problem underlying the incompatibility between the mainstream and feminist approaches. Although attention to and the integration of 'difference' in the sense of the *religious differences* between women would appear to enable a de-essentialisation of the feminist study of religion, such a move necessarily implies a de-theologisation of feminist approaches and points to a questioning of the religious viewpoint. This in turn relates to a particular issue, which has hereto barely been addressed and centres on the problem of 'difference' in yet another sense, that of the non-religious versus the religious viewpoint.

Through a detailed critical analysis of some recent critiques of feminist reconstructionist approaches, I suggested that the fact that feminist reconstructionists have a great tendency to be essentialist is not so much because mainstream religious studies is so essentialist, but because these feminist scholars are in fact *practising* rather than studying religion. I argued that the real problem lies in the blurring of boundaries or the 'conflation' between insiders and outsiders, between the theological (or religious viewpoint) and the pretence of the 'objective' character of mainstream religious studies through its method of phenomenological description and analysis. Hence, an essentialist, universal 'woman' is upheld for religious/ideological/feminist reasons, whilst the universalising framework in mainstream religious studies – the very focus of the feminist unmasking of androcentrism – is *supposedly* done in order for the discipline to maintain its integrity as a scientific discipline, free

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from religio-political 'advocacy'. The question arises whether such a thing as a feminist study *of* religion is at all possible.

The incompatibility underlying the impossibility of a paradigm shift of the mainstream is therefore related to some inherent features of both feminist and religious studies scholarship, which collide when attempts are made to intersect. However, as has become clear in the above account leading to this insight, both 'religious studies' and 'feminist studies' are by far homogeneous entities, but mere generalising names that cover a great variety of forms of scholarship. Both terms cover many internal and often conflicting debates on theory and methodology and even the questioning of the meaning and legitimacy of both as autonomous or interdisciplinary disciplines or fields of study in themselves. In the next part of this chapter, attention will be given to some of these discussions, arguing that the boundaries *within* respectively religious studies and feminist approaches are very much matter of debate. The im/possibility of a paradigm shift of the mainstream from the perspective of feminist theory is therefore but one aspect of even broader problems and methodological debates that are currently taking place in the social sciences and humanities.

### **2. The Mainstream: Science or Theology?**

Rosalind Shaw's (1995) critique that the 'view from above' perspective inhibits a gender-inclusive approach in the mainstream study of religion referred to the approach of Mircea Eliade, and the methods applied in the history or phenomenological of religions more generally. In spite of the congruence between the hermeneutic method (of empathy, experience and interpretation) in religious studies on the one hand, and what Shaw terms a critique of positivism in many strands of feminist epistemology on the other, the 'view from above' perspective in the first hampers compatibility. This takes place through what was identified as the textual and the *sui generis* definitions of religion. According to Shaw (68-69), both definitions lead to a decontextualisation of religion:

In mainstream history of religions, understandings of the 'uniquely religious' are usually constituted by excluding or peripheralizing social and political content in defining what really counts as 'religion'. Historians of religion who make the *sui generis* claim do not suggest that 'pure religious' phenomena can exist empirically, but that 'certain experiences' or phenomena exhibit a fundamental religious character and that our method must be commensurate with the nature of our subject-matter. ... Thus desocialized, 'the uniquely religious' is deemed interpretable only 'on its own terms': studies of religion which entail social or political analysis are typically dismissed as reductionist.

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Both hermeneutics and phenomenology have to date been the dominant methods applied in mainstream religious studies, although in recent years considerable debate has developed as to whether these techniques and their epistemologies are worthy for the study of religion as an academic discipline. What is often referred to as the 'insider/outsider problem' identifies this particular strand as belonging to the insider approach, in that it is built upon on the presumption that the scholar must 'climb out of one's skin' into that of another (McCutcheon 1999) in order to be able to grasp, study and understand their beliefs and actions, from the 'inside'.<sup>11</sup> Phenomenology refers to the techniques for making descriptions of human behaviour, which can only be attained by using empathy in order to temporarily 'enter' into the other's intentions and *meanings*. Central to the hermeneutical method is then the *interpretation* of these meanings, which draws back on the method of *Verstehen* in the practice of the *Geisteswissenschaften* opposed to the *Naturwissenschaften*, the first being introduced as a way to study human subjects through questioning their meanings and intentions.

The tradition of the *Naturwissenschaften* by contrast, is characterised by an outsider-perspective on all empirically observable phenomena in 'nature', including humans. Opposed to issues of meaning and interpretation, this perspective holds that it is both impossible to get inside the experience and feelings of the subject under study and that the explanations the insiders themselves provide are irrelevant to the purpose of scholarly analysis. Rather, through observation, human behaviour and beliefs must be explained. Like nature, the 'laws' of human behaviour must be studied as to develop theories that can account for the regularities and causes of this behaviour in view of further generalisations and predictability. The naturalistic study of religion founded on such an outsider-position can be traced to the Enlightenment and in particular the work *A Natural History of Religion* (1757) by Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776). Hume basically introduced the idea that religion must be studied as a human rather than a religious construct, reducing religious behaviours and beliefs to human fears and hopes (McCutcheon 1999: 67).

The German Protestant preacher Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) who published *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultural Despisers* (1799), is referred to as the figure representing a critique of the rational-Enlightenment tradition in its reductive approach to religion in *both* scholarly analysis and society. For Schleiermacher, religion 'eluded the critique of reason for in its essence it is not rational or irrational; instead, religion is an emotional state that possessed as much reality as did our experiences of the material world around us' (McCutcheon 1999: 68). Schleiermacher therefore laid the basis for the later premise in the hermeneutical/phenomenological approach in the modern study of religion that religion as a highly private, personal feeling or state of consciousness and as a matter for the insider, could not be reduced to or

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understood as anything other than a religious impulse itself. Twentieth century scholars of religion like Rudolph Otto (1869-1937), Joachim Wach (1898-1955) and Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), similarly regard religious experience as a private and personal phenomenon, the study of which can only take place by referring to the religious experience of the scholar. In denouncing both the possibility and validity of reducing religion to 'external' causes or emotions, the insider's experience is not only authorised, but must be entered or even shared by the scholar. For Rudolph Otto (1999 [1950/1917]: 78) for example, what he calls the 'numinous' is defined in essentialist terms:

This mental state is perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible to any other; and therefore, like every absolutely primary and elementary datum, while it admits of being discussed, it cannot be strictly defined. There is only one way to help another to an understanding of it. He must be guided and led on by consideration and discussion of the matter through the ways of his own mind, until he reach the point at which 'the numinous' in him perforce begins to stir, to start into life and consciousness. [...] ...it can only be evoked, awakened in the mind; as everything that comes 'of the spirit' must be awakened.

Moreover, the outsider must be able to experience this religious feeling, or what Otto also called the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* in order to understand and study it (ibid.: 78-79):

The reader is invited to direct his mind to a moment of deeply-felt religious experience, as little as possible qualified by other forms of consciousness. Whoever cannot do this, whoever knows no such moments in his experience, is requested to read no farther; for it is not easy to discuss questions of religious psychology with one who can recollect the emotions of his adolescence, the discomforts of indigestion, or, say, social feelings, but cannot recall any intrinsically religious feelings.

For Joachim Wach (1999 [1967/1935]), Mircea Eliade's predecessor at the History of Religions Department at the University of Chicago during the fifties of the previous century, Religionswissenschaft is distinct from theology, which is 'concerned with understanding and confirming its own faith'. Wach nonetheless appeals to the 'inner experience' of religion or 'true religiosity' of the scholar in that 'he' may be able to understand it. However, Wach (91) does not require that one 'must actually belong to a community of believers if one wishes to grasp its actual concern'. The non-reductionist view of religion *sui generis* and the requirement of 'learn[ing] from our personal religious life in order to encounter the foreign' is nonetheless clear (90-91):

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An inner aliveness and broadness is necessary if we actually wish to understand other religions. In this connection it should be stated explicitly that the one-sided advancement of a particular point of view is bad for the understanding. As justified and fruitful as may be the co-operative approaches of psychology, sociology, and typology, pure psychological, pure sociological, and pure typological answers do not help us to understand foreign religiosity. ... It appears to be a truism to say that hermeneutics demands that he who wishes to understand other religions must have a sense (*Organ*) for religion and in addition the most extensive knowledge and training possible.

Finally, the oft-mentioned Mircea Eliade's (1999 [1969]) vision of the study of religion (what he calls the history of religions) within the academy is guided by the same non-reductionist methodological presumptions first initiated by Schleiermacher. This includes a focus on understanding the meaning of religion expressions and forms (hermeneutics), which according to Eliade must be studied and understood 'from within'. After 'collecting, describing and classifying his documents', the scholar must attempt to understand them on 'their own plane of reference'. Similar to Wach's point of view, this does not necessarily entail the exclusion of psychological or sociological dimensions of religious phenomena, but they are to remain secondary in any analysis (99):

This does not mean, of course, that a religious phenomenon can be understood outside of its 'history,' that is, outside of its cultural and socioeconomic contexts. There is no such thing as 'pure' religious datum, outside of history, for there is no such thing as a human datum that is not at the same time a historical datum. Every religious experience is expressed and transmitted in a particular historical context. But admitting to the historicity of religious experiences does not imply that they are reducible to nonreligious forms of behaviour.

For Eliade, religion or what he also following Otto often calls the 'sacred' opposed to the 'profane' (Antonen 2000), is not only *sui generis*, but an intrinsic and universal property of man, as homo religiosus. Thus for the above and many other contemporary scholars of religion applying the phenomenological/hermeneutical approach to date, religion, the 'sacred', the 'holy', the 'numinous' or *numen* are *sui generis* ontological, or essentialist. They are simultaneously subjective and objective categories, non-reducible to their historical or social matrix. Such an approach is precisely the focus of Rosalind Shaw's feminist critique, as with the exclusion or peripheralisation of social or political content, consequently, questions of power and inequality and privilege are deflected, as 'the distinctively religious' is constituted as apolitical (1995: 69).

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Shaw points to how the hegemony of the *sui generis* or irreducibility conception of religion must be understood within the historical context of the politics of the academy. The study of religion as distinct from theology or the confessional approach in fact needs this conception of religion in order to retain and maintain its authority as an autonomous discipline. Defined as distinct in its subject matter, a unique methodology would serve to protect its otherwise 'dissolution' into other disciplines and departments such as sociology, psychology, or anthropology, once approached reductionistically. On the one hand, Shaw stresses, the mainstream study of religion with its emphasis on meaning and interpretation was in many ways 'ahead of its time' up to the sixties and compared to the positivism and scientism that dominated other social sciences. However, since this period, its 'institutional embattlement' and continuous effort to claim autonomy has resulted in an intellectual marginalization from broader debates and paradigm-shifts taking place across disciplines such as feminism, structuralism, postmodernism, etc. It is in this sense that Morny Joy (2000: 117; 2001: 179) can claim that contemporary religious studies for the greater part appear to remain 'unabashedly modernist'.

As noted earlier, Shaw's insightful, yet concise article does not reflect any further on actual implications and possible consequences of the incompatibility between this hegemony of irreducibility in the mainstream and a feminist approach to the study of religion. Does this imply that for any feminist or gendered study of religion to be possible, the only option would be to locate this in other social science disciplines harbouring the alternative reductionist or naturalist perspective? As Shaw notes on the position of positivism and scientism in any case, these epistemologies were the first to undergo severe feminist critique. The possibility of a feminist critique and straightforward correction of androcentrism in 'science as usual' is anyhow usually perceived to be passed by in any current general typology of feminist theory, and as was shown in chapter three.

In any case, in recent years the insider/outsider problem in the mainstream is by far resolved. The critique of the hermeneutic, non-reductionist perspective of religion has increased, tied to even broader and far-reaching debates on how the study of religion should proceed, and whether such a study is possible at all. What McCutcheon (1999) calls 'naturalistic' or 'scientific' approaches to the study of religion, founded on the scientific method as developed by figures such as Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and René Descartes (1596-1650), and further influenced by Enlightenment principles of the primacy of reason over divine revelation, have returned with a vengeance in the modern study of religion towards the end of the twentieth century.

In an article published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* in 1983, Robert A. Segal (1999 [1983]) issues a stark offence against Eliade's position on the irreducibility of religion, or the claim that religion can only be understood in the terms of believers themselves. For Segal, Eliade's approach is full of inconsistencies and often 'entirely arbitrary', for instance by

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arguing that interpreting religion religiously can only be attained by describing or transcribing the believer's own view of religious meaning for himself (143):

Any distinction between the true meaning of religion and the true meaning of it for believers, is fallacious. ... What he must therefore be saying, despite his profession of modesty, is that the conscious, irreducibly religious meaning of religion for believers is its true one, which means at once its true one for them and its true one in itself. Indeed, Eliade's willingness to exceed and even violate believers' particular conscious views of the meaning of religion for them suggests that he is concerned with more than its truth for them.

Segal argues that all the typical methods applied in the history of religions that claims to delineate itself from theology or the confessional approach, such as the comparative method, the process of *Verstehen* and the phenomenological approach, ultimately fail to 'justify an exclusively nonreductionist interpretation of human phenomena' (151). The phenomenological approach to religion according to Segal, is no more than 'in fact very personal appreciations of it, akin more to certain forms of literary and aesthetic criticism than to the natural or even social sciences' (150):

...the essence of religion constitutes metaphysical knowledge, and it is far from evident that any empirical method, which the phenomenology of religion purports to be, can provide it. A phenomenologist can certainly try to prove empirically that an irreducibly religious interpretation of religion either is more nearly adequate than any other one or captures a dimension of religion missed by all other ones, but when he maintains that his interpretation uncovers the essence of religion he exceeds the bounds of empirical evidence. He exceeds not simply the meaning of religion for believers but also its provable meaning in fact.

For Segal, a nonbeliever studying religion in this way constitutes a contradiction in terms. In order to attain more than simply describing or transcribing the believer's point of view and to actually be able to explain it in the believer's own terms, the 'appreciation' – through empathy – of the reality of religion would require of the scholar to consider the divine itself (153):

...a nonbeliever seeking to appreciate the religion of a believer must appreciate the truth, not merely the origin or function, of a belief, and must appreciate the truth of a belief which, even as an agnostic, he not merely does not happen to share but cannot accept.

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In Segal's conclusion then, underlying approaches such as that of Eliade which refute reductionist interpretations is merely the fear 'that they reduce God to a delusion'. Such nonreductionist approaches in fact function 'in order to preserve the reality of God', which serves religious rather than scientific purposes. Hence, for nonbelievers or outsiders in the modern study of religion proper, only reductionist interpretations are possible, whilst for believers the latter is 'impossible'. As can be deduced from Segal's following comment however, the paradoxical situation precisely has to do with the particularity of the subject matter and the broader historical and cultural context of the development of the social sciences and the demise of religion in Western society itself (158):

Unfortunately, God is not, like pain, a reality to be explained but is rather, like atoms, an explanation itself of reality. The reality to be explained is religion, or its object. Where God is the explanation offered by nonreductionists, nature, society, and the psyche are among the explanations offered by social scientific reductionists. Those explanations, as rival ones to God, do challenge the reality of God, so that Eliade is justified in fearing them, even if he is not justified in rejecting them. These explanations may not refute the existence of God, but, if accepted, they may well render his existence superfluous – and in that sense threaten the reality of God.

A reductionist approach such as that of Segal inevitably not only delegitimises the mainstream study of religion as an autonomous discipline, but poses the 'threat' of having religion 'explained away', 'leaving the scholar with nothing left to study' (McCutcheon 1999b: 132). Many a religious studies' scholar bent on maintaining the division between the theological and scientific approach have sought various solutions to, and alternative assessments of this dilemma, which by no means can be discussed in detail here. In an answer to Segal's forceful charge that irreducible religion would be a 'disguise' for believers to smuggle their commitment into their work as scholars, Daniel Pals (1990 [1986]) for example, puts forward that a certain level of understanding without commitment remains possible. Pals (98) hereby reverts to the understanding and study of the 'inner logic' of belief systems - such as 'truths', relationships, textures and qualities -, and the way they 'draw conclusions from premises we personally cannot accept'.

Similarly, a well-known authority in the field of mainstream religious studies, and founder of the first religious studies department in the U.K. (Wiebe 1986: 1), Ninian Smart for decades now has professed an allegiance to the phenomenological method and the principle of 'imaginative participation'. Smart sets out to transcend the insider/outsider problem through what he has termed 'methodological agnosticism', that is through *epoché* or the 'bracketing' of issues of truth and validity. Arguing against the tendency in the sociology

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and psychology of religion towards projectionist theories of religion, Smart (1986: 215) nonetheless refutes an explicit atheist perspective, claiming that ‘the non-acceptance of the existence of God is not equivalent to the acceptance of the non-existence of God’. Rather, ‘suspension of belief’ or methodological agnosticism will allow for a non-theological, yet non-projectionist or non-reductionist perspective.

Although a committed phenomenologist interested in both the meaning of religion from the insider’s point of view, and the description and categorisation of religious phenomena, Smart simultaneously does not eschew the need for explanation according to a framework that is akin to the understanding of ‘inner logic’ which Pals refers to. However, what Smart terms as religious rather than theological (or ‘buddhological’ for example) explanations, involves the way in which ‘particular or general features of religion explain other features both of religion, itself and/or of something contained within another aspect of human existence’ (Smart 1999 [1973]: 211). This idea of ‘patterns of interaction’ or ‘recurring motifs’, by virtue of which the autonomy of *Religionswissenschaft* would be enabled, in Smart’s view can apply to both intra religious and extra religious explanations, stressing the comparative and structural dimension underlying his theoretical propositions in his later work (e.g., in *Dimensions of the Sacred*, 1997).

Smart’s intermediate position also follows from his critique of figures such as Eliade, whom he faults for completely ignoring the anthropological, sociological and economic dimensions of religion (Smart 1999 [1978]: 142):

Thus though I have much admiration both for Eliade’s work and the way he has given stature to the history of religions, my regret is that his creative hermeneutic is in the end restricted – the vehicle of a certain worldview, and a means of giving life to much of man’s archaic religious symbolism, and yet somehow cut off from the wider explanatory task which religion can and should perform.

Concepts such as the sacred/profane distinction or Rudolph Otto’s definition of religion as ‘the experience of the Holy’ and his notion of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, are similarly criticised on grounds of them being derived from cultural presuppositions rather than universally applicable to, for instance, more mystical or contemplative traditions such as non-theistic Theravada Buddhism (Smart 1986 [1963]: 188; 1996: 29). Smart’s programme for the study of religion as a phenomenological and a comparative project that focuses on the differences between religious traditions, allows for a great diversity of religious concepts and practices including the so-called world religions. It also allows for the inclusion of religious traditions such as those of the more small scale cultures traditionally studied by anthropologists. To date these religious traditions are still often excluded or marginalized in many religious studies programmes and research paradigms (e.g., Gill 1994). As noted above, this

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project aims to arrive at a framework that focuses on the 'explanatory correlations between elements in the different dimensions of religion' (1986 [1967]: 182-183):

But since religion has its wider milieu, as has just been noted, these explanatory correlations should be extended, for example through considering the psychological and sociological roots of certain religious phenomena, and the converse, the religious roots of some psychological and social phenomena. ... In short, the comparative study of religion is a vital ancillary to other studies, just as they can be to it.

Smart thus tries to avoid the essentialism in older phenomenological approaches, by paying attention and linking religious 'phenomena' to broader social and political contexts. However, for a reductionist such as Donald Wiebe, this is a false move. In a recent article, Wiebe (1999 [1994]) discusses and criticises Ninian Smart's methodology, as part of a thorough defence of a naturalist, reductionist or 'outsider' approach to the study of religion. Wiebe argues that Smart's proposal for religious studies which is 'more' than pure, objective, empirical science, yet 'less' than theology grounded in religious commitment and involvement, ultimately fails and reverts back into a form of insider scholarship. Following a similar line of argument to that of Robert Segal in his critique of Eliade, Wiebe attributes this failure to Smart's appropriation of phenomenology combined with a principle of 'bracketed realism'. This approach would allow for a description of religious phenomena including the reference to the object of worship in the life of the devotee or insider. Smart in as 'neutral' and comparative terms as possible refers to the object of worship as the *Focus* of religion, thereby leaving the question of the existence of the Focus unanswered and additionally unasked in Wiebe's point of view. For Wiebe however, this methodological agnosticism and phenomenological description does not really 'eschew ontological assumptions' (57-58): 'Ultimately Smart urges the student of religion, even though he or she is in search of natural explanations for religious phenomena, to leave open the possibility of alternative explanations going beyond the scientific'.

Illustrating his point by making an analogy with 'Father Christmas scenarios' with children as the believers, Wiebe (64) argues that 'the phenomenological description, to be sure, must involve a description of the "existence-belief" of the devotee, but it does not require acceptance of that belief. The latter would, in fact, define a philosophical or religious undertaking that the bracketing is designed to avoid.' For Wiebe (65) then, Smart's principle of bracketing is a 'kind of crypto-theological enterprise, predisposing the student of religion to assume the "truth" of religion' (that is, to assume that the Focus of religion exists). Wiebe's (66) own view is clear: the only way religion can and should be studied in the academy is within the parameters of a scientific setting:

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That ‘something more’ than the scientific should be sought obviously involves a recognition of at least the plausibility of religion’s truth; and such recognition could only be either to religious experience of some kind or to metaphysical or theological argument, neither of which is appropriate to the activity of academic departments set aside for the scientific study of religious phenomena.

Underlying - and explicitly stated by Wiebe elsewhere – Wiebe’s view of how science and any academic discipline should proceed is not only the eradication of metaphysical or (crypto-) theological argumentation, but also any part for the ‘moral’ or ‘political’ within the academy. It is precisely here where the paradox of the feminist non-confessional study of religion lies, as was shown in the inherent problems and contradictions underlying Hewitt and Young’s critique of feminist reconstructions of religion for being insider’s ‘advocacy’ that may not hold a place in the academy. As was elaborately shown earlier, and following Wiebe’s argumentation, an approach such as that of Young which claims to reject ‘feminism’, yet itself as true to the phenomenological method can be accused of crypto-theology. Yet, as would be the case for any feminist perspective, it can also be accused for the instantiation of the political into its epistemology.

Wiebe (56) points to how Smart in many respects follows Eliade’s – more obvious – crypto-theological but also broader what I would call *moral or political* concerns implied in their religious studies programme : ‘He maintains, in agreement with Eliade, ‘[i]t would be artificial for the Religionist [that is, the student of religion] to present the meanings of faiths and cultures and then simply to contract out of the question of *their significance in the larger perspective of human history and a new global humanity*’” [italics mine].<sup>12</sup> Historians of religion such as Joachim Wach and Mircea Eliade have likewise commented upon the broader and social relevance of their scholarly work (McCutcheon 1999: 70-71). Eliade (1999 [1969]: 96) explicitly alludes to the practical benefits of the history of religions which he envisions as ‘a new humanism’:

This is why we believe that the history of religions is destined to play an important role in contemporary cultural life. This is not only because an understanding of exotic and archaic religions will significantly assist in a cultural dialogue with the representatives of such religions. It is more especially because, by attempting to understand the existential situations expressed by the documents he is studying, the historian of religions will inevitably attain to a deeper knowledge of man. It is on the basis of such a knowledge that a new humanism, on a world-wide scale, could develop.

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In the preface to Wiebe's (1999: x) collection of articles it becomes clear that crypto-theology is not an isolated mistake. Wiebe is adamant on the 'unacceptable interference' of all kinds of 'politico-ideological concerns in the academic study of religions in the modern university context.' (xiii):

A study of religion directed toward spiritual liberation of the individual or of the human race as a whole, toward the moral welfare of the human race, *or toward any ulterior end than that of knowledge itself*, should not find a home in the university; for if allowed in, its sectarian concerns will only contaminate the quest for a scientific knowledge of religions and ultimately undermine the very institution from which it originally sought legitimation [italics mine].

One notes the similarities with Marsha Aileen Hewitt's (1999) critique of the religious point of view, which as noted earlier is conceived as the 'methodological instantiation of ideology in the academic process [...] reinscribing ideology, since one is advocating on behalf of a particular interest'. In taking accusations for ideological rather than disinterested scientific approaches - such as in Wiebe's line of thought - to its end's conclusion, a 'feminist critical' perspective becomes rather awkward, as was shown above. In trying to avoid a theological viewpoint, Hewitt's claim to a feminist commitment and proposal for an alternative was shown to be highly problematic.

Although only a few arguments from a limited number of voices to the insider/outsider debate – which continues - and the future of religious studies in general have only been briefly presented, I hope to have shown that these discussions taking place in the 'mainstream' have functioned as a reason for the mainstream to be greatly untouched by feminist critique. Furthermore, in view of both the incompatibility and the question of any kind of transformation, this particular juxtaposing of the conflict between religious studies as a discipline of 'science or theology' with feminist critique and epistemology broadens and complicates further the problems identified by Rosalind Shaw.

Opposed to Shaw's refutation of the phenomenological approach and its *sui generis* claim, and in light of the epistemological shift concerning the question of objectivity within feminist theory and research sketched in chapter three, the reductionist, naturalistic, disinterested, objective, outsider alternative approach proves equally problematic for any feminist or gender-inclusive perspective. Before I take a closer look at the more precise reasons for the incompatibility from the perspective of recent debates on the issue of objectivity within feminist theory and methodology, I will review some recent discussions on religious studies methodology that aspire to transcend rather than provide any straightforward solution to the insider/outsider problem. Contextualised in even broader debates taking place across disciplinary

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boundaries, it is suggested that it may be at this conjecture where openings towards compatibility may be conceivable.

### **3. Deconstructing both Reductionism and the *Sui Generis* Claim: The Reflexive Turn**

In the institutional embattlement of religious studies within the academy, the reproduction of the hegemony of the *sui generis* claim was somehow forced in order to safeguard its position and justification as an autonomous discipline. As noted earlier, Rosalind Shaw (1995) commented that one of the consequences of this move had been an 'intellectual marginalisation' from broader debates and paradigm shifts cutting across other disciplines. Besides feminist critique, these developments can be said to cover diverse movements of thought, critique, and even areas of study in themselves, including various 'post' movements such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, but also under titles such as orientalism, reflexivity, cultural critique, deconstruction, the issue of representation, the linguistic turn, etc. All these developments have had an impact on theory and methodology in various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, and have in turn greatly influenced and contributed to the development of feminist theory and feminist studies as a distinct field. As was shown in chapter one, the influence of poststructuralism and postmodern thought for the theorisation of gender as an analytical concept has been paramount, although the stakes and relationship between feminist politics and practice opposed to what is often conceived of as the inaccessibility of feminist postmodern theory remains a matter of debate, to which I shall return.

In a recent article in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, Morny Joy (2000: 111) laments the way in which religious studies appears to remain immune for all these shifts. According to Joy, mainstream religious studies continues to debate 'on an abstract level', vastly ignoring the changes taking place in other disciplines 'where the "Eurocentric mindset" and its philosophic and methodological presuppositions are being submitted to critical examination'. Central to these critical debates nonetheless, are issues such as the relation between objects and subjects in the context of the research relationship, questions of the possibility or attainability of neutrality and objectivity, the way in which values and unequal power relations have circumscribed and participated in the cultural construction of the 'other', etc. These all concern epistemological issues which are highly relevant in view of the recent discussions on religious studies methodology, introduced above.

Perhaps in light of the traditional comparative and cross-cultural or cross-religious character of mainstream religious studies, both Morny Joy (2000; 2001) and Russell T. McCutcheon (1999b) refer to orientalism and postcolonialism in situating the epistemological challenge religious studies must face. Edward Said's (1995 [1978]) *Orientalism* can be perceived as one of

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the foundational texts of postcolonial thinking, although Said was by no means the first to make the link between the material and intellectual in the colonial relationship between the West and the East, or what is known as the Third World (Loomba 1998: 45-46). Appropriating Michel Foucault's concept of 'discourse' however, Said made explicit what he saw as the intimate link between the production of knowledge and power in the context of *colonial discourse*, embodied in the discipline of Orientalism itself, the scholarly and literary texts through which the West had 'represented' and thereby 'constructed' the non-Western 'other'. The study of colonial discourse then interrogates how images, stereotypes and 'knowledge' of the colonial subject or culture are related to real material, economic, political or imperialist control which is simultaneously an epistemic process through which the Western or European dominant 'self' is defined.

The idea of the self/other binary in which the 'othering' always implies the denial of selfhood or even agency was in turn by no means wholly new, and it has been fundamental in second-wave feminist thought, particularly in Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism. The notion of woman as 'other' opposed to the normative male self (white, heterosexual, colonial...) has been addressed in the initial critiques of androcentrism, such as that of Rita Gross (1977) on the history of religions in chapters one and three above. The linkages between both feminist discourse analysis and (post)colonial discourse analysis through the analogy of the subordination of women and 'colonial subjects' are thus more than apparent, although 'mainstream' postcolonial thinkers have not always been apt to see these evident, often mutually reinforcing connections.<sup>13</sup>

In his reader, Russell McCutcheon (1999b) does not discuss the possible implications of orientalism or postcolonial thought for religious studies in any detail. However, he does suggest that the idea of 'reflexivity' not only follows from the idea that the so-called neutrality or objectivity of scholarly studies of the 'other' can be questioned, but that Said has shown how such descriptions are not so much representations of the other, but rather productive of the identity of the subject making the description. Joy (2000; 2001) by contrast shows how many historians of religion themselves were often highly 'orientalist' in their own studies of 'exotic' religious traditions. As a discipline dating from the late eighteenth and nineteenth century 'which endorsed a particular approach that reflected its penchant for classifying things non-Western' (2000: 116) this may not be so very surprising. But, as for contemporary 'male scholars' in the field of religious studies, according to Joy these continue to be utterly eurocentric in their outlook (2000: 117):

The strictly historical and textual approach involved in this enterprise ... has undergone some realignment in the past few decades, much of it due to the incorporation of the methods of quantitative measurement and definition, structuralism (anthropology) and of phenomenology (philosophy). But, by and large, the status of the investigator and his/her

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preconceptions have not, until recently, been subjected to serious scrutiny. Religious Studies has remained, for the most part, unabashedly *modernist* in its self-understanding and definition [italics mine].

Joy then turns to the work of Ninian Smart, who despite all attempts to 'decolonise' or 'deorientalise' Western categories of analyses, has not incorporated any form of postcolonial critique, nor addressed the issue of reflexivity (ibid.):

Yet with a perfunctory nod in the direction of cultural diversity, and the recognition of the need for some self-analysis – along the lines of Habermas' ideological critique – there is no further elaboration, let alone admission, by Smart, of the fact that a radical restructuring of the discipline might now be required. ... Nor is there acknowledgement that what has been involved here is not simply the indiscriminate importation of dubious Western ideals, definitions and methods, but also a wholesale misconstrual of non-Western ways of thinking and acting, contorted to fit the Procrustean bed of the current Western rational categories and its self-serving classifications.

Although both McCutcheon and Joy introduce the issue of reflexivity in the context of postcolonial critique, I suggest that the general terms in which they are signalling this epistemological shift could be called 'postmodern'. I thereby appropriate the term in the broadest possible sense of being situated in a historical condition of *postmodernity*<sup>14</sup>, with *postmodernism* expressing 'a critique of modernist agendas as they are manifested in various forms and locations around the world' (Grewal and Kaplan 1997: 2). Postmodernism has come to refer to an enormous variety of ways in which this critique is expressed, ranging from 'cultural practices, writers, artists, thinkers and theoretical accounts of late modernity' (Waugh 1998: 177), from 'weak' forms of critique to more 'radical' ones, and expressed in differential ways between and within traditional academic disciplines in general. Postmodern critique is minimally defined as a questioning of the Enlightenment project and its commitment to the development and discovery of 'objective' science, and the 'grand narratives' of universal knowledge and 'truths', based on the idea of unilinear progress of 'man' as a rational coherent subject.

Many of the *products* of this postmodern critique have been questioned, such as the accusation of the failure of postmodern thought to develop an alternative theory of knowledge, or the problem of political emancipation and agency opposed to what is often associated with the relativism or even nihilism in much postmodern thinking. Nevertheless, I believe that postmodernity as a condition, as well as postmodernism, - minimally characterised as a kind of epistemological critique of the foundationalist and essentialist assumptions of modernist knowledge claims - can be appropriated for designating the general

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shift forming the background to the current and fundamental critiques of mainstream religious studies, such as those of Russell T. McCutcheon and Morny Joy. 'Reflexivity', yet also deconstruction (derived more specifically from poststructuralist thought), or social constructionism can be understood as various 'tools' that can be appropriated in postmodern analysis. A postmodern analysis of the insider/outsider problem for example, does not so much seek to solve, but rather contextualise and deconstruct the debate itself (McCutcheon 1999b: 289).

In the previous paragraph concerning the insider/outsider problem and the debate between the reductionist and *sui generis* approaches in the study of religion it was argued that reductionists such as Donald Wiebe not only accuse non-reductionists of incorporating theological concerns, but also political or ideological concerns into what should be 'objective', disinterested scientific scholarship. In *Manufacturing Religion*, Russell T. McCutcheon (1997) is just as critical, but approaches the problem of essentialism in the phenomenological/hermeneutical study of religion from what I would call a postmodern – rather than a 'modern' – perspective and mode of analysis.<sup>15</sup> McCutcheon rarely employs the term 'postmodern' and claims to be 'unapologetically reductionistic', for his book 'advocates a naturalist, historical scale, where all human events and conceptual or textual productions – in a word, discourses – are understood to have socioeconomic and political origins and implications' (1997: 17). Such an omission – including the terms poststructuralism and postcolonialism I might add – may not be entirely trivial, as critics of postmodern and poststructuralist analysis in particular often associate these movements with idealism or 'textualism' to the exclusion of the material, or the 'naturalist' which McCutcheon is precisely defending, an issue to which I shall later return.

In his assessment of the *sui generis* claim, McCutcheon nevertheless primarily draws on Foucault, as the main objective is to show how the conceptualisation of religion as autonomous, personal, private, unique and essential is 'a highly discursive as well as political strategy' (xi). What McCutcheon sets out to do is analyse the *sui generis* claim as a form of *discourse* in itself. In the process I think, McCutcheon both confirms Rosalind Shaw's thesis on the incompatibility of this claim with feminist approaches, yet also gives some more ideas on the implications of this claim. McCutcheon therefore indirectly offers some suggestions for any gendered approach, there where Shaw remains rather reticent:

...what this book addresses are the various modes and sites of conceptual production in creating and reproducing the discourse on *sui generis* religion and their relations to the social production of humans as political subjects. It names and challenges the hegemony of scale that operates in the modern study of religion, which defines and manufactures religion as an essentially ahistorical human intuition

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clothed in certain historical accessible categories, such as myth, symbol, and ritual. It identifies the various intellectual, institutional, social, and geopolitical implications that arise from this isolationist and idealist approach to the study of religion.

McCutcheon does a deconstructive reading of Eliade's methods and theories and secondary literature around his life and work. He also includes the reproduction of this *sui generis* discourse as employed in comparative religion textbooks and university classrooms, thereby examining the strategies and sites of this discourse on an intellectual, social, economic and political scale. Thus, next to the claim that religion is 'an sich', techniques of generalisation, dehistoricisation, universalisation, essentialisation and naturalisation have served to intellectually 'construct' religion. Religion has been simultaneously 'to a large measure constituted by the methods which are supposed to elucidate it' (19), or in other words, 'the scale makes the phenomenon' (20). The social and economic scale refers to the way the *sui generis* claim has served to constitute and retain religious studies as an autonomous discipline – the 'institutional embattlement' Shaw points to – yet also the stakes, benefits, and consequences surrounding these exclusionary strategies for the scholars located in the discipline. On the political scale the implications are profound and are again in accordance with Rosalind Shaw's thesis regarding the abstract *homo religiosus* and the a priori detachment of politics, power and gender from any analysis (22):

...the disembodied believer and the apparently apolitical hermeneut, are abstracted from the socioeconomic and historical particularity and turned into generic, disembodied minds... The historical minimalization characteristic of the discourse on *sui generis* religion constitutes the redefinition, reconstruction, and representation of human beings not as social, economic, and political beings with certain basic material needs and relations but as essentially believers of creeds.

McCutcheon does not limit himself to the dominant phenomenological/hermeneutical, anti-reductionist approach constituting the autonomy of religious studies as a distinct discipline. He also partakes in a deconstruction of the insider/outsider divide in that the oppositional discourse challenging the *sui generis* claim is argued to be often just as essentialist and exclusionary of the sociopolitical scale (16-17):

But by labelling aspects of this discourse of the discourse on religion as being in some way essentially theological, critics may in fact perpetuate the division of scholars of religion inasmuch as one group purports to study essentially religious data. In other words, much effort has been expended on critiquing the *sui generis* claim as if it were an essentially

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*religious* claim, but not much energy has been exerted in critiquing it as a sociopolitical claim. [...] Rather, for the sake of intellectual and institutional demarcation [religion and theology versus science and theory], they [critiques of cryptotheology] function to isolate further, and thereby perpetuate the perception of, the essential autonomy of the religious phenomenon.

In this particular attempt to offer a deconstructive or ‘postmodern’ reading of both sides, - the anti-nonreductionist *sui generis* scholars on the one hand and the reductionist, objectivist or even positivist on the other - McCutcheon shows how an alternative analysis of the insider/outsider problem is possible. He does this by maintaining what he terms a ‘naturalist’ perspective on religion as but one cultural aspect of real historical and contextualised – with Shaw I add ‘differentiated’ - human beings, rather than ‘disembodied subjects’.

As for the ‘dangers’ of postmodern analysis, one possible implication may be that of the dissolution of the insider/outsider divide in the sense that the insider’s viewpoint, subjectivism and the religious viewpoint is reinstated, which I will return to in the context of the relationship between postmodernism and feminism and the dilemmas of feminist anthropology. In the context of contemporary religious studies, in commenting upon advocates of ‘postmodern pluralism’ within the field, Johannes C. Wolfart (2000: 391) for example, states how ‘under the cover of postmodern pluralism (or, at least, relativism) they are seeking to reestablish theological judgements as intellectually creditable and otherwise legitimate determinants of public life’. Referring to one of the advocates of such a position (George Marsden), according to Wolfart (392), ‘current pluralistic principles dictate that “faith-informed scholarship” must be recognized by public universities, especially since these have already accorded standing to women’s studies and gay studies’. However, Wolfart also notes that the author in question here is perhaps conflating specific critical perspectives – he considers ‘modernist’ – ‘of say, feminism with perspectivalism in general’.

It is in this context that I suggest for example Katherine K. Young’s (1999d: 287) resistance towards what she sees as the major problems with postmodernism and deconstruction: ‘the instability of all perspectives; the collapse into relativism and social inaction’ with ‘some feminists argu[ing] expediently for using deconstructionism only when it serves their own political purposes’. As I argued earlier however, many feminist scholars in religion, - including Young who additionally conflates feminism with gynocentrism – whether they would claim themselves to be ‘modernist’ or ‘postmodernist’ are conflating both the political and religious viewpoint. A ‘postmodernist’ meta-analysis then again such as that of McCutcheon of the mainstream, shows how both sides of the divide are themselves – whether crypto-theological or objectivist – highly ideologically and politically informed. It is my suggestion that at least a much more reflexive, and situated view is necessary of all these perspectives, and attention is highly due to the diversity such terms as

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'modernism', 'postmodernism', or feminism(s) cover, including a deconstruction of the way these are often appropriated in straightforward oppositional terms.

### **4. Beyond the God-Trick: Postmodern Feminist Anthropology and the non-Religious Viewpoint**

In this paragraph I will be exploring how the problem of essentialism in the feminist study of religion can be addressed, moving beyond the lacunae and various confluences in the juxtaposing of the 'mainstream' and existing feminist approaches to the study of religion. I suggest this would necessitate a turn to a reflexive approach, one that can be located in the more recent epistemological shift within feminist theory and methodology introduced in chapter three. For this, I will first briefly review some of the general debates and what I consider fruitful lines of thought generally subsumed under the header of 'feminist postmodernism'. I will not so much present a straightforward solution to the insider/outsider problem, which in addition to the theses of Rosalind Shaw was identified as one of the main parameters underlying the incompatibility between mainstream religious studies and a feminist approach. Rather, I will turn to what I see as some parallel dilemmas, yet also some promising suggestions in contemporary feminist anthropology and feminist postcolonial critique. Debates on contemporary feminist anthropological methodology, I argue, may open some possibilities of conceiving a feminist study of religion from the non-religious point of view, yet also serve as a general framework for empirically testing both Shaw's and the additional hypotheses on the incompatibility, to be illustrated with a case study in the following chapters.

*From the 'View from Nowhere' to 'Views from Somewhere': Feminism Critically Appropriates Postmodernism*

In chapter three a number of typologies of feminist theory and research were presented, differentially characterising the most recent stage of development as 'deconstructive', 'reflexive' or the 'postmodern' or even 'poststructuralist' phase. In many respects, feminist theory can be viewed to have been postmodern *avant-la-lettre*. Critiques of androcentric epistemology and 'false objectivity' were formulated as early as the seventies, whilst the unmasking of the supposed 'neutrality' of the academy and the links between science and power had already been underway since the emergence of critical theories and the 'post-empirical crisis' in knowledge (chapter two). Besides the development of social constructionist and later intersectionalist theories of gender (chapter one), women of colour had in turn initiated a critique of the false pretensions and universalisations of feminist theories by Western, white, middle-class

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women. They had hereby demanded the inclusion of the representation of voices and experiences of different groups – ‘plurality’ - beyond those of ‘women’ as a homogeneous category and in the process scrutinised ‘universal’ theoretical concepts and frameworks such as the public/private divide (chapter three).

During the late eighties and nineties however, within the development of what may be termed postmodern philosophy, a more radical critique of objectivity emerged. This involved a denouncing of the modernist idea of ‘the view from nowhere’ or the Archimedean viewpoint, that is *foundationalism*, with knowledge understood as the reflection of ‘truth’, whether founded in God, reason or history (Andermahr, Lovell and Wolkowitz 1997: 81). The intersection of this critique of the metanarratives of modernity and ‘totalising frameworks’ with feminism has enabled a fruitful diversification of feminist theory. Yet it has also contained highly paradoxical features, feminism itself being a modern emancipatory ‘metanarrative’ and very much a product of liberal humanism and Enlightenment thought. On the other hand, feminism has always been both critical of and both critically engaging with both modern narratives, such as marxism for example. Such an engagement with postmodern philosophy moreover, has included and enabled radical self-critique in a reflexive mode. Initiated by the critique from women of colour, postmodernism, poststructuralism and deconstruction have allowed for further conceptual and theoretical sophistication and diversification of feminist theory. Through an interrogation of feminism’s own foundations, this has allowed for new tools of analysis and thought leading to possibilities for both expanding and incorporating the earlier critiques from ‘diversity’. Thus whereas women of colour had critiqued the ethnocentrism and ahistoricism of feminist theory and questioned notions such as ‘patriarchy’, ‘women’, ‘experience’ or ‘oppression’, postmodern critique and poststructuralism for many has provided both a philosophy and a vocabulary for critiquing this ‘false universalism’ and the essentialism that has been implicit within much feminist theorising.

Following the critique of the earlier ‘big three’ of feminism, feminist social, psychological, and anthropological theories from the seventies and eighties have been critiqued for their various forms of essentialism in both concepts and their approach, such as the search for a ‘key factor’ in explaining women’s ‘universal’ oppression through causal frameworks. As referred to before, well-known research such as that by Nancy Chodorow (1997 [1979]) on mothering and the development of gender identity, or Carol Gilligan’s (1982, 1997 [1977])<sup>16</sup> research on women and moral development, on the one hand appears to move beyond biological essentialism, in any case contravening the androcentrism and false generalisations in mainstream theory. However, from a feminist postmodern perspective these theories are criticised for their false generalisations and ‘meta-narrative overtones’ in terms of offering universal explanations and relying on essentialist concepts of gender identity, without contextualising these in terms of cross-cultural and historical sensitivities.

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What can be considered a critical encounter or more of a feminist critical and selective *appropriation* of postmodernism, several authors in *Feminism/Postmodernism* (Nicholson 1990), show how ‘the whole package’ of postmodern philosophy need not necessarily and perhaps should not be bought. Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson (1990) and Seyla Benhabib (1990) for example, offer critical readings of Lyotard, whose refutation of all metanarratives would imply only ‘plural, immanent and local forms of legitimation’ or a ‘justice of multiplicities’. This would preclude critiques of ‘pervasive axes of stratification, for critique of broad-based relations of dominance and subordination along lines like gender, race, and class’ (Fraser and Nicholson 1990: 23). For Fraser and Nicholson however, a feminist appropriation of postmodern theory can incorporate critiques of traditional and foundational philosophy and epistemology, yet through retaining a ‘robust conception of social criticism’, it does not have to recede to either a view of criticism and political practice as merely ad hoc, nor abandon historical narratives or ‘large theoretical tools altogether’. Thus the authors argue a for a political postmodern feminist theory which (34):

...would be explicitly historical, attuned to the cultural specificity of different societies and periods and to that of different groups within societies and periods. Thus, the categories of postmodern-feminist theory would be inflected by temporality, with historically specific institutional categories like the modern, restricted, male-headed, nuclear family taking precedence over ahistorical, functionalist categories like reproduction and mothering. Where categories of the latter sort were not eschewed altogether, they would be genealogized, that is, framed by a historical narrative and rendered temporally and culturally specific. Moreover, postmodern theory would be nonuniversalist. When its focus became cross-cultural or transepochal, its mode of attention would be comparativist rather than universalizing, attuned to changes and contrasts in stead of to covering laws.

Often depending on what is understood under, or which authors – beyond Lyotard - are covered by ‘postmodern’ philosophy and critique, feminist theorists differ in their position on the possibilities of appropriation. This mostly relates to the question of retaining feminism as a political project or as often referred to as the problem of ‘agency’. According to Jane Flax (1990, 1992) for example, and in accordance with Fraser and Nicholson’s optimistic viewpoint, feminist theory actually ‘belongs’ within the terrain of postmodern philosophy. Feminist theory is postmodern in that it shares ‘the growing uncertainty within Western intellectual circles about the appropriate grounding and methods for explaining and interpreting human experience’ (1990: 41). Feminist theory similarly raises important metatheoretical questions about ‘the possible nature and status of theorizing itself’. Others are more sceptical in the

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possibility of a fruitful encounter, fearing the postmodern 'depolitisation of philosophy', relativism through eclecticism, the celebration of 'differences' and plurality, and 'a view from everywhere' which would undermine rather than further the feminist political project (e.g. Benhabib 1990; Bordo 1990; Di Stefano 1990). Critical feminist appropriation of postmodernism therefore comes in many forms, minimally distinguishing between postmodernism as an 'aesthetic practice' and as a 'critique of knowledge' (Grewal and Caplan 1997; Waugh 1998), or by identifying and selecting preferable 'weaker' versus detrimental 'stronger' forms (Benhabib 1990; Waugh 1998).

Perhaps what is considered one of the most influential postmodern feminist essays, – and also launching the development cyberfeminism – 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' by Donna Haraway (1991 [1985]), in its title alone expresses how 'postmodernism' in feminism does not so much represent a seizure with traditional critical theory (socialist feminism). Moreover, it can be viewed as more of an engagement with earlier narratives in an 'almost infinite variety of pathways and combinations', to be viewed as more of 'net which catches up most of the major social theorists of the second half of the twentieth century' (Andermahr, Lovell and Wolkowitz 1997: 170). In its style at least, 'A Cyborg Manifesto' can be seen as typically 'postmodern'. In its eclecticism and usage of metaphors, the 'cyborg', the hybrid of machine and organism, stands central as 'a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as woman's experience in the late twentieth century' (Haraway 1991 [1985]: 291). The manifesto is an 'attempt to build an ironic political myth', which seeks an affiliation between feminism, postmodernism, socialism and materialism. The cyborg thereby functions as a metaphor for playfulness and pleasure but also the political power of the confusion of boundaries, between the human and the animal, the animal-human and the machine, the physical and the non-physical. It also refers to the confusion of boundaries between the natural and the artificial, and the mind and the body in a technological age in which 'the certainty of what counts as nature – the promise of innocence – is undermined, probably fatally' (294).

The cyborg as a 'promising and dangerous monster' in a 'post-gender world' moves beyond 'myths of original unity', such as marxism and psychoanalysis, out of which difference and dominance are produced. It does not recognise the Garden of Eden, as the 'illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential' (293). For Haraway, the cyborg thus functions as a metaphor for a critique of meta-narratives, both scientist, humanist and religious and feminist 'myths' – 'god is dead; so is the goddess' (301) – and a deconstruction of boundaries and binaries out of which fruitful political positionings may emerge. In terms of identity constructed through the intersections of gender, 'race', class, etc., postmodern identities which even

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though they are necessarily destabilised, specific, fragmentary, partial and contradictory, allow for possibilities for coalitions of affinity or 'political kinship' between women regardless of their differences. Thus 'the acid tools of postmodernist theory and the constructive tools of ontological discourse about revolutionary subjects might be seen as ironic allies in dissolving Western selves in the interests of survival' (297). The objective is to avoid 'lapsing into boundless differences and giving up on the confusing task of making partial, real connection. Some differences are playful; some are poles of world historical domination. "Epistemology" is about knowing the difference.' (300).

The 'deconstruction' of the essentialist categories of binary difference and domination produced by meta-narratives and universalist theories is a term which perhaps more properly belongs under the heading of 'poststructuralism', as another general term, aligned and often overlapping what has hereto been defined as 'postmodern'. Again this term designates many positions and infinite varieties, drawing on theorists as diverse as Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Louis Althusser, Julia Kristeva, and many others who may or may not have self-identified as 'postmodern' or 'poststructuralist'. Their theoretical insights have nevertheless been critically appropriated in new and diverse forms within feminist theory. Sharing with – as present in Haraway's manifesto for instance –, but possibly more pronounced than in postmodern theory are the notions of the 'subject' and 'subjectivity', and their intersections with ideas of 'agency', 'identity', 'language', 'meaning' and 'power'. Included among the general critique of meta-narratives, foundationalism and essentialism, objectivity and the 'view from nowhere', is the critique and deconstruction of the unified, autonomous, 'sovereign' 'subject' within liberal humanism. Ideas of subjectivity and meaning, including binary oppositions and difference, seen as the products or 'effect' of language rather than 'reflections of reality' and 'deconstruction' (originating from Derrida) as a means of unravelling or revealing these constitutive or signifying practices, have mostly been appropriated in feminist literary criticism and many forms of 'textualism'. Feminist poststructuralist appropriations of some of Michel Foucault's ideas have overall been more applicable and therefore more popular in social and historical research.

Central to the feminist appropriation of Foucault is the concept of 'discourse', broadening and challenging the idea of 'there being not being anything outside of the text', or at least in a reconceptualisation of discourse as constitutive, yet more than merely 'textual'. Additionally, as an alternative to the more humanist (Marxist/structuralist) notion of 'ideology' (Brooks 1997: 49), discourse, 'discursivity' and 'discursive practices' are more than merely linguistic meanings, in that 'discourses' are related to context and materiality, being located in institutions, practices, and procedures of knowledge production, having real-world material and social effects. Discursive formations, whether they are academic disciplines – such as clinical or psychoanalytic discourse – or other coherent bodies of knowledge and practices

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more generally, 'construct' or invent both the object of these knowledges, in as much as discourses and discursive practices constitute the 'subject' and subjectivity. Discourse is furthermore intimately connected with power, reconceptualised by Foucault as both productive and dispersed. As referred to in chapter one, there are obvious affinities with the feminist idea of domination and repression not merely taking place in the public sphere or institutional settings, but in the private and everyday practices and interactions – the personal is political -, often subtle, and constitutive and leading to internalisations of subordination.

Regarding the feminist theorisation of gender, Foucault's ideas have proved immensely fruitful, as they have contributed to a sophistication of an anti-essentialist, constructionist approach, unmasking the 'naturalist' discourse on bodies and sexuality and shifting the focus to discourses as mechanisms that themselves are actively involved in the essentialisation and 'naturalisation', thus constitutive of gender, gendered and embodied subjectivity. Judith Butler's (1990a; 1990b; 1992) appropriation of Foucault is perhaps paradigmatic here (chapter one). She eloquently shows how the focus of feminist theory must shift towards a poststructuralist analysis of sex/gender and the way gendered identity and subjectivity is produced.

As with postmodern philosophy however, the encounter between feminism and poststructuralism is seen by many as to be fraught with dilemmas and problems, again in relation to the question of feminist politics, agency and the politics of identity (e.g. Alcoff 1988; Marsden 1993; Nash 1994). One of these dilemmas has often been framed as the paradox involved in the poststructuralist deconstruction of the category of 'woman', 'the central concept for feminist theory and yet it is a concept that is impossible to formulate precisely for feminists' (Alcoff 1988: 405). Alcoff (419) for example, warns for a kind of neodeterminism or nominalism in the deconstructionism of Derrida and Foucault, which leads to the dilemma of how to 'ground a feminist politics that deconstructs the female subject ... [which] threatens to wipe out feminism itself'. Many feminist theorists have nonetheless interrogated possibilities of alliances that do not lead to relativism or political immobility, such as Alcoff's notion of 'woman as positionality' (431):

Gender is not a point to start from in the sense of being a given thing but is, instead, a posit or construct, formalizable in a nonarbitrary way through a matrix of habits, practices and discourses. Further, it is an interpretation of our history within a particular discursive constellation, a history in which we are both subjects of and subjected to social construction. The advantage of such an analysis is its ability to articulate a concept of gendered subjectivity without pinning it down one way or another for all time. Given this and given the danger that essentialist conceptions of the subject pose specifically for women, it seems both possible and desirable to construe a gendered subjectivity in relation to

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concrete habits, practices, and discourses while at the same time recognizing the fluidity of these.

The impact of both the critique from, and postmodernism and poststructuralism for feminist theory has thus shifted attention from essentialist notions of 'shared experience' and 'shared identity' to that of the processes under which identity and subjectivity are the outcomes of particular processes. Rather than 'given', identity and subjectivity are acquired and reproduced through changing and multiple hegemonic discourses and discursive practices. Various proposals have been made in order to frame agency and resistance in more strategic instead of essentialist and foundationalist ways such as in 'temporary alliances', 'bonding, coalitions, interconnections' (Braidotti 1994a), 'affinity' or 'webbed connections' (Haraway 1991 [1988]), or 'politics of identification' (Brah 1996) above identity.

Epistemologically, the critical appropriation of the postmodern critique of objectivity in contemporary feminist theory has not lead to 'the view from everywhere', but various 'reflexive' forms of feminist epistemology, framed as the option of 'partial perspective' or 'situated knowledges' (as proposed by Haraway 1991 [1988]). In 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', and in her familiar typical style, Donna Haraway (1991: 183) addresses the fundamental dilemma for feminist theorists in the postmodern age, being 'trapped by two poles of a tempting dichotomy on the question of objectivity'. According to Haraway, on the one hand social constructionism and deconstruction have functioned as welcome tools for moving beyond the feminist critique of androcentric bias. They have showed the 'radical historical specificity, and so contestability, of every layer of the onion of scientific and technological constructions' and the way science can be shown to be a 'contestable text and a power field'. However, the unmasking of the doctrines of objectivity has also resulted in cynicism, a kind of 'epistemological electro-shock therapy', - 'they're just texts anyway, so let the boys have them back' (186). Haraway (187) also phrases the dilemma as follows:

So, I think my problem and 'our' problem is how to have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own 'semiotic technologies' for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world, one that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness.

Haraway refers to Sandra Harding's (1986, 1991) typology (introduced in chapter three) of feminist empiricism, standpoint epistemology and

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postmodernism, locating the above dilemma at the intersection of the latter two perspectives. What Harding calls the dichotomy of ‘successor science projects’ versus ‘postmodern accounts of difference’, and Haraway ‘radical constructivism’ versus ‘feminist critical empiricism’, according to Haraway both ultimately miss a point. Haraway is firstly critical of standpoint epistemology, the grounding of theory from the ‘vantage points of the subjugated’. Whilst vision ‘from below’ is at least preferable to empiricism with its ‘various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims’, standpoint epistemology is also problematic as it carries dangers with it, such as the ‘romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions’ (191). To the extent that standpoint epistemology minimally privileges women’s *experience* as a grounding for ‘women’s ways of knowing’, it was argued in chapter three that this epistemology is aligned with a focus on ‘difference’. It can therefore be identified as the major framework or area in which the greater part of existing feminist research in religious studies or theology can be categorised.

In its relation to the insider/outsider problem in religious studies however, feminist standpoint epistemology may arguably have little more to offer than the postempirical hermeneutical/ phenomenological method. From the perspective of postmodern critique of objectivity, the latter critiques objectivism through incorporating the subjectivity of others (the insider’s point of view), yet also ultimately endorses the subjective/objective distinction. This takes place through the application of techniques such as bracketing, so that ‘by suspending their own subjectivity, researchers can be “objective” about the subjectivity of others’ (Nielsen 1990: 8). In their critique of ‘science as usual’, however, both feminist empiricists *and* feminist standpoint theorists similarly share the presumption that objective and true knowledge is possible (Prins 1997: 65). The problem thus lies in the premise that subjugated standpoints and knowledges would be epistemologically privileged, automatically being more complete, adequate and objective accounts of the world, ‘grounded in the Cartesian assumption that a single and unseamed social as well as physical reality exists “out there”’ (Stanley and Wise 1993: 189). Many of these critiques are not entirely fair once Harding’s entire oeuvre is taken into account. In *The Science Question in Feminism* Harding (1986) in fact already addresses the problem in terms of the differences between women, neglected by earlier standpoint theorists such as Nancy Hartsock (1997 [1983]) and Dorothy Smith.<sup>17</sup> In doing so, she immediately relates to the postmodern questioning of concepts such as ‘truth’, ‘reality’, and ‘experience’ (Harding 1986: 27 (citing Jane Flax)):

Considered on its own terms, the feminist standpoint response raises two further questions. Can there be *a* feminist standpoint if women’s (or feminists’) social experience is divided by class, race, and culture? Must there be Black and white, working-class and professional-class,

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American and Nigerian feminist standpoints? This kind of consideration leads to the postmodern skepticism: 'Perhaps "reality" can have "a" structure only from the falsely universalizing perspective of the master. That is, only to the extent that one person or group can dominate the whole, can "reality" appear to be governed by one set of rules or be constituted by one privileged set of social relations.' Is the feminist standpoint project still too firmly grounded in the historical disastrous alliance between knowledge and power characteristic of the modern epoch? Is it too firmly rooted in a problematic politics of essentialized identities?

Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1990) propose to solve the problem of feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint epistemology being successor sciences and non-relativist, versus the trouble with feminist postmodernism for being too relativist. Their critique of both foundationalism *or* relativism consists of pluralising the concept of standpoint and experience. They thereby refer to the work of black feminists, such as that of Patricia Hill Collins (1990), who adapts the notion of a 'black feminist standpoint'. According to Stanley and Wise this notion allows for an ontological and contextual grounding of the multiplicity of distinct experiences of women, incorporating multiple feminist *standpoints* in the plural, including those of black and lesbian women. Thus, the differences between women and the category 'women' behoove deconstruction in order to focus on 'ontological separations as well as similarities' (34).

In her later work, Harding (1990: 97-99) sees feminist standpoint thinking (and feminist empiricism as matter of fact and to some extent) as already incorporating anti-Enlightenment tendencies, claiming it would argue against feminine essentialism and the idea of unitary consciousness, whilst 'feminist postmodernists [would] adhere to some powerful Enlightenment assumptions that even the feminist empiricists do not'. The insistence on not even interpreting the categories in her own proposed typology as mutually exclusive or developmental, becomes evident in further attempts (1991, 1993) to reconcile standpoint epistemology with feminist postmodernism towards what is sometimes called a 'postmodernist standpoint approach'.<sup>18</sup> Introducing the concept of 'strong objectivity' as an alternative to objectivism in the traditional conception of scientific knowledge, Harding comes closer to - and is perhaps to a large extent influenced by - Haraway's proposed solution to the dilemmas of the encounter between feminism and postmodernism.

Haraway's (1991 [1988]) concept of *situated knowledges*, or 'a doctrine of embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects', purports to offer an alternative 'vision' opposed to the 'god-tricks' of relativism and totalisation, as mirroring twins in the problem of objectivity. Haraway claims objectivity ought to be about particular and specific embodiment, or 'only partial perspective promises objective vision' (190). Thus for Haraway, in the postmodern sense the knowing self is indeed

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split and partial, inasmuch as subjectivity is multidimensional: 'There is no way to "be" simultaneously in all, or wholly in any, of the privileged (subjugated) positions structured by gender, race, nation, class' (193). Contra (traditional) standpoint epistemology that may be accused of essentialism and foundationalism, Haraway argues 'subjugation is not grounds for an ontology; it [merely] might be a visual clue' (ibid.). Haraway's plea for 'politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims', in other terms could be called 'reflexive' par excellence. In what Haraway literally refutes as the 'view from above', is replaced by 'the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions, i.e., of *views from somewhere*' (196) (italics mine).

Harding (1991) takes the de-essentialisation of standpoint epistemology further by pluralising the feminist standpoint notion and emphasising the fact that it should not be conflated with *women's* standpoint. A *feminist* standpoint(s) rather, is something that must be *achieved*, (127) instead of automatically being rooted in women's 'biology' or 'experience'. Haraway's (1993) influence becomes markedly clear in further attempts to rethink standpoint epistemology as forms of situated knowledges and as a way to generate stronger standards for objectivity. Here, the standpoint is rethought to be a necessary, though not sufficient *starting point* rather than an end-point for maximising objectivity. This simultaneously addresses the possible accusation of ethnocentrism and foundationalism: 'Thus the claim by women that women's lives provide a better starting point for thought about gender systems is not the same as the claim that *their own* lives are the best such starting points' (1993: 58). Considering the plurality of feminisms and the differences between groups of women, 'standpoint theory argues that each of these groups of women's lives is a good place to start in order to explain certain aspects of the social order' (60). Although critical of Harding's older work, I believe Stanley and Wise's (1993: 191-192) idea of 'feminist fractured foundationalist epistemologies' and their notion of 'feminist ontology' is another attempt towards more of a synthesis between more situated, embodied and postmodern feminist epistemologies:

Cartesian approaches, including feminist ones, ignore or deny their grounding in ontology: that is, in the interests, competences, experiences and understandings of knowledge-producers. Our feminist critique of knowledges argues instead for a materialistic, but not marxist, theory of knowledge, one irrevocably rooted in women's concrete and diverse practical and everyday experiences of oppressions; and it insists that these analytic knowledges are reflexive, indexical and local: they are epistemologically tied to their context of production and are ontologically grounded.

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Despite various attempts to reconceptualise feminist standpoint theory through postmodern critique and the burgeoning of feminist postmodern and poststructuralist theory, as Susan Hekman (1997) notes, standpoint theory is much less prominent and often discarded as an 'older' phase in the development of feminist theory, and as at first sight would be inferred from the very typology Harding originally proposed. With Hekman however, I agree that despite many a critique of standpoint epistemology, with for example its marxist roots contravening the antimaterialism of postmodern theory, a more careful reading of Harding and Haraway shows how some typologies have themselves been somewhat simplified, overlooking what can be viewed as encounters between and reflections on different theoretical perspectives. If anything, standpoint theory must itself be contextualised as what Hekman (1997: 342) sees as the beginning of a paradigm shift in the concept of knowledge, minimally emphasising how knowledge is situated and perspectival and in its confrontation and integration of the differences between women, it offers 'that there are multiple standpoints from which knowledge is produced'.

Moreover, it is my expectation that feminist standpoint theory will reclaim some of its attention in the near future, as the 'romance with (postmodern) epistemology' diminishes and is currently itself being problematised in relation to the material and corporeality. Even feminist empiricism is similarly being rethought and reinterpreted since and in view of feminism's encounter with postmodernism. This includes the redefining of objectivity, reincorporating notions of 'reason and rationality' and emphasising the contextuality of knowledges without relapsing into traditional gender essentialism and foundationalism, yet avoiding some of the relativist and anti-materialist tendencies in some feminist postmodern strands of thought. Sylvia Walby (2001) for example, has recently argued that Harding's view of science has been too limited and in it, science, empiricism and positivism are too easily conflated and that the idea of knowledge as socially created can be found in many contemporary sociologies and philosophies of knowledge. Whether feminism's encounter with postmodernism should lead to de-relativisation and deeper materialisation of some postmodern epistemologies or alternatively return to a more de-essentialised and de-foundationalised model of standpoint theory or empiricism, I will leave aside. The point is that in this shift in epistemology in any case *reflexivity*, cannot be ignored in any form of contemporary feminist research, including that in the domain of feminist religious studies.

With regard to the juxtaposing with the insider/outsider debate however, and my own analysis of the ways 'difference' functions on different and additional levels in the case of feminist non-theological research of religion, many of these discussions on epistemology do not provide concrete suggestions on how feminist research within the context of the social sciences may look. Moreover, they often assume a conflation between the researcher and the

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researched in terms of feminism. Thus in the name of reflexivity, both Haraway, Harding and Stanley and Wise have all in one way or another argued for a levelling, rather than maintaining the boundaries between object and subject. Haraway (1991 [1988]) proposes for situated knowledges that the object of knowledge must not be seen as passive or inert, nor reduced 'to the ephemera of discursive production and social construction' (197). Rather, feminist accounts of objectivity and embodiment require that 'the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and an agent, not a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and authorship of 'objective knowledge'. (198). Harding's notion of 'strong reflexivity' (1991; 1993) holds that both observer and subject matter are put on the same causal plane, in order to achieve a more 'reciprocal relationship' between the agent and object of knowledge (1991: 161). According to Harding, opposed to the non-operationalisable forms of 'weak' notions of reflexivity and objectivity or 'judgmental relativism' frequently employed by anthropologists and sociologists (1991: 162-163), pleads for 'strong objectivity', which requires 'strong reflexivity' (1993: 69):

This is because culturewide (or nearly culturewide) beliefs function as evidence at every stage in scientific inquiry: in the selection of problems, the formation of hypotheses, the design of research (including the organization of research communities), the collection of data, decisions about when to stop research, the way results of research are reported and so on. The subject of knowledge – the individual and historically located social community whose unexamined beliefs its members are likely to hold 'unknowingly,' so to speak – must be considered as part of the object of knowledge of scientific method.

Stanley and Wise (1993: 200) argue for a 'morally responsible epistemology' recognising the following:

...the reflexivity of the feminist researcher *in* her research as an active and busily constructing agent; insistence that the 'objects' of research are also subjects in their own right as much as researchers are subjects of theirs (and objects of other people's); acceptance that the researcher is on the same critical plane as those she researches and not somehow intellectually superior; and, most fundamental of all, no opinion, belief or other construction of events and persons, no matter from whom this derives, should be taken as a representation of 'reality' but rather treated as a motivated construction or version to be subject to critical feminist analytical inquiry.

Whereas both Haraway and Harding's views on epistemology mainly focus on the natural sciences and thus have little concrete to say on social sciences or the

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humanities, Stanley and Wise, who are themselves sociologists, show how a 'postmodern', social constructionist viewpoint must be combined with reflexivity and accountability: 'feminist knowledge should be accountable knowledge, knowledge which acknowledges and reveals the labour processes of its own production' (2001). For all these feminist theorists, reflexivity thus involves a reconceptualisation of 'objectivity', deconstruction does not necessarily lead to relativism but refers to contextualisation, situating knowledges and to accountability.

As I have argued above, little of these discussions on feminist epistemology and the issue of reflexivity have been seriously applied to feminist studies of religion, although one may attempt to locate different types of research according to disciplinary boundaries within typologies, such as those suggested in chapter two. In the case of the insider/outsider problem and the question of feminist research on religion from the non-religious point of view, it at least becomes clear that any notion of a 'postmodern standpoint' must not be conflated with the 'insider' perspective, the first referring to women's lives or experience as a starting point rather than religious experience or views. A more postmodern, constructionist perspective as proposed by authors such as Harding, Haraway and Stanley and Wise does away with an 'older' more essentialist view of standpoint epistemology, one that does possibly make a conflation between the feminist as the insider's point of view.

It is precisely this kind of subjectivist epistemology that Katherine K. Young (1999d) in her severe critique of feminist research in religion, refutes. A reflexive approach however, one that avoids both the 'god-trick' and the 'view from nowhere', and as has been introduced in contemporary postcolonial, postmodern and feminist critique, would I believe be a starting point for rethinking the feminist study of religion. The main question how to remain reflexive, normative, to avoid the god-trick, to acknowledge one's location, positioning, yet remain feminist without participating in religious discourse or crypto-theology, is, however, by no means 'solved' by the idea of situated knowledges. Additional problems and dilemmas remain, and in order to move beyond the 'romance with epistemology' in contemporary feminist theory, I will be looking at some of the developments and past discussions in the field of feminist anthropology, which I argue methodologically and epistemologically may offer some further suggestions for an alternative, reflexive feminist study of religion. The 'reflexive turn' has been paramount in mainstream anthropology, and in the case of feminist anthropology as a social science in which the study of 'others' stands central, some parallel dilemmas with feminist religious studies become apparent.

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*Feminist Research Dilemmas and Reflexivity: Feminist Anthropology*

In Marilyn Strathern's (1987) account of the 'awkward relationship' between feminism and mainstream (chapter three), for the sake of her argument, Strathern drew on 'feminist approaches', generally characterized as those of the *radical* feminist kind. Despite their many methodological affinities, anthropology and feminist scholarship find themselves in a situation of mutual 'mockery', based on a differential conception of and relationship to their subject matter or the 'other'. For the radical feminist, in the taken-for-granted position of the subordinate standpoint, or the view from below, the non-feminist 'other' is patriarchy. For the (innovative) anthropologist on the other hand, the 'other' is the cultural 'other', and in light of postcolonial critique and postmodern self-reflexive critiques of the discipline, not the 'other' but the 'self' is under attack.

Anthropology - in the words of Rosalind Shaw (1995) - is attempting to effect an epistemological shift from a 'view from above', in order to decolonise and reinvent the discipline in various forms, through collaborative projects, 'polyvocality', techniques of experimentation, etc. In the 'new ethnography' in particular, as Strathern (1987: 290-291) noted, anthropology nonetheless mocks feminism as being a mere Western, and a particular cultural phenomenon and therefore presenting a limited view of the world: 'If women construct subjectivity for themselves, they do so strictly within the sociocultural constraints of their own society. The establishment of self must endorse a worldview shared equally by the Other'. However, crucial in the refutation of feminism as ignorant to cultural differences, as ethnocentric and thus participating in, rather than struggling against orientalist forms of scholarship, I believe, is Strathern's remark that this refutation takes place 'from a vantage point outside their own culture'. This perspective, I counterpoise, is more aligned with a non-situated 'view from above' than any possible 'view from below'.

In the same paragraph in chapter three, I also noted that one of the main and more original tensions underlying Strathern's characterisation of the 'awkward relationship', can be framed in terms of anthropology's traditional 'liberal ideology of cultural relativism' versus the claim of feminism as a universal politico-ideological and ethical project. Micaela di Leonardo (1991: 10) defines the 'feminist conundrum' in the form of the question how to 'analyze critically instances of male domination and oppression in precisely those societies whose customs anthropology was traditionally pledged to advocate?' Throughout the seventies and eighties there have been various and many responses in feminist anthropology to this conundrum, drawing on different theoretical models and taking different stances on the question of women's subordination cross-culturally. Developments in feminist theory and scholarship in general during the 'postmodern era', have also had a significant impact on theorising in feminist anthropology, making Strathern's juxtaposition

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between radical feminism and innovative anthropology somewhat outmoded at present.

Strathern does not take note of the internal developments within feminism and feminist theory referred to as the debate on 'difference' or the critique from diversity discussed in the previous chapter. Admittedly, the time of publication also proceeds most of the major discussions of the relationship between feminism and postmodernism, yet directly after the influx of postmodern and poststructuralist theory and discussions on reflexivity leading to the so-called 'linguistic turn' in anthropology. Strathern calls this development in mainstream anthropology the 'innovative approach', otherwise often referred to as the experimental or 'new ethnography' exemplified by publications by James Clifford and George Marcus (1986) and George Marcus and Michael J. Fischer (1986). The way in which these developments have had an impact on feminist anthropological theory furthermore shows how the issue of reflexivity has been played out in at least one social science in which multiple forms of difference feature centrally. As argued by feminist anthropologist Henrietta Moore (1988: 9), it is important to note that the notion of 'difference' - the critique from diversity - emerging in feminist anthropology is not the same as the concept of 'cultural difference' as central to the discipline of cultural anthropology. Whereas the basic tension between feminism and anthropology then lies in the primacy of either gender or cultural difference, one of the important contributions of feminist critique, is precisely the insight that cultural difference is 'but one difference among many'. According to Moore (9-10):

Feminist anthropology has recognized this insufficiency in so far as it formulates its theoretical questions in terms of how economics, kinship and ritual are experienced and structured through culture. It has also gone on to ask how gender is structured and experienced through colonialism, through neo-imperialism and through the rise of capitalism. But it must be said that it has, for the most part, still to confront the question of how gender is constructed and experienced through race.

As argued in the first chapter, it is precisely in the intersection of feminism and anthropology that the most promising research and theoretical perspectives are to be found on the intersections between multiple forms of difference and their relationship to power and inequality. In a similar way to the critique from diversity on the ethnocentrism, racism and essentialism of earlier feminism, - for not taking the differences between women into account - anthropology has similarly provided a questioning of a feminism that assumes a universal identity and experience of women. However, this questioning is then located in the context of an empirical social science in which an immediate relationship with the 'other' is present. After a phase of the 'anthropology of women' followed by the 'anthropology of gender', a next phase for feminist anthropology

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according to Moore would then involve coming to terms with the *real* differences between women, 'opposed to contenting itself with demonstrations of the variety of women's experiences, situations and activities worldwide'.<sup>19</sup> To deal with difference would mean to look at the way 'racial difference is constructed through gender, how racism divides gender identity experience, and how class is shaped by gender and race' (1988: 11). The benefits of such a feminist anthropology are for both mainstream anthropology and feminist theory itself (ibid.):

Anthropology is in a position to provide a critique of feminism based on the deconstruction of the category 'woman'. It is also able to provide cross-cultural data which demonstrate the Western bias in much mainstream theorizing. ... The third, and current, phase of the relationship between feminism and anthropology is thus characterized by a move away from 'sameness' towards 'difference', and by an attempt to establish the theoretical and empirical grounds for a feminist anthropology based on difference.

Opposed to Strathern's (1987) more negative stance, Moore's (1988) prospects on compatibility and mutual benefits may have been slightly too optimistic though, as subsequent publications and debates on the relationship between postmodernism, reflexivity on the one hand and anthropology and feminism on the other have meanwhile shown. For, the 'reflexive turn' in mainstream anthropology, perhaps best exemplified with the publication of *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* edited by James Clifford and George Marcus (1986), leashed a severe response by many a feminist anthropologist. It has greatly influenced what can be seen as a very 'special' (Davids and Willems 1999: 5) relationship of contemporary feminist anthropology with postmodernism. The decolonisation of the 'field' had set in after the Second World War and this 'field' increasingly resisted being studied as a mere anthropological 'object' (Asad 1973; Wolf 1982). Although attempts to 'reinvent' (Hymes 1972) and de-orientalise anthropology and other social sciences can be traced back to the sixties (Nencel and Pels 1991), issues of ethnographic authority and objectivity, cultural representation and power in particular became increasingly problematised in mainstream anthropology during the eighties under the influence of postmodern critique, known as a genuine moment of 'crisis of representation'. What appeared as a welcome development from the perspective of feminism, conversely both 'infuriated and saddened' many women anthropologists upon reading *Writing Culture*. According to Ruth Behar (1995: 4-5):

No two pages in the history of anthropological writing have ever created as much anguish among feminist readers as did James Clifford's uneasy statements justifying the absence of women anthropologists from the

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project of *Writing Culture*. Pushed to account for this gap by the criticism of a feminist reader who reviewed the book in manuscript, Clifford now made the infamous claim that women anthropologists were excluded because their writings failed to fit the requirement of being feminist *and* textually innovative.

Central to the book was the ‘incredibly obvious point’ that what anthropologists basically do is that they write. This writing – ethnographies – had to be understood in terms of ‘poetics and politics’, dependent, ‘on the words of (frequently less privileged) others for its existence and yet offer[ing] none of the benefits of authorship to those others who participate with the anthropologist in the writing of culture’ (Behar 1995: 4). The general context for the reflexive turn in anthropology therefore included the questioning of the power relations involved in the practice - and origins - of anthropology and particularly in the representation of the ‘other’, very much in line with the critique of orientalism initiated by Said. The ethnographic text pretends to convey ‘objective’ knowledge, whilst the ethnographer him/herself is completely absent from the ethnographic account. This gives the text the authority and status of being true and factual rather than the product of a particular interaction and observation on the part of the researcher carrying and interpreting through his/her own cultural presumptions.

The linguistic turn revolved around an exclusive focus on ethnographic representation and rhetoric, leading some to conclude that ethnography was more about *inventing*, creating ‘fictions’, rather than *representing* cultures through the usage of particular rhetorical strategies (Clifford 1986). The implications of this radical constructivist stance combined with the wish to further deconstruct the power inequalities between the ethnographic author, the invisible ‘self’ (the view from above) and the ‘other’ as the object of representation, was a shift in focus to the ethnography ‘as text’. This was to be analysed as a literary text with certain language styles, meanings and symbols. In order to solve this ‘crisis of representation’, proponents of the ‘ethnography of text school’ looked into alternative and experimental ways of writing in order to make the influence of the ethnographer upon observation and interpretation apparent, through techniques of dialogue, or by the integration of multiple voices, termed ‘polyvocality’.

The exclusion and rejection of work by feminist anthropologists in *Writing Culture* created such anguish, because ‘experimental’ techniques or ‘textual innovation’ were proclaimed wholly novel. However both techniques of experimentation and the issue of power differentials in fieldwork and in representation had precisely been important to feminist anthropology preceding the so-called postmodern turn, - before ‘reflexivity was a trendy term’ (Wolf 1992: 132) - yet without ever having affected or been taken seriously by the mainstream. In an article expressing their concern for the postmodern turn in anthropology from the perspective of feminism, Frances E. Mascia-Lees,

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Patricia Sharpe and Colleen Ballerino Cohen (1989: 11) argue that what appear to be 'new and exciting insights' to postmodern anthropologists such as the editors in *Writing Culture*, are not so innovative at all:

...that culture is composed of seriously contested codes of meaning, that language and politics are inseparable, and that constructing the 'other' entails relations of domination – are insights that have received repeated and rich exploration in feminist theory for the past forty years. Discussion of the female as 'other' was the starting point of contemporary feminist theory.

Deborah Gordon's critique (1988: 1) of the omission of feminist insights from *Writing Culture* and postmodern anthropology is equally harsh:

For feminists, particularly feminist anthropologists and ethnographers, an important problem with experimental ethnographic authority is its grounding in a masculine subjectivity which encourages feminists to identify with new modes of ethnography, claiming to be decolonial, while simultaneously relegating feminism to a strained position of servitude.

On the one hand feminism is credited by contributors such as James Clifford and Paul Rabinow, as a participant of movements of political and cultural critique, having profoundly influenced the academic climate towards the end of the eighties and the very location from which these authors speak. However, according to the editors the absence of feminist essays in the book is warranted by what Clifford sees as their 'lack of textual innovation and experimentation'. Work such as Jean Briggs' *Never in Anger* published in 1970 is then referred to by Clifford as an existing and older example of successful experimental ethnography, yet omitting that the book combined a feminist perspective with textual experimentation, and the fact that Briggs herself was a self-defined feminist scholar (Davids and Willemse 1999: 6). A whole host of earlier feminist anthropologist work by well-known and less-known authors (including the work of many an 'anthropologist's wife') such as Ruth Benedict, Elsie Clew Parsons, Eleanore Smith Bowen, Margaret Mead, Zora Neale Hurston, Ruth Landes, Ella Cara Deloria, Marjorie Shostak, Barbara Myerhoff and many others can be said to have been focussed on issues of 'textuality', the problem of representation of the 'other' and participated in feminist 'experimentation' in their work (see *Women Writing Culture* edited by Behar and Gordon 1995).

Nencel and Pels (1990: 17-18) similarly point to how Clifford contradicts himself by claiming feminist anthropology has not produced 'unconventional forms of writing', yet simultaneously cites three important examples of it, thus attempting to 'clean ethnographic experimentation of feminist stains, while making use of the insights put forward by feminism'.

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Diane Bell (1993: 7-8) also comments out how 'again we see the appropriation of a woman's tradition, for awareness of self as an instrument of observation – that is, reflexivity – once named and analysed, is given a male genealogy and becomes central to the critiques of culture by the postmodernists'. According to Behar (1995: 4), throughout the twentieth century many women had crossed the border between anthropology and literature,

...but usually 'illegally,' as aliens who produced works that tended to be viewed by the profession as 'confessional' and 'popular' or, in the words of Virginia Woolf, as 'little notes.' The *Writing Culture* agenda, conceived in homoerotic terms by male academics for other male academics, provided the official credentials, and the cachet, that women had lacked for crossing the border. Even the personal voice, undermined when used by women, was given the seal of approval in men's ethnographic accounts, reclassified in more academically favourable terms as 'reflexive' and 'experimental'.

Additionally, from the perspective of feminist theory and scholarship since the late seventies, the critique from diversity had involved similar issues such as the politics of authorship, representation and indeed experimentation with 'form'. These issues were extensively addressed by women of colour in *This Bridge Called my Back* for example, a work including contributions such as poems, letters, stories, etc., fulminating against the alleged and possible separation between objective and subjective or 'critical' opposed to 'creative' forms of writing.<sup>20</sup>

Women's contributions are not only ignored by postmodern anthropologists, but in appropriating only the radical, essentialist, or old-style standpoint strands, feminism itself is rejected as a culture-bound ideology, a Western 'meta-narrative' – as in Strathern's 'awkward relationship' – whilst other critical and political perspectives within the academy such as anti-colonialism or anti-racism are taken for granted (di Leonardo 1991: 23). For many feminist critics moreover, absence and omission was not the only problem. For some, the new ethnography did not go far enough. Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen (1989: 8) suggest that anthropologists would better look to feminist theory, as the latter at least *knows* its politics. Both anthropology and feminist theory share the insight that the 'other' (women or non-Western men and women) is equally importantly 'human' and both are critical of so-called 'universal truths' concerning human behaviour. Postmodern anthropologists attempt to deconstruct Western assumptions and categories in their new ethnography, as well as the general context of dominance and inequality in which the anthropologist stands opposite the to 'other'.

Instead of finding a way in which the 'other' can actually become a subject in the research process however, anthropologists turn to postmodern epistemology holding knowledge and truth are unattainable. The result is not

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only an attitude of relativism or even nihilism. In practice, the reification of the author as a subject and authority takes place instead of its deconstruction. The experimental and eclectic form only makes the text accessible for insiders. Elaborate self-reflection, self-introspection and the localisation of the ‘other’ in the ‘self’ in an attempt to undercut the authority of the author/researcher, have the opposite effect of maintaining the author as the central subject, and leaving *real-world* power inequalities unaltered (Abu-Lughod 1991; Wolf 1992).

The critiques of postmodern anthropology by feminist anthropologists echoes many of the suspicions formulated by feminist theorists such as Sandra Harding, Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Hartsock discussed earlier, who warn for the dangers of lapsing into relativism in the ‘view from everywhere’, the abandonment of materiality, embodiment, of politics and indeed, the abandonment of theory itself. In the context of a social science and empirical research however, the pitfalls of such a version of postmodernism become even more apparent. The problem for this kind of postmodern perspective in anthropology is the fact that one remains at the level of perspectivalism. A postmodern research stance *in se* does not bring with it an alternative theory or research methodology to anthropology (di Leonardo 1991; Pinxten 1997; Pinxten en Orye 1997). Thus Lila Abu-Lughod (1991: 143) argues:

Despite a long history of self-conscious opposition to racism, a fast-growing, self-critical literature on anthropology’s links to colonialism ..., and experimentation with techniques of ethnography to relieve a discomfort with the power of anthropologist over anthropological subject, the fundamental issues of domination keep being skirted. Even attempts to refigure informants as consultants and to ‘let the other speak’ in dialogic ... or polyvocal texts – *decolonizations on the level of the text* – leave intact the basic configuration of global power on which anthropology, as linked to other institutions of the world, is based [italics mine].

In the new ethnography therefore, we may conclude that ‘decolonisation’ or ‘deconstruction’ thus only takes place at the level of the text, and with Margery Wolf (1992: 136) that the way mainstream anthropology has appropriated postmodern theory may have offered ‘better’ ways for writing ethnographies, but by no means any proposals for better ways of doing fieldwork. The problem of power and inequality in all stages of the research and writing-up process in anthropology have nonetheless been extensively – if not easily solved – problematised in terms of ‘feminist dilemmas’ (Wolf 1996) for the feminist anthropologist, yet also apply to any feminist social scientific research in general (e.g. Ribbens and Edwards 1998).

The power differences between the researcher and the researched during the process of fieldwork are only one issue in need of reflection, whereas the subject of anthropological research mostly concerns cultural groups or

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subgroups in a structurally and economically less privileged position than that of the researcher. Feminist ideals of co-operation, equality, reciprocity, mutual respect and general 'empowerment' turn out to be false illusions once the anthropologist appears, depending upon hospitality and spare time, only to disappear after a while with the knowledge gained. The anthropologist is the one to determine and justify the research agenda, the questions, the direction and especially the purpose and point of any research project. In such a context, research is for the greater part conducted *by* and is *about* women, but rarely *with* and *for* women as in the traditional ideal of what feminist research should be about (see chapter two). Various feminist social science researchers, including anthropologists, have attempted to solve this contradiction by introducing more activist kinds of research, directed at structural changes among the research population and as desired and co-determined by the informants themselves. Such more applied forms of research nevertheless remain rare, and not merely due to the difficulties and demands of academic institutions and expectations. As remarked concerning the new ethnography, techniques such as 'letting the other speak', or often applied methods by feminist anthropologists such as the life history or oral narratives, do not automatically imply that the 'other' effectively becomes empowered. Many of these premises often push the other (woman) into a 'victim-position', reminiscent of many perspectives in development studies, perpetuating orientalism through eurocentric preconceptions on the 'underdeveloped' other.

Other dilemmas pertain to the ways in which information is obtained in the field. The position of the researcher allows her to be selective in self-disclosure, whilst it is expected of ethnographic informants to provide detailed portraits of their everyday lives. In the case of researching women's lives, this has been particularly problematic as feminist researchers are precisely interested in what mainstream science has often disregarded as uninteresting, not contributing or valid as a context of the production of knowledge itself. This frequently concerns the private, domestic, familial sphere where women in many societies are often situated. The dilemmas of making the private or the intimate and personal public, and how to translate these forms of knowledge-practices into academic discourse are considerable (Ribbens and Edwards 1998).

The distance between the field and 'home', can allow for the researcher to reconstitute her identity in a strategic manner in view of gaining entrance or obtaining certain information (Wolf 1996). Various feminist anthropologists have admitted to the fact that they have consciously lied about their background, relationships (single, marital status, etc.), sexual orientation, or their economic means in order to continue, or at least not be prevented from continuing their research in the field. In a review article of Judith Stacey's article 'Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?' published in 1988, Elizabeth E. Wheatley (1994) summarises how Stacey locates the dilemmas for the feminist anthropologist in both the process and the product of research. Despite the

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apparent similarities between ethnographic and feminist premises for conducting research, applying methods that call for egalitarian relations, reciprocity and mutual respect, Stacey is of the opinion that the exploitation of the researcher's subjects and many contradictions are inevitable. Informants are in actual practice placed 'at great risk of manipulation and betrayal' (Wheatley 1994: 405):

As an example, she [Stacey] outlines the dilemma she faced when one of her key informants, a fundamentalist Christian, requested that the details about her past lesbian status and relationship be kept in confidence for fear that such disclosure would be damaging to her. This informant and her former lesbian lover competed for Stacey's allegiance and sympathetic understanding. Stacey faced difficult ethical decisions in relating to these women – she was in the awkward position of potentially betraying one or the other woman, not only in terms of how she interacted with them, but also how she accounted for them in the written product.

The second paradox for feminist anthropologists in Stacey's account is posed in the writing of ethnography, where elements of inequality and exploitation similarly enter the ethnographic product. As a feminist Stacey wanted to discuss and negotiate the final product with her informants, but this posed further dilemmas. Remaining reticent on her informant's lesbian past for instance would have both unintended homophobic consequences and in general betray 'ethnographic truth'. In her critique on Stacey's subsequent proposal to turn to the new ethnography nonetheless, Wheatley (1994) argues that although the latter may acknowledge paradoxes of representation such as the above, it does not do much to ameliorate them, consistent with other feminist critiques of the postmodern turn discussed above.

*De-orientalising a Feminist Social Science Approach*

That the dilemmas and paradoxes for feminist scholars studying lived 'culture' that do not feature centrally in recent discussions of feminist epistemology discussed in an earlier paragraph, cannot merely be attributed to the fact that contemporary 'feminist theory' in general does not bear upon empirical research or even empirical 'reality'. Regardless of all in-built reservations and considerations due to the issue of 'differences', I believe, this theory still often presumes a conflation between 'women' and 'feminists', however culturally, racially, sexually, religiously or economically diverse or privileged. In anthropology and any other social science however, the differences between researcher and researched can also pertain to their diversity as women, not only as feminists. This holds for the kind of feminist study of religion that I propose.

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The greatest challenge for the feminist social science scholar therefore, is perhaps research that focuses on *non-feminist women*, which characterises the case study in the following chapters.

Important for the further reflexive turn within all forms of feminist research, but also in view of the development of global or, as it more recently is often formulated, *transnational* feminist movements, is what is generally termed as postcolonial feminist critique. Transnational feminist movements and scholarship aspire to refrain from reproducing orientalism, nor gender essentialism and cultural essentialism (see also my conclusion). In many respects, postcolonial feminist theory can be seen as aligned with or continuing the critique from diversity, yet this diversity takes place and is theorised from, in and on a global and historical scale, rather than being limited to ethnic, racial or other forms of ‘minority’ differences *within* Western locations. Postcolonial feminist theory can be broadly defined as a research area which aims to redress the lack of attention for gender issues in mainstream postcolonial theory through the ‘gendering of orientalism’, which involves the explication of the relations between racism, sexualisation, and gender in colonial, postcolonial and imperial representation. Postcolonial feminist writings in general simultaneously provide a critique of Western feminist theory, in particular the way the latter has often and problematically appropriated a homogeneous category of ‘third-world women’ (Gandhi 1998; Loomba 1998; Mills 1998; Quayson 2000).

Certain writings by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak can be considered to be the most influential in bringing attention to Western feminist theory as participating in orientalism and therefore signal the development of postcolonial feminist critique during the nineties. In a chapter entitled ‘Difference: “A Special Third Women Issue”’ in her book *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, and in her idiosyncratic literary style, Trinh (1989) points to how ‘Third World women’ are treated as a special category of ‘difference’ by many Western or liberal feminists, sustaining itself as the primary referent (82):

Have you read the grievances some of our sisters express on being among the few women chosen for a ‘Special Third World Women’s Issue’ or being the only Third World woman at readings, workshops, and meetings? It is as if everywhere we go, we become Someone’s private zoo.

Trained as an anthropologist, Trinh also refers to the way the image of the ‘Third World Woman’ in the context of what Trinh calls ‘pseudo-feminism’ merges and is interconnected with that of the ‘Native’ in the context of (neo-colonialist) anthropology. Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s (1991) article ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses’, originally published in 1984, shows how the category of ‘Third World Women’ is

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deployed in a variety of Western feminist texts and scholarship, only and similarly to contribute to a process of ‘othering’ in an ethnocentric and what Mohanty describes as a colonial fashion (53):

...the feminist writings I analyze here discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/re-presenting a composite, singular ‘third world woman’ – an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse.

Although Mohanty does not question the descriptive and informative value of most feminist writings on women in the third world, her attention goes to the political implications and effects of a great deal of this work. Her concern is with the way ethnocentric universalism is often produced in such analyses and in particular the way the representation of Western feminism is then received by many third world women, who then conflate it with imperialism. Mohanty (55) delineates three analytic principles guiding feminist scholarly discourse on women in the third world, the first being ‘the strategic location of the category “women” vis-à-vis the context of analysis’. ‘Women’ are thus constituted as a homogeneous group across class and culture, and assumed to share the same needs, desires, equally and universally ‘oppressed’ or ‘powerless’ under ‘patriarchy’. Third world women are thereby often discursively constructed and objectified as ‘victims’ of particular socioeconomic systems, including that of male violence, of Western colonisation, of the (Arab) patriarchal familial system, economic development process (the liberal ‘women in development’ literature), or religious ideologies such as ‘the Islamic code’.

In all these contexts, ‘women’ – and ‘men’ - are constituted as a homogeneous, internally undifferentiated ‘powerless’ group. It is as if they are sexual-political objects outside and *prior* to their entry into the arena of social relations, kinship structures within specific contexts, within specific varieties, rather than constituted *through* such structures. In the case of religious ideologies for example, ‘Islam’ is treated as an ideology ‘separate from and outside social relations and practices, rather than a discourse which includes rules for economic, social and power relations within society (62). ‘Islamic theology’ or ‘religion’ then becomes imposed on a separate and given entity called ‘women’ (64):

What is problematical about this kind of use of ‘women’ as a group, as a stable category of analysis, is that it assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of their subordination. Instead of analytically *demonstrating* the production of women as socioeconomic political groups within particular local contexts, this analytical move limits the definition of the female subject

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to gender identity, completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities. ... Because women are thus constituted as a coherent group, sexual difference becomes coterminous with female subordination, and power is automatically defined in binary terms: people who have it (read: men), and people who do not (read: women). ... Such simplistic formulations are historically reductive; they are also ineffectual in designing strategies to combat oppressions. All they do is reinforce binary divisions between men and women.

As a second analytical presupposition in such feminist scholarship on third world women, Mohanty refers to the way particular methodologies are used to demonstrate universal cross-cultural male domination and female exploitation. For instance, the widespread practice of veiling as a descriptive generalisation is automatically equated with the control of women, without attending to the concrete meanings associated to veiling in specific cultural, social and historical contexts. The mere existence of the sexual division of labour is similarly taken to be 'proof' of the oppression of women. Finally, a political presupposition which underlies the analytical and methodological strategies implies that in this form of colonialist discourse on 'third world women', Western feminists in fact become the real subject of feminist discourse, with third world women never rising 'above the debilitating generality of their "object" status' (71), and ultimately robbed 'of their historical and political agency' (72).

Finally, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1994 [1988]) famous essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' argues how through the representation of the 'subaltern' women in both imperial and feminist discourses, as 'doubly oppressed', they are always already absent or silent. As both 'the object of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant' (82), (102):

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernity.

Through a postcolonial reading of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* for example, Spivak (1995 [1985]) shows how the emergence of the female subject and her claim to individual autonomy, - that of the white female protagonist in the novel. It is simultaneously complicit with and situated in imperialist discourse. Thus as a novel representative of Western feminism, it is also 'imperialist feminism', existing through and participating in the erasure of the 'third world woman' or the colonial subject (symbolised in the figure of the half-caste Bertha Mason in the novel).

Although these three writers and their work all greatly differ in background and in style, in all texts the tension between feminist theory and

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postcolonial critique is important. On the one hand liberal and radical Western feminism is identified as colonialist or imperialist, as shown in the feminist academic practices and representations of the 'third world woman'. From a feminist point of view then again, both mainstream postcolonial theory and anti-colonial movements<sup>21</sup> can be faulted neglecting issues of gender, fraught with deeper problems such as 'double oppression' or the silence of the 'subaltern woman'. Postcolonial theory's affinities with, and borrowings from postmodern and poststructuralist theories however, may point to more intersections between contemporary postmodern feminist theories and postcolonial critique, contributing to a decolonisation or de-orientalisation of the first. According to Ann Brooks (1997: 105) postmodern, postcolonial and feminist theories (engaging with deconstruction) all have in common their critique of and objective of the 'dismantling or subverting [of] dominant hegemonic discourses'. All share a questioning of traditional epistemologies and meta-narratives employing binaries such as self/other, centre/margin, coloniser/colonised (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1995: 86) and critique a notion of the unitary subject.

More so than many varieties of mainstream postmodern theory, feminist theory as well as postcolonial theories are explicitly political in the sense that they focus on the analysis of oppression of the 'other' and seek ways to dislodge structures of colonial/gendered domination. The problem of 'agency' and 'resistance' figures in both postmodern feminist theories and postcolonial theories, yet in both cases, this problem arises especially I believe, when the focus remains overtly textual and limited to the issue of 'representation'. Thus although the problem of women as the 'site' rather than the 'subject' of various discourses and debates in (post)colonial contexts has been identified as a major issue in postcolonial feminist critique, particularly regarding the debate surrounding *sati* or widow immolation in certain parts of India in the past and in present times (Loomba 1998; Mani 1989; Narayan 1997; Spivak 1994 [1988]), the dilemma remains how to solve the problem of absence or the possibility whatsoever of 'recovering' the subaltern voice and agency. Whereas Spivak can be taken to be more pessimistic on this account, claiming the virtual impossibility of recovering the standpoint of the oppressed subject, - 'there is no space where the subaltern subject can speak' -, Uma Narayan (1997) using the same debate on *sati*, is more optimistic on the possibilities of non-imperialist and decolonised feminist politics and agency.

Narayan (1997) critiques the colonial representation of the 'Indian tradition' of *sati*, in particular as treated by the radical post-Christian feminist Mary Daly in her *Gyn/Ecology: the Metaethics of Radical Feminism* published in 1978. Daly gives the impression in her book that widow immolation would be a widespread and persistent phenomenon threatening the lives of many Indian women. According to Narayan, Daly does not pay any attention whatsoever to the contextual aspects of *sati*, the practice being limited to certain castes and regions and virtually unknown in many communities. The result is

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'the effacement of cultural change within historical time ... with the effacement of cultural variations across communities and regions [to] suggest a "Third-World culture", that is "frozen" with respect to both Space and Time' (50). Narayan's problem is with the way women in third world countries are thus represented as victims of 'tradition/religion/culture' as if these are unproblematic and static complexes, whilst problems in the Western world are hardly ever presented or approached in a such a reductionist, simplistic manner.<sup>22</sup> Firstly, colonialism probably greatly contributed towards the construction and spread of the practice as a 'tradition'. Thus in the British colonial discourse of the nineteenth century concerning the start of a prohibition on sati, the first concern appeared to be the protest from the Indian population that would threaten British hegemony. The colonisers assumed that the status of 'sati' as a tradition could be determined by 'religious sanction', prompting a number of Indian religious specialists to look for religious scripture which could legitimise the practice. This strategy however, proved totally alien to the Indian context and a host of disparate perspectives could be justified by another host of 'holy' texts. According to Narayan, this urge for 'cultural authenticity', inasmuch as many other 'native traditions', contributed to their actual construction (63). The debate on sati thus generated a notion of 'tradition' that was constructed by British colonials and a number of their elite subjects, under the guise of 'discovery'.

According to Narayan, the growing Indian attention for sati since the nineteenth century can be compared to the way many local practices and 'traditions' in third world countries were constructed as 'national traditions' as crucial components within movements of independence. Colonial representations were used in turn by anti-colonial movements as a form of 'reversed orientalism' (Abu-Lughod 1991: 144). In Narayan's view, some recent attempts to reinstate the practice of sati must be analysed as contemporary phenomena and not simply put into dichotomous framework of religions/tradition opposed to westernisation/modernisation. Two instances of sati during the eighties for example, show how many of the concerned accrued considerable benefits following the immolation of widows. At the local level the family gained a considerable amount of money and the site chosen for the pyre proved convenient for the erection of memorial signs and even sati-temples, contributing to the growth of a lucrative religious tourism to the benefit of the family and direct surroundings. At the national level, the public and spectacular dimensions of the happenings have confirmed adoration and self-sacrifice as a visible nationalistic political ideal of 'Hindu womanhood'. For Narayan, the fact that sati is not justifiable in terms of tradition or culture would not automatically imply that it is morally acceptable. From this kind of perspective, Narayan is arguing for a non-colonial form of feminism and feminist scholarship, one that must not be simply rejected as a culture bound ideology, but thoroughly de-colonised itself.

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The field of postcolonial studies – with writers such as Spivak – is mostly located in the humanities and engaged with the analysis of (often literary colonial or neo-colonial) texts. By contrast, the postcolonial feminist critique such as that of Narayan and Mohanty appears to be more concerned with the material, social and political strategies and real-world contexts and *consequences* of such representation (through an analysis of social scientific discourse rather than literature), emphasising the need to both link and differentiate between the discursive and the material. In borrowing Teresa de Lauretis's distinction between 'Woman' and 'woman'<sup>23</sup>, Mohanty expresses the need to address the relationship between the first, 'a cultural and ideological composite Other constructed through diverse representational discourses' and the second, 'real, material subjects of their collective histories' (1991 [1984]: 53). In some of Mohanty's other work, becomes clear that an analysis of feminist colonial representation of 'third world women', is but one necessary aspect in a much broader project of identifying non-Western feminist politics and practices. This project in turn might contribute to a epistemological and political corrective of Western feminist analysis towards more transnational modes of feminism (Mohanty 1991; Alexander and Mohanty 1997). Such a de-orientalising of feminist theory would thus involve a more intersectional and complex approach towards the feminist study of gender and power (1991: 13):

I want to suggest that it is possible to retain the idea of multiple, fluid structures of domination which intersect to locate women differently at particular historical conjectures, while at the same time insisting on their dynamic oppositional agency of individuals and collectivities and their engagement in 'daily life'. It is this focus on dynamic oppositional agency that clarifies the intricate connection between systemic relationships and the directionality of power. In other words, systems of racial, class, and gender domination do not have *identical* effects on women in third world contexts. ... It is also by understanding these intersections that we can attempt to explore questions of consciousness and agency without naturalizing either individuals or structures.

Reflexivity can be found in both feminist appropriations of postmodern and postcolonial theories, as they share a basic critique of essentialism, and underline the connections between knowledge and power, culture and politics, and representation and agency in a global context. Overt textual approaches towards 'discourse' that see power as endlessly diffuse and differences as 'playful' may run into danger of reifying these differences and keeping the Western subject in place. Approaches such as Mohanty's by contrast attempt to move beyond and incorporate postcolonial and postmodern insights in view of a different more nuanced and comparative approach that focuses on power and materiality, taking context and the intersectional construction of identity into account. Although postcolonial critique is foremost concerned with the 'Orient'

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and feminist postcolonial research has focussed on the relation between the West and ‘third world women’, it is my contention that postcolonial reflexivity can and equally must apply to contexts in which the ‘other’ figures in a research relationship. The de-colonisation of anthropology similarly implies that all contexts in effect can be considered ‘postcolonial’, as is attested in the increasing focus of anthropological research ‘at home’.

It is my contention that such a feminist postcolonial anthropological approach would be conducive in a gender-inclusive study of religion and gender, and I will be applying some of the basic suggestions made in the analysis and interpretation of empirical research in the form of a case study discussed in the following chapters. Theoretically, the methodology proposed appropriates an intersectional and praxeological notion of gender set out in chapter one, or in Visweswaran’s (1994: 75) words, one ‘displaces gender from the center of feminist theory, and starting from a consideration of how race, class, or sexuality determines the positioning of a subject – not with being “women,” but how women are different.’ In general, this proposal would borrow on the convergences between feminist anthropology and feminist postmodern, poststructuralist and deconstructive approach towards sex/gender, introduced in chapter one. Although the main perspective is that of social science and ‘lived religious identity and agency’, in line with anthropology, I also call for more cross-fertilisation between the humanities and social sciences as put forward by Susan Sered (chapter one). In very basic terms, this would involve the study of both the level of discourse, ideology, symbols, etc. regarding gender and religion, but also the way these are constructed, appropriated, contested and ‘put into practice’ in real people’s daily lives.

At the end of the first and introductory chapter, three main observations concerning the contemporary status of the study of gender and religion underlying the problematic relationship between mainstream religious studies and a feminist approach were ascertained. In the same chapter that predominantly focussed on conceptual issues pertaining to the study of ‘gender’, and in review of the recent literature, I stated how to date the mainstream remains ‘androcentric’, failing to make any ‘gender critical’ turn. On the other hand and in the second place, I argued that the field of the feminist study of religion in many respects appears to be ‘lagging behind’ in comparison with other areas of feminist research, and that there has similarly been barely any integration of what I called ‘feminist gender theory’ from a more comparative and cross-cultural approach. Thirdly, I remarked how in turn the feminist study of religion appears to be marginalised or even ‘ghettoised’ in gender studies or feminist studies as a purportedly interdisciplinary field. In the following three chapters I set out to show how all these observations are not only related, but point to a deeper, multifaceted ‘awkward relationship’ between feminist scholarship and the mainstream discipline of religious studies. My thesis was that this relationship of apparent incompatibility could be attributed

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to both internal features of feminist scholarship and of religious studies, but mostly in the *juxtaposing* of these two fields of study.

Following the conceptual focus of chapter one, chapter two set out to explore the possible historical grounds for this awkward relationship, offering some initial insights on the diversified and complex relationship between feminist movements, religion, and the academy in Western society. In chapter three, some general typologies of feminist research and theory were applied to the contemporary feminist study of religion in order to assess the presence and/or character of any methodological shifts. Borrowing Rosalind Shaw's (1995) hypothesis on the relationship between religious studies and a feminist approach, I concurred with her that a greater part of this scholarship can be viewed as essentialist, in as much as an engendering of the mainstream is hampered by its inherent essentialism due to a 'view from above'. However, although attention has been given to the issue of 'diversity', in phase with general developments in feminist research and theory, I argued that this has greatly taken place in the context of one religious tradition only, to the detriment of taking religious differences and its possible implications into account.

In this chapter, I have delved deeper into the methodological and epistemological reasons underlying the relationship of awkwardness and incompatibility. First, I maintained how the problem of 'difference' versus essentialism in the feminist study of religion needs to be readdressed. Besides a re-theorisation of the religious differences between women, an inquiry into differences in the frame of insider/outsider positionings, or the religious versus the non-religious viewpoint of religious studies scholarship is required. Typologies of the feminist study of religion discussed in the previous chapter were reassessed in view of the insight that there appears to be no epistemological distinction between the insider perspective - the *practice* of religion in terms of studies *in* religion or 'theology' - on the one hand, and the strictly scholarly outsider perspective such as in the mainstream history of religion's methodology on the other. In the feminist study of religion in which boundaries are commonly drawn along the lines of reformist or revolutionary perspectives, I showed how there seems to be no distinction between the critique of androcentric methodology, and patriarchal religion as such. This conflation points to a profounder problem still, as in the fundamental epistemological critique that feminist scholarship poses to mainstream scholarship on notions of objectivity and value-neutrality, the blurring of insider/outsider boundaries cannot be escaped. Those scholars repudiating the feminist study of religion as a religio-ideological activity however, can themselves be shown to be incapable of being immune to the instantiation of politics and ideology into their proposal for 'objective' scholarship. The question shifted to whether a feminist study *of* religion is conceivable at all. I also argued that as some recent calls to include religious diversity in the feminist study of religion suggest, de-theologisation would be required.

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However, even this methodological discussion does not take note of the problems feminist scholarship faces once juxtaposed with the insider/outsider debate in the mainstream.

In the following paragraph, I argued how these problems are not isolated, but can be related to internal debates in the mainstream study of religion, where discussions on essentialism and reductionism are by far resolved. Following up on Shaw's assessment, I underlined how the traditional mainstream religious studies methodological programme (with techniques of phenomenology, hermeneutics, *époché* and bracketing, etc.) and in employing a *sui generis* conception of and essentialist approach to religion, inhibits questions of gender from the feminist point of view. However, I also demonstrated how the alternative reductionist approach that sees the preceding as 'cryptotheology', is similarly problematic as it rests on principles of objectivity and value-neutrality which are highly problematic from the perspective of feminist epistemology.

I proceeded with a closer inquiry into the kind of 'postmodern' feminist epistemology that rejects this objectivism. It is also at this conjecture I argued that perhaps some possibilities towards alternatives in the study of gender and religion could be found, rather than any definitive 'solutions' to the problems involved in major paradigm shifts. This involved a look at some recent discussions of religious studies methodology that hope to transcend the insider/outsider debate beyond essentialism/reductionism and forge what I viewed as a 'postmodernisation' of religious studies. These discussions mostly centre on the notion of 'reflexivity', borrowed from primarily postcolonial critique and theory. At this point, I sought alliances with postmodern feminist theory where important notions such as 'situated knowledges' allow for a critique and refutation of the 'god-trick' or a 'God's eye view', both in the sense of the omniscient 'modernist' scientific objectivist perspective *and* in the sense of the religious point of view.

Finally, I pointed out how this epistemological grounding did not allow for the 'difference' in the context of researcher/researched relationship in any de-orientalised feminist social science, for which I once again turned to feminist anthropology. Although having to deal with its own problems and debates, a feminist anthropological approach to the study of religion and gender I argue, may in turn contribute to a further de-orientalisation or de-colonisation of feminist theory and research in general. Although progress is currently being made, I find the latter, on the whole continues to remain insufficiently attentive to questions of culture, but as I ultimately will argue, also and especially to those of religion and the religious differences between women (and men).

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<sup>1</sup> Shaw draws on a critical analysis by Marsha Hewitt on writings in feminist spirituality, including the work of Carol Christ ('Cyborgs, Drag Queens, and Goddesses: Emancipatory-Regressive Paths in Feminist Theory', *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 1993, 5, p. 135-154).

<sup>2</sup> See chapter three, under: 3. Against Androcentrism: Critiquing Male Bias.

<sup>3</sup> These include *Women in World Religions* (Sharma 1987), *Today's Women in World Religions* and *Religion and Women* both published in 1994, *Feminism and World Religions* (Sharma and Young 1999) and most recently a book on *Women Saints in World Religions* (Sharma 2000).

<sup>4</sup> See chapter one under 1: A Millennial Fantasy: On the Verge of a Paradigm Shift towards Gender Inclusiveness? And chapter two: 3. Against Androcentrism: Critiquing Male Bias.

<sup>5</sup> See chapter three under: 2. Situated Typologies of Feminist Research in Religion: *General Classificatory Schemes*.

<sup>6</sup> On these methods of mainstream religious studies, see next paragraph and further.

<sup>7</sup> Young (1999b) continuously generalises the term 'feminism' and 'feminists' which she sees as homogenic categories that hold men 'responsible for all human problems' (177). Young is clearly entirely ignorant of the development, vastness, and variety in feminist scholarship for three decades now, and her call for more attention to men and the problem of masculine identity and more 'intersexual dialogue' is all the more peculiar in that it completely sidesteps all the theorising and work being done in the field of gender studies and men's studies institutionalised years before the publication of her review. See also Young's (1999d: 298-299) 'Postscript' to the collection *Feminism and World Religions* (Sharma and Young 1999), in which she claims that 'the task of feminism, its raison d'être, is to improve the status of women as a class in relation to men as a class. Because every problem of women as a class is blamed on men as a class, and because these problems have never been completely solved, some feminists assume that they must continue to undermine men as a class in every conceivable way.' In Young's view 'gynocentrism' 'demonizes' men as a class (302).

<sup>8</sup> Ninian Smart (1996: 20) for example claims that 'constructive theology, which is a branch of worldview-construction, is more a part of the *data* of the descriptive and phenomenological treatment of religions.'

<sup>9</sup> Fiona Bowie (1998) briefly refers to Sandra Harding's standpoint epistemology as noted earlier.

<sup>10</sup> The issue of religious differences in terms of doctrine/theology versus an emphasis on practice, especially from the perspective of gender in Orthodox Judaism, will be taken up in the case study in chapter seven.

<sup>11</sup> The two perspectives are also often categorised as 'emic' (insider viewpoint) and 'etic' (outsider viewpoint), words derived from 'phonemic' and 'phonetic' referring to respectively sound units and the cross-cultural notations representing these vocal sounds as used in the International Phonetic Alphabet (Pike [1967] 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Wiebe (1999 [1993]: 132) similarly joins the critique of Ninian Smart in his plea for the establishment of a 'World Academy of Religion', which he sees as another reintegration of the religio-theological study of religion within the academic, scientific study of religion.

<sup>13</sup> Said has often been critiqued by feminist writers for his 'failure' to pay attention to sexual and gendered metaphors in orientalist discourse (Andermahr, Lovell and Wolkowitz 1997: 156-157). Orientalism is itself often a gendered process, with the effeminisation of the 'other' man and Western women 'orientalised as the internal other' (Moors 1991: 117). Race and gender as categories of hierarchical and mutual reinforcing difference have similarly shown to be prominent in both popular and nineteenth century scientific discourse (Lomba 1998: 160-161). Another example of a feminist critique and appropriation of the notion of orientalism is that of Reina Lewis (1996). In her study of orientalist representations by Western women, Lewis argues that access of the latter was different to that of white men, which produced a differential gaze on the orientalised 'other', their positioning as women itself 'being contingent on the other shifting relational terms that structured the presumed superiority of the Western Orientalist' (4).

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In 'Orientalism, Occidentalism and the Control of Women', Laura Nader (1989) shows how images of 'other' women function to keep women subordinate in one's own society. Nader also argues that these controlling processes work both ways. Through 'Occidentalism' the grip on women in Middle Eastern countries is similarly often justified.

<sup>14</sup> Coined by Jean-François Lyotard, the term postmodernity or the 'postmodern condition' in general refers to the features of contemporary Western society 'after modernity'. In the first place it is a particular 'temporal, historically specific social formation' (Inderpal and Grewal 1997: 4) characterised by a particular economic structure (of 'post-Fordist production' and 'late consumer capitalism'), yet also the 'cultural logic', the 'cultural forms' and most aspects of 'contemporary life' characteristic of these conditions.

<sup>15</sup> McCutcheon is obviously not the only author to have embarked on such a critique and himself refers (1997: 131) to scholars like Benson Saler, Hatjot Oberoi and Talal Asad who have from different perspectives and with different alternative proposals set out to critique 'religion' as an essential ahistorical category of analysis.

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. the critique of Chodorow by Iris Marion Young (1997 [1989]), and Marilyn Friedman (1997 [1987]), Michele M. Moody-Adams (1997 [1991]) and Seyla Benhabib (1997 [1986]) for critical readings of Gilligan.

<sup>17</sup> See chapter three.

<sup>18</sup> As Baukje Prins (1997: 69) notes, surprisingly Harding only seems to have used this specific term only once to characterise the dialectic between the two approaches as undertaken in *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (1991: 49).

<sup>19</sup> Due to their evident focus on cross-cultural data and sensibilities, feminist anthropologists were among the first to signal that concepts such as 'oppression' or 'status' were relative or at least needed careful situating within different cultural and historical contexts. Theories in search of 'key factors' for sexual inequality were found too simplistic. Evolutionary-Marxist perspectives were criticised for the way contemporary societies were seen as 'underdeveloped' on a time scale (Leacock 1978; Di Leonardo 1991: 15). MacCormack and Strathern (1980) questioned Ortner's (1974) structuralist and dichotomous scheme which proposed that universally women were associated with 'nature' opposed to the – superior – association of men with 'culture'. Strict theoretical divides between the private and the public sphere (Rosaldo 1974) and their relation to gender difference and inequality were similarly critiqued on the basis of cross-cultural data and comparative theorising.

<sup>20</sup> See chapter three under: 6. Deconstructing Women through 'Diversity': *The Differences between Women*.

<sup>21</sup> For the relationship between nationalist anti-colonial movements and gender, see chapter eight and my conclusion.

<sup>22</sup> See Narayan's essay on domestic violence in the U.S.A. in the same book (Narayan 1997).

<sup>23</sup> From Teresa de Lauretis's *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, in: Brooks 1998: 109.

## **CHAPTER FIVE RELIGION AND GENDER IN A STRICTLY ORTHODOX JEWISH COMMUNITY**

The objective of the following three and final chapters is to present the results of a case study, drawing on both a literature study and an empirical study, carried out among strictly Orthodox Jewish women living in Antwerp, Belgium. The empirical research has been carried out, as far as possible, following the methodological framework of feminist anthropological research on gender and religion as proposed in the preceding chapter. However, since this is an application of the theory, the following analysis also functions as an illustrative testing of the hypotheses set out in the previous theoretical part, concerning the relationship of incompatibility between mainstream religious studies and a feminist gender studies approach. The problematic ‘view from above’ approach, extensively discussed in theoretical and methodological terms, is countered through an analysis of religious agency and identity from the perspective of feminist gender theory.

The choice of the religious tradition and community is furthermore warranted on the basis of the lacunae in the androcentric, mainstream study of religion, and the alternative proposal which looks at theory and methodology in feminist anthropology and postcolonial feminist critique. The challenge is to show how ‘religion as text’, religion *sui generis*, and the non-reflexive means of researching religion ultimately fail from the perspective of gendered critique, nevertheless by opting for precisely an empirical study in the context of a ‘world religion’ and Mediterranean religious tradition as locally practised within the context of contemporary western society. In order to show the limitations of mainstream approaches from the perspective of a comparative, anthropologically based gender studies approach, one does not have to look ‘so far’ at more ‘exotic’ religious traditions or places as has often been the case and was extensively illustrated at several conjectures in my previous account.<sup>1</sup> By focussing on a religious tradition and community where patriarchal traditionalist gender norms (the level of discourse and ideology) and roles (the level of practice) prevail (strictly Orthodox Judaism), the process of ‘recovering’ women’s religious agency is most challenging in both methodological aspects *and* in terms of feminist analysis and interpretation.

This chapter consists of a study of literature, that, at different levels, reformulates the general charge of androcentrism in religious studies and anthropology, while pointing at the lacunae in feminist scholarship on religion that depart from what I termed an ‘insider’ or religious point of view. First, I briefly review the field of feminist religious studies scholarship on Judaism, by appropriating some of the axes of differentiation and typologies on gender and feminist research set out in chapters two and three. In the second paragraph I

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turn to social scientific (anthropological) rather than ‘theological’ or insiders’ perspectives on strictly Orthodox Jewish ‘religion’. This research is shown to be characterised by an androcentric perspective, despite the fact that ‘lived’ religion and religious practice is the object of study. I finally point to the lacunae in existing social scientific research on women in strictly Orthodox Jewish communities that remains limited in its application of feminist theory and methodology of the kind I propose. In chapters six, seven and eight, an account follows of my own case study concerning strictly Orthodox Jewish women’s religious practice in Antwerp.

### 1. Jewish Feminists and Feminist Jewish Studies

*The question of Women and Judaism is more crucial today  
than all the political problems of the people and its state.  
Failure to deal with it seriously threatens the viability of the  
Judaism of Torah and Mitzvoth in the contemporary world.*

Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1992 [1980]: 128)

In chapter two, under *Jewish Feminisms*, I briefly characterised the relationship between second wave feminism and Judaism as a religious tradition. In reviewing some of the first Jewish feminist literature dating from this period of the late sixties onwards, the complex and polysemic relationship of feminism to Judaism immediately became apparent. Whereas self-proclaimed feminists like Rachel Adler (1995 [1983/1973]) initiated a critique of Judaism as a patriarchal religion in much the same line as ‘Christian’ contemporaries such as Mary Daly, it can be stated that status of feminism vis-à-vis Judaism was historically much more problematic than in Christianity, and particularly in the context of a culture that was predominantly Christian. For example, I drew attention to the fact that debates on women’s status within Judaism predate, or take place independently of, explicit feminist movements and concerns. Moreover, the very relationship between Judaism and feminism has often been ‘antithetical’ in the sense that in Judaism and the ‘survival’ thereof, much more is at stake than it being a mere *religious* tradition. It can also possibly be viewed as a category of *identity* in much broader terms, or *ethnicity* in view of more recent historical shifts.

In the previous chapter on the epistemological problems underlying the possibility of a feminist study of religion, and relating to the insider/outsider debate and the conflation of ‘studying and doing religion’, it was shown that both feminist reconstructionist/revolutionary and reformist approaches could be viewed as internally ‘theological’ or departing from the religious point of view. This hypothesis similarly applies, yet also gains a particular character in the

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feminist study of Judaism. For it can be theoretically argued that all these types of studies, whether they seek to adapt Jewish religion to feminist concerns, or wish to critique the tradition as a whole as 'hopelessly patriarchal', all perspectives remain those of 'insiders'. The focus in the following paragraph will first lie on the specific character, and in particular the lacunae in view of the insider/outsider problem in the feminist study of religion in the case of Judaism. Meanwhile, a critical overview of these studies will serve as an introduction of data on 'the position of women in Judaism' as relevant for the case study in chapters seven and eight.

*Judaism and Feminism: An Antithesis?*

*My own synagogue is the only place in the world where I am not named Jew.*

Cynthia Ozick (1995 [1983]: 125)

In 'Jews and Judaism in Contemporary Europe? Religion or Ethnic Group?' Jonathan Webber (1997) eloquently sketches the historical shifts that have led to the transformation of Jewish identity as a category of 'religion' to that of 'ethnicity' in the outsider view, but also as internalised by many contemporary European Jews. Whilst these shifts are obviously fundamental to any discussion of Judaism or Jewry from the perspective of social science, it must be underlined that Judaism has always been an ethnically defined 'religion' to start with. From a gender perspective, it must also be noted that this particular patriarchal religion is furthermore – somewhat paradoxically – matrilineal defined. Although definitions of 'who is a Jew?' have historically, contextually and interculturally varied, the rabbinical definition holds that it is solely the mother who determines a child is a Jew. This particular cultural construction of Jewish identity combined with the more recent shifts that Webber outlines, form an important background to any discussion on the difficult relationship between feminism and Judaism, and repeatedly crop up as paramount in much of the feminist Jewish literature.

In an overview of the 'geopolitics of Jewish feminism' for example, which – although being a personal account – can be viewed as a genealogy of the history of the Jewish feminism, Alice Shalvi notes that many 'pioneers and leaders' of the U.S. second wave feminist liberal movement were in fact Jewish women (Shalvi 1995: 231). Shalvi, however, does not reflect any further on this fact, apart from noting that this feminism in general revolved around the familiar liberal issue of women seeking self-fulfilment in the workforce rather than remaining in the confines of the domestic sphere, which was particularly the case for the traditional Jewish female role.<sup>2</sup> This coincidental socio-

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historical 'fact' therefore stands apart from the question whether writers such as these in any way reflected on the relationship of their own Jewishness to feminism. Yet from the viewpoint of the author, at the same time the very fact of ethnicity somehow seems to warrant their inclusion in such a genealogy of 'Jewish feminism' in an – albeit comparative - international context, both religious and secular.

The question is in what way 'Jewish feminism' or 'feminist Judaism' converge or differ. Whereas both are determined by and converge in terms of 'Jewishness as ethnicity', only the boundaries of the latter at first sight seem to be clear from the perspective of the radical feminist transformation of Judaism as a religious tradition, as put forward by the revolutionary or reconstructionist approach (see next paragraph). Even here however, these analytical boundaries around the distinct 'theological' perspective may turn out not to be so easily defined, which at this point can be illustrated with Judith Plaskow's (1991 [1990]: xviii) question: 'At what point in the reinterpretation of Judaism does the Jewish tradition cease being Jewish and become something else?'

As for 'Jewish feminism', the literature shows that apart from the minimal determinant of ethnicity, meanings are vastly diverse. Firstly, as in the non-Jewish case, many women's organisations that are at least *organised* on the basis of both signifiers of gender and ethnicity are by no means necessarily 'feminist' or at least would not self-identify as such, in that they do not per se focus on feminist or even distinctly women's issues. In confining herself to large Jewish women's national organisations in the U.S. for example, Shalvi characterises Hadassah, the largest women's Zionist organisation as 'non-feminist'. She also depicts the National Council of Jewish Women (non-Zionist) as 'concerned with general social issues, not with Jewish ones' (Shalvi 1995: 233). In a footnote to an article on the feminist challenge to Judaism, Norma Baumel Joseph argues that the difference between Jewish feminists and feminist Jews is not 'mere word play' and 'rests on which category is considered the noun and which the modifying adjective'. However, even this distinction does not entirely make clear whether it also rests on secular or otherwise religious identity: 'while there are many feminists who are Jewish, only some are attempting to use feminist theory and methodology to transform (modify) Judaism' (Joseph 1995: 65).<sup>3</sup>

Characteristic for what can be termed the development of 'Jewish feminism' was that from its inception both Jewish religious and secular issues on women's status were in practice often deeply intertwined, and to a far greater extent than was the case for the strictly secular women's movement in the broader gentile society.<sup>4</sup> Focussing on the impact of second wave feminism on the role of the synagogue in the U.S., Rela Geffen Monson (1992: 228) argues that it was especially in the arena of the synagogue, as a central public institution of Jewish life in general, where demands for Jewish women's equality took a start. Although the movement that was directly inspired by the broader American feminist movement was initiated by a 'small group of highly

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educated, traditional Jewish women', women who were not observant suddenly began to visit the synagogue and partake in the battle.<sup>5</sup> According to Monson, these women 'viewed their protest as a political as well as a religious act, even though it took place within the framework of a religious institution' [...] They saw a link between the ritual and the secular roles within the synagogue'.<sup>6</sup>

That in the case of Jewish feminism the boundaries between the religious and the secular were immediately indistinct is no more apparent than in the Israeli context, where the literal boundaries of Israel as a state are infused with particular meanings of and connections between ethnicity, nationality and religion. The very fact that state and religion are constitutionally not separated as in the U.S., has to date been seen as the primary factor in the painstakingly slow advances and highly contradictory situations for women's status of inequality.

The complexity of the relationship between Judaism and feminism is further enhanced by the delineation and perception of feminism as both a non-Jewish and a 'modern' phenomenon. This has been the case on grounds of nationality in Israel since the early seventies, where the first feminist activists were predominantly Anglo Saxons, and feminism was perceived as a 'foreign import', irrelevant in the context of the 'myth of equality' in Israeli society (Shalvi 1995: 235-6). Historically, second wave feminism as a predominantly secular and modern movement has furthermore often been viewed as a threat to Judaism, in both religious and ethnic terms and across national lines. Susannah Heschel (1995 [1983]: xli) interprets this perceived threat in a much broader context of Judaism as a religion coping with the challenges of modernity: 'To an extent, the conflict emerging between feminism and Judaism today parallels the conflict between Jews and Western culture that begun to take shape with the Emancipation of Jews in Europe two hundred years ago'. According to this perspective, feminism is seen as but one extension of the Enlightenment critique of religion, and for Judaism, but one form of secularism's challenge towards the place of halakhah, rabbinic and divine authority in the process of the struggle over the identity of Judaism as a religion no longer encompassing all of 'life'.

Heschel also emphasises the way in which second wave feminism was perceived as a threat to the very survival of Jewish ethnicity itself, both by the religious and the broader secular Jewish community (Heschel 1995 [1983]: 5). The development of feminism coincided with a period of struggle within the Jewish community that was dealing with factors such as 'rising assimilation and intermarriage, declining population growth, decreasing immigration to Israel, and growing awareness of the Holocaust' (4). This threat to the survival of Jews was interpreted in both a literal and a cultural sense in that feminism was – falsely - perceived as an attack on the 'traditional family' and more specifically on the women's role within the family as the 'traditional, self-sacrificing mother [...] predominantly responsible for preserving the Jewish people throughout the centuries' (5). In an article published in 1975, Paula Hyman

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(1995 [1983]: 19) attempts to expose what Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) has more recently called the myth of 'women as bearers of the collective' in the context of Jewish identity. Hyman critiques the discourse in which the Jewish woman had supposedly played the central role in the transmission of Judaism to her children, and functioned as central to the Jewish family which had preserved Judaism as 'a bulwark against further erosion of Jewish solidarity and consciousness'.

Besides invoking the role of Jewish women as an ideological tool in counter-feminist discourse, the threat of feminism to Judaism or 'Jewishness' in terms of both religion and ethnicity has also been argued on the grounds of a similar ideology of equality between the sexes in traditional Jewish society. From a traditionalist Orthodox Jewish perspective this 'equal but different' notion forms the very basis of any discussion of gender roles,<sup>7</sup> particularly when provoked on debates about women's emancipation and its gains in the contemporary Western world. However, Jewish traditionalist, reformist and radical feminist critiques of Judaism will also often underline the historical 'fact' that Jewish women's status was often higher than that of their non-Jewish contemporaries. Even Rachel Adler's (1995 [1983/1973]: 16) landmark radical feminist critique of women as mere 'peripheral Jews' contains such a reference: 'Make no mistake; for centuries, the lot of Jewish woman was infinitely better than that of her non-Jewish counterpart. She had rights which other women lacked until a century ago'. In particular, Adler refers to women's rights pertaining to marriage such as her right of consent, and contractually binding support by the husband (in the *ketubah*), monetary settlement in the case of divorce, and finally the much mentioned law of *onah*, man's legal duty to provide for his wife's sexual needs.<sup>8</sup>

The status of feminism as modern, secular and generally non-Jewish has consequently not only been problematic for its diverse opponents, but was equally problematic for Jewish feminist critiques and reinterpretations. In virtually none of main feminist Jewish literature has feminism been presented as an unproblematic tradition of thought and social action to be straightforwardly imported or relevant for Jewish concerns. Any analysis of these reflections must therefore build upon developments within feminism and feminist theory where the differences between women and 'diversity', minimally in terms of what can broadly be called 'cultural' differences, are taken into account, as argued in the previous chapters.

The question of the possible irreconcilability between feminism and Judaism by Jewish feminists is most strongly illustrated by evoking explicit forms of 'feminist anti-Judaism', as Heschel (1995 [1983]: xviii) does in the case of the referral to 'Christian feminist anti-Judaism', which '...hinder the efforts of Jewish feminists by magnifying Judaism's sexism into an antisemitic distortion'. Heschel hereby focuses on the type of feminist pseudo 'scholarship', as critiqued by other feminist scholars of religion on the so-called pre-historical matriarchal societies before the advent of patriarchal monotheism.

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According to Heschel, Judaism is thereby held to be accountable for the 'death of the Goddess' and the introduction of patriarchy as the foundation of western civilisation. An equally explicitly anti-Semitic attitude by some Christian feminists is the claim that 'Jesus was a feminist' and would have liberated women from patriarchal Judaism (xix). Judith Plaskow (1986: 117-118) also refers to the precarious situation many Jewish feminists find themselves in, whilst '...feminist criticism of Judaism provides fuel for anti-Semitism', whereas 'according to the new feminist form of anti-Semitism, Christianity can perhaps be redeemed from sexism, but for some strange reason, Judaism cannot.' Plaskow furthermore compares this form of ethnocentrism or racism which is inherent in many kinds of western feminism with the case of many Muslim women, whose traditions may be 'oppressive' towards women, yet in a different way and therefore no more sexist than Christianity.

Rather than an outright rejection of feminism as a 'foreign import', those who nurture the possibility of 'feminist Judaism' or alternatively 'Jewish feminism' have nonetheless by no means seen the import of second wave feminist movement as an easy affair. These critical views shared by many Jewish feminists are therefore very much in line with other critiques from women other than the dominant white, western, middle-class, secular, or post/Christian, gentile feminism initiated in the last decades. They similarly attest to the untenability of any universal form of women's experience or notions of global sisterhood that go across and above racial, ethnic or religious lines. Then again, for many self-proclaimed Jewish feminists, feminism and Judaism does not necessary have to be conceived of as 'an oxymoron' (Plaskow 1991: ix). There are predictable dilemmas however, for the Jewish woman's position as what Plaskow has called the 'other's other' (1986: 11, 1991: 95), and problems involved in constructing a distinct Jewish feminist identity versus both gentile *and* Jewish patriarchy.

For Plaskow (1986: 114), the Jewish feminist dilemma also explains part of the reason why Jewish feminists have been much less radical in criticising Judaism than Christian feminists have been of Christianity, in that 'we are afraid of being without allies'. In Plaskow's later work (1991) the dilemma can be elaborated further by building on the issue of 'difference' and ideas of intersectionality as developed in less essentialist feminist theoretical insights. In a critique of the main liberal feminist ideology that has hereto ignored issues of difference pertaining to questions of 'race', class, and religious privilege, Plaskow aligns herself with the critique of minority women and 'women of colour' of this dominant kind of feminist theory which has 'ignored the multiple communities that shape women's lives' (1991: 91).<sup>9</sup> Plaskow is hereby clearly alluding to the fact that second wave feminism strategically needed to deny or underplay the differences between women in order to resist the notion of woman as 'other' to man. However, in politics of global sisterhood and unified women's 'experience' as a suppressed 'class' founded upon gender alone, women from other minority groups have

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experienced otherness and forms of domination through other relations of difference, which need to be acknowledged by the dominant feminist and broader community.

*The 'Great Divide': Critiquing or Transforming Jewish Tradition?*

In chapter four it was argued that the so-called 'great divide' between reformist and revolutionary or reconstructionist approaches in the feminist study of religion appeared to be but two sides of the same 'insider's' perspective on the study of religion as a (crypto-)theological quest. In the following paragraph, I will illustrate how this divide between remaining within or going beyond 'normative' religious tradition can be characterised in the case of the feminist study of Judaism. This way I will show how these differential approaches share the general lacunae stated earlier, yet I will sketch in more detail how these surface in the study of a particular religious tradition. In the case of contemporary Jewish communities, for example, it will be noted how different approaches are directly tied to and determined by the denominational positing of the author. Finally, I will be reviewing some of the work that incorporates more recent frameworks in feminist theory, such as the perspective of 'gender', including feminist postmodernist and postcolonial appropriations.

Discovering Patriarchy Revisited: Women as Peripheral Jews

Parallel to the slow but certain development of a U.S. feminist Jewish movement in the early seventies<sup>10</sup>, the issue of women's inferior status within Judaism and the relationship between feminism and Judaism was gradually taken up by Jewish feminist scholars in the academy. In a list of the 'key events and milestones' in the history of U.S. feminism, - after the ordination of the first Reform woman rabbi (Sally Priesand in Reform Judaism) in 1972 - Shalvi (1995: 232) mentions the event of the 'first national conference of Jewish women' held a year later, which according to Monson (1992: 229) was sponsored by the North American Jewish Students Network. The same year a special edition of *Response* was published, including Rachel Adler's (1995 [1983/1973]) essay 'The Jew who wasn't there', often considered one of the first radical feminist critiques of Judaism and 'basic reading' on the subject ever since its first publication in 1973 (Heschel 1995 [1983]: 3).<sup>11</sup>

For Adler, any discussion of 'the woman problem' in Judaism must start with a close examination of Jewish law, *halakhah*. Although many scholars may have been complementary on 'women's status in Judaism' by way of making 'lyrical exegeses on selected *midrashim* and *aggadot*' (Adler 1995 [1983/1973]: 12),<sup>12</sup> Adler claims that a focus on this level of religious narrative alone does not suffice to address the problem of the inferiority of Jewish

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women. Rather, the problem lies in the area of normative daily practice and behaviour, which in the case of Judaism is regulated by halakhah. In this brief essay, and in the tradition of primary insights of feminist scholarship as outlined in chapters two and three, Adler is therefore one of the first to question the status of women as mere objects within both a patriarchal religious tradition and in androcentric scholarship. Gail B. Shulman (1974), in a similar early radical critique of Judaism as a patriarchal religious tradition, argues that both biblical and rabbinical writings should be critically examined, whilst at the same time ‘keeping one’s historical perspective’ (143). Drawing on a variety of biblical and talmudic sources and sayings by contemporary rabbis, Shulman argues women’s status in Judaism has always been that of ‘other’, and although ‘she may frequently be placed on a pedestal built of clever rationalizations, she is ever separate in “Woman’s Place”’ (Shulman 1974: 145).

In focussing on halakhah, Adler builds her main argument that in Jewish law and practice women are mere ‘peripheral Jews’. She delineates certain factors which later become the main issues in any discussion on the position of women in Judaism and feminist studies perspectives on Judaism. Firstly, women are legally placed in the category next to children and Canaanite slaves, all of which are exempt from all positive commandments (*mitzvot*) which are bound to fixed times. Although all Jews share the responsibility of fulfilling the negative precepts, such as not violating the Sabbath, not eating non-kosher food, and general imperatives such as not to steal, murder, commit adultery, etc., according to halakhah women in particular are exempt from those positive *mitzvot* which can be characterised as the normative, paradigmatic commandments, which are absolutely incumbent upon men.<sup>13</sup> These include the performance of rituals such as wearing *tefillin* and *tzitzit*<sup>14</sup>, the daily recitation of the Shema prayer, the hearing of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, eating in the sukkah during the celebration of Sukkot (Festival of Tabernacles), and others, all which can be seen as paradigmatic - male – religious rituals (Longman 2000: 6).

Adler furthermore emphasises that according to Jewish law, women, children and slaves ‘have limited credibility in Jewish law [as] is demonstrated by the fact that their testimony is inadmissible in a Jewish court’ (Adler 1995: 13). Women are also not counted in the minyan, the minimum requirement of ten male Jews that are necessary to perform a synagogue service, and perhaps most important of all, women are not obligated to study Torah<sup>15</sup>, or only in so far as it relates to the *mitzvot* they themselves have to perform. Adler in so many words argues that the latter particular religious obligations incumbent upon women, such as lighting the Sabbath candles and going to the mikvah (ritual bath), are ‘peripheral’ activities and therefore inferior in that they are only relationally defined to men’s activities and the broader community. Jewish women do not have the ability to ‘cultivate the relationship between the individual and God’, in the manner that is possible for men. Women are mere

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‘tools’ and must sacrifice themselves in order that ‘others may actualise themselves spiritually.’

Both Adler (1995: 15) and Shulman (1972: 149) link women’s peripheral role and exclusion from important religious rituals with the fact that women must perform primarily *physical* activities, taking care of the husband’s and family’s physical needs, the opposite of men’s resolute potential for non-physical spirituality. Apart from the fact that women are confined to the domestic sphere, able to ‘excel in their own domain, keeping clean homes, kosher kitchens, and close-knit families’ (Shulman: 145), this association of women with the body and her definition in terms of biology is most pronounced regarding her mitzvah of visiting the *mikvah* or ritual bath. Although the details to this practice will be explained in depth later, here it suffices to note how both Adler and Shulman view this practice as a thoroughly instrumental and even a degrading experience. According to Adler: ‘She goes to the mikvah so that her husband can have intercourse with her and she bears children so that, through her, he can fulfil the exclusively male mitzvah of increasing and multiplying’ (14). Shulman elaborates more extensively on the history and sources on the laws of niddah (surrounding menstruation and purity), yet is no less condemning of any kind of rationalisation: ‘This concern for holiness, for “cleanness,” may be admirable, but the inclusion of women as unclean individuals, sandwiched somewhere between lepers and those suffering from fluxes is not admirable; it is harmful and demeaning. It says, in effect, that for a great part of a woman’s life, a perfectly normal body function renders her unclean, diseased, taboo’ (152).

Radical feminist criticism of the peripheral or object position of women in Judaism such as these by Adler and Shulman contains some of the primary issues that have inspired subsequent feminist Jewish scholars and activists. Despite their overt radical nature and obvious commitment to change, these critiques remain rather reticent on the ways in which exactly to go about the transformation of Judaism. Shulman for example, remains revolutionary inspired, yet rather vague in her concluding remarks: ‘The solution for Jewish women is not to join the Temple Sisterhood and wait patiently, but to join together in sisterhood to confront and change sexist traditions and institutions within Judaism.’ (160). Adler goes more to the core of the problem, yet refrains from taking any definitive stand, formulating what would seem to serve as the main starting point for the ‘great divide’ as this would take form in the case of Judaism: ‘All of this can quickly be rectified if one steps outside of Jewish tradition and *halakhah*. The problem is how to attain some justice and some growing room for the Jewish woman if one is committed to remaining *within halakhah*’ (Adler: 16).<sup>16</sup>

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### Judaism: Hopelessly Patriarchal? Reformists and Revolutionaries

Although the divide between scholarly feminist critiques of religion according to a reformist or more revolutionary perspective as discussed in chapter three and four mostly took place within the context of (post-)Christian feminist theology, this taxonomy introduced by the post-Christian 'revolutionary' Carol Christ in the late seventies, has also been found applicable to the development of and divergences in the feminist study of Judaism. Carol Christ collaborated with Jewish 'revolutionary' Judith Plaskow in their edition of *Womanspirit Rising* in 1979, where in the introduction they both subscribe to the perceived disagreement among feminists on the 'reformability of religious tradition' in both Jewish and Christian theology (Christ and Plaskow 1979b).<sup>17</sup> As noted in chapter three, Rita Gross emphasises their later refutation of the (mis)conception that these labels are 'hierarchical', implying that revolutionaries may be more 'radical' and therefore better than 'reformists'. In reviewing the divergence in feminist approaches to Judaism since then, it can nevertheless be shown that the divide itself is only deemed relevant from the perspective of Jewish revolutionaries like Judith Plaskow. Those who can analytically be termed reformist scholars do not view the literature or positions by revolutionaries as particularly relevant to their own discussions.<sup>18</sup>

From the perspective of revolutionaries however, reformist approaches may be considered but one first step, or as precursors to a much more radical and final feminist reconstruction of Judaism. Even those acknowledging the multiplicity of the meanings of Jewish feminism, i.e. by providing overviews of these approaches, also tend to follow a similar sequential structure. Ellen Umansky (1999) for example, does not explicitly position herself in her survey article on feminism and Judaism<sup>19</sup>, yet delineates three different ways in which Jewish feminism can be understood. This begins with a paragraph on Jewish feminism as 'a call for increased participation and legal change', followed by 'a call for equal access' and finishing with the likes of Susannah Heschel, Rachel Adler and Judith Plaskow under 'feminism as transformation', or the creation of a 'feminist Judaism' (Umansky 1999: 186).

Although Plaskow joined ranks with Christ in a radical condemnation of the patriarchal nature of their respective religious traditions, according to Gross (1996: 45) Christ's concluding essay 'Why Women need the Goddess' in *Womanspirit Rising* (1979a), already reflected 'her growing immersion in the goddess movement'. The article expresses how Christ found it 'increasingly impossible to remain within the monotheistic framework', culminating in an overtly post-Christian stance such as in *Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess* published in 1987 (Gross 1996: 53). Revolutionaries like Christ or Mary Daly who rejected patriarchal Christianity as inherently sexist and 'hopelessly patriarchal beyond repair' often opted for 'non-Christian' or 'post-Christian' constructions of feminist religion such as feminist spirituality, the Goddess movement or Wicca (see chapters two and three).

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Jewish feminists coming to the same conclusions similarly applied this insight to monotheistic biblical religions including Judaism, and were left with no alternatives other than to 'walk away completely' (Joseph 1995: 47). In *The Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (1979) Naomi Goldenberg, for example, argues that feminist critique and transformation of tradition 'would alter it as to render it no longer recognizable as Judaism.' Plaskow, however, also in her more recent work (Plaskow 2000a), will not relinquish Judaism and her own identity as a religious Jew, hoping to transform existing tradition, however radical her terms may be.

Plaskow's revolutionary approach consists of a rejection of the liberal 'equality' model of women's emancipation, and of the way this model made its entry among the first feminist voices and critiques within Jewish communities in North America during the second wave feminist movement. According to Plaskow, the Jewish women's movement had focussed on both female imagery and status, and effected or at least pushed for change of women's position regarding halakhah and religious institutions and practice. However, for Plaskow, this feminism had not gone far enough in questioning the fundamental causes of Jewish women's oppression: 'It has focussed on getting women a piece of the Jewish pie; it has not wanted to bake a new one' (Plaskow 1995 [1983]: 223).<sup>20</sup> Judaism as a deeply patriarchal tradition, must be completely reformed in order to be inclusive of 'women's experience', which cannot be attained by merely 'adding women' or giving them access to the existing male dominated patriarchal institutional framework. Although towards the end of the twentieth century Jewish women have - in theory - attained equality in all strands of non-Orthodox Judaism, this had 'not turned Judaism into a *feminist* tradition' (Plaskow 1991: xvi) (emphasis mine).

The fundamental dilemma in the radical transformation of Judaism, however, remains as expressed by Plaskow's question: 'At what point in the reinterpretation of Judaism does the Jewish tradition cease being Jewish and become something else?' (1991: xviii). Not only the degree and boundaries of feminist reinterpretation are disputable, but also the definition of what 'Jewish' means in the first place is at stake. This obviously depends very much on the background and positioning of the Jewish feminist critique in question and in what way feminist commitment is seen to influence the choice to remain within or the willingness to opt for a more 'liberal' and what is sometimes also called more 'progressive' denomination. Sue Jackson (1997) for example, takes a similar revolutionary transformative approach to that of Plaskow, and likewise is discontent with the model of equality as institutionalised in what she calls those strands of 'progressive Judaism', as it [progressive Judaism] 'still does not feel at home. The language, the stories, the prayers, the rituals, often deny me, making it difficult for me to always name myself Jew. Yet, I do want do to so' (Jackson 1997: 139). Whilst rejecting Orthodox Judaism as 'hopelessly patriarchal', Jackson therefore still longs for 'more than progressive Judaism is at present able to give' (140).

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The problem Jackson seems to have with these progressive forms of Judaism, not only lies in her unfamiliarity of a community and experience which she experiences as alien to her own, but also her need for religious practice and a deeper spirituality from the standpoint and experience of being a Jewish *woman*. Jackson thus agrees with Plaskow that in the Reform synagogue, formally granting women equal rights of participation and their status of 'honorary male' does not offer them any satisfying mode of religious experience and identity, whilst liturgy, services and god-language derive from 'men's experience' alone. Whereas for revolutionaries progressive forms of Judaism remain patriarchal at their core, Orthodox Judaism hardly appears to be worth mentioning, in essence excluding any possibility of reconciliation with feminist premises (Jackson 1999: 139). From the perspective of feminist 'reformists', who identify with progressive denominations, Orthodox Judaism is also seen as archaic, sustaining patriarchal structures that continue to subordinate women in the religious sphere and in the contemporary world.

Pnina Navè Levinson (1990) for example, clearly takes a stand in offering an introductory overview of beliefs and practices pertaining to women as developed in Progressive Jewish congregations, and 'contrasting them to beliefs and practices of Orthodox Judaism' (Levinson 1990: 45). For Levinson, the 'tragedy of Orthodoxy' has been its refusal to apply the process of change and adaptation in the area of halakhah, as a reaction to nineteenth century religious modernisation. What Levinson terms 'non-fundamentalist' interpretations however, are those that do not view halakhah as divinely ordained and therefore 'immutable legislation', but rather as man-made, 'often inspired', open to change, adaptation and democratic debate. From the perspective of Progressive Judaism therefore, Levinson understands the 'true definition' of Jewish tradition as the counterpart to Orthodox or 'fundamentalist' strands, namely 'the usual process of halakhic change and adaptation to life conditions', with change as a prerequisite rather than heterodoxy in order to 'assure a continuation of Jewish life' (Levinson 1990: 46).

As summarised in chapter two, the issue of Jewish women's equality and emancipation predated second wave feminism in the case of the development of Reform Judaism in nineteenth century Germany. Reform ideology itself, in its alliance with Enlightenment principles of liberal equality and emancipation, from its inception made the issue of women's status part of its agenda. At a rabbinical conference held in Breslau in 1846 demands were made to change women's position in halakhah. God's blessing to men 'for not having made them women' was eradicated from the morning prayer, girls became religious adults at the age of twelve next to boys, and also eligible to be counted in the minyan. These and other changes were not immediately, but rather gradually introduced, and developed further in the U.S. where local congregations independently decided on the implementation of these adaptations.<sup>21</sup>

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The Conservative movement in the U.S., unwilling to undertake the process of adaptation of tradition to the extent that Reform had taken, nevertheless also placed problematised the exclusion of women from religious public rituals before the onset of the women's movement in the sixties and seventies. In very general – and relative - terms, in the Reform ideology, halakhah may be considered divinely 'inspired', yet fundamentally man-made and therefore malleable. As Leonard Gordon (1995: 3) notes, 'feminist critiques of Jewish law (halakhah) have, for the most part, rejected the law altogether on much the same grounds as liberal Judaism's rejection of halakhah as a mode of religious expression'. Conservative Judaism by contrast, chooses to remain true to halakhah, yet does accept the possibility of human subjectivity in halakhic decisions, therefore not completely opposing to the idea of multi-interpretability. Contemporary responsa to traditional sources thus remain within the halakhic framework, 'using the same methods of reasoning as did the rabbis of the past to arrive at new conclusions' (Hauptman 1992: 171). As pertaining to women's status for example, Conservative Judaism has not entirely abolished the 'degrading' part of the morning prayer, but altered it into more gender neutral terms (thanking God for having made me 'an Israelite') (Cornille 1994: 38).

In 1955 members of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, the official halakhic body of the Conservative Movement discussed the possibility of women to be granted *aliyot*<sup>22</sup> (Hauptman 1992: 171; Umansky 1999: 204). In practice, individual rabbis and their congregations consequently decided for themselves whether women could be granted aliyot. The impact of second wave feminism for both the Conservative and the Reform movements was most felt in the arena of the religious institutions and its leadership positions. As noted in chapter two, the first woman Reform Rabbi was ordained in 1972. In Conservative Judaism, as 'forced to reevaluate the roles and status of women as a whole as well as within its particular rabbinical, cantorial, and lay institutions' (Umansky 1999: 203), after officially granting women the right to be counted in the minyan in 1973, the first debates on women's ordination began, not to be positively finalised until 1980. Finally the most progressive, recent and smallest (2% in U.S.) of the Progressive Jewish movements, Reconstructionism from its inception proclaimed gender equality on all levels, and only recently has been incorporating further feminist concerns such as gender inclusive language in prayer, besides introducing new blessings, poems and commentaries by Jewish feminists (Umansky 1999: 202-3).

The major feminist transformations that have taken place in the Progressive Jewish denominations revolve around gender equality in the institutional sphere in terms of 'equal access' and participation in roles and positions which were formally exclusively reserved for men. As for the area of halakhah, transformations have mostly taken place pertaining to the eradication of law and practices that have been interpreted as detrimental to women's status from the perspective of feminism. Both Reform and Conservative Judaism have

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found solutions to the problem of the 'get', where according to halakhah, women need a bill of divorce (the *get*) from their husbands in order to be able to remarry in a religious ceremony.<sup>23</sup> Other 'archaic' commandments have been abolished or modified such as levirate marriage (the duty of childless widows to marry a brother of their deceased husband). Parallel rites-de-passage to those for boys have been introduced, such as more public rituals by mothers of thanksgiving on the birth of a child, and the celebration of the birth of a daughter and *bat mitzvah* as a parallel to boy's bar mitzvah, marking the transition to adult religious responsibility. Finally, the laws of *niddah*, or the laws surrounding the menstruating women, one of three traditional exclusive mitzvot incumbent on married women, have been completely abolished in Progressive Judaism.

For both reformist and revolutionary Jewish feminists, the condemnation and abolishment of the laws of *niddah* or 'family purity' appear to be the *conditio sine qua non* of any feminist critique and transformation of Judaism, interpretable entirely in the patriarchal control of and fear for female sexuality. In her refutation of the possibility of a reconciliation between feminism and Orthodox Judaism, Levinson (1990: 59) states that in the Reform tradition 'the private dates of women are not pried into when setting the wedding date. The Mikveh, or ritual bath, likewise is no more practised. Instead, sexual ethics are taught and discussed'. In general, this 'open' attitude can be partly attributed to the direct influence of the place of female sexuality and biology within the second wave feminist movement and critiques. In the context of the feminist transformation of male-dominated institutions in Jewish communities in terms of equal access, this can also be explained by the traditional 'belief' that menstruating women are prohibited by Jewish law from touching a Torah scroll and participating in the synagogue prayer service (Cohen 1992). This would therefore necessitate a feminist deconstruction of the patriarchal framework wherein the laws surrounding female sexuality have been understood as a barrier to women's inclusion in the public religious sphere. Such critiques often base their arguments on detailed studies of the menstruation laws and notions of purity and impurity through taking a historical approach towards the context in which the laws and 'beliefs' surrounding *niddah* have historically developed, in order to delegitimise contemporary 'suppressive' halakhic practices in Orthodox communities (Cohen 1992; Wasserfall 1999). Revolutionary critiques of the model of equal access and 'honorary males' then again, do follow this line of argument, yet are also currently seeking ways to reinstate female sexuality and sexuality tout court within new forms of feminist Jewish religious expression (Plaskow 1991, 2000).

Contrasting the concept of God as male in Christianity as irrelevant in the context of Jewish God language, Cynthia Ozick (1995 [1983/1979]: 123) proclaimed in 1979 that 'the right question' on the status of women in Judaism is not so much a *theological* issue, but a sociological problem. The solutions to

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the problem of Jewish women's status therefore, according to Ozick should be sought within the legal framework of halakhah. The answer to Rachel Adler's question 'how to attain some justice and some growing room for the Jewish woman if one is committed to remaining within halakhah' (Adler 1995 (1983/1973): 16), has as illustrated above consequently been addressed within Progressive denominations, and on many issues debates continue to this day. For these feminist transformations to be possible within Progressive Jewish denominations however, the changes that have effectively been forced have been dependant on the very redefinition of 'tradition' and particularly the status of halakhah. The feminist challenge therefore has greatly depended on the extent to which 'Judaism' has been considered as a historically contingent - patriarchal - system of law in its relationship to the surrounding, changing society, and this according to the definitions within each particular denomination. Feminist transformations have therefore been successful to the extent that particular redefinitions of Judaism and Jewish communities in their response to modernity (including feminism) have actually approached halakhah itself. Most notably, in Reconstructionism, which has redefined Judaism as a 'civilisation' rather than a religion, halakhah has been given the status of 'only a vote and not a veto' (according to its founder Mordecai Kaplan, in: Heschel 1995 [1983]: xlviii). Yet, in Reconstructionism, and its accommodation of 'modern science and philosophy', even the requirement of belief in a supernatural deity has been questioned.<sup>24</sup>

One could therefore argue that for Judaism in its confrontation with modernity, in order to become more feminist, it has had to become more 'secular'. From a feminist revolutionary perspective, Heschel thus claims that it is not that feminism poses insoluble problems to Jewish law, but that Judaism itself has undergone a (and must continue this) transformation, with the 'real' conflicts emerging from 'the weakness of theological responses to modernity, which are thrown into relief by the challenge of feminism' (Heschel 1995 [1983]: xlii). As for the changing status and definition of halakhah that is being put forward by these modern redefinitions in various progressive denominations, Heschel claims that 'modernity strikes not so much at the specifics of traditional theology, but at the general concept of theological absolutism' (xliii). For Plaskow however, the difficulty of the topic of halakhah for feminists is precisely the fact that it 'evokes and gets caught in denominational differences' (Plaskow 1991: 60). From the revolutionary perspective, whilst non-Orthodox Jewish feminists see halakhic change either as 'relatively straightforward or as irrelevant', Plaskow claims that 'Orthodox feminists have focussed their quarrels with Judaism largely on halakhic issues. Non-Orthodox feminists, myself among them, have often expressed impatience with narrowly halakhic feminist analysis' (61). Therefore, for Plaskow, any feminist transformation of halakhah, determined within the parameters of denominational acceptance and definition, is besides the real issue, taking the

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question a step further to the relevance and tenability of retaining halakhah itself within the creation of a truly Jewish feminism.

In the same collection of essays with Ozick's argument that the 'right question' on the status of women in Judaism is sociological, to be solved within the framework of halakhah, Plaskow (1995 [1983]) responds with an essay titled 'The Right Question is Theological', refuting Ozick's argument by claiming women's 'otherness' functions as an absolute and central presupposition in Jewish law. For Plaskow, any denominational attempt towards women's equality within halakhah, will not solve the fact that halakhah as a male and patriarchal creation, sees the male religious actor as the norm, and the woman as the 'other', the deviation from the generic within a legal category of peripheral social status and disability. The otherness of women in halakhah is symptomatic of yet a deeper level of what Plaskow considers a *theological* problem in Judaism, to be found in the Torah and concept of God and Israel itself.

From this radical perspective, women's inferior status in Judaism is therefore not conceived of as a mere 'legal' or even sociological problem, but an *ontological* problem, which Plaskow locates in Jewish 'theology' in general. As in major feminist critiques of Christianity, Plaskow hereby problematises 'God language' and the image of God as masculine in Judaism. Rita M. Gross (1979) had already formulated a similar critique in the seventies, inspired by the post-Christian feminist Mary Daly's call to 'move beyond God the Father'. Fully realising the fact that 'God is not really either female or male or anything in between' (Gross 1979: 168), Gross nonetheless argues that in Judaism as a theistic religion, the fact that female images of God seem degrading or alienating, is proof that male God language and images of God as male, both mirror and serve to legitimate women's oppression. For Gross, Judaism is therefore 'blind' to its own androcentrism in the automatic, unreflective usage of male God language. A feminist strategy in order to correct the situation would be to incorporate female God language, such as the name 'God-She' to religious vocabulary: 'If we do not mean that God is male when we use masculine pronouns and imagery, then why should there be any objections to using female imagery and pronouns as well?' (Gross 1979: 170-1). Plaskow refers to anthropologist Clifford Geertz' (1966) definition of religious symbols as both 'models of' ultimate reality and 'models for' the social order.<sup>25</sup> The same correlation is made between male God-language and the maleness of God's image in relation to woman as 'other' and her inequality within the religious community.<sup>26</sup> From this revolutionary feminist perspective, not only halakhah presupposes the 'otherness' of women, yet even more problematically, this is reflected in God speech and deeply in Jewish theology.

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Reconciling Orthodox Judaism and Feminism

Above it was made clear that many feminists within Progressive and Orthodox Jewish denominations are searching for various ways of solving difficult problems and challenges pertaining to women's inferior status, yet by attempting to remain within their own denominational tradition or community. Modern Orthodox Jewish women are increasingly putting problems such as that of the *agunah*, and the injustice done to many observant Jewish women who are barred from remarrying on the agenda. Many of them are often highly educated activists and scholars, sometimes they are even Talmud specialists themselves. Blu Greenberg (1998 [1981]) was one of the first Orthodox feminists to publish a full-length analysis on the possibility of a fruitful relationship between a traditional Jewish way of life and feminism in the form of a collection of essays in 1981. By self-identifying as 'traditional', according to Umansky (1988: 357) however, Greenberg's views have been labelled as too radical, or non-Orthodox by many male critics within the Orthodox community, yet they have been seen as nowhere near radical enough by Progressive and Revolutionary Jewish feminists.

As an Orthodox Jew, in contrast to both dismissals and redefinitions of the status of halakhah in Progressive and in revolutionary perspectives on Judaism, Greenberg fully acknowledges halakhah as divinely ordained. Any change in view of the amelioration of women's position, must therefore take place within the framework of halakhah itself. As for her view on feminism as a secular modern movement which has been strongly refuted in by traditional Jewish institutions, Greenberg proposes a 'dialectical' relationship between Jewish and feminist values, seeking room for women's concerns within halakhah, yet also to imbue women's concerns with Jewish values. Together with all Jewish feminists, Greenberg pleads for immediate rabbinic solutions to the problematic issues in family law such as the *get* and women's inability to testify in court. Greenberg also regrets and acknowledges women's inferior position within religious life, such as the restriction of their religious responsibilities and their limited rights in prayer, life-cycle ceremonies, communal life, and especially halakhic education and knowledge. At the same time however, she understands the perceived threat of feminism to Judaism and underlines those 'destructive elements' that pose an 'attack on the family', which after all, is the 'primary source of strength and support in coping with an often dangerous and hostile world' (1998: 12).

Central to Greenberg's account are also the consistent referrals to the historical fact that Jewish women were never completely oppressed, but were legally guaranteed protection and care (41), a situation which improved through time (67), yet was also always negatively influenced by universal sex asymmetry in the surrounding society. On the other hand, Greenberg sees a redefinition of women's status within halakhah as necessary and unavoidable in contemporary society, justifiable by viewing halakhah as a fluid system that

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was never entirely closed or static, her central argument being ‘where there was a rabbinic will, there was a halakhic way’ (44). Regarding women’s exemption of mitzvot such as prayer and study for example, Greenberg proposes a reduce the period of exemption so as to allow for the possibility of women to participating in traditional men’s religious responsibilities. However, Greenberg simultaneously vindicates the view which sees the raising of (young) children as an expression of women’s religiosity, in contrast to her view of feminism as child and family-negative. A related issue in which Greenberg remains adamant on the downside of feminism, is the issue of abortion, which she sees as an overreaction and overemphasis on self-interest and disregard for the holiness of life. Here Greenberg argues, there is sufficient halakhic room for both abortions and birth control, yet this must not diminish the importance of children and family life as a means to individual self-fulfilment.

As with the feminist reformist perspectives in Progressive strands of Judaism, Greenberg also views the issue of women’s subordinate status in Judaism not a theological ‘truth’, but as a sociological problem to be solved (46). Radically different to Progressive Jewish feminists however, Greenberg does not adhere to the particular model of gender equality, which emphasises the notion of sameness between men and women, inspired by the liberal feminism and seeking to minimise the question of sexual difference between women and men. For Greenberg, the biological difference between women and men is an absolute given (91, 173)<sup>27</sup>, the basis which has served for different social and religious roles for men and women. Due to historical circumstances this has changed nevertheless, and in the contemporary world no longer implies a hierarchical system of difference (Greenberg 1998 [1981]: 20).

...we must reject the notion that equality means androgyny. From the perspective of Judaism there can be separate, clear-cut roles in which men and women may function as equals without losing separate identities. Male and female are admittedly difficult concepts to define, but we must be aware in each instance whether we are dealing with the dignity of equality, which is an essential value in Judaism, or the identity of male and female, which is not.

Although Greenberg demands for equality in certain spheres of religious practice and positions in religious institutions traditionally reserved for men (including ordination and other positions of authority in the community), at the same time, certain principles in both biology, social reality and law which emphasise and build upon the differences between women and men must be preserved. The general principle of ‘separation’ which is central to Judaism and equally applies to the separation of the sexes, must therefore not be completely abandoned, as in itself, Greenberg considers this necessary for a ‘healthy sense of sexual identity’ (52). Regarding the *mehitzah*<sup>28</sup> for example, Greenberg perceives that the separation between women and men does not necessarily or

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inherently imply the subordination of women, it can also enhance 'the mystery of sexuality', opposed to surrounding society and daily life where equality and androgyny are sometimes 'confused' (95). Distinctiveness in women's and men's roles can still be expressed in for example the lightening of the Sabbath candles by women. As for the mitzvah of the laws of family purity, Greenberg provides an historical development of the laws, which led to the current practice whereby married women must monthly ritually purify themselves in the mikvah. Despite the historical association of niddah with impurity and defilement in rabbinical interpretations, Greenberg also emphasises other interpretations of the laws connecting it to ideas of life renewal, marital love and the holiness of sex. Greenberg also defends this exclusive female mitzvah as an act of self-definition for the Jewish woman and a way of continuing tradition that must not be rationalised but accepted like many other *hukkim* from the Torah (rituals and rules for which there is no given ethical or logical reason (121)). In this different-but-equal model then, Greenberg hopes to see the gains of feminism implemented, eradicating outdated subordinating laws and practices. Yet she also wishes to leave room for the distinct differences between men and women in certain areas, particular those that bear to women's sexuality and their child-rearing and domestic roles.

*Sameness or Difference: Across Denominational Divides*

Reviewing the feminist critiques and transformations of Judaism until halfway through the nineties, Norma Baumel Joseph (1995: 55) suggests that there are three distinct modes available for female ritual expression in Judaism. First there is the integration of women into a previously male sphere, secondly the construction of parallel but separate modes of ritual expression for women, and alternatively the creation of totally new practices. None of the options in this perspective can be straightforwardly aligned or placed under any of the different feminist critiques within, or beyond – in the case of the feminist revolutionary viewpoint – particular strands of contemporary Judaism. Nor can these options be categorised in any kind of evolutionary or hierarchical framework from past to present in the development of the relationship between feminism and Judaism. As has been central to any discussion of feminism in any sphere of life, the tensions between the 'sameness' and the 'differences' between women and men resurface in all of these perspectives.

As argued above, in Progressive strands of Judaism, the equality model of women as equal in worth and in role was gradually imported or already included as part of the denominational identity. These ideas of equal access were directly inspired by the second wave liberal feminist predicament of equal rights in spite of difference. Not only has this equality not entirely been attained in all Progressive institutions and positions; practice does not always live up to the theory. As noted earlier, many of the major changes in the Progressive

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denominations in favour of bettering women's status have only been very recent, and therefore it could be argued that complete equality as reflected in numbers of women in prominent positions within the institutional sphere and the broader community is but a matter of time. In the early nineties however, it appears that despite women's ability to become ordained a rabbi in Reform Judaism since 1972, women rabbis today still have not achieved prominent positions of leadership, such as those on the most important committees of the Central Conference of American [Reform] Rabbis (CCAR) (Umansky 1999: 196-7).

Umansky (1999) argues that since the eighties and nineties, many female rabbis and increasing numbers of male rabbis have opted for a career that is in balance with family life, thus reflecting the developments and changes in mentality after the 'superwoman' ideology in the broader society. Umansky further suggests, that the reason women rabbis appear to be choosing to work in smaller congregations rather than the more prestigious pulpits many men aspire to, because they place greater value on intimacy and close relationships with their congregants. Their greatest impact on the Reform movement, will therefore take place 'from below' on a day-to-day basis. For Umansky, this aspiration to replace hierarchical structures by the sharing of responsibilities, privileges and power can be labelled as a relational, and therefore as a distinctive feminist model, in that it aspires towards the empowerment of others (of both women and men).

Changes within the Progressive movements that have slowly but surely embraced a model of liberal equality between the sexes based on a notion of 'sameness', in practice may have maintained inequality. Opposed to Umansky's observations on the Reform movements in the U.S., which themselves are institutionally changing precisely because of the 'difference' women seem to make, the revolutionary perspective obviously rejects the model of liberal equality and especially the principle of 'sameness'. For these radical critiques of Judaism, the problem of 'women's difference' so deeply ingrained in Judaism as a religion, needs to be both thoroughly addressed and placed at the heart of any possible kind of feminist transformation of patriarchal institutional structures and ideology.

Among revolutionaries like Judith Plaskow and Rita Gross (in her older work), Judaism may turn out to be 'hopelessly patriarchal', yet women's 'difference' may also serve as a basis for a reconstruction of tradition in generating new forms of religious experience and the definition of religious community. This implies a process of rediscovering 'suppressed' elements of femininity in Torah, such as the image of God as female (*Shekhinah*)<sup>29</sup> in the mystical tradition of Judaism (Plaskow 1995 [1983]: 231, 1991: 138; Gross 1979) and trying to conceive of new non-hierarchical patriarchal forms of 'theology'. This may also entail leaving certain patriarchal elements of tradition behind, such as abandoning halakhah altogether, as 'adding' women's voices may not change the fundamental structure of a legal system in which women

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had no part in creating, but were only defined as objects or the 'other' to the normative male (Plaskow 1991: 63). This may even involve a new concept of community, in which differences and 'diversity' are not denied, but can be celebrated in non-hierarchical ways (Plaskow 1991: 75-120).

Since they are opposed to the principle of liberal equality that minimalised sexual difference and women's sexuality in Progressive feminist transformations, Orthodox feminist critics committed to remaining within the traditional halakhic framework have sought to retain sexuality as the marker that makes women's difference. Rather than viewing women's sexuality as that which is accountable for much of their subordination within Judaism, in particular regarding the laws of family purity, Orthodox feminists like Blu Greenberg choose to revalorise the laws and practices surrounding women's reproductive capacity, retaining a framework of laws and practices which are demarcated according to gender as defined by sexual difference. More recent revolutionary perspectives denounce the way women's sexuality in the halakhic definition has become defined as an area to be controlled and feared, yet also point out to the more positive views in Judaism with sexuality as a potential source for the sacred and 'divine unification' (Plaskow 1991: 186, 2000). Feminist writings on sexuality and the female body can serve as inspirational models for rethinking the relationship between sexual, embodied selves and God, beyond the ambivalent, yet deeply patriarchal energy/control model in Judaism.

Besides the introduction of rituals for women parallel to those of men, such as the bat mitzvah celebration, Jewish women and feminists of divergent strands have also sought ritual celebrations that are women-centred in the liturgical calendar, such as the reclamation of the Rosh Hodesh or the New Moon celebration. According to Joseph (1995: 51), the rediscovery of this 'lost women's holiday' by many Jewish women's groups throughout the western world, 'speaks to the pervasive need for communal religious experiences in which women are at the centre and can focus on their religious lives as Jews'. As indicated by rabbinic documents, women would have taken a holiday once a month during the new moon, although the celebrations and the association of this holiday with women supposedly fell into disuse during the middle ages. Some of the contemporary women's groups are reclaiming the holiday as a sort of 'herstory', some as study groups, some as prayer groups exclusively for women.<sup>30</sup>

Prayer (*tefillah*) is one of the important mitzvot women in traditional Jewish denominations are not exempt from, apart from the recitation of the Shema and wearing tefillin. Nevertheless, as Greenberg (1998: 79) notes, it is precisely one of liturgical activities women in Orthodox communities do not participate in frequently, caused by their peripheral role – such as their non-inclusion in the minyan – in communal prayer in the synagogue. Women in Orthodox synagogues may furthermore not lead public prayer (receive aliyot and read the Torah), serve as cantors or sing in a synagogue choir. Those

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Orthodox women who have not found much satisfaction in the merely private forms of prayer, have recently sought to create a halakhic way of participating in communal prayer by forming women-only prayer groups, where they can lead prayers and read Torah (Haut 1992) amongst women. Much controversy has surrounded these tefillah groups, and especially the issue whether these groups are to be counted as minyanim. Although this issue has not been halakhically resolved, the prayer groups themselves do have complete Torah readings, and allow menstruating women to approach a Torah scroll which would otherwise be forbidden in the space of the synagogue (Haut 1992: 141-142).

Despite the critiques and sometimes rabbinic resistance towards these women's prayer groups, innovations are taking place such as the celebration of bat mitzvah, engagements, marriages and baby naming celebrations, even incorporating new prayers, thereby adding distinctive 'feminine experience' (Haut: 143) wherever permissible under halakhah. The formation of the umbrella organisation 'The Women's Tefillah Network', has furthermore stimulated the exchange of information and provision of support between prayer groups all over the U.S. Joseph (1995: 52-53) notes that recently, even though Progressive congregations offer equal access and participation in public religious settings, some women appear to have the need for similar women-prayer groups, including even secular women.

The above overview focussing on the axis of sameness/difference, gives another perspective from which to view the different feminist critiques and transformations of Judaism. Whilst 'sameness' stands central to Progressive Judaism as in Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist congregations, women's difference seems to be the basis from which both (modern) Orthodox feminist critiques and initiatives, and revolutionary thinking are emerging. For modern Orthodox feminists, patriarchal rabbinical and halakhic constructions of difference as sexual difference rooted in biology are reaffirmed, yet often reinterpreted in a positive light. In her recent work, revolutionary Judith Plaskow seems to be drawing on more recent feminist theoretical thinking on sexual difference and embodiment from non-biologicistic and non-essentialist perspectives, yet only at the level of what Plaskow calls Jewish theology. Initiatives such as the Rosh Hodesh and women's tefillah groups in Orthodox Judaism on the other hand, are actively seeking new forms of religious ritual and celebration, which maintain and reproduce women's difference and the traditional separation of the sexes. That women from Progressive strands and additionally even secular women are becoming attracted to these women-centred spaces, may suggest that these celebrations and get-togethers are in fact forms of effective spiritual and communal empowerment for Jewish women *as* women, and they are therefore perhaps experienced as somewhat threatening to the male Orthodox rabbinical authorities (Haut 1992).

The dilemma of sameness and difference in the relationship between feminism and Judaism are articulated by Joseph (1995) as a major problem that

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pervades feminist critique. Whilst the Progressive movements have made important gains in a development towards 'integration', not a single denomination has been completely reformed, suggesting problems might be more profound. On the other hand, as illustrated by a phenomenon such as the Rosh Hodesh groups, which have developed across denominational lines, these expressions of 'female bonding' and the creation of sense of 'special femaleness', may be considered by some as but an interim step towards full equality (Greenberg 1998: 95). Even so, this separatist model is a strategy 'fraught with danger' (Joseph 1995: 57), preserving and maybe even reinforcing traditional patriarchal structures of gender segregation.

Presenting her views based on personal experience in italics throughout an overview of developments in the relationship between feminism and Judaism, Joseph (1995: note 2) shifts from the 'invested scholar to involved participant' with the following reflection on the recurring problem of sameness versus difference:

I am still troubled by the thorny problem of separation versus integration: should we continue our distinctive services? Should we have separate women's studies departments or 'mainstream'? How does this differ from the existence of separate Jewish studies departments? (Joseph 1995: 52)

By expressing these doubts, Joseph not only touches upon the issue of sameness and difference as it pertains to much broader questions of identity determined by axes of gender, religion and ethnicity. She also cognitively groups social reality (the feminist impact on religious institutions and ritual) together with methodological and disciplinary issues of how we should study these developments. This quote is furthermore indicative of the problems and therefore the lacunae, characteristic of all approaches within the feminist Jewish studies of religion as hereto overviewed. The divergent approaches can be delineated regarding their differences in terms of their understanding of the relationship between feminism and Judaism, i.e. some starting from a denominational perspective, others seeking to create a 'feminist Judaism'. Other approaches can be compared in the way they deal with the tensions of sameness and difference. However, all these types of study, which are considered the most important and 'canonical' in this field, and regardless of their internal disagreements, all seem to be of the type of feminist study *in* religion, as hypothesised in the previous chapters.

In the above-mentioned types of feminist studies in Judaism, not only is the line between insider and outsider perspectives blurred. In the case of the relationship between feminism, feminist studies and Judaism, the boundaries between the religious and the secular in terms of identity and identification are also blurred. This occurs because Judaism and 'Jewishness' are also bound to what nowadays is called 'ethnicity', which appears to be existentially and

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historically problematic in the development of feminist critique and transformation of Judaism as a religious tradition. Judith Plaskow and others for instance have called for a refutation of the boundaries of the religious and secular in Jewish feminism 'insisting rather that feminism is always political as well as spiritual' (Cohen 2000: 3). In Plaskow's (2000b: 12) revolutionary view, Jewish feminists should move beyond 'a single-minded focus on internal religious issues and synthesizing the concerns of religious and secular Jewish feminists'. For those starting from a particular standpoint within and both defending a particular denomination this factor is less problematic, yet for those who are more radically critical of Judaism as 'hopelessly patriarchal', the redefinition of tradition brings up questions that are highly problematic regarding Judaism as a patriarchal and ethnically defined religious tradition or community.

### *The Gendering of Jewish Studies and Postmodern Interventions*

*I see Jewish Studies as a perpetual pursuit of truth that I take to be a religious activity informed by contemporary science and philosophy.*

Hava Tirosh-Samuelson (2000: 9)

If the main hypothesis argued in chapters four on the absence of a demarcation between insider and outsider perspectives in feminist studies of religion also holds for feminist studies of Judaism, then it is expected that the same particular consequences of this hypothesis apply. It was argued that the paradigmatic transformations within the feminist study of religion itself under the influence of theoretical developments in feminist theory are problematic due to some main features of religious studies as an autonomous discipline. First, women as an essentialist category appear to remain central rather than a movement to more social constructionist theories of gender. Work that is more recent does try to address the move towards gender rather than women as a category of analysis, but often this is reflected in titles of collections of essays or their introductions only. The analytical insight of gender as a socially constructed category proves particularly problematic in view of the argument that feminist studies of religion are always simultaneously in the process of 'doing religion'. This is not to say that more recent work does not contain the desire to reformulate and rethink feminist transformations of religion that are more gender inclusive. The above dilemmas on the issue of sameness and difference have shown this, but again, this only takes place at a level that is intrinsic to religion itself, such as the discussion on God language. Umansky (1999: 197) for example, chooses to sever any straightforward

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relationship between feminism and women per se, by choosing to label the recent changes 'from below' in Reform congregations in the U.S. that are challenging hierarchical structures as feminist rather than feminine, in which both female and male rabbis are partaking.

In the previous chapters it was also suggested that the slow paradigmatic transformation internal to the feminist study of religion was problematic not so much because of the essentialising and universalising tendencies of the mainstream, but the fact that religion was being practised rather than studied. Consequently, I assume that the fact that these feminist approaches often show essentialist tendencies, can in turn be often attributed to the essentialist or *sui generis* nature of a particular 'religion' – especially in regards to gender – itself. As the above overview has made clear, this also turns to be the case for traditional rabbinic Judaism, where gender roles are often essentialistically, biologically, and most importantly *sexually* defined and seem to form the very basis of the traditional patriarchal religious framework and its theology. For those religious feminists who wish to remain within the framework of halakhah, 'biology as destiny' is sometimes called into question, yet at other times accepted as the central premise for retaining women's difference, as it is fundamental to halakhah and therefore divinely ordained. Recent revolutionary critiques such as those of Judith Plaskow look to social constructionist positions on sexuality and gender in feminist theory, in order to explain historical developments from a scholarly perspective, and then simultaneously appropriate these ideas in envisioning reconstruction of religious tradition and spirituality.

Very telling is perhaps T.M. Rudavsky's (1995) relatively recent collection of articles titled *Gender and Judaism: The Transformation of Tradition*. The title captures the diversity of the contributions to the book, ranging from explicit feminist critiques to research on Jewish masculinity. Leonard Gordon (1995) in an essay titled 'Toward a Gender-Inclusive Account of Halakhah' for example, like Plaskow pleads for the usage of gender as an analytical category in the historicity of halakhah, by asking what role women have to play in its development. Gordon also uses the concept of gender however in order to avoid any kind of 'gender essentialism' that may lead to a feminist refutation of halakhah as 'irredeemably' male. This is then followed by an - equally gender essentialist - feminist reconstruction of feminism and Jewish feminist spirituality: 'When feminism joins liberal Judaism in self-exclusion from halakhah, feminism risks reinforcing the characterization of women as 'Other' within Jewish systems. Halakhah, like American law, still requires feminist revision' (Gordon 1995: 11). For Gordon, the categories of gender and 'gender inclusiveness' therefore serve to take a particular position within the debate on the possibility of a transformation of tradition. Yet this position is one that is conservative-liberal as recent feminist critiques of the political conservative usage of 'gender' (see chapter one) show, in that it seeks women's inclusion in halakhah as to be reformed, yet retained in Judaism.

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The feminist study of rabbinic law is particularly problematic, again in that boundaries are easily transgressed between insider and outsider perspectives, once women's (religious) agency is taken as the object of study. From the perspective of historical research, Shulamit Magnus (1990: 34) argues that Jewish women's history must not be 'distorted' through 'mythologization for propagandistic purposes':

Suffice it is to say that the call for Jewish women's history is not a call for yet more studies of the status of women in rabbinic law. The depths of that particular area of inquiry may well not have been plumbed, but that is also a subdivision of rabbinics; it is not women's history. Needless to say, apologetics for the status of women in rabbinic law are neither rabbinics nor women's history.

If the place of feminist interpretation of rabbinic law is the prerogative of rabbinics only, approaches still diverge in their appropriate methodologies. In a book review of three recently published feminist studies of rabbinic texts<sup>31</sup>, Deborah Glanzberg-Krainin (2000) for example, argues how these works show how feminist questions challenge both the idea of 'objective' readings of texts, yet another may also be 'actively writing theology'. Judith Hauptman's work explores the way women and women's concerns are handled in Talmudic law, through a careful contextual and 'intertextual' reading, arguing a 'depatriarchalisation' of the Talmud is not possible. However, according to Glanzberg-Krainin, Hauptman does show that rabbis did struggle to change the law in a way that 'is sympathetic to women and responsive to their concerns'. Hauptman thereby makes a distinction between sociocultural history and context, and the dynamic construction of Jewish law itself. In Miriam Peskowitz's work however, law is not separated from sociocultural context in arguing rabbis' thinking about gender 'can only be understood in relation to the historical and cultural world of which they were a part'. In this perspective, noting that the scholar is always in the process of constructing gender during the reading of texts complicates the notion of scholarly objectivity. Finally, Rachel Adler's concern is to 'engender Judaism as a spiritual and ethical practice'. Halakhah is found sexist and damaging to both women and men, and cannot be easily 'fixed'. Adler calls for the generation of a 'new halakhah' that is both engendered and liberatory.

Moving from the field of religious studies of Judaism to the general field of what is called 'Jewish Studies' in general, gender inclusiveness has only been addressed during the last decade. *Wissenschaft des Judentums* developed during the nineteenth century, purporting to challenge the 'scholarly legitimacy of Christian scholarship that drew conclusions based on faulty stereotypes regarding Judaism and ignorant of Jewish sources' (Heschel 1990: 254). Preceding yet parallel to the development of *Religionswissenschaft*<sup>32</sup>, the modern study of Judaism set out to apply a strictly scientific or non-religious

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approach in the study of Judaism, one that was interdisciplinary – ‘adapting Enlightenment categories of philology, history and other European academic categories’ (Peskovitz 1997: 34) – yet clearly motivated by certain current concerns of the politics of identity. According to Peskovitz and Levitt (1997: 3), as Jews producing knowledge about Jews, these ‘Wissenschaft scholars were making an overt claim (and conscious) bid for Jewish membership in the community of the “Europeans”’.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile what is generally called the field of Jewish Studies, has substantially expanded its interdisciplinary character to include more approaches from the humanities and social sciences, including sociology or anthropology of Jews or Jewish communities and culture. However, according to Susannah Heschel (1990: 243) writing only one decade ago, there is still no proper intersection between Jewish studies and women’s studies:

For example, although the study of Jewish women calls into question commonly assumed categories, methodologies and conclusions in the field of Jewish studies, the major textbooks in Jewish history rarely mention women. At the same time, most studies of Jewish women pay little or no attention to feminist theory, just as some major studies of women’s history ignore Jewish women.

Shulamit Magnus (1990) in an article addressing the failure of intersection regarding women’s studies and Jewish historiography illustrates the extent to which the reconceptualisation in ‘integrating the study of Jewish women into the study of “the Jews”’ must go. In the case of Jewish religious history for example, questions such as ‘Did Jewish Women have a Talmudic Era?’ recast the methodological issue of standard periodisation. Whole categories of inquiry hitherto not taken seriously will have to be respected, for instance by looking at ‘inarticulate but pervasive and powerful expressions of Jewish identity as expressed in ritual observances, child-rearing and healing practices, and in official and unofficial community service’ in order to uncover women’s reality and beliefs (30-31). The differences in the periods of Jewish assimilation in the modern era in Western Europe and the U.S. are similarly being reconceived from the perspective of gender. For instance, in German-Jewish assimilation women were not affected the same way as men in the liberalisation of the synagogues, liturgy and observance of festivals. Women’s Jewishness not only showed more continuity in that it remained centred in the private sphere of the home, but arguably women did not assimilate to the extent that men did, with the home in effect replacing the synagogue as a site of religious practice. In imperial Germany the transmission of Jewish identity therefore shifted from ‘men to women, from public to domestic areas and from actions to subjective and emotional feelings’ (Heschel 1990: 245). Paula Hyman (1995) places this development in the broader context of the way in Western Europe Judaism had adapted to the ‘prevailing bourgeois model of female domesticity’, with

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religion and religious identity being transposed to women's domain, women becoming the guardians and transmitters of moral and religious consciousness.

Jewish history is presently also being reconceived through intersectional approaches towards gender, 'race' and ethnicity. Studies taking a constructionist approach have focussed on both histories of assimilation both in Western Europe, later the U.S., particularly the way in on the one hand in anti-Semitic discourse at the beginning of the twentieth century the 'woman question' was linked to the 'Jewish question'. According to Pellegrini (1997: 50) the 'racial' difference of 'the' Jews was articulated through the 'sexual' difference 'man/woman', with 'Jewishness becoming as much a category of gender as race'. Increasing attention has been given to the way in historical discourse Jewish masculinity has been constructed as 'effeminate' discourse (e.g. Hyman 1995) through to representation in modern popular culture (e.g. Brod 1995) or the intersections between constructions of nationalism, militarism and masculinity in contemporary Israel (e.g. Mayer 2000).

Finally, a (de)constructionist notion of gender has been applied in feminist Jewish studies work, accompanied with tools of analysis from postmodern and poststructuralist theory. In the editors' introduction to *Judaism since Gender* (1997), religious studies' professors Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt (1997: 3) identify two main characteristics of the field of Jewish Studies, which have prevented the reconstitution of 'the production of Jewish knowledges as a feminist project'. Not only has the field of Jewish Studies been characterised by an exclusive 'masculinist' framing in the privileging of men and 'maintaining commitments to the values and categories of specific kinds of masculine intellectuality'. Intertwined with this frame is its epistemology of rationality, scientism and objectivity which has defined the discipline since its foundation as the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in the nineteenth century. The second observation is clearly influenced by feminist postmodern theory on the notion of objectivity as set out in the previous chapter. This introductory remark testifies to other attempts in an incorporation of recent feminist theory and gender theory in the study of Judaism throughout the collection of essays.

In Peskowitz's own essay on the 'Engendering of Jewish Religious History' for example, Peskowitz (1997: 18) is highly critical of those 'many feminist studies of Judaism [that] still work within the categories (and utilize the methods) of Enlightenment-based scholarship'. For Peskowitz this must entail going beyond the earlier 'add and stir' technique, which replicates a liberal model where the 'categorical structures that had marginalised women in the first place' are ignored. Secondly, the incorporation of gender as a central category of analysis is required, which according to Peskowitz remains untheorised in most studies of women, gender and Judaism, continuing older forms of feminist research on 'women', yet under a new name (20, 30).<sup>34</sup>

In elaborating further on how to engender Jewish religious history using more recent and sophisticated feminist theory, Peskowitz then goes on to critique Judith Plaskow's chapter in her theological reconstruction of a feminist

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Judaism and her viewpoint on reconstructing and redefining Jewish women's history as a part of this project. Peskowitz's problem with Plaskow's approach is however not the fact that this alternative feminist historiography should serve theological purposes, but that Peskowitz disagrees with Plaskow's reproduction of Enlightenment categories and oppositions such as 'history' versus 'memory' or 'objective evidence' versus 'subjective selective memory' (27). Peskowitz furthermore rejects Plaskow's strategy of reshaping Jewish memory by 'letting women speak' as a potential essentialising project that ignores the social construction of voice and the differences between women (29). The influence of feminist poststructuralist theory on the deconstruction of binaries, the deconstruction of the unified subject and identity can be read in Peskowitz's critique of Plaskow: 'we must allow our notions of identity to contain more complexity and ambiguity. Subjectivity need not be based on a model wherein identity and desire and the past are understood as necessarily unified, congruous, harmonious, and coherent' (29).

The poststructuralist 'linguistic turn' and the issue of 'diversity' between women is particularly apparent in an article by Laura Levitt (1995). In this essay, Levitt models her 'reading' of a section of the ketubah (the Jewish marriage contract) and a portion of an article by Plaskow on sexuality, on a 'reading' of an essay by Minnie Bruce Pratt by 'diversity feminists' Chandra Mohanty and Bidy Martin (1986). Levitt aims to focus on the 'notion of positionality by drawing a connection between notions of "home" and "identity"' (Levitt: 1995: 39.). Similar to Peskowitz's critique of Plaskow, Levitt claims that Plaskow's appeal to the notion of 'mutual consent' in her radical critique of the institutional marriage arrangement in the ketubah, remains liberal and in this way only serves to 'reinforce current Jewish marital practices' and gender inequality (46). For Levitt in contrast, feminist Judaism is a question of non-essentialist identity 'subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power' and positioning oneself in reaction to specific texts and narratives.

The introduction and application of feminist postmodern and poststructuralist theories to the reformulation of the feminist study of Judaism has made place for a more social constructionist and less essentialist approach. However, that these deconstructions and ponderings on new forms of Jewish feminist identity or subjectivity seem to take place at the level of the text and its readings only, raises the same kind of critiques in other fields of feminist research alluded to in previous chapters regarding this 'linguistic turn'. For one of the central feminist critiques of disciplines such as religious studies and Jewish studies (Wenger 1997: 113) was precisely the limitations of their traditional text-oriented approach. On the other hand, the very first feminist scholarly critiques of Judaism focussed on both increased religious participation in its broadest meaning of both practice (ritual and law), structure, and (re)reading and reinterpreting these texts as one essential dimension of Judaism as a religious tradition. Also, since postmodern and poststructuralist feminist

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theories from the literary disciplines are slowly being applied within the feminist study of Judaism, the latter appears to develop into an exclusive academic activity. Laura Levitt (2000: 8) herself refutes critiques of her deconstructive work in that attending to writing would be 'conservative': 'I believe that slowing down or resisting certainty might be a more honest feminist politics, at least for now as we work to reformulate Jewish studies'. Yet these academic enterprises do still promise to offer solutions to the same questions of sameness and difference and feminism for the experience of religious Jewish identity. They thereby remain 'insiders' perspectives', but probably in even a stricter sense of the term. The rhetoric offered is only accessible to those within the academy who are familiar with this rhetorical technique and terminology, a point which Peskowitz and Levitt in fact raise in their very own editorial introduction (1997: 6-7).

In the same introduction, Peskowitz and Levitt reproduce this emerging divide between Jewish feminism in - 'scholarship' - and outside - 'activism' - of the academy. In a footnote citing important contributions during twenty-five years of feminist scholarship, works such as Christ and Plaskow (1979), Heschel (1995 [1983]), and Plaskow (1991) are included in a particular part of the list after the following remark: 'In emphasising a certain kind of feminist scholarship, we find ourselves in a bit of a bind. ... Despite its difficulties, the academy has been a more fruitful terrain for Jewish and feminist writing. Nevertheless, much writing has also been produced on these topics by women who are not connected to the university' (1997: note 8). The above works which I have discussed earlier as of the 'revolutionary' kind, are thus understood by the authors to be of a different sort of feminist scholarship, despite the fact that all the authors mentioned do hold academic positions in U.S. universities in religious or Jewish studies.

### 2. Studying Strictly Orthodox Jewry

*Traditional ethnographic studies of 'Hasidim' typically portray Hasidic men to the exclusion of women.*

Janet S. Belcove-Shalin (1995a: 17)

In the previous chapter a methodological framework was presented which built on the hypotheses on the problematic relationship between religious studies and a feminist gender studies approach. I then argued that a 'reflexive and postcolonial feminist anthropology of religion' could enable the possibility towards a reconceptualised gender inclusive study of religious traditions. In this paragraph, I shall first take a closer look at some of the major existing -

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primarily anthropological - qualitative social scientific studies on the type of religious community that will also serve as the tradition under study in the following chapters. As in the previous paragraph, this overview will function as an introduction to the type of community in the case study, but it will also be a critical analysis of that literature in the sense that this literature will be read through a 'gender lens'. For I will be identifying where and why this work on strictly Orthodox Jewish communities fails to pay attention to the question of gender. Considering the argument made for an anthropological approach in the gendered study of religion, the research discussed in this paragraph cannot entirely be characterised as 'androcentric' for entirely the same reasons as those set forth in the chapters on the androcentric study of religion. As regards the type of religious community under study, however, the typical anthropological, methodological focus on 'people and praxis' rather than texts does by no means automatically render the anthropological study of religion as attentive to questions of gender or a paradigm of gender inclusiveness.

### *Defining Religious Traditions and Religious Communities*

The argument for the necessity of an anthropological methodology in a non-theological/confessional study of religion can be proven most poignantly in the case of a male-dominated religious tradition. In such a tradition women appear to feature as 'the other' in terms of an object position, and often do not feature at all in the dimensions which form the analytically relevant categories of 'religion' in the mainstream religious studies approach. This is certainly the case in those contemporary religious communities that practise a form of traditionalist religion that can be defined as highly 'patriarchal'. The case study in the following chapter focuses on such a religious community that can be broadly characterised as belonging to a form of 'strictly Orthodox Judaism'. In particular, the case study draws on interviews held with female members of a local community, affiliated with the Orthodox Jewish congregation of the 'Machsike Hadass' in Antwerp, Belgium.

### Strictly Orthodox Judaism and Jewry: On Appropriate Terms

Strictly Orthodox Judaism has been the subject of much academic inquiry, both in its definition as a 'community' in the social sciences and history, and in the meaning of a 'religious tradition', both in historical accounts – the rise and development of the tradition –, and finally as the subject of religious studies. Many of these studies have furthermore combined approaches, including discussions of history, doctrine and myths, sometimes accompanied by more sociological descriptions of contemporary Hasidic society, such as the organisation of a particular Hasidic community (e.g. Fischer 1988; Rabinowicz

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1970; Robberechts 1990; Safran 1988). However, this particular ‘denomination’ in the modern forms of Judaism as a religion, has not been discussed in the context of the confrontation of feminism with Judaism and Jewish Studies such as discussed in the previous paragraph. For the religious Jewish feminist needless to say, this strand of Jewish religious belief, practice and community is experienced as anti-feminist and patriarchal, yes even sexist and misogyn at its core, irreconcilable with any progress in the status of Jewish women and their emancipation in the modern era.

It is therefore this type of religious tradition and community which carries the most interesting challenges in view of the main hypotheses. Strictly Orthodox Jewish women do not partake in what is often considered central to the representation of religious tradition in the classical religious studies approach (texts and elites), nor in actual religious practice (public ritual, official institutional positions and leadership, etc.) from the anthropological point of view. However, terms such as ‘strictly Orthodox’ and especially ‘ultra-Orthodox’ and their boundaries in terms of which traditions and communities can or cannot be subsumed under these categories is a matter of debate. Here, I shall limit the discussion of definition and focus on the historical development of religious tradition, in function of the lacunae in current research. I will be leaving some broader issues, such as the concept of ‘fundamentalism’, particularly in its relationship to the issue of gender and feminism, for a later chapter.

Samuel Heilman (1992: 12) notes that what has been termed ultra-Orthodox in much contemporary literature, is in recent years coming to be replaced by the label *haredim*. Haredim as a term would be less pejorative, and also more of a ‘native’ category for those Jews who can be considered traditionalist<sup>35</sup> in that they are distinguishable from non-Jews and other secular and religious Jews (including the modern-Orthodox), ‘by way of their dress, attitudes, worldview, and the character of their religious life’ (Heilman and Friedman 1991: 197).<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Webber (1994: 27) on the other hand, claims that the term ‘ultra-Orthodox’ is coming to be replaced by ‘strictly Orthodox’, the same as *Haredi*. The usage of the term ‘Orthodox’ moreover, is similarly more of a name appropriated for religious Jews in the context of the transformations in the nineteenth century in central and Eastern Europe, where the first denominational strands developed in the context of the growth of assimilation and the challenge towards the modernising surrounding society. Contemporary Orthodox Jews can therefore be characterised as religious Jews who continue to follow halakhah according to the rabbinical tradition. Willem Zuidema (1993: 150) for example, prefers the term ‘halakhic Judaism’ above ‘Orthodox Judaism’, terms such as ‘orthodox’ being etymologically derived from Greek and therefore not native concepts. From the historical-sociological perspective however, and according to Orthodox Jews themselves, Orthodox are those religious Jews who did not adapt or transform Judaism as a religion, but are rather continuing Judaism as lived and practised in its fundamental

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historical form dating back to the installation of rabbinic Judaism in the Hellenistic period (Cohn Sherbok 1996: 25). However, all these descriptive categories are both relative and dynamic in their appropriation and internalisation by both ‘outsiders’ and amongst insiders themselves, both from the perspective of the scholar and contemporary daily usage by Jews and non-Jews alike, in a complex of historical and sociological shifts and contexts (Webber 1987, 1997).

Heilman (1992: 12) claims that whilst the labels ‘Orthodox’ and ‘ultra-Orthodox’ are outsiders’ constructions in that ‘they come from a language foreign to Jewish experience’, “haredi” resonates with Jewish meaning.’ Haredi was apparently first used in modern Hebrew to describe any religious, observant and pious Jews, yet later came to be used for those religious Jews that had not accommodated to modern lifestyles and western culture, denoting their emphasis on traditionalism. The Hebrew term ‘Haredi’ and the plural ‘Haredim’ etymologically derives from Isaiah 66:5 in the passage ‘Hear the word of the Lord, you who tremble [haredim] at His word’. The word refers to those to whom ‘the Lord will pay heed’, those who defend the faith and uphold the law in their special relationship to God (Heilman and Friedman 1991: 198; Heilman 1992: 12). Despite Heilman’s argument for the use of this term as it is less of an outsider label; the term is not completely a native category. Although it is used by many Jews, it is not used by Haredim themselves, who call themselves ‘erlicher Yidn’, thus defying that they would be some separate sect, but simply the ‘true Jews’.

Further questions arise to the preferable usage of the term above ‘ultra-Orthodox’ or the more recently coined ‘strictly Orthodox’. The first is the question of locality. Both Heilman and Heilman and Friedman’s research is located in the Israeli context, and it is not clear whether ‘Haredi’ can straightforwardly be applied in the case of strictly Orthodox communities outside of Israel, in surroundings where the term is altogether foreign to the vast majority of non-Jewish society. One other term that is used ‘internationally’ for the vast majority of traditionalist religious Jews is ‘Hasidic’ (singular: a Hasid or plural the Hasidim and the rarely used *Hasidista* for female singular). Hasidim is furthermore used as both an insider and outsider generic category to refer to both a religious tradition and a type of community. The vast majority of both religious studies and social scientific research also focuses on this particular branch of strictly Orthodoxy or Haredism. Hasidism as a living religious tradition also has a historical genealogy as a movement which developed two centuries ago and is characterised by tangible institutional continuity to the present. In this respect, Hasidism as a religious tradition predates what could be called ‘Orthodoxy’ as an organised and identifiable movement, which Heilman and Friedman (1991: 199) locate in the last third of the nineteenth century, entirely in the context of the *Haskalah*<sup>37</sup> or Enlightenment. Strictly speaking, not all contemporary traditionalist Jews neither are, nor do they identify as ‘Hasidic’. That these distinctions are

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important, and the historical reasons for these distinctions furthermore show how Hasidism in itself is by far a unified term with internal differences in terms of both community and tradition.

### Hasidim, Misnagdim and Other Traditionalists: A Brief Overview of Historical Development

Depending on the explanatory framework of the author, the earliest identifiable roots for the religious movement which was to be called Hasidism – translated as piety - can be located in seventeenth century Eastern Europe. These authors emphasise the particular historical, political and sociological context as highly relevant for the early development of the Hasidic movement. After 1648, the Jewish communities living in Poland, White Russia and the Ukraine became victims of the pogroms, organised by Ukrainian nationalists (Cossacks, lead by Boris Chmielnicki) who were at war with the Polish authorities.<sup>38</sup> In this climate, travelling mystical preachers offered protective amulets, curing the sick and performing miracles (Gutwirth 1999: 603). These *Baal Shem*, ‘masters of the Name’ [of God], became increasingly popular, as they promised ‘individual salvation’ – through piety – which was welcomed above rabbinical legalism.

Another historical event that is often appropriated as one of the factors that facilitated many Jews’ receptiveness to this form of religion, is the despair following the collapse of messianism, after the conversion of the popular ‘messiah’ Sabbatai Zvi to Islam in 1666 and his death in 1676. This climate of spiritual crisis accompanied economical deprivation, and a growing gap between poor and rich Jews, the latter gaining control over the *kehilla*<sup>39</sup>, who were joined by rabbis who neglected the religious needs of the poor immersed in their own world of the study of the law (Armstrong 2000: 118). Hasidism thus also grew as a part of a ‘backlash’ (Heilman and Friedman 1991: 207) against the neglect and contempt by rabbinic scholars for the ‘ignorant masses’ in Eastern Europe. This culminated in the rise of a folk religion, prioritising ritual, prayer and emotion, including elements of mysticism and devotion to charismatic leadership (also present in the messianic movements), a stark contrast to the rabbinical understanding of piety as the intellectual study and learning of the law.

The Baal Shem and preachers to the common folk attempted to educate the needy Jews, protesting against the rabbis and often formed disparate cells and prayer groups, refusing any ties with the synagogues. Armstrong (2000: 118) calls these groupings of revolutionaries ‘Hasidim’, although the movement itself is mostly attributed to one particular foundational figure. In 1735 the poor Jewish innkeeper Israel ben Eliezer (1700-1760), who was born in the small town of Okop (near Kamenets on the border of Podolia and Moldavia), declared himself to be a Baal Shem on grounds of a revelation. During his travels and the

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performance of various miracles, his popularity steadily grew as he gathered a considerable number of disciples (Cohn-Sherbock 1996: 51). Presenting himself to Hasidic circles as the 'Besht' – an acronym of Baal Shem Tov, or 'Master of the Good Name', he became their rabbi. Around 1740 Hasidic cells were erected in towns in Podolia, Volhynia, Galicia and the Ukraine and by the time of his death, the Besht was supposed to have had some 40.000 followers, all praying in their own separate synagogues (Armstrong 2000: 118).

The Besht taught that God could not only be attained by study and prayer, but also through 'an uplifting melody, a spirited dance, or an inspiring story, if the Almighty was praised' (Belcove-Shalin 1995a: 4). The spiritual element of Hasidism was mythical, drawing on the Lurianic kabbalistic symbol<sup>40</sup> of the 'sparks' of divine light that had been captured in material things according to Luria's version of creation as a primal catastrophe (Armstrong 2000: 119). The Besht transformed this vision into a positive insight into the omnipresence of God. Everywhere there was a spark of the divine to be found. The Hasidim had to become aware of this hidden divine dimension by practice in concentration and by the Hasidic ideal of *devekut*, communion or attachment to God. *Devekut* was furthermore attainable for everyone through a practical kind of mysticism: 'Authentic spirituality, taught the Besht, could be attained by the common folk, the *am haaretzim*, provided one is willing to worship the Almighty with humility (*shiplut*), joy (*simchah*), and enthusiasm (*hitlahavut*)' (Belcove-Shalin 1995a: 5). All daily, seemingly mundane activities could therefore mitzvot in themselves and were endowed with divinity. Hasidim could at all times experience this omnipresence of God and make it visible, such as in the loud and ecstatic performance of prayer.

Under the influence of the Besht's successor, the Talmudic scholar Dov Ber of Mezerich (by Volhynia) (1704/10-1772)<sup>41</sup>, Hasidism spread to Southern Poland, the Ukraine and Lithuania. The movement also institutionalised, in the codification of the Besht's teachings and the development of a new form of religious leadership in the figure of the *rebbe*. The *rebbe* was considered to be a *zaddik* (holy person) and his authority was based on piety and charisma, and he was seen as a mystical intermediary to God. The role of the *rebbe* eventually becoming dynastic, with leadership passing from father to son. Before the development of the different courts or dynasties with their own personal *rebbe*s though, the movement had to deal with an aggressive confrontation with rabbinic authorities. During the leadership of the 'Maggid' Dov Ber, when the Hasidic movement reached Lithuania, under the initiative of head (Gaon) of the Academy of Vilna, Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, who had rejected the Hasidic contempt for Torah study, in 1772 a herem (decree of excommunication) was issued against the movement followed by a second decree in 1781 (Cohn-Sherbock 1996: 53-54). The followers of the powerful Gaon were called the *Misnagdim* the 'opponents' (of Hasidism) by the Hasidim, who did not consider them 'true' Jews. The *Misnagdim* conversely, remained faithful to the primacy

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of Talmudist's reading of the law and scholarship, denouncing the cult of the zaddik, and its emphasis on spirituality and mysticism.

One Hasidic rabbi from White Russia and a disciple of the Maggid, Shneur Zalman (1745-1813) tried to reconcile the conflict with the Misnagdic Gaon, but to no avail. Zalman's writings include the mystical treaty 'Tanya' (1791)<sup>42</sup> that was to form the basis for new Hasidic thinking as followed by the *Chabad*, which was much closer to the spirituality of the Misnagdim. The Chabad viewed rational thought as the starting point for attaining spirituality (Armstrong 2000: 121). The conflict between Hasidim and Misnagdim nonetheless sharpened rather than diminished – Zalman even being jailed following a complaint by the Misnagdim to the Russian authorities – at least until the beginning of the nineteenth century when the common threat of the Haskalah (Enlightenment) finally began to encroach upon Eastern Europe.

Meanwhile, the Hasidic rebbes began to develop different courts, taking their names from the community in which they were based, such as the Satmar in Hungary, the Belz in Galicia, the Lubavitcher in Russia (Chabad)<sup>43</sup>, the Ger in Poland, etc. The courts differed from each other over such issues as the abilities of the rebbe, the best ways of reaching salvation, the study of mysticism and the Talmud, but also in their outward appearance in daily and ceremonial clothing and in their hairstyle for instance. The cult of the rebbe was one of complete devotion and absolute authority, followers turning to him for their spiritual, personal, psychological and financial needs. The different Hasidic communities continued to grow and new dynasties continued to be founded into the late nineteenth century. It was also during this period that the disputes and differences between the Hasidim and the Misnagdim began to diminish. The Misnagdic rabbi, the *rav*, was gradually attributed similar characteristics as the rebbe, such as a charisma besides his scholarly authority (Heilman and Friedman 1991: 210). The idea of separate courts and communities was also applied, yet in the Misnagdic case the yeshiva became a central point. Yeshivas such as Etz Hayim in Volozhin (1802), and later Knesset Yisrael in Slobodka (1882) and Knesset Beit Yitzhak in Kaminetz (1897) became large institutions attracting many young men who lived separate from their families, socialised and subordinated to the view of the *rosh yeshiva* (head of the yeshiva) (Heilman 1992: 24).

The traditional Jewish communities in Eastern Europe (*kahalim*) were not unaffected by the forces of secularisation after the impact of the French revolution started to seep eastwards. Jewish inhabitants of the larger cities could not remain unsusceptible to these changes and after the Enlightenment, and later in the nineteenth century under the influence of socialism, communism and Zionism (Gutwirth 1999: 604). Hasidic and Misnagdic communities which were mostly located in the smaller towns, apparently were somewhat protected from these processes of modernisation and the growing Jewish assimilation into the surrounding society, although as Heilman and Friedman (1991: 208) argue, separatism from the surrounding society in itself always formed an essential

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and defining characteristic of what it meant to be Hasidic. In this it therefore remains to be debated whether the Hasidic movement could be interpreted as a revolutionary movement, setting 'the stage for some of the individualistic and revolutionary actions of Jewish modernity' (Heilman and Friedman 1991: 208). Armstrong (2000: 120) for example claims that although Hasidism was a movement of 'the people' there was nothing 'democratic' about it. According to Heilman and Friedman (ibid.) the separate communities and later the institution of the yeshiva in both Misnagdic and Hasidic communities which developed:

... made totalistic *Jewish* demands on its members, Hasidism also conformed to what would become an essential element of contra-acculturative Orthodoxy. Yet whatever the revolutionary implications of the concept of Hasidism, in practice Hasidim were always very much a part of non-assimilated Jewry – Orthodox Jews.

From the 'perspective of modernity' therefore, the newly category of those religious Jews who resisted assimilation and secularisation, amongst the 'Orthodox', the Hasidim and Misnagdim who were once 'revolutionaries', would two centuries later come to embody the most stubborn resisters to the changes in the surrounding society, in order to preserve their unique identity and way of life. In this historical context, the contra-acculturative Hasidim and Misnagdim somehow had to set aside their differences and disputes in order to join ranks in face of the common enemy of secular modern culture. Even the ghetto walls could not stop these influences, as Jewish identity and religion became transformed into a matter of 'individual choice' – voluntaristic – and privacy (Heilman 1992: 15; Webber 1997: 264). Whereas in western Europe many Jews, as national citizens, assimilated entirely into their host societies – 'ceasing to be Jews' (Heilman and Friedman 1991: 201), others sought a form of acculturation that did not sever all ties with Jewish religion and tradition, yet did involve full participation in modern society.<sup>44</sup> This model set forth by the *maskilim*, of the *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) also reformed or modernised 'religion' itself, making fundamental changes in order, often based on the Christian model of worship (morals and ethics) rather than ritual praxis (Heilman 1992: 17) and can be viewed as the context for the development of Progressive (Liberal/Reform) strands of Judaism.<sup>45</sup>

Those resisting both assimilation and the acculturation by the *maskilim*, came to be called 'Orthodox', holding on to tribal ties and the traditional way of life. Obviously the changes and innovations in Western Europe did not reach the East till much later into the twentieth century, nor was their impact as great in these parts. Here, the Hasidim and Misnagdim were those communities most resilient to these historical changes, later to be called the ultra or strictly Orthodox as one end of the line, opposed to the neo-Orthodox and the modern-Orthodox on the other. The latter were minimally willing to make some forms

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of compromise, leaving the ghettos and claiming a place within civil society; yet not by relinquishing their Jewish ritual praxis and communal ties.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Hasidic leaders and their followers similarly took on Misnagdic aspects, such as the emphasis on Torah study and yeshiva learning, sometimes de-emphasising radical mysticism. However, Heilman (1992: 26) notes that these differences were merely 'neutralised' on the eve of the Second World War, only to resurface some three generations later when tradition seemed more secure. However, in 1912 in Kattowicz in Upper Silesia, Orthodox Jews concerned with the development of both Reform Judaism and Zionism joined to overcome the differences between Misnagdim, Hasidim and both Orthodox east and West European Jewry in the foundation of the *Agudat Israel* union, including its own council of leading rabbis.

By the end of nineteenth century, of the six million Jews living in Europe, approximately a third of this population would partake in a mass migration, following the anti-Jewish outbreaks, and the devastation of many communities during the First World War and finally the severe measures imposed upon Jewish traditional way of life by the U.S.S.R. government. The vast majority of east and southern European Jews moved to the U.S., considered a *treife medina*, an unkosher state by the religiously observant (Heilman 1992: 29; Gutwirth 1999: 605). Objections to those that chose to emigrate to Israel were motivated by the rejection of secular Zionism, unacceptable to the strictly Orthodox view of the notion of a 'Jewish state', which was not established on Torah foundations (Heilman 1992: 29). Traditionalist Jews were therefore among the last to emigrate before the Second World War. Belcove-Shalin (1995a: 8) nevertheless argues that the history of Hasidism in North America does date back to the nineteenth century. Minor rebbes or 'shiktl rebbes' – persons claiming a distinguished ancestry or descent to established Hasidic leaders, or simply noted for their charismatic authority – and Hasidic congregations were then established and flourished, most notably the first 'American' Hasidic court in Boston in 1916.

Cohn-Sherbock (1996: 65-66) notes that in the period in-between the great wars, Poland contained the largest number of European Jews, more than a third of these being Hasidim and associated with Agudat Israel. The most important court at the time was that of Ger, whose rebbe escaped to Israel in 1940. The Holocaust finally almost destroyed Eastern European Jewry, including many of the Hasidic and Misnagdic communities. After modernisation and Zionism however, Heilman (1992: 31) notes that paradoxically, this destruction simultaneously:

...created the conditions which enabled the spread of ultra-Orthodoxy. This trauma intensified the sense of breach that mass migration and the social changes that accompanied it had already aroused in Jewish consciousness. After the Holocaust there was no going back. Now even

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the most traditionally oriented of Jews were forced to reincarnate the past. A new religious framework was created by the survivors.

Only a few rebbes and their followers survived the Holocaust, some returning to Poland from the U.S.S.R., Romania and Hungary, but the vast majority of them left for America and later on for Israel, where 'weak' forms of Orthodoxy were surrounded by an undermining secular culture, to be rekindled by the traditionalist survivor immigrants. In Israel then again, there had been a long settlement of Orthodox Jews, particularly in Jerusalem where the traditionalist way of life was upheld. Here however, this world was also surrounded by secularism and particularly in its Zionist form. The 'new world haredim' as Heilman (1992) calls them, as survivors had a 'special sense of mission', in bringing the image of a mythical past back to life. They continued to dress as their forebears had done, spoke Yiddish and even identified themselves with the European names of the Hasidic communities before the war.

In the U.S., New York became the city where most of the Hasidim would settle and re-establish their courts.<sup>46</sup> Until this day these growing communities are for the most part concentrated in three areas of Brooklyn. Williamsburg is home to mostly Hasidim of Hungarian and Romanian origins, with the extremely ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionist Satmar being demographically, politically and religiously the most important group. There already lived many Jews in the area of Borough Park before the war, yet afterwards the neighbourhood became very Hasidic (some 80% of the 75.000 Jews). Finally, the Lubavitcher are the most prominent group in the area called Crown Heights. After the war, many Hasidim settled here, but since the sixties, they have become a minority amongst the Afro-American population. Outside of New York, Hasidic communities live spread throughout the U.S. and Canada, some in isolated communities, others in particular neighbourhoods in major cities.

The rebbe of Ger managed to escape from Nazi persecution and settled in Jerusalem, like the rabbi Jehiel Joseph Rabinowicz carried on the traditions of Binla and Przysucha (Cohn-Sherbock 1996: 67-68). Jerusalem attracted many Hasidim, also because here strictly Orthodox communities had been present before the war (such as the neighbourhood Mea Shearim). Another known community, that of Belz, revived since the establishment of the rabbi Aaron Rokeah of Belz who has similarly managed to escape from the Nazis. The largest Israeli population of Hasidim is concentrated in Bnei Berak, some five kilometres from the centre of Tel Aviv, where numerous Hasidic communities and their rebbes live. Bnei Berak is also the centre of the Vischnitz dynasty, originating from nineteenth century Moldavia. Chabad or Lubavitcher settlements are to be found in Kfar Chabad (five miles from Tel Aviv) and Nahalat Har Chabad.

Outside of North America and Israel, Hasidic and Misnagdic communities are to be found virtually everywhere, from Australia, Western Europe, and South America to South Africa. Most notable is the Hasidic

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population in North-west London, where Belzer, Bobover, Gerer and Satmarer live in Stamford Hill and Golders Green. Manchester, Glasgow, Leeds and Liverpool are also home to smaller Hasidic communities. Other Hasidic communities thrive in numerous cities and places from Paris to Montreal (Belz), and from Switzerland to Antwerp, Belgium.

### *Studying Communities: The Hasidim*

In the introduction to a recent compilation of ethnographic studies on Hasidic Jews in America, Janet S. Belcove-Shalin (1995a: 13) notes that despite the Hasidim being the subject of historical, philosophical, and popular accounts dating back to the nineteenth century, the social scientific study of Hasidim is a far more recent endeavour. Even in contemporary religious studies approaches, the focus is often on Hasidism in its historical and theological content. Typical is the detailed description of the development of the movement since its foundation in eighteenth century Eastern Europe and its central characteristics such as its emphasis on *hitalahavut* (enthusiasm and joy) above formalism in prayer and study and the cult of the *zaddik*, and the development of the diverse courts under the figure of the dynastic charismatic *rebbe*. Belcove-Shalin argues that the dearth of contemporary and social scientific approaches until the seventies was influenced by the secularisation/modernisation thesis that dominated American ethnography and sociology of religion. It was assumed that religion was dying and that Jews in western society were progressively becoming assimilated with Judaism evolving further into a 'civil religion'. At the very least, it was expected that in the U.S. religious Jews would increasingly become affiliated with Progressive redefinitions of Judaism such as Conservative and Reform in an accommodation of religious belief and practice modelled on the dominant modern forms of Christianity in the broader society. In the sociology of Jewry, this thesis explained the relegation of Orthodox Jewry to the position of 'a residual category' of research (Mayer 1973).

Particularly strictly Orthodox Jewish communities such as the Hasidim, a minute minority within the already small minority of Orthodox Jewry, and especially since the holocaust, were conceived as remnants of the past, destined to gradually disappear under the influence of modernisation.<sup>47</sup> Confronted with the demographical facts of the growth of Hasidic populations around the world and other traditionalist movements more generally, to this date the survival and therefore the relevance of studying such religious communities is hardly superfluous. Authors like Dan Cohn-Sherbok (1996: 70) nevertheless believe that due to the conflict between the Hasidic belief in divine authority and contemporary biblical scholarship and 'scientific facts', that 'despite the efflorescence of Hasidim in contemporary Jewish society, it is inconceivable that Hasidism could provide an overarching framework for Jewish living in the twenty-first century'.

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The pioneering ethnographic studies on Hasidim such as *Williamsburg: A Jewish Community in Transition* by George Kranzler published in 1961 and *The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg: A Study in the Sociology of Religion* by Solomon Poll in 1962 even expressed doubts as to the survival of these otherwise thriving traditionalistic communities. In retrospect Belcove-Shalin (1995a: 14) argues that these doubts were completely unfounded. Since the sixties to the present day, ethnographic studies of Hasidic communities have been limited in number, yet less doubtful as to their survival and growth. The vast majority of this traditional ethnographical monographic work has furthermore predominantly focussed on North America, followed by a much smaller number of more recent studies on or including the Haredim in Israel published during in the nineties (Heilman 1992; Landau 1993<sup>48</sup>; El-Or 1994). Finally, the ethnographic study of strictly Orthodox Jewish communities in Europe has been limited, save Jacques Gutwirth's research on the Belzer Hasidim in Antwerp (1968; 1970), and Harry Rabinowicz's recently published, yet more historical account of the Hasidim in Britain.<sup>49</sup>

Belcove-Shalin's (1995a) review of the ethnographic literature on Hasidim not only points to the relatively small number of studies, but also their rather 'traditional' approach. Besides the absence of more new lines of inquiry, such as 'feminist theory' and anthropology of religion, much of this research has employed the ethnographical holistic technique of detailed descriptions of the beliefs and practices of a particular neighbourhood or dynasty, tending to 'avoid comparisons with other religious communities, Hasidic or non-Hasidic' (16). As a general editor Belcove-Shalin then claims that the ethnographic articles that follow the introduction in her book help to fill in these important lacunae by moving beyond earlier traditional approaches. Leaving the question whether more contemporary research has taken on perspectives influenced by 'feminist theory' or comparison aside at this point, one may wonder whether past research has given attention to the issue of gender at its very first level of critique as explained in chapter three: do women in this research figure as religious agents? Notable for example, is that in the foreword to the very same volume, Samuel C. Heilman (1995: xiv) writes on the contemporary 'Hasid' in a way that parallels the most basic kind of androcentrism in religious studies and other disciplines which from the very beginnings feminist scholars were most critical of:

To be a Hasid today means more than simply following a rebbe. It means spending extended time in a yeshiva, plumbing texts and insulating oneself and one's family (especially children) from the attractions of the world outside its walls. It means staying away from the rough and tumble of making a living or else investing it with ontological inferiority – with the inevitable compromises that it engenders. In Israel it means staying out of the army with the erosion of religious authority and the mixing of secular and religious, boy and girl that occasions.

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In this statement Heilman is taking the male Hasid for the normative Hasid, as Hasidic women do not spend any time at all in a yeshiva, ‘plumbing’ the texts of the Talmud, which is entirely a male activity in Hasidic communities. Reviewing the older traditional ethnographic material shows the same lacunae.

### Locating Hasidic Women in Traditional Ethnographies

In two such traditional ethnographical studies of Hasidic communities it can be illustrated how both Jerome M. Mintz (1968) and Jacques Gutwirth (1970) take man as the normative Hasid, viewing woman as ‘other’. Jerome M. Mintz (1968) in a study of the Hasidic community in New York in the late fifties and early sixties takes a somewhat different approach than the classical structure of an ethnographic monograph, in that it takes a Boasian approach in studying the culture of a community through its oral tales and legends. First tales were collected among informants from a variety of the New York Hasidic courts, followed by a distillation of the particular themes. This served as an inroad for more general questions on other subjects, values and attitudes: ‘The narratives were therefore used as a mirror of belief and custom, and also as an investigative tool, serving at times as a means of obtaining value judgements’ (Mintz 1968: 16). Towards the end of the introduction and in commenting on the applied methodology it becomes clear that the vast majority of more than 150 informants interviewed were male (19): ‘Unfortunately, very few women were interviewed and opportunities to observe infant care were limited. (The law prohibits a woman from being alone with a man other than her husband or father.)’ The fact that women were hardly interviewed, and the reason for this discrepancy is thus merely noted in brackets. Mintz’s book is divided into two parts, the first on the Hasidic people themselves, including chapters on the history and settlement of the community, followed by the life in the courts, youth and marriage, the figure of the rebbe, the mitzvot, supernatural beings and magic and relationships with gentiles and non-Orthodox Jews. Chapter three on ‘court life’ departs entirely from the male as the normative Hasid, illustrated by sentences similar to that of the quote by Heilman above (Mintz 1968: 48-49):

Like all orthodox Jews, the hasidim meet at the besmedresh<sup>50</sup> for three daily prayer services – at any time from dawn until noon for the morning prayer (sharis), and at dusk for the afternoon prayer (minheh) and the evening prayer (mairev). The morning prayer appears to be the most solemn as the talis (prayer shawl) and tefillin (phylacteries) are worn. Since only ten men are required for a minyen (quorum) to begin services, there may be several morning services, sometimes overlapping. During the week, when the strict Shabbes prohibitions are not in force,

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the scene is one of ease and bustling activity: collections for charity are made; some-one may be selling yarmelkhes, books, or pens; another may be passing out political or religious broadsheets; men are studying aloud in pairs or in groups; small groups may be chatting, exchanging jokes and confidences, and smoking cigarettes before prayer; and children may be racing through playing tag. Many of the men come to besmedresh early in the morning before prayers or return late in the evening in order to study and discuss talmudic writings.

Despite the fact that Mintz's views the besmedresh as the 'central point for the activities of the hasidic court' (48), this passage does not at all make clear what role Hasidic women play in the besmedresh, or in which of the more or less serious social activities they are included. Nowhere in the entire description of the Hasidic social structure patters does it explicitly become clear that in fact the women both traditionally, as in all Hasidic communities to date, do not participate in these prayer services, and wear 'talis and tefillin'. What we know is that they are not counted in the minyan. It is not clear if women are present during the weekly 'ease and bustling activity' of making jokes and smoking cigarettes, although children do seem to be present. The style of Mintz's ethnographical description is that it is assumed that women do not participate in the learning of the Talmud. Not until a description of the 'outward signs' of 'yiddishkeit' do we learn that contradictory to Hasidic men's peyes, beards and black kaftan, women 'wear long-sleeved though fashionable dresses, and married women wear wigs or other head coverings' (57). Under the listing of the professional occupations by Hasidic men, we only learn that while in Eastern Europe Hasidic women attended to business so men could engage exclusively in study and prayer, this pattern has shifted in the New World, with men being main providers and studying less hours to spend more time on 'family affairs' (62).

Gutwirth's ethnology of the Belzer Hasidim of Antwerp (1970) Belgium is an extensive and detailed study based on methods of interviews and participant observation, including historical and demographical analysis of one of the six Hasidic communities of the late sixties in Antwerp<sup>51</sup>, the Belzer counting 418 individuals in 1963 (Gutwirth 1970: 12). Gutwirth's main objective is to provide as complete as possible a description and analysis of this community in its social and religious aspects, and secondly to approach a scientific explanation of the general factors which contribute to the cohesion and 'balance' of the community (422). As in an earlier article by the same author (1968), much attention is paid to techno-economical activities (in particular the diamond trade and industry) of the community, which are strikingly similar to those of the Eastern European *shtetl* (village), which contributes to the strong sense of religious and social identity of the community. As opposed to Mintz's study, first hand quotations are very limited and the author clearly wishes to provide complete and 'objective' detailed

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descriptions and analysis, rather than an insight into the native point of view. Nowhere is it stated how many women were actually interviewed, how much access was gained into familial life and the domestic sphere, or how the gender of the researcher influenced the research results. Similar to Mintz, the first fact we learn about Hasidic women is stated in the introduction after a short description of men's attire as illustrative of the extent to which this community strictly adheres to Jewish law (13-14):

Les hommes ont notamment les barbes touffes et des "papillotes" (mèches de cheveux près des tempes), ils portent des chapeaux noirs d'une type particulier et des lévites. Les femmes dissimulent leurs cheveux coupés très court sous un foulard ou sous un perruque. Les jeunes garçons ont des papillotes et portent des képis de velours noirs.

In the third chapter on the formation and growth of the Antwerp community, we learn Gutwirth's main interpretation of the place of the Belzer women, which will be repeated in the following chapters (40):

La formation de la communauté fut essentiellement un fait masculin. Chez les hassidim de Belz, les femmes se cantonnent surtout dans les fonctions familiales et elles ne furent pas des protagonistes actifs de la mise en place de l'organisation communautaire. Elle n'en faisaient (et n'en font encore) partie que dans la mesure où elles appartiennent à la famille d'un fidèle en tant qu'épouse, fille, mère ou belle-mère.

Gutwirth thus clearly defines the 'community' itself in terms of the public sphere, observing women as but passive objects, belonging to the family of a 'believer', paradigmatically defined as male. This view of woman as other is testified in expressions throughout the whole monograph, such as: '...les adeptes, leurs femmes et leurs enfants...' (133).

In Mintz's monograph, not until half way through the fourth chapter on 'youth and marriage' do we learn what the main religious duties for the woman consist of: 'the preparation of the food, the bearing of children, the religious training of the young, and the maintenance of the purity of the home by careful attendance at the mikveh and observation of the attendant sexual regulations' (79). In certain passages throughout the chapter, relations between men and women are discussed, such as the strict separation between the sexes and the taboo on the topic of sexuality. In the final paragraph on 'the upbringing of women' we finally learn more about the different education for girls, and the secrecy and shame surrounding the ritual of visiting the mikvah. The following reason is given for the fact that girls do not study Talmud (Mintz 1968: 83): 'In the hasidic hierarchy of values, women are accorded less importance than men. As a result education is considerably different for hasidic girls than for boys. As the hasidim do not regard the intellect of girls to be equal to that of boys, it is

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considered sufficient if they learn about the Bible, the religious holidays, and the dietary laws.’ The first statement is grounded in a footnote that refers to two seemingly contradictory sources, – fact or legend? – perhaps referring to some doubts by the author as to women’s complete inferiority or more ambiguous status in Hasidic culture: ‘See Maimon’s *Autobiography*<sup>52</sup>, p. 176, where the hasidim threaten to whip one of their fellows whose wife had given birth to a girl. In *Praise of the Besht*<sup>53</sup>, no. 107, a hasid would go to the Besht for an amulet and give him money *even* when his wife gave birth to a girl’ [author’s emphasis] (Mintz 1968: 83, no. 10).

Gutwirth’s ethnology consists of five-hundred pages of detailed analysis, divided into chapters on demographical facts, professional activities, organisation of community life, separate chapters on the daily, yearly religious cycle and the Sabbath, the marriage ceremony, the cult of the rebbe, matrimonial system, social integration, etc. In all these chapters, the focus lays on the male Belz Hasid and his main function within both ethnographically observable and official religious rites and roles. Chapter seven consists of nearly forty pages of description of male daily and ceremonial Hasidic appearance and attire, in chapter twelve, the ‘sociocultural integration of the male child’ is studied. In contrast to Mintz, Gutwirth does devote one chapter (chapter thirteen which is the shortest of the whole book) to ‘la femme’, which begins with the statement that ‘seuls certains aspects de la situation féminine seront évoqués ici’ (323). It does not entirely become clear if and/or in what way the invisibility or irrelevance of Belzer women in Gutwirth’s study is a reflection of their actual status in the community, or that this is determined by male bias in the research process, and the definition of what counts as the important religious and social and educational parameters of the community. Gutwirth notes that the woman only participates in a ‘marginal, secondary’ way in community life and the religious cycle. However, she is to be found ‘au coeur de la vie du foyer, dont elle assure le caractère conforme à la tradition, mettant par ailleurs au monde de nombreux enfants qu’elle doit élever et soigner’ (323). Opposed to the socio-cultural integration of the male child, no singular equivalent rite such as circumcision or bar mitzvah exists for the girl. The absence or marginal role of girls in what Gutwirth counts as the normative forms of community and religious life thus furthermore leads him to conclude that ‘chez les Belzer, la condition subordonnée de la femme est un fait établi...’ (ibid.)

The remainder of the chapter on Belzer women describes women’s appearance and attire, the school system for Hasidic girls in Antwerp of the sixties, women’s professional activities and their social position in general, and finally a few notes on sexuality and married life. Essential to women’s appearance is their conformance to the rules of ‘decency’ and ‘non-sexual provocation’, which according to Gutwirth starts from childhood. This entails the covering of the neck, and knees and elbows with three quarter or full-length sleeves. Married Belzer women will cut their hair short after their wedding, and

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cover it with a kerchief, turban or a wig. As for education for girls, Gutwirth emphasises the limits placed on religious education compared to boys, which is compensated by the exposure to more profane subjects, albeit both geared to girls future roles as housewives (328):

Le savoir reste axé sur la formation nécessaire à un future épouse de hassid, qui élève ses enfants, tient un ménage et aide éventuellement son mari à écrire une lettre, à tenir des comptes, sans que de telles connaissances, du moins selon les valeurs traditionnelles, lui assurent une quelconque supériorité sur les hommes. [...] En vérité, le caractère de l'enseignement féminin relève entièrement de la conception des hassidim quant à role de la femme dans la vie juive. A la femme reviennent les connaissances ménagères et pratiques, un acquis religieux utile à la familiale; à l'homme revient le savoir noble et élevé, celui qui concerne un véritable approfondissement des textes sacrés et des lois. Et cette division complémentaire est *basée sur une conception de la supériorité de l'homme* auquel, seul, sont ouverts les domaines les plus importants [emphasis mine].

That the Belzer themselves harbour this view is then illustrated with – a rare – quote by the headmaster (cited by name) of the Belzer school for girls 'Benos' that was founded in 1955 (328-329):

'Si une femme pratiquait la circoncision ou était abatteur rituel, nous n'aurions jamais la certitude qu'elle observe correctement les prescriptions.' ... 'De toute façon, elles ne sont pas aussi douées pour les études que les hommes.' Ce fidèle ajoute: 'Pour la paix du ménage, il vaut mieux qu'une femme ne soit pas trop savante; elle ne doit pas discuter avec son mari, il ne faut pas qu'elle puisse lui dire: Tu es un ignorant'.

Gutwirth adds to this that opinions such as these are the doctrine of the community and largely shared by all male believers, yet does not give any insight or mention of what women have to say. The writer even applies the notion of 'apartheid' in the description of this sex-segregated system based on male superiority and female dependence. As for the code of decency and its impact on the sexual relations between women and men, Gutwirth remains short: the Hasidim are strongly reserved on this highly private subject. Sexuality itself is sanctified and this sexual morality with the ideology of monogamy and procreation and the division of labour, which according to Gutwirth is linked to and reinforces the type of socio-economic system and division of labour within a commercial and capitalist environment (334).

Mintz's ethnographical descriptions of the Hasidim, both women and men of Williamsburg are less extensive and detailed than those of Gutwirth.

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Although like Gutwirth, Mintz does take the Hasidic male to be the normative Hasidic person, as is reflected in both the research process and the style of ethnographic writing and representation, some passages in Mintz's work do seem to point to instances of women's agency and perhaps insight as to the influence of 'male bias' due to the methodological limitations. Apart from the introductory remark noted above that Mintz hardly interviewed any women, this instance of male bias is alluded to concerning the tales, which form the content of the second part of the book: 'Since the tales are told by men rather than by women, they contain the accepted male attitudes' (86). Mintz's most insightful observations as to the life of Hasidic women in the New York community, is the fact that women are more than men exposed to secular culture. This not only results from the fact that they have the opportunity to follow secular education (college) whilst boys visit the yeshiva, but also from the difference of their life style from that of Hasidic women in Eastern European life of the past. While Hasidic women no longer are the main providers or the 'business women', but more focussed on the home, they do go to movies, read secular books, listen to the radio, and watch television, which is unknown terrain for boys and men. Hasidic women also seem to be 'coming to demand a larger role in hasidic life' (85), expressing their resentment when husbands spend too much time away from home fulfilling their public religious obligations. The main areas in which women do briefly feature in this chapter on 'youth and marriage' are those of courtship and marriage, the 'reverence towards mothers', sexuality and the laws of family purity.

The laws of family purity are one area that Gutwirth remains reticent about, despite his treatment of the important rules of decency and women's proper role within the family sphere. Nowhere in Gutwirth's extensive monograph is there any mention of the monthly visit to the mikvah, or the laws of niddah, which besides women's mothering and domestic obligations, consist of the most important religious obligation women must perform. Mintz does not give any precise details on the sexual regulations married women must follow, yet does note their importance as illustrated by the 'tales' that tell of the consequences women face who ignore them (Mintz 1968: 79): 'One tale notes that neglect in attending the mikveh may result in harm to one's offspring. Punishment can be even more direct for those who despise their obligations, as one tale of a fiery bath indicates.'

### Has Anything Changed? Androcentrism in Contemporary Studies of Hasidim

Nearly twenty five years after *Hasidic Legends*, Jerome R. Mintz (1994) published a new book on the Hasidim of New York, this time in the form of a 'social history', based on interviews, ethnographic observation and secondary material such as newspaper files and court records. According to Mintz, central to this study are the Hasidic people themselves, concerning 'family life, social

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organization, social change, and conflict within the Hasidic community' (1). The history and the conflicts are primarily understood and represented as the intra-communitarian struggles between the different New York Courts, such as the Satmar, M'lochim, Lubavitch, Bobov, Stolin. These even involve conflicts between the Hasidim and the broader community, such as the 'race relations' in Crown Heights, or the participation of New York Hasidim in local politics and their usage of the secular courts.

Despite this broad focus on the politics and history of the New York Hasidic communities in the contemporary 'new world' and their struggles to retain their traditional way of life and distinct identity vis-à-vis each other and the surrounding secular society, Mintz's ethnography definitely provides much more insight on the lives of Hasidic women compared to earlier work. This is reflected in his research methodology and a variety of topics, ethnographic citations and descriptions. From the list of cited informants at the end of the book (413-415) it can be inferred that approximately a quarter of the interviewees were in fact women, ranging from Hasidic 'housewives' and 'young women' to social workers and therapists. In the subject index the category 'women' is included, relating to more than twenty 'related features', such as education, clothing and wigs, synagogues, mothers, kosher foods, abortion, driving cars, working outside the home, marriage and mikvah, etc (434). The lives of Hasidic women are most extensively discussed in three chapters on 'families' (chapter 6) and 'family problems' (chapters 16 and 20, the latter from the perspective of therapists).

After describing and actually citing some female informants on their experience and views on the education of boys and girls and the process of courtship, compared to the more traditional ethnographies discussed above, it becomes more explicitly clear what women's main responsibilities are. These stand opposite to religious learning, the ritual role and the political and religious leadership positions that are the prerogative of men alone:

Women care for the children and maintain the purity of the marriage and the household. They visit the Rebbe to ask for a blessing. Women help raise funds for the needy, and look in on the sick, shop and cook meals for them. They light the Shabbes candles and prepare the house for the holy days. In earlier times in some courts, the day before Yom Kippur the ladies' auxiliary would bring in wax, roll it out, and place wicks in the newly made candles. Religious ceremonies in the besmedresh, however, are carried out only by men. The women prepare food for the Rebbe's tish and for the melave-malke, but only the men attend these gatherings. Men crowd the main floor for prayer and study, while a smaller space set off from the main floor, or often a balcony, is reserved for the women. A curtain or a woven wooden lattice shields the women from the men's sight. On holy days some of the women congregate behind the lattice to pray and watch the activities on the main floor of

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the besmedresh. In the social as well as the religious spheres men and women remain apart. When families attend a wedding or a bris (circumcision) the men and women celebrate the occasion in separate rooms. There is, however, a clear harmony in ceremonial and ritual occasions. In shul on the fast day of Yom Kippur the women supply the wailing and the tears that augment the cries and means of men (Mintz 1994: 66).

In this description of Hasidic women's proper role, women's activities that do not take place in the actual male defined centre of religious public life, at least do not remain invisible nor are they trivialised, such as in Gutwirth's approach above. Mintz nonetheless infers that women do hold a subservient position, by referring to the proper conduct when a couple pays a visit to the Rebbe (67): 'The Rebbe is even more circumspect toward women than are his followers. He will not shake a woman's hand or even look directly at her. The husband is seen as the head of the family'. Although this form of proper conduct and the husband's primary role in the interaction with the Rebbe is then supported by a quotation by a Hasidic woman herself, Mintz is the one to interpret this as an act expressing women's inferior status. From the statement 'women's lower station in the religious sphere is considered to be balanced by the respect they receive for their role in the household' (67), it can then be assumed that there is some ambiguity on the part of the author as to the Hasidic viewpoint on women's inferiority or equality in value. However, again the household and the women's activities therein are themselves not to be conceived of as religious activities or to be included as what *counts* as the religious sphere.

More so than in the older studies discussed in the preceding paragraph, Mintz discusses and cites Hasidic women on, or in the context of topics such as arranged marriages, having and educating children, the 'religious mitzvah and social benefit' of having large families, and attitudes towards birth control. In two chapters on 'family problems', both Hasidic women, men and therapists are cited on conflicts in families, including a few critical or rebellious women who may experience the rules of modesty as a burden, or who are critical of the expectations for their roles as mother and housewife. Mintz attributes some rebellious or critical attitudes to the fact that in recent years a number of Hasidic women are working outside of the community and thereby have become exposed the changes in women's status in the outside world. Contact with secular society is limited though, and most knowledge is gained by exposure to the media such as magazines and sometimes the TV. According to Mintz however (183), although 'community mores and standards are stretched and sometimes broken [...], these lapses do not appear to call into question religious faith and acceptance of the Hasidic world view.'

Another known male researcher who has continued to conduct and publish on strictly Orthodox Jewish communities since the seventies is the sociologist Samuel Heilman, also contributor to a piece on Jewish

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fundamentalism in Marty and Appleby's famous Chicago fundamentalism project (Heilman 1999). Heilman's 1979 publication on synagogue life amongst Hasidim has been criticised (e.g. Sacks 1995: 303) for its male-centred focus of the strictly Orthodox world. Heilman's (1992) more recent book on the Hasidim of Jerusalem, offers a portrait of what Heilman calls the Haredim in Israel, based on methods of participant observation as both an 'insider and an outsider' to Jewish communities (361). Whilst making these conceptual distinctions in terms of analysis, Heilman's ethnography reads much like a travel story, written in the first person and clearly influenced by the 'new ethnography' in recognising the researcher's own subjectivity and experience as central to the research process (e.g. Heilman refers to James Clifford's innovative approach, 138, 361). Heilman thus emphasises 'epistemological empathy', acknowledges the filter of the observer's interpretation, and in general rejects traditional ethnographic objectivism. Heilman also reflects on his own positioning, such as his own personal motivation for the undertaking of this study, as an American Orthodox Jew in search of his 'roots'. However, gender does not feature as any relevant parameter to the research process or its results. Although 'women' are featured in the book, as the category 'women' is to be found in the index like in Mintz's work, and they appear in between the 'grander narratives' on synagogue life. However, there where they are commented upon, this usually involves Haredi women's appearance, or concerns the segregation between the sexes in general, such as with *mehitzah* in the synagogue or in the educational system. Not until the very last chapter - on sexuality -, does it become known whether Heilman, and if he did, *why* he did or did not interview any women (332):

Because as a haredi woman Breindel could not be alone with a man who was not her husband, Beryl was our constant companion throughout our conversations, although to give his wife some freedom he had sometimes gone to another room or when he was with us immersed himself in a book. Indeed, during all my conversations with haredi women, their husbands were within sight as we spoke, a fact that undoubtedly played a part in all I heard.

The three main analytical motifs in Heilman's 'ethnographical bricolage' consist of respectively 'community', 'education' and 'passages'. Again, the community, 'I follow them to their celebrations and gatherings to find out what is important to them and how they bond together' (xx), is defined as the male dominated public sphere of the synagogue and yeshiva. This is testified in an account of the author's participation in a visit to the men's mikvah on the day before Yom Kippur, or in the discussion of the celebration of a bar mitzvah or the gathering of male Hasidim around the Rebbe's Tisch on Sabbath. Heilman describes the presence of women at the bar mitzvah celebration as follows in terms of their outward appearance only (56):

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The little girls wore their most elaborate finery; their mothers wore fancy dresses and, in line with the custom of the married keeping their own hair under cover, finely coiffed wigs on their heads. Indeed, the attractive women were perhaps the most striking sight of all as I approached. As I looked at these women, I could not help thinking to myself that I did not know they all had husbands who looked as if they came out of an earlier century, I would suppose their spouses to look as up-to-date as the women did.

Haredi women's appearance is also described in a chapter on a pilgrimage, noting on the rules of modesty and the injunction for covering their hair (122):

Although all the women had their heads covered, and each wore a high-necked, long-sleeved dress, even on the warm spring day, to cover all hint of nakedness, they did manage to find ways of displaying their femininity and attracting attention. It was the way they wiggled themselves when they moved or even more in the way they decorated themselves. Dressed in their finest, many of the wigged ladies sported large brooches, sparkling necklaces, diamond rings, and jeweled bracelets. Even those in austere black kerchiefs had pierced their ears, in which they wore small but glimmering earrings.

In a chapter on a men's gathering at the Rebbe's table on the Friday Sabbath, women's participation in the community is interpreted as follows (84):

Women were not actually locked at home on Sabbaths, although after preparing [*sic*] the multicourse meals and caring for their many children, they might not have much sense of their own freedom. Still, they sometimes did go out for a walk with the children on long summer Sabbath afternoons, but that was a different type of community activity, something not endowed with religious or spiritual significance. [...] Even on those special occasions when women did come to a rebbe's tisch (as at the Belz bar mitzvah), they commonly were kept at the margins of the crowd: upstairs in a gallery or outside on the street, peeking in at a window. For them communion emanated from the home and hearth and was experienced through their husbands and children – which is why marriage and a family were an absolute prerequisite for being a haredi woman.

The second major part of Heilman's ethnography on the education of Haredim, is based on participant observation in various classrooms and interviews with male students and teachers, from kindergarten, through to primary school and the yeshiva. The education of girls is only mentioned in that there is a strict

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segregation of the sexes, and that even only teachers will teach children of the same sex. In brackets, Heilman remarks that increasing numbers of Haredi women have been entering the teaching profession in the last forty years; This fits in a general trend of women working outside the home due to economic pressures (181). In the final part on rites of passage, the process of matchmaking, a wedding and a funeral are described. Again, women are only occasionally described and seldom is their own voice heard. In one paragraph titled 'Moshe's daughter' for example, Heilman tells a story of how a Hasid's sixteen-year-old daughter became betrothed, yet the tale is solely based on an interview with her father Moshe (280).

Unlike the ethnographers discussed above, however, Heilman digresses on the topic of sexuality, which first becomes apparent in a chapter on the posters which are prominent on the walls in Haredi neighbourhoods, which beside being important announcements and advertisements, also contain prescriptions for proper conduct regarding the ways to dress, eat, and they offer moral guidance and political advice. Referring to those posters urging women to dress modestly, which list appropriate dress and behaviour for girls and women, Heilman sees these outward and public warnings that function to regulate and control (women's) sexuality as an almost Freudian repression of sexual instincts (308):

For haredim nothing so much embodied sexuality as a woman. Her hair, arms, legs, and voice were enough to arouse the basest instincts. Thus, in public, on the street, in the presence of men, women had to be properly covered. Signs proclaimed this message again and again.

And (309):

Modesty has to be inculcated again and again, for sexual appetites were always lurking below cover, at all times and ages, ready to burst through and confound erlicher Yidn.

Heilman's final chapter, 'The Triumph of Sex' is wholly devoted to the topic of Haredi notions of the body and sexuality between women and men. Whilst the author expected this 'normally unspeakable region' would be difficult to learn about, he notes that as an outsider, he had the advantage in for that a number of informants, he served as the 'perfect stranger' with whom they could share some of the private secrets they would not speak of with other members of the community (314-5). For the greater part of the chapter, Heilman relies on the interviews conducted with a married couple of the strict Hasidic community of the Reb Arlech. Heilman quotes both husband and wife, yet notes that in all conversations with Breindel, her husband Beryl was always present according to the rules of the interaction between men and women, which applies to both insiders and outsiders.

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Heilman describes how and which kind of sexual education both individuals received, and the way sexual relations and restraint are imbued with spirituality and thereby idealised and contrasted with sexual immorality in the secular world. Heilman interprets and counters the viewpoint put forward on modesty and sexual restraint by his informants, by insisting sexuality is repressed and therefore central to the Haredi way of life. This in then also founded on Heilman's own experience in one of his rare encounters with the Haredi woman Breindel (341):

Yet with all this covering on, she occasionally hitched up her leg to tighten her thick brown stockings, which went up to her knees. I found this moment which allowed me momentarily to see her bare legs, arresting – almost suggestive. Certainly, it was not the shape or sight of her leg that attracted me. It was rather the thought of it. How Ironic. Precisely because they so emphasised covering it up, haredim, far more than any other group I knew, had succeeded in transforming a woman's body into a sex object.

In summary, and with exceptions, the greater part of the older and ethnographical research on Hasidic or strictly Orthodox Jewish communities, yet also some more recent accounts can in general be characterised as sharing many androcentric features. The male Hasid and his activities are counted as normative or paradigmatic of what it means to be a Hasid and in the practice of Hasidic 'religion'. Hasidic women have clearly been researched, observed and interviewed to a far lesser extent than men, although this can be ascribed to the (male) sex of the researcher which prevents access due to rules on interaction between women and men in these traditionalist and gender segregated communities. However, the authors do not particularly reflect on this important factor despite the willingness of some to engage in a reflexive approach. The ethnographical representation does provide some insight into Hasidic women's lives even if this may be limited and their activities that are sometimes trivialised on the part of the author. This is problematic, for in particular concerning the interpretation on women's supposed inferior status or subordination, it does not always become clear if this concerns the author's perspective or conversely the 'native's' - men's or women's? – point of view. Whereas some of the older work remains rather reticent on issues of sexuality, Heilman's recent work – since the 'sexual revolution' – in an almost voyeuristic sense devotes a whole chapter to the topic of sexuality, although again the laws of family purity are not discussed from the Hasidic woman's point of view.

### **3. Placing Women at the Centre: The Voice of the *Hasidista*<sup>54</sup>**

Before taking a closer look at the lacunae of some of the recent research that

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does take Hasidic women as object of study, it is worthwhile to include another 'exceptional' contemporary ethnographical monograph of a Hasidic Community that aspires to be gender inclusive. In this particular study, a whole chapter is devoted to Hasidic women, drawn on an extensive survey of participant observation, formal and informal interviews with some 175 single, married, widowed, and divorced women of the Hasidic community of Williamsburg in New York. In contrast to the above discussed researchers such as Mintz and Heilman, in this study of the Hasidim of Williamsburg, George Kranzler (1995) notes the necessity to focus into more depth on the role of Hasidic women as compared to his study of Hasidim in the sixties (discussed above) (167):

My report (1961) did not deal with the women of Jewish Williamsburg in a separate chapter. Yet throughout the discussion of the process that changed the structure and dynamics of the old Jewish neighbourhood before, during, and after World War II, significant comments from women highlighted their role in each phase of the transformation that replaced the earlier Jewish population with groups of more intensely Orthodox residents. The radical developments, which evolved from the impact of the crises that threatened to destroy the Jewish community and the turnabout resulting from the decision of the Rebbe of Satmar and other Hungarian hasidic leaders to make a stand and fight the forces of blight and disintegration, require separate treatment of the role and status of the women. Their values and attitudes are a major factor in the successful rebirth of the neighborhood.

Kranzler is therefore one of the few amongst the main ethnographers of Hasidic communities to conduct an extensive research on Hasidic women<sup>55</sup>. Not only does he treat Hasidic women as a separate category of informants, but also in his interpretation of these women as agents in their own right and their fundamental role in the development and maintenance of the community and its specific identity. The study of the 'essential Weltanschauung and life-style' (167) of these women covers topics such as demographics, courtship and marriage, education, social structure, economic patterns, social welfare, leisure and cultural activities and political attitudes. A separate paragraph discusses the situation of divorced, widowed and single women. In contrast to the above studies, the interviews with Hasidic women themselves allow their own voices to be heard on their values and attitudes as to their activities and their status in the community. As in other Hasidic communities, the women in Kranzler's study do not follow religious education to the extent that their husbands do, they do not have a voice in the administration of the synagogue, or any other 'policies' pertaining to religious or ritual life. However, Kranzler maintains that all interviewees saw the raising of a family and their role as mother and homemaker as the fulfilment of their proper destiny. Kranzler furthermore

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concludes that even though outsiders may consider these women discriminated and inferior, they are not simply (193):

...caught in ignorance and lack of understanding of the world about them. They are not blindly following the line fed to them by their leaders because they do not know any better and are unwilling to leave the shelter of the East European shtetl, which their parents and grandparents had brought with them from deepest Hungary.

In other words, based on the informants' responses, Kranzler seems to reject the idea that these women are mere victims of a patriarchal ideology or indoctrinated with 'false consciousness', but have actively chosen to embrace and accept the strictly Orthodox Jewish gender norms. They hereby consciously reject ideas of women's liberation and self-fulfilment outside of the home that prevail in the surrounding society (204). Despite the replication of this native viewpoint, however, there are some echoes of doubt in Kranzler's account. Although 'nothing in their responses suggests any form of rebellion or the hidden desire of getting out of this highly structured life' (205), in a discussion of the sample of single women, Kranzler does allude to the efficiency of the way these women have been educated into internalising Hasidic gender ideology (205):

The overwhelming *impression* one gets is that these seventeen young ladies are intelligent and fully aware of what is going on in the world beyond the invisible walls of their voluntary ghetto. But their education has done a good job convincing them of the great value and meaning of the life-style of the ultra-Orthodox community into which they have been born or brought at a very early age [emphasis mine].

Kranzler not only portrays Hasidic women's agency by virtue of treating them as ethnographic subjects, yet also pays closer attention to areas bypassed by the above researchers. Among others, this concerns the extent to which the Hasidic women of Williamsburg work outside of the home in jobs such as bookkeepers, sales personnel, in management, as teachers, computer programmers, or as clerks (181-187). Whilst many of the married women work with their husbands, Kranzler notes that a portion of the women interviewed have also established their own shops or stores, usually providing services for the own community, such as in *sheitl* (wig) or clothing boutiques, jewellery and house furnishing stores.

The most prominent area where women are active outside of the home is that of social welfare, another subject that the previous authors hardly discuss. Almost without exception, all the women in the survey were in some way involved in the charity and kindness projects in the community. Many women are members of the numerous charity and service organisations, visiting or

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preparing food for patients in hospitals, fundraising projects, organising and hosting lunches, teas, auctions and bazaars. According to Kranzler, this charity work is also one of the major avenues for women to gain a measure of prominence and public recognition. The women themselves nonetheless interpret all these forms of official, but also unofficial or private forms of charity and kindness (helping neighbours or the elderly and sick in need) as 'hesed work' (mitzvah of 'loving-kindness') (189):

While the study of the Torah is the first and foremost challenge of the men, the women have been educated to think of themselves *Eishes Hayil*, women of valor, who dedicate their lives to the duties of the home, the family, and the needy. 'This is our *mitzvah*,' many of the women responded when questioned about their keen interest in welfare activities.

Kranzler does not further elaborate on the fact that many Hasidic women interpreted their welfare activities as a religious obligation in itself. His research can nonetheless be acclaimed for at least – in one chapter – considering Hasidic women important agents in the community. This shows a contrast to the other studies discussed, where the society of scholars from which women are excluded is repeatedly seen and represented as the centre of the community. One issue which these authors did allude to more or less extensively, and Kranzler strangely enough fails to discuss, is the most important 'official' mitzvah for women, the laws of family purity. Nowhere in the chapter on Hasidic women is there any mention of the mikvah, the laws of niddah or any of the regulations on sexual conduct or education of women or men. The absence of any discussion of the family purity laws seems to have functioned as a prerequisite for the Hasidic women's co-operation on the survey and the extensive results on many other topics, yet nowhere is this explicitly stated (169):

Obviously, the survey had to respect the particular sensitivities of the respondents and their families; certain questions could not be asked.

In this respect, Kranzler's research can be viewed as the opposite to that of Samuel Heilman (1992) and his chapter on sexuality, both in its methodology and style of ethnographic interpretation. The author himself will not even state what these 'sensitive' questions may have been, and the subject of women's monthly visit to the mikvah is not mentioned at all, despite the usual guarantee of anonymity as in any regular ethnographic monograph. Kranzler in general does not comment on his personal position (including gender) whatsoever throughout the entire book, which makes his work strikingly different from Heilman's more reflexive study.

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*Beyond Adding Women: Feminist Perspectives?*

In the previous chapter, under the paragraph 'Studying Communities', Belcove-Shalin's (1995a) introduction to the study of contemporary Hasidic communities in the U.S. was appropriated in an assessment of the status quaestionis and lacunae in the theoretical frameworks of existing ethnographies of Hasidim. Belcove-Shalin furthermore argues that the contributions to the volume that she is the editor of rectify the absence of both comparative and feminist approaches. Belcove-Shalin claims a number of the essays redress the imbalance in the portrayal of only men in traditional ethnographic research on Hasidim, the contours of which were explored in the preceding paragraph. In the book, four articles take Hasidic women as the main ethnographic subject of inquiry: Ellen Koskoff (1995) on women's musical performance, Lynn Davidman and Janet Stocks (1995) in a comparison between Lubavitch Hasidic and fundamentalist Christian approaches to family life, Debra R. Kaufman (1995) on newly Orthodox women, and finally Bonnie Morris (1995) on Lubavitcher women of Crown Heights.

These researchers (Koskoff; Davidman; Kaufman and Morris) are said to be the first to address the problem of male bias in ethnographies of Hasidim and publish accounts of their own studies of Hasidic women during the nineties. The first book to capture the public imagination on women's role in Hasidic communities dates from the eighties, when journalist Lis Harris (1995 [1985]) published a personal account of her encounters with Hasidim of New York, many of her conversations being with women and about their life at home. In the early nineties though, two of the above contributors to Belcove-Shalin's volume (1995c), Lynn Davidman (1991) and Debra R. Kaufman (1993 [1991]) independently began to publish on their similar research on Hasidic women of the Lubavitcher group in the United States. This culminated in two academic books, both first published in 1991. Bonnie Morris (1995, 1998) is the third major researcher on Lubavitcher women in the U.S. who can be added to this list. She was also contributor to Belcove-Shalin's volume, whose historically oriented work was published in 1998. Outside North America, (and other than the study of the Lubavitcher Hasidim), the only extensive ethnographic study that takes Hasidic women as the object of study can be attributed to the Israeli scholar Tamar El-Or (1994), whose monograph in Hebrew on women of the Gur Hasidim of Israel has been translated into English.<sup>56</sup>

In the following paragraph, the books mentioned above will first be briefly screened in view of the main hypotheses, and the detection of the particular lacunae that characterise this research. While these studies are very much informed by feminist epistemological and methodological critiques and use frameworks borrowed from the discipline of women's studies, some lacunae can be noted in function of my main hypotheses. The question is to what extent these studies can be viewed as the type that merely 'adds women'

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or go further into the application of feminist theoretical frameworks as suggested by Belcove-Shalin. Secondly, the fact that most of these studies have focussed on one particular type of Hasidic community – the Lubavitcher – is highly relevant for the question of reflexivity and in particular the importance of reflecting upon the relationship between the identity of the researcher and that of the researched.

It must be added that recently a few other female researchers have studied Hasidic communities, who did not set out to intentionally focus on women only as ethnographic informants. These researchers do not take the concept of gender as the main focus in or guiding their research, nor do they draw on feminist theories or methodology, yet contrary to the previously discussed ethnographical work by many men, both Belcove-Shalin (1988) and Laurence Podselver (2000) have reflected on gender as a fundamental issue in their research process. Podselver (2000: 161) for example, who conducted fieldwork among the North African Lubavitcher Jews in the Parisian suburb of Sarcelles, as a French scholar without any background in women's studies did not consciously set out to study women as specific group. Podselver nonetheless claims to have been 'led ... to a specifically women's subject, the lives of ba'alot teshuvah. The decision to study women rather than men and to deal with the separation of the sexes was out of my hands.' Podselver states that as an outsider, she was sometimes allowed to interview men in public places or in certain families, but 'had real access only to the female sector of Hassidic society' (ibid.).

Belcove-Shalin (1988: 77) in her study of the Hasidim in the New York community of Boro Park, reflects on how she anticipated gender to be a problem in her research: 'I was relieved to discover that my fears were only partly justified. The very handicaps I had [as a single woman in a sex-segregated society and a non-Orthodox Jew in an ultra-Orthodox Jewish community] most feared proved at times to be hidden assets. No male anthropologist could establish nearly as good rapport with a *hasidiste* (a female Hasid), whose modesty must be safeguarded, as I could.' As with Podselver, the female sex of the researcher did not necessarily preclude interviews with male Hasidim: 'As long as I strictly adhered to these norms [of modesty] and kept all my interactions with men public, I did not have any problems interviewing them' (Belcove-Shalin 1988: 95). Nevertheless, Belcove-Shalin could not fully participate in or closely observe the public religious world that was only open to men (ibid.):

Despite my ability to interview both male and female Hasidim, in a community such as Boro Park where sex and lifestyles articulate so strongly, my gender carved out for me a well-defined niche. I had to resign myself to the fact that I could not pray or study with men or attend storytelling gatherings. On *shabes*, *yontev*, and other ritual

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occasions, I was consigned to a place behind the *mekhitse* (a barrier dividing the sexes in the synagogue) with the women.

Both these studies on Hasidim by female researchers did not set out to specifically focus on women or gender issues, but were (originally) directed at the ethnographic study and representation of Hasidic communities in their entirety. Despite rather than because of the sex segregation, at least the relationship between the sex of the researcher and the research process and access to informants divided according to gender is problematised. Neither the male, nor the female Hasid is in any way taken as the 'normative Hasid' in the same way as was the case in earlier ethnographic studies that could be characterised as 'androcentric'.

*Ba'alot teshuvah* and 'Frummies'

Davidman's (1991, 1995), Kaufman's (1993 [1991], 1994, 1995) and Morris' (1995, 1998) studies of Hasidic women all share two main basic characteristics that are relevant for the main hypotheses. Firstly, they all employ some of the feminist epistemological premises that were argued as necessary for a feminist postcolonial anthropology of religion as suggested in the theoretical framework offered in chapter four. All three authors minimally take women's experience and women's voices (as ethnographic informants, or in the case of Morris as authors of written texts), as the starting point for conceptualising (religious) agency. All of these studies indirectly challenge both the notion of religion as 'text' and religion as a *sui generis*, decontextualised phenomenon. Not only do they employ a social scientific methodology. By focussing on people and their lives rather than holy scriptures, they additionally move beyond the 'scholars' society' and the institutional public religious sphere as the centre of Hasidic tradition and community which form the subject of mainstream ethnographies of Hasidim that take the male as the normative Hasid and agent of religious life and the broader community.

Both Kaufman's (1993 [1991]) and Davidman's (1991) early studies of Lubavitcher or alternatively 'Chabad' Hasidic women are not only unique in being the first studies of Hasidic women, but in particular the first to study the *ba'al teshuvah* movement or 'newly Orthodox Jews' from the perspective of women. The *ba'al teshuvah* consist of a specific phenomenon in the Hasidic world, as they belong to the only Hasidic community that actively practises proselytisation, in hoping to attract secular Jews to 'return' to a strictly Orthodox Jewish lifestyle and community. The majority of Hasidic communities that originated in Eastern Europe such as the Belzer, the Ger, etc. do not practise any kind of 'missionary' activity, nor are they interested in non-Orthodox secular Jews or Gentiles alike outside of their community. However, the Lubavitcher in Israel and North America and one group of followers of the

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Bostoner rabbi in the U.S. have in recent years intensified their programmes for attracting secular Jews to adopt a Hasidic life style. Especially in the late sixties and early seventies climate of the counter culture and 'hippie religious sentiment' in the U.S., many secular Jews became attracted to the spiritual and ritual components of the movement and started to travel to Israel where educational outreach programmes were formed (Kaufman 1993 [1991]: 15-17).

To date, the Lubavitcher practise what some would call almost 'aggressive' proselytising campaigns, which were initiated by the late rebbe Menachem Schneerson, who from his main offices in Crown Heights has launched different organisations, such as the Jewish Peace Corps and youth organisations that operate the so-called 'mitzvah-mobiles' or 'teffilin-tanks'. These mobiles drive around Jewish neighbourhoods and turn up at public manifestations. Lubavitcher youths then walk up to individuals, and after asking if they are Jewish, they are invited to engage in a religious ritual such as putting a *mezuzah*<sup>57</sup> on their door post; men are helped in putting on tefillin, encouraged to wear a *yarmulke* (skullcap), and candle sticks are offered to women for the Sabbath lights. Their outreach programmes and educational facilities are numerous all over the world, which obviously plays a part in their much greater visibility in the secular world.<sup>58</sup> New recruits can then spend time at residential houses (called Chabad). Returnees are provided with 'new' parents who act as their sponsors.

The Lubavitcher are not only much more visible through their interaction with the secular world, but it can furthermore be argued that compared with other Hasidic groupings, the Lubavitcher are much more accessible to curious outsiders, including ethnographic researchers who are often viewed as potential 'converts', or at least are often received in a hospitable manner.<sup>59</sup> It must be emphasised however, that as all other studies of Hasidic communities, these researchers have been secular Jews themselves, and this factor of accessibility must therefore be questioned regarding the identity of non-Jewish researchers. The literature barely makes mention of Lubavitchers' attitudes and activism towards gentiles, although one may wonder whether theirs is an activism interested in converts in the strict sense of the term.

Except for Tamar El-Or's (1994) research on women of the Gur Hasidic community of Bene Barak by Tel Aviv in Israel then, the vast majority of ethnographic research on Hasidic women has been undertaken on the Lubavitcher community, and by secular Jewish women themselves. Davidman (1991) and Kaufman (1993 [1991], 1994, 1995) in particular do not focus on so-called 'frum-born' women, sometimes referred to as 'frummies' within these communities, but rather the process of 'conversion' or returning itself. The focus of their research is the broader framework of women's agency and the 'paradox' of women actively and consciously choosing to become part of patriarchal religious communities. Epistemologically and methodologically then, it can be argued that both authors take a feminist perspective in that the focus of their research is on women as 'minded, social actors' (Kaufman 1993

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[1991]: 132), that women's 'experience' is taken as central, rather than marginal to the 'construction of social reality' (157). For Davidman in her research on ba'alot teshuvah the starting point for her research is similarly 'women's experience' from the perspective of the ethnographic informants (43, 50). Kaufman is more explicit, though not elaborate on the application of premises of feminist methodology in her own research. In a much shorter version of her ethnography on ba'alot teshuvah (1995: 149-150):

In my study on newly Orthodox Jews I have relied heavily on feminist and interpretive epistemological and methodological models. I describe these newly Orthodox Jewish women in their own voices and from their own perspectives. I focussed on their everyday world 'by taking it up from within,' from the standpoint of them as 'knowers actually and locally situated.'

Morris's (1998) study of Lubavitcher women, is not limited to newly Orthodox women, but is a more historical study of the history of the Lubavitcher women of Crown Heights, based on sources such as the communities archives, including publications by the Lubavitcher Women's Organisation, pamphlets by rabbis on the role of women, cookbooks, marriage manuals, teachers' guidelines, etc. Opposed to Kaufman and Davidman, Morris thus focuses on Lubavitcher women as involved in outreach programmes and as the proselytising agents themselves, rather than the 'converts' who are the subjects of study in Davidman and Kaufman. The period under study however, covers women's 'activism' from the post-war period right to the present, and although Morris did not conduct any ethnographic interviews, the research did include participant observation in contemporary events such as classes, women's conventions, synagogue services, and other festivities. This makes the study more than a merely historical account, but a portrait of past and present Lubavitcher women's lives. The focus on women's 'activism' and their 'contributions to their own American community since 1950' (1), as in Kaufman and Davidman, therefore takes these women to be active knowers, constructors, and subjects of religious agency.<sup>60</sup>

By employing a feminist methodology of focussing on women's agency, all three researchers state their criticisms of earlier research on Hasidim that has always been limited to the study of men. Whilst Morris notes that the role of Hasidic women has been blatantly 'ignored' by past historians and theologians (18), Davidman (1991: 204) likewise notes that the majority of sociological studies of U.S. Jewry have been conducted by men, and focussed on men: 'or if the samples included women and men, the reports rarely distinguish between the women's and men's responses.' And according to Kaufman (1993 [1991]: note 7, 170-171):

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In most social science studies, the Orthodox Jewish community is generally explored and then analyzed through the perspectives and experiences of men, especially through the male-oriented activities associated with synagogue and study. Even some of the most recent books published on Jewish orthodoxy, despite their rich detail and keen insights, fail to give us any compelling sociological explanation of orthodoxy's potential appeal to women.

Morris (1995: 162) not only notes the absence of Hasidic women's perspectives in studies of Judaism, but also their absence in *women's studies*. Besides their critique of androcentrism in earlier studies and their application of feminist epistemological and methodological insights, all three researchers are confronted with the problem of feminist analysis and interpretation. The main issue for the research questions of Kaufman and Davidman both touch on the fundamental dilemma of women actively choosing to embrace patriarchal religious ideology and communities. Their studies of ba'alot teshuvah and women of the Lubavitcher community must therefore be considered as a specific kind of study of Hasidism, as the same theoretical frameworks and research questions cannot not be equally applied in the case of the vast majority of Hasidic communities and the 'frum born'.

Davidman places her research questions within the broad framework of the fallacy of the thesis of secularisation in which religion was assumed to lose its meaning and importance in the face of modernity. The dilemma Davidman confronts is the attraction of contemporary women such as the educated secular Jewish women in her study to the resurgence of fundamentalist and traditionalist religion, that 'have resisted the liberalizing tendencies of the times and constructed ideologies and rules that create and maintain "traditional" definitions for female and male roles' (Davidman 1991: 42). Kaufman (1993 [1991], 1995) confronts the same paradoxes as to why the middle-class, well-educated assimilated Jewish women in her study should have consciously rejected secular culture, including their perception of the deficiencies of gender roles and dominant liberal feminism within modern society.<sup>61</sup> Both researchers who are clearly informed by a feminist paradigm of sociological or ethnographical research, thus face the issue of how to interpret and represent their research subjects, which explicitly define themselves as anti- or non-feminist. This is minimally testified by the fact that they have chosen to live in a community where women appear to be defined and 'controlled' through patriarchal ideology. As explained in previous chapters (one and four), this fundamental dilemma often holds for many forms of contemporary feminist anthropology which strive to move beyond older interpretative frameworks caught in the dilemma of cultural relativism/universal feminist politics and the agency/ideology debate in general.

Kaufman at one point expresses this uneasiness and forebodes of feminist critique of her analysis (1993 [1991]: 132): 'Many readers may believe

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that I have given too much credence to the women's own words, that, like many researchers, I have "fallen in love" with my subjects, and that I am unable to see them objectively or analytically.' This more subjective pondering on the part of the author touches the feminist anthropological dilemma at its core. Applying the feminist methodological premise of giving the research subjects their own voice and agency simultaneously harbours the dangers of delegitimising the feminist political agenda, which must inform any kind of analysis and interpretation. Kaufman all the more moves on tricky grounds, as her interpretative framework indeed may seem far-fetched to some. The women Kaufman interviewed openly rejected - what they perceived as - as feminism and its consequences for men and women in modern society. In her interpretation of the choices these women made in opting for the conservative gender ideology and gender roles of Orthodox Judaism, Kaufman infers that these women actually both 'accommodate' and 'resist' the patriarchal framework. This takes place through a valorisation of sex segregated life and notions of femininity, next to women-centred and pro-familial values which they find in Hasidic communities and religion. Disappointed with what the modern secular world and its dominant liberal views of equality had to offer, the return to Orthodoxy was often motivated by what these women found the practical and spiritual valorisation of women's role as wife, and other 'feminine qualities' such as nurturing, caring and connectedness which are to be found in strictly Orthodox Jewish ideology. In her analysis, Kaufman takes her analysis a step further in linking the women-centred ideology of difference these women embrace, with similar forms of 'difference' feminisms that are women-centred and focus on sexual difference, such as the radical feminism of Adrienne Rich and Mary Daly (150).<sup>62</sup>

Morris (1995, 1998) similarly refuses to view the 'frum-born' Lubavitcher women of her study as mere passive victims of patriarchal religion, despite their explicit anti-feminist rhetoric and views. That these anti-feminist, or what Morris prefers to call *counterfeminist* (1998: 1) women have been excluded from the canon of women's or feminist studies, Morris seems to suggest, can also be attributed on account of *ethnicity*. Morris (1995: 162) claims that the voice of the Hasidic woman is 'excluded from feminist texts because she is traditionally observant Jew, and from the critical texts of her own religious laws because she is female.' Besides the dilemma for feminist historians, whether Hasidic women are 'agents or victims of religious ideology' (ibid.), Morris furthermore relates the dilemma of feminist research on non-feminist women as it pertains to Hasidic women as an issue of cultural differences - or 'ethnic' in the case of Jewish identity - between women. This is not so much expressed in the relationship of the cultural differences between the researcher and the researched, but certainly in an implicit critique of liberal white feminism. Central to Morris's argument of restoring 'agency' to the Lubavitcher women and what she sees as 'a minor women's movement of their own' as educational leaders, writers and missionaries, is the notion of ethnicity

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(1995: 168): ‘...Hasidic women’s antifeminism was rooted in minority survival rather than the political pulpit.’ In the struggle for the survival of the community and the securing of ‘Jewish authenticity’, vis-à-vis the outside gentile world, the politics of gender were of minor concern, combined with the perception of liberal feminist values as a threat to the Jewish family.

The existing ethnographic research that focuses on Hasidic women rather than men as the paradigmatic members of Hasidic communities, to a certain extent moves beyond a phase of ‘adding women’ to existing androcentric research. It implicitly incorporates aspects of the main hypotheses following from a feminist critique of androcentric male focussed research on religion, yet obviously within the context and area of social scientific research on Hasidic communities rather than the discipline of religious studies. The studies by Davidman, Kaufman and Morris all seem to be informed by frameworks and discussions within feminist studies and gender studies at the level of epistemology, methodology, and the politics of representation and interpretation, yet these excursions are usually rare, brief and somewhat limited. Finally, as the three main studies have focused on one particular type of community that forms somewhat of an exception to the Hasidic ‘normative’ community and tradition, the research questions are similarly specific and are placed in a particular field of study. In particular they pertain to the topic of conversion and the rise of fundamentalist and traditionalist religion and its relationship to issues of gender.

Tamar El-Or’s (1994) ethnographic study of the frum-born Gur Hasidic women in Tel Aviv is therefore different to the discussed research and unique in its kind. In one respect, this study resembles those above in it diverging from a typical monographic ethnographical approach. In the introduction El-Or explains her choice not to focus on topics such as the daily routines, religious lives, intimate family worlds and the socio-political status of Gur women, as ‘private matters’ pertaining to the ‘relationships between wife and husband and between women and their bodies’, for she felt these were private matters that shouldn’t be ‘exposed’ (7). The study therefore primarily focuses on one particular aspect of the life of Gur women, which concerns their education during adult life and their intellectual world. El-Or’s most important conclusion is that these Haredi women are paradoxically ‘educated for ignorance’. The religious studies in women’s classes are limited to ex cathedra and ‘practical’ knowledge, - in contrast to the ‘substantive’ studying and the active discussing and *lernen*<sup>63</sup> that men do – in order to ideologically reproduce their status (as mothers and housewives) within the community.<sup>64</sup>

In her conclusion, El-Or therefore does seem to take a feminist critique of the community she describes and the position of women, ‘ignorance’ being a pejorative term. Yet for the greater part she does not focus on questions pertaining to feminism, women’s status and emancipation, or the victim/agency question in which her own views and the perspectives that inform her research can be found. In the afterword for example, we are only confronted with some

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brief observations pertaining to women's status in Haredi communities in Israel (1994: 209):

When people learned I was carrying out a study of haredi women, many of them asked me a question: 'Are they happier than we are?' Since I could not provide an answer to this query, I decided to look into the frequency of the question. I learned that we sometimes consider the other possibility (i.e., the religious life), as a way out of distress we have been unable to resolve. A society that is structured according to sexist compartmentalization of men and women is nevertheless thought of as a possible source of happiness. Somehow, it seems better than the indeterminate here and now of a society that has, for the last hundred years, been conducting a probing inquiry into the relations between the sexes. People are weary of this. It still seems, even if only sometimes, and briefly, that 'there,' among women and men who 'know their places,' life might be easier.

As for the usage of feminist (gender) theory at the level of epistemology and methodology, in the introduction, El-Or (1994: 8) merely claims that 'theory and research in the field of gender studies have aided my work.' However in the accompanying footnote, we only read (note 4: 9): 'I will not discuss the subject of gender studies here', and then a referral to three sources in feminist anthropology from the seventies.<sup>65</sup> The words feminism or feminist theory or research are seldom used in the book, except for the final chapter of the ethnography, however, where a paragraph titled 'Women and Men' is included, in which El-Or appears to be drawing on some fundamental insights on the cultural construction of gender in more recent feminist theorising (187):

...the haredim are constantly reexamining, in thought and in action, the set of categories they use to decode their social reality, including the categorization of men and women. The social category called 'gender' is here part of a cultural structure. *Within the discourse of deconstructionism but without a theoretical discussion*, the research (ethnography and its interpretation) aims to unveil some mechanisms of that gender structuring [emphasis mine].

After the statement, the accompanying footnote merely refers to Linda Nicholson's *Feminism/Postmodernism* (1990), and the reader is therefore completely uninformed of what the 'discourse of deconstructionism' may be, or in which way and what other feminist theory may have informed the writer. El-Or briefly discusses the differences between ideologies of gender and actual praxis, which indirectly touches upon the issue of women's agency, central to the above studies of newly Orthodox women (188):

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Part of this study focuses on the question of how, in practical terms, subordination and dependency between women and men are created. What are the local reasons for this subordination in each context; and how does each group of women, in every culture, live with it, interpret it, give it meaning and validity, and perhaps try to change it? It is therefore not enough to expose the gap between the sexes and its policy ideology, while presenting society as 'male.' The social sciences must also study the entire input of women into each society.

This implicit critique of androcentrism in social scientific research is not stated until the end of the book, and as for the discussion of haredi gender construction and gender ideology, these insights are present, but for El-Or they do not appear to be central to the ethnography in terms of the research questions, methodology and analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> See also Judith Okely's *Own or Other Culture* (1996) in which she questions the way anthropology has traditionally focussed on the 'exoticised other' in far away regions, rather than focussing on 'centres of power' at home and in the West.

<sup>2</sup> Betty Friedan, the author of *The Feminine Mystique* can be mentioned here (see chapter two).

<sup>3</sup> The 'modify' in brackets refers to the distinction that Joseph makes within the category of religious Jewish feminists, see under the 'great divide' in the next paragraph.

<sup>4</sup> In this respect, the intertwining of religion and feminism in second wave Jewish feminist movement is more in line with first wave feminism in the broader western society, opposed to second wave hegemonic feminism as predominantly secular or even an anti-religious affair (see chapter two).

<sup>5</sup> Orthodox feminist Blu Greenberg (1998: 32) in her account of her first 'acquaintance' with feminist critiques of Judaism at the First National Jewish Women's Conference held in New York in 1973, also observed the fact that many women of non-observant backgrounds 'came to Judaism through feminism'. So in search for their emancipation and belonging as women, they similarly found a community or 'roots' in Judaism.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Cornille (1994: 36) argues that Jewish women's emancipation was more of a battle for religious equality rather than an economical affair, as in the Jewish tradition women did to a certain extent always partake in economic life, working in order for their husband to be able to study the Torah. See also chapter seven.

<sup>7</sup> The 'different but equal' ideology will also be discussed in the context of strictly Orthodox Jewish discourse on gender in chapter seven.

<sup>8</sup> Onah: literally 'season'. The husband's obligation for marital relations with his wife (Glossary Kaufman 1995 [1993]).

<sup>9</sup> Plaskow refers to the usual important works in this tradition such as those by Moraga, Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, etc. (see chapter three).

<sup>10</sup> See under *Jewish Feminisms*, chapter two. *Ezrat Nashim* was probably the most noticeable form of an organised feminist movement in Conservative Judaism.

<sup>11</sup> Since the late sixties, Jewish feminists outside of the academy starting formulating similar critiques, usually in denominational Jewish journals. Examples are: Ruth F. Brin, 'Can a Woman be a Jew', *Reconstructionist*, 24, 25 October 1968; Paula E. Hyman, 'The Other Half: Women in Jewish Tradition', *Conservative Judaism*, vol. 26, no. 3, Summer 1972 and Deborah

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Weissman, 'Towards a Feminist Critique of Judaism', *Congress Bi-Weekly*, vol. 29, no. 13, 24 November 1972 (see footnotes 2, 7 and 87 in: Shulman 1974).

<sup>12</sup> Midrash literary translates as 'inquiry or investigation', and refers to a genre of literature which interprets the Bible, usually homiletically, to extract its implicit meanings. Aggadah (aggadot, pl.) refers to 'narration', the sayings, homiletic interpretations, historical information, legends, anecdotes, and folklore of rabbinic literature. Aggadah is the non-legal portion of rabbinic literature, distinguished from halakhah, which refers to the legal material (glossary in Heschel 1995 [1983]).

<sup>13</sup> More information on the mitzvot for women and men follows in chapters seven and eight.

<sup>14</sup> *Tefillin* are the two leather boxes containing scriptural passages that are bound to the left arm and on the head and worn during prayer. *Tallit* is the rectangular garment to which the *tzitzit*, fringes are attached, numbering 613, representing the divine commandments.

<sup>15</sup> Whether women are even permitted to study Torah is matter of debate, see chapter seven.

<sup>16</sup> According to Arnold Jacob Wolf (1998), Rachel Adler has now repudiated some of her earlier studies and can be seen as 'always reverencing tradition, but solidly feminist in spirit and ecumenical in tone'. Descending from a generation of Reform Jews, apparently Adler lived as an Orthodox Jew for many years, only to return to Reform Judaism later on. Critical of Liberal Judaism for 'giving up standards of behaviour ... for its "grab-bag" of performance with no practice', in her recent work she nonetheless proposes what Wolf perceives to be the 'major text of the new Jewish feminism' (*Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> 'Jewish theology', in as much as 'Jewish doctrine' are awkward concepts in Judaism because strictly speaking there is no theology in Judaism in the Christian sense of the term. Channa Safrai (1997) for example, argues that the word does not exist in Hebrew, nor is it found in traditional sources. Concepts such as 'Jewish thought', 'Jewish ideas', 'Jewish community and its faith' or 'Jewish community in its relation to the Divine' would be better equipped in the study of Jewish religion. Rachel Adler (1998: 245) similarly claims that 'theology' is problematic as the nature and methodology of theology are more open questions in Judaism: 'Biblical and rabbinic Judaisms embody a variety of theologies in narrative, prayer, law, and textual exegesis'. Anthropologist Susan Sered (2000) embarked on a similar problem when she set out to use anthropological research on the lives and rituals of Jewish women in order to lay the groundwork for a Jewish feminist theology. However, Sered soon found that theology 'as an intellectual enterprise' was much more of a Christian rather than a Jewish 'thing'. Rather, according to Sered, contemporary Jewish feminists excel in *ritual* rather than 'feminist theological conversation' (see also the problem of ethnocentric definitions in feminist interreligious dialogue under *Transgressing Sacred Boundaries*, chapter four). Rachel Adler (1998: 245) also remarks how the opponents of Jewish feminism in the 1970s and 1980s often classified 'Jewish feminist theological' writings as *socio-political* polemic rather than theology: 'Even today, few feminist Jewish scholars identify themselves as theologians, although their work may be covertly or even overtly theological'. The problem therefore points to another important insight still, which will be addressed more fully in chapter seven. In the context of women in strictly Orthodox Jewish communities, it will be argued that a focus on religious agency must look to religious practice and ritual and its relation to rabbinic law, which is central to the study of modern Orthodox Jewish religiosity. However, 'theology' is used in the context of Judaism where the authors I draw on have applied the term (e.g. Judith Plaskow). Moreover, from the perspective of feminist critique 'theology', also in the Christian context is often problematised and matter of debate. This often concerns what the sources of 'theology' may be from the feminist insider's point of view, which often privileges (women's) *experience* over doctrine (see chapter three).

<sup>18</sup> This is deduced by the mere fact of reticence: all of the reformist-type of literature I reviewed did not even include the work by the otherwise authoritative religious studies scholar on feminism and Judaism Judith Plaskow, and others in their accounts or bibliography.

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<sup>19</sup> Later in the article, Umansky briefly lets on concerning her own positioning, stating it is not her intention to denigrate either the study of religious texts or the Talmudic tradition, but rather to ask if ‘the study of religious texts along with participation in regularly scheduled public worship have been the central expressions of Jewish piety, when by and large only men studied religious texts and participated in public worship, are we to conclude that traditionally women weren’t pious?’ (Umansky 1999: 189).

<sup>20</sup> The wordplay Plaskow uses is the same that Katherine K. Young (1999b) entitles her critique of the reconstructionist approach of Rita M. Gross in a review essay ‘Having Your Cake and Eating It Too: Feminism and Religion’, see chapter four under 1. Feminist Studies in/of Religion.

<sup>21</sup> The constitutional separation of church and state also allowed for this autonomy, whereas in Europe, the legal requirement of membership in one local community for all Jews made the development and recognition of Progressive movements and communities difficult (Levinson 1990: 51).

<sup>22</sup> Lit. ‘going up’. Aliyah refers to the honour of being called up to the Torah to recite blessings before and after each section is read at public, communal services; also refers to the act of immigrating to Israel (glossary in Heschel 1995: 283).

<sup>23</sup> In Orthodox Jewish denominations, the problem of the get and the plight of the *agunah* (the ‘chained’ woman who has been issued a get) continues to be a major problem and in the forefront of the Jewish media. Without a get, a woman cannot re-marry in an Orthodox synagogue and any children from new partnerships will be considered to be *mamzerim* (illegitimate) and consequently ostracised by the wider community (Fox 2000: 1): ‘The verdicts of a righteous *beth din* (ecclesiastical court), established by conservative rabbis in America to free “chained women”, have been condemned and rejected by Orthodox religious authorities for utilising a false interpretation of halakhah’. See also the contributions in *Women in Chains: A Sourcebook on Agunah* (Porter 1995).

<sup>24</sup> According to Umansky (1988: 355), although Kaplan did reject supernaturalism, not all Reconstructionists share this view, and a reinterpretation rather than a rejection of ‘spirituality’ stands central.

<sup>25</sup> Here we see an example of the blurring of boundaries between studying and doing religion in what Linda Woodhead (2001) observes as the combination of a theological agenda by feminist scholars of the likes of Daly, Christ and Plaskow with more ‘scientific’ methods of exegesis and even social sciences (see under Transgressing Sacred Boundaries, chapter four).

<sup>26</sup> In noting the great resistance towards the feminist introduction of female God-language in the case of Judaism, Plaskow points out to the – unjust – fear of the reintroduction of polytheism into the tradition. In order to counter this fear, Plaskow takes a historical-critical approach, by stressing the historical context in which Judaism as a monotheistic religion grew and was forced to suppress ‘the female side of divinity’ (1995 [1983]: 229-230).

<sup>27</sup> In her final concluding essay, Greenberg notes that there are also behavioural differences between men and women, as ‘informed by social scientists’ (1998: 173).

<sup>28</sup> The partition separating women from men used in many, primarily traditionalist synagogues, often through a curtain or a separate balcony for women.

<sup>29</sup> Shekhinah refers to the divine presence in the world. Jewish mystical literature describes the Shekhinah as the female principle of God immanent in the world (glossary in Heschel 1995).

<sup>30</sup> In the U.K. the traditional Rosh Hodesh group joined with the women’s group of the Reform movement in 1993, according to Shalvi (1995: 235) indicative that also here ‘women are clearly on the move, at last’.

<sup>31</sup> The books include Rachel Adler’s *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (The Jewish Publication Society 1998), Judith Hauptman’s *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman’s Voice* (Westview Press, 1998) and Miriam Peskowitz’ *Spinning Fantasies: Rabbis, Gender, and History* (University of California Press, 1997).

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<sup>32</sup> In a footnote, Robert J. Baird (1997: 9, n. 3) draws attention to the fact that *Wissenschaft des Judentums* played an inaugurating role in the development of the scientific study of religion (with figures such as F. Max Müller and E.B. Tylor) predating it by approximately fifty years, yet a fact that is unfortunately mostly unnoticed.

<sup>33</sup> Robert J. Baird (1997) hypothesises that the development of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* was predicated on a kind of ‘veiled christian-ness’ as part of the ethos of the Enlightenment and modernity. In social and political terms the scientific study of Judaism was the recognition of the ‘deghettoization of the Jewish community’ in nineteenth century Germany, inextricably linked with a ‘fundamental reimagining of Judaism itself’ as a kind of historical and essentialist object, as fact and as a positive science rather than religious revelation. Baird suggests that the reconception and essentialisation of Judaism and Jewishness must be seen in the context of the Christian response to seventeenth and eighteenth-century pluralism, whereby ‘religion’ was reconceptualised as a natural and transhistorical and transcultural generic category *sui generis*, or as belief, knowledge, and rational justification. This essentialised and ‘veiled christian’ notion of religion was then appropriated in the scientific study of Judaism, additionally constructing and reinforcing a notion of essential ‘Jewishness’ in all times and places.

<sup>34</sup> Beth S. Wenger (1997) similarly claims that gender studies scholarship and analysis has not yet penetrated or challenged the ‘ongoing legitimacy of the traditional core of Jewish Studies’, with contemporary Jewish Studies still stuck in an earlier ‘add and stir’ phase of feminist scholarship.

<sup>35</sup> I here use the term ‘traditionalist’ for the Antwerp community I studied, as distinguished by S.C. Heilman and S.M. Cohen in *Cosmopolitans and Parochials: Modern Orthodox Jews in America*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989 in Belcove-Sahlin (1995: 15). Heilman and Cohen distinguish between three wings of Jewish Orthodoxy in the U.S.: traditionalism (ultra-Orthodox, contra-acculturative); centrists (adaptive acculturative, modern Orthodox) and finally the nominally Orthodox.

<sup>36</sup> Heilman (1992) nonetheless uses ‘ultra-Orthodox’ in the title of his book rather than Haredi, which seems to point out that these transitions are recent and not universally accepted.

<sup>37</sup> Enlightenment; a movement to promote modern European culture among Jews during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. An adherent was called a *maskil* (plural *maskilim*) (Glossary in Heschel 1995).

<sup>38</sup> These Ukrainian Cossacks revolted against the Poles in 1648 under Boris Chmielnicki, whereby both Polish and Jewish communities were attacked (Jews often functioned as go-betweens in running the land of the Polish nobility). According to Karen Armstrong (2000: 41), the Jewish experiences and discourses surrounding these massacres, made many Jews susceptible to the rites and penances of the Lurian Kabbalah, in order to hurry messianic salvation.

<sup>39</sup> Hebrew: governing body of the Jewish community in the European Diaspora.

<sup>40</sup> A new creation myth was ‘revealed’ to the Ashkenazi Jew Isaac Luria (1534-1572), founding a new form of Kabbalah (Jewish mystical tradition). According to the myth, the omnipresence of God is explained by the doctrine of the *tsimtsum* (‘withdrawal’): the eternal and inaccessible God (called *ein sof*, ‘without end’) by the kabbalists) had to shrink, making space within himself in order to make space for the world. Creation thus began with a cruel act of God towards himself. In his righteous longing to become known to and through his creatures, *ein sof* had condemned a part of himself into exile. In contrast to the orderly, peaceful creation in the first chapter of Genesis, this was therefore a violent process. In an early stage, the *ein sof* had tried to fill the emptiness he had created by the *tsimtsum* with divine light, but the ‘vessels’ that served to carry it, were crushed under the pressure. Sparks from the divine light fell in the abyss from everything that God was not. After the breaking of the vessels, some sparks returned to God, but some remained captured in this godless realm, filled with the angry power that *ein sof* had sent out because of the *tsimtsum*. After this disaster, the creation went wrong; things were in the wrong place. When Adam was created, he could have put things right, and had he done

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so, the exile of God would have ended on the first Sabbath. But Adam sinned and ever since then, the divine sparks have been captured in material objects, and the *Shekinah*, the presence in which we can best approach the divine on earth, floating through the world in an everlasting exile, longing to be reunited with the godhead (Armstrong 2000: 24-25).

<sup>41</sup> According to Belcove-Shalin 1704 (1995: 5), Mintz (1992: 9), versus Armstrong (2000: 120): 1710.

<sup>42</sup> According to Zalman, the intellect consists of three faculties: *hokhmah* (wisdom), *binah* (understanding), and *daat* (knowledge). These are then the first, second and third of the ten *sefirot*, the divine emanations. God desires both the heart and the mind; thus *hokhmah* and *binah* act as father and mother, giving birth to the love of God. Everybody has the potential to become a *zaddik*, yet the *zaddik* functions as a teacher rather than a miracle worker, thus again bringing back the study of the Torah as an equally important element of spiritual life (Cohn-Sherbock 1996: 55-56).

<sup>43</sup> Rabbi Dov Baer of Lubavitch was the son of Shneur Zalman, and after his death in 1812 settled in Lubavitch which was to become the centre of Chabad Hasidism (Cohn-Sherbock 1996: 61).

<sup>44</sup> Feminist research on the history of Jewish assimilation has countered this generalising view, in that women did not 'assimilate' to the extent men did in Western Europe (e.g. Hyman 1995), see also under *The Gendering of Jewish Studies and Postmodern Interventions* in the previous paragraph.

<sup>45</sup> The foundation of the 'modernisation' of Judaism and the *Haskalah* can be attributed to Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) who prioritised reason above belief, a separation between church and state and an individualisation or personalisation of belief which would enable Jews to remain 'Jewish' yet simultaneously 'proper Europeans' (Armstrong 2000: 122-123).

<sup>46</sup> The number of Hasidim in New York alone is estimated at 100,000-200,000 (Gutwirth 1999: 605). However, due to the vast divergences in sources on population numbers of Hasidim and other strictly Orthodox Jews in North America, Israel and the rest of the world (a rough estimate is 650,000 worldwide), no numerical certainty can be given whatsoever. Robert Eisenberg (1996: 1) estimates that due to the high birth-rate, the Orthodox Hasidic population grows at an annual increase of 5 percent, which would theoretically imply a doubling of the population every fifteen years.

<sup>47</sup> Samuel C. Heilman (1995: xii) estimates the percentage of Haredi (strictly Orthodox Jewry among which the Hasidim) at 25 percent of the nearly 10 percent Jews who call themselves 'Orthodox'.

<sup>48</sup> Landau's book is not an academic but a journalistic study, which was nonetheless carried through ethnographic methods of interviews.

<sup>49</sup> Harry Rabinowicz, *A World Apart: The Story of the Chasidim in Britain*, 1996. Laurence Podselver's (2000) contribution to a recent conference on Jewish women in the U.S., consists of a short account of her research amongst the North African Lubavitcher Hasidim in Paris. It is likely that similar smaller less known studies exist, but here the focus has been on the best known, relatively widely distributed ethnographic monographs in the English language.

<sup>50</sup> The *besmedresh* is the house of study and prayer which is also used for other activities in Hasidic social life.

<sup>51</sup> Gutwirth (1968: 128-128; 1970: 51-52) speaks of approximately 1300 Hasidim in total, the Belzer being the largest community, next to the Satmar, the Vischnitz, the Chortkow, the Ger and a sixth *shiebt* (prayer room) which has developed around Reb Ytsekl, originating from Galicia.

<sup>52</sup> Maimon, Solomon, *Autobiography*, translated by J.C. Murray, London: East and West Library, 1954 (in: Mintz 1968: 454).

<sup>53</sup> *In Praise of the Besht* ('Shivhei ha-Besht'), translated and edited by Dan Ben Amos and Jerome R. Mintz, to be published by the Indiana University Press (in Mintz 1968: 454).

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<sup>54</sup> Belcove-Shalin is the only researcher I have encountered employing the term *Hasidista* for the 'Hasidic woman', in Belcove-Shalin 1995: 19 or in an earlier essay *hasdista* ('female Hasid') in Belcove-Shalin 1988: 77.

<sup>55</sup> Kranzler's study focuses on the Hasidim of Williamsburg, who are mainly Hungarian-type Hasidim, some 40,000 inhabitants, consisting of fifteen to twenty Hasidic groups (1995: 23). The majority of the women who were interviewed for the separate chapter were followers of the Rebbe of Satmar, Pappa, Tzelem, Klausenburg, Vishnitz, Spinka, Krasna and others. Their ages averaged 32.6 years old, thus representing the young and middle-aged group, who together with their husbands consist of the most important element of the Williamsburg Hasidic population (168).

<sup>56</sup> Another more modest study of Hasidic women has been conducted by Stephanie Levine (1998) on Lubavitcher girls in Crown Heights. Nira Yuval-Davis' (1992, 1999) articles on strictly Orthodox Jewish women can also be mentioned here, yet this article does not use an explicit ethnographical approach and applies a wholly different theoretical framework and therefore will be treated further on. Other social scientific studies of Orthodox, but not strictly Orthodox Jewish women have been undertaken by Susan Sered (1992) and Christel Manning (1999).

<sup>57</sup> This is a small case that contains a piece of parchment inscribed with verses 4-9 of Deuteronomy 6 and 13-21 of Deuteronomy 11 and then is attached to one or more doorposts of the home (Kaufman 1993: 25).

<sup>58</sup> See their website: <http://www.chabad.org>

<sup>59</sup> Researchers such as Davidman (1991) have sometimes taken on this role as 'interested potential returnee' in order to gain access to the community, such as in enrolling on courses in residential centres.

<sup>60</sup> Another recent study of Lubavitcher women of Crown Heights was conducted by Stephanie Levine (1998), who focuses on 'girls' (unmarried women) between the ages of thirteen to twenty-three. Although in this short insightful article, some interesting points are raised, such as Levine's observation that Lubavitcher girls seem to be: 'less inhibited and more forceful than their secular counterparts' with their own worlds and the boundaries of *tzniut* (rules surrounding 'modesty'), Levine does not borrow any theoretical insights from feminist or gender studies.

<sup>61</sup> The main differences between the ba'alot teshuvah in Kaufman's and Davidman's studies, is that Kaufman focussed on newly Orthodox women who had completed the conversion process, whilst Davidman focuses on women new recruits in the midst of their 'conversion process', in two different settings: Bais Chana, a Lubavitcher residential institute for young returnees in St. Paul, Minnesota and a modern Orthodox synagogue on Lincoln Square in New York City. Kaufman in contrast, interviewed some 150 ba'alot teshuvah in five urban areas, approximately the half of which identified as Hasidic, belonging to the Lubavitcher or Bostoner Hasidim.

<sup>62</sup> Kaufman's comparison between the discourse of her interviewees and the ideology of cultural feminism will be taken up further in chapter seven.

<sup>63</sup> El-Or (1994: 133) borrows Samuel C. Heilman's distinction between two types of study, 'learning' being a process of study to attain a certain piece of knowledge opposed to 'lernen' (a Yiddish word) as study for the sake of study, and a reproduction of culture.

<sup>64</sup> El-Or compares women's study with men's study as researched by Samuel S. Heilman, such as in *Synagogue Life*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.

<sup>65</sup> These are the early feminist anthropology 'classics', such as M. Zimbalist-Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (eds.), *Women, Culture and Society*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975 and Rayna Reiner (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Woman*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975 and Carol McCormack and Marilyn Strathern, *Nature, Culture and Gender*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **THE FIELD: ANTWERP, LAST EUROPEAN SHTETL OR THE NEW JERUSALEM?**

This chapter presents a description of the ‘field’ of the case study and a reflection on the methodological process applied in approaching it. Then follows a general overview of the historical, social, and organisational information on the strictly Orthodox Jewish community in Antwerp. I will briefly elaborate the fieldwork methods and initial research questions, before turning to the results and analysis in chapters seven and eight.

#### **1. A Concise History of Antwerp Jewry**

##### *Persecution and Toleration*

Historical documents show the presence of Jewish communities in the area of present-day Belgium as early as the fourth century (Abicht 1994: 20). Even this period shows evidence of discriminatory laws, such as the ban on becoming employed by Jews, or later attempts of forced conversion to Christianity, at least until the reign of Charles the Great in 800, which introduced a period of more tolerance and the growth of some Jewish communities. In the thirteenth century, Jewish settlements existed in many towns in the Duchy of Brabant and the first signs of Jews living in the town of Antwerp date from this period. Ludo Abicht (1988: 17) argues that the ‘pattern of conditional tolerance’, that was inaugurated at this time, characterised the situation for Antwerp Jews in subsequent eras, who were permitted to work as bankers, no doubt to the advantage of the pockets of kings or town councils. The ‘first wave’ of Jewish immigrants to Antwerp were Ashkenazi Jews from Central-Europe. However, many of these, including the Jews living in Brabant, were accused of various crimes and severely persecuted after the plague epidemic of 1348, and again in the 1370’s.

What Abicht (1988: 16) calls the ‘second wave’ of immigration to Antwerp, concerned Jews from an entirely different background and area. These Sephardi Jews, often *Marranos*<sup>1</sup>, had been forced to convert to Christianity or alternatively flee from the Christian reconquistadores of the Iberian Peninsula - from Islamic authorities - in 1492 and from Portugal some five years later. The Sephardim who settled in Antwerp played an important role in the development of Antwerp with its harbour into an international trade centre, some of them managing to achieve a measure of success despite the continuous threat of agents of the Inquisition. Jacques Gutwirth (1968: 121) suggests that already during this time, many Jews were involved in the diamond

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trade. After the Spanish conquest of Antwerp, and the separation of the Low Countries, like many of the Protestant traders and intellectuals, Jews fled to the North, many of these Sephardim settling in Amsterdam.

Under the authority of the Austrian emperor in the eighteenth century, a limit was placed on the number of Jews permitted to live in a town and bound to paying special taxes. These and other laws kept the Jewish community in Antwerp small. Abicht (1988: 21) claims that although official numbers are untrustworthy, it can be inferred that these Jews were involved in the trade in tobacco, lace and diamonds. The *Toleranz-Edikt* issued by Emperor Joseph II in 1782 finally permitted Jews to build their own synagogues, and take up professions other than banking, allowing them access to public schools and positions. Thus Gutwirth (1968: 121) claims that whilst both Spanish and Austrian conquerors had always been 'eager to expel the Jews', local magistrates were much more reluctant and this relative tolerance endured over the centuries and contributed to the prosperity of the city. In 1791 however, for the first time the ruling French Republic declared Jews to be full citizens, introducing the fundamental changes in the transformation of Jewish identity to a private matter of religious practice and personal 'choice'.

This movement of emancipation continued under Dutch rule (1815-1830?) and the first years after the foundation of the independent Belgian state in 1830. In 1816, a central synagogue was built in Brussels and this meant the small Jewish community of Antwerp, some two hundred people, were legally acknowledged. The National Congress decided to acknowledge and finance both the Protestant and Catholic religion in 1831, though they apparently 'forgot' to mention Judaism (Abicht 1994: 43). This was speedily rectified however, and Judaism was accepted as an official religion and consequently received subsidies for religious services by the government. In 1832 the *Centraal Consistorie van de Israelieten in België*<sup>2</sup> was founded. This has remained the official representative organ of the Jewish communities of Belgium.

From 1800 until 1870 the first groups of immigrants to Belgium came from the Netherlands and the Rhine area. These Dutch Jews mainly settled in both Antwerp and Brussels. After Belgian independence, the Jewish immigrants mainly came from Elzas-Lotharingen in France. They settled in Brussels and other Southern parts, whilst German Jews also came to Brussels, that until 1900 was the largest Jewish community of Belgium (5600 Jewish inhabitants). Many of these Jews had earned a living as door-to-door or travelling traders, settling into professions such as craftsman, merchant or manufacturer towards the second half of the nineteenth century (Abicht 1994: 43-44).

The large 'third wave' of Jewish immigration to mainly Antwerp began in the 1880's, the period of persecution and poverty in Eastern Europe as illustrated in the previous chapter. These predominantly Ashkenazi Jews from Russia worked in the diamond sector, numbering some 8000 Jewish inhabitants in Antwerp by 1901. Many of these remained in Antwerp, which served as a

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transit centre for the thousands of Jews who were en route to the U.S. (Rabinowicz 1996: 39). Although there is no certainty as to the exact numbers of the Jewish population of Belgium at the turn of the century<sup>3</sup>, it can be assumed that the population most certainly was multiplied by ten compared to half a century earlier (Abicht 1994: 44). The Jewish population grew from some 15.000 in 1913 to 35.000 in 1927 and 55.000 in 1933 (Abicht 1988: 25).<sup>4</sup> Rabinowicz (1986: 39) notes that on the eve of the Second World War, Antwerp furthermore counted some thirty-four synagogues and houses of prayer. Besides this religious community life, Jewish schools were established, next to a number of charitable and philanthropical agencies primarily in aid of refugees.

The majority of the Antwerp Jews – most likely adult men - were active in the diamond industry – mostly as cleavers -, although in the industry itself both Jews and non-Jews worked, as was also the case since the foundation of the Diamond Exchange in 1904. Diverse factors contributed Antwerp's growing into the world centre for diamonds, superseding Amsterdam by the 1920's. Gutwirth (1968: 122) attributes this process both to the discovery of raw materials in West Africa and the Belgian Congo in 1912. These diamonds of inferior quality required skilled cutters and the wages in Belgium were low. The Antwerp dealers furthermore had preferential treatment in the buying of diamonds (especially Belgian Congo), the Jewish immigrants were hard workers and the traders had extensive networks with Jewish clients throughout the world.

Abicht (1988: 25-26) also notes that at this time, Jews were represented on all steps of the social ladder, from unemployed, to manual labourers and entrepreneurs. Similarly, their political diversity mirrored the diversity in the gentile society, from the extreme left to reactionary rightwing. Many Jews in fact participated in the Flemish emancipation movement. That is until anti-Semitic ideas crept into Flemish Nationalist circles in the thirties.

### *The Destruction, Reconstitution and Chassidification<sup>5</sup> of a Community*

The invasion of Belgium by Nazi Germany into on the 10th of May 1940 also brought the Endlösung to the Jews of Belgium. Apparently, both the Belgian authorities and the non-Jewish population were initially resistant towards the persecution of Jews, as is illustrated by the relatively late introduction of the yellow David star on 15th of March in 1942. Documents show the Nazi occupiers had been hesitant because of the wave of compassion growing under the population (Abicht 1988: 66). Many gentile Belgians tried to protect their Jewish fellow-citizens, by hiding thousands of adults and children in their private homes, monasteries, orphanages, etcetera. On 5 July 1942, the official deportation commenced of the Belgian Jews, who by this time had already been efficiently segregated from the rest of society. Approximately half of the

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Belgian Jewish population was sent in 28 convoys from the Dossin-Kazerne in Mechelen towards Vittel, Buchenwald, Ravensbrück and Auschwitz. To Auschwitz alone some 24.811 Belgian Jewish children, women and men were deported, of which 1193 had survived in 1945 (Abicht 1994: 70).

After the war, the Belgian authorities took active steps to repatriate many of the Jews who were working in the diamond industry and had managed to escape the holocaust. The port of Antwerp also functioned as a transit station for survivors from central and Eastern Europe, with thousand of refugees settling in the city (Gutwirth 1968: 123). Many among these East European survivors or 'displaced persons' (Brachfeld 2000: 188) were Hasidic Jews from Poland, Hungary and Romania, many of which participated in the fast recovery of the diamond industry. Brachfeld estimates the total post-war Jewish population of Belgium at 32.000. As for estimates of the post-war Jewish population of Antwerp, only Gutwirth's (1968, 1970) study of the Belzer Hasidim carried out in the early sixties provides us with numbers. To date, the statistics of the Antwerp council do not register religious affiliation of its inhabitants, which means the only records available are the lists of members of religious congregations and other social and cultural services (Abicht 1988: 63, Abicht 1994: 134).

Gutwirth (1968: 121) estimates the number of Jewish inhabitants of the city of Antwerp in 1966 at some 10.500, thus a quarter of the pre-war population. Abicht (1994: 134) notes a growth to 12.000 in 1969, to the number of 15.000 to 18.000 at the time of his writing in the early nineties. Abicht (1994: 134) claims that today, the population also includes Jews from the Netherlands, Sephardim from Southern Europe, a small group of Israelis and Americans and recently a growing number of Jews from Georgia.<sup>6</sup>

None of the literature on the history of Hasidim in the city of Antwerp is precise as to the presence of Hasidic Jews before the onset of World War Two. Despite the much greater diversity in both social, political and religious orientation among the Jews of Antwerp compared the post-war period as noted by Abicht, it can be assumed that particularly due to the influx of East European Jews since the 1880's, an Orthodox, religiously observant community was definitely formed and Hasidim were most likely amongst them. Gutwirth's (1968) study of the Belzer Hasidim in Antwerp for example, notes the presence of Belzer in Antwerp before the war. However, according to Gutwirth these perished in the holocaust, and therefore attributes the contemporary Belzer community to immigrants after the war. Rabinowicz (1996: 39) informs us that Hasidic Jews such as the Belz, Grodzisk, Chortkov, Vischnitz, Ger, Alexander and Zanz did settle in Antwerp before the war, but this information is limited to the fact that they 'settled in the poorer areas of Kievit, Leeuwerik, and Somerstreet', which are in fact part of the contemporary Hasidic neighbourhood. However, Rabinowicz fails to mention any further references or the sources for these observations.

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Also, as in the case of immigration after the war of East European Hasidim to the U.S., we can most likely assume, that in Antwerp a similar process of gradual *chassidification* took place, with existing Orthodox Jewish communities becoming more and more Hasidic ever since the fifties. However, Abicht (1988: 36) argues that the process of secularisation which had probably been as strong in Antwerp as amongst the Jews in North America, Israel and Soviet Union before 1940, was halted after the war with the result that 'here we have a form of Judaism that is much "purer" (or more "Jewish") that almost anywhere else.' Whilst the process of chassidification can possibly be explained by comparing the similar and synchronic phenomenon of other Jewish communities throughout the world, and even in the broader context of the rise of various traditionalist and religious fundamentalist movements, it remains notable that in contemporary Antwerp, the greater part of the Jewish community is in fact religiously observant, indeed Orthodox.

Less religious or non-religious Jews do live in Antwerp, but the authors note that this concerns but a tiny minority. Willy Bok (1986: 371) estimates that at the time of his writing, some 80% of the Antwerp Jews are members of a religious community and 90% of the children aged 3 to 18 visit a Jewish day school. Of the estimated 15.000 to 20.000 Antwerp Jews today, the vast majority at least is affiliated with one of the two religious Orthodox congregations (Gutwirth 1999: 605). The Hasidic population is estimated to number some 5000 to 6000 inhabitants, which makes them approximately a third of the total (mostly Orthodox) population, indeed a unique situation compared to anywhere else in the world. 'All of Jewish life in the town is hasidically coloured' (Gutwirth 1999: 605), giving Antwerp Jewry its unique character and title of a contemporary 'shtetl'.

Among the rare attempts for the explanation for both the growth and the persistence of this shtetl type of community, is Gutwirth's (1968, 1970) major focus on the socio-economical cohesion resulting from the specific role of Antwerp Jewry in the diamond industry. Although before the war, the economic activities of Antwerp Jewry mirrored the same religious, social and political diversity of the broader community, after the war, a relatively large number of the community is active in the diamond industry. According to Gutwirth (1968: 132), 'it seems, therefore, that the persistence of this community possessed of an intense Jewish identity (an archaic and rare survival in western countries) is related to the perpetuation of techno-economic activities [crafts and trades and businesses often linked to semi-skilled industries] rather similar to those which used to prevail in the shtetl.' Other factors such as the historical tradition of Jews being involved in the diamond trade since the eleventh century, the transactions which require limited networks based on trust, etcetera., or in Gutwirth's (1968: 133) words: 'the industry, which is associated with ancient traditions and is in some measure a world in itself, exhibits further points of similarity with an intense Jewish life.'

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The reconstitution of predominantly Orthodox Jewish Antwerp community thus involved an evolution towards a relatively tight, cohesive community, located in a particular area of the city of Antwerp, with its members acting upon the same structural networks of economic, religious, and social organisation. In comparison with contemporary Brussels for example, which is in fact the town with the largest Jewish population of Belgium, Jews live throughout the whole city and its suburbs, in contrast to the a relatively small and specific area where the majority of Antwerp Jewry lives. Most Jewish children in Brussels do not go to Jewish schools but use the regular official educational facilities (Bok 1986: 373). The Jews living in Brussels furthermore attest to a far larger diversity in terms of religious affiliation and religious or non-religious identity. Brussels is home to the *Centraal Israëlitisch Consistorie*, which represents Jewish religious communities from the whole of Belgium. In Brussels, the presence of many secular Jews is also testified by the importance of the secular Zionist *Centre Communautaire Laïc Juif*, which was founded in the sixties. Brussels also has a *Liberale Israëlitische Gemeente*, which in practice is closer to the American version of Conservative Judaism. This community is not represented or acknowledged by the Consistoire, partly explained by the resistance of Antwerp Orthodox Jewry who feel this community is not observant enough (Abicht 1994: 152).<sup>7</sup> Brussels does have an *Orthodox Israëlitische Gemeente*, numbering some 2500-3000 members. The *Israëlitische Gemeente van Brussel* under the great rabbi Albert Guigini is more modern Orthodox and finally there is another Orthodox Sephardic community (Abicht 1994: 155-157).

## 2. A Closer Look at the Contemporary Community

### *Structure: Congregations and other Community Institutions*

In 1816 the first synagogue in Antwerp was opened on the Paardenmarkt, where at this time most of the Jews had settled. Descendants of Dutch Jews who had remained in Antwerp after the partition of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1830 built the great synagogue of Antwerp in the Bouwmeestersstraat in 1893. Thirdly, an Orthodox community 'following the Russian-Polish rite' (Abicht 1988: 24) is to have existed since 1867, opening its first synagogue in the Oostenstraat in 1918.

Today there are three officially acknowledged Jewish religious congregations in Antwerp. The smallest religious congregation in Antwerp is the Sephardic community, *Gemeente van de Portugese Ritus*. Portuguese and Turkish Sephardic Jews were acknowledged as a separate religious community in 1910 and opened their synagogue in the Hovenierstraat in 1913, the first to be built in the present Jewish area of Zurenborg and Borgerhout and in the middle of the 'Diamantwijk' (diamond area). Of the other two main religious

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congregations, the oldest is the *Machsike Hadass*<sup>8</sup>, or the *Orthodoxe Israëlitische Gemeente*, which was founded in 1892 and acknowledged by the state in 1910 (Bok 1986: 372). According to Rosenberg (1999) however, *De Israelitische Orthodoxe Gemeente van Antwerpen Machsike Hadass* was in fact first called the *Israëlietische Synagoog van de Russisch-Poolse Ritus* and was founded in 1870 after a law was passed on religious services. In 1951, the name was then officially changed to the *Orthodoxe Israëlietische Synagoog Machsike Hadass*.

According to Bok (1986: 372), the Machsike Hadass is inspired by the foundations of the Agudat Israel which was founded in 1910 and therefore explicitly traditionalist oriented. Whilst Rosenberg (1999) characterises the Machsike Hadass as a ‘generally non-Zionist Orthodox congregation’, Bok (1986: 372) claims that although initially and ideologically the organisation was anti-Zionist, today it does acknowledge the existence of the Jewish state at a political level, without incorporating Zionist ideology. Today’s Hasidic communities of Antwerp are all affiliated with the Machsike Hadass, which gives this community its more ‘rigorous’ or traditionalist character, compared to the other major religious community that follows the congregation of the *Shomre Hadass*<sup>9</sup>.

Until recently, the Machsike Hadass was led by the chief rabbi Ch. Kreiswirth (who died on 30/12/2001), assisted by rabbi E. Sternbuch and rabbi T. Weiss, and the rabbinate is also located in the Jewish area, in the Jacob Jacobsstraat. Their main synagogue is in the Oostenstraat, as it was founded as the ‘synagogue of the Polish-Russian rite’ in the second decade of the twentieth century. The congregation supervises two major beth midrashim (study halls or houses). The rabbi and the dayan (religious judge) also regulate the religious legal jurisdiction, pertaining to internal, usually economical or financial disputes. Members voluntarily abide by this law, as other citizens or residents of Belgium, there are subjected to the state’s legal system. The Machsike Hadass furthermore provides all religious services to its members, such as the ritual butchers for kosher meat, ritual supervisors for kosher restaurants and shops, mikvahs or ritual baths (one for women and one for men, including one in Knokke-Heist), and ritual circumcisers, etcetera.<sup>10</sup> The Machsike Hadass has numerous formal or informal relations with a number of institutions, such as the Jesoda-Hatora and Beth-Jacov schools, the Yeshiva Ets Chaim in Wilrijk, the upper secondary school Yeshiva Tal Toire, as well as the majority of all beth midrashim and the separate Hasidic communities (Rosenberg 1999). The ‘kehille’ makes announcements with wall posters, and has a weekly paper *Shabat Be-Shabato* that informs its members of the congregation’s activities.

The Shomre Hadass, or the *Israëlitische gemeente van Antwerpen* evolved out of a fusion between the older *Israëlitische gemeente* and a religious organisation Shomre Hadass which was founded in 1920 (Bok 1986: 371-372). According to Abicht (1994: 139) the ratio between the two congregations is usually cited as 60/40, with the Shomre Hadass being the larger community, but

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this figure is probably no longer accurate due to the much higher birth rate among the more traditionalist Jews. Rosenberg's website (1999a) on the Jewish community of Antwerp includes excerpts from 'a letter of the congregation', claiming some 1250 families are member. Although the leaders of the Shomre Hadass are very observant and traditionalist, the majority of its members are more lenient, and can perhaps be described as 'modern-Orthodox' (Bok 1986: 372), or according to Abicht (1994: 136) 'conservative' Jewish. Anyhow, the community counts quite a number of members who are more liberal or 'lax' in religious observance.

The Shomre Hadass (Abicht 1994: 136-138) runs two synagogues, the main synagogue in the Bouwmeesterstraat and the Romi Goldmuntz synagogue in the Van den Nestlei (built in 1927). The second is actually located in the current Jewish area. Besides these two synagogues, the beth midrash (prayer and study house) 'Moryah' is located in the Terliststraat in the building of the rabbinate and the community's secretary. The Shomre Hadass is run by a board under the chief rabbi D.M. Lieberman, assisted by rabbi J. Kohen. The community also has six representatives at the Consistoire in Brussels. The Shomre Hadass is also responsible for the state acknowledged *Tashkemoni school* in the Lange Leemstraat and the Van Diepenbeekstraat, the only mixed Jewish school in Antwerp, which also accepts children from 'mixed marriages' in which one of the partners is a convert, rather than Jewish born. The school's identity is therefore also illustrative of the more 'open' attitude of the community towards modern society and secular culture, regardless of the adherence to halakhah by most of its members. The community furthermore runs two burial grounds and a mikvah. Various butchers and restaurants are controlled by the rabbinate.

Amongst the members of the Machsike Hadass are the more traditionalist and 'ultra' or 'strictly Orthodox' Jews, including the separate Hasidic communities (numbering appr. 5000 people in total). According to Abicht (1994: 139), the different courts are: The Belzer (which is numerically the largest), the Satmar, Vischnitz, Ger, Sandz, Chortkov, Lubavitch, Klausenburg, Barditchev and Bobov. Rabinowicz (1996: 39) also mentions the Alexander. Henri Rosenberg's (1999) more recent website on the Jewish community of Antwerp however, provides us with much more detailed and up to date information on the present Jewish religious and non-religious organisations, including the Hasidic congregations.

In his list of 'Synagogal associations and Hasidic congregations' in Antwerp, out of some thirty different institutions, Rosenberg (1999) includes a total number of nineteen 'chassidé's', including details on their founders and other short descriptive informative items and addresses. The 'Chassidé Alexander' for example has the status of a 'v.z.w.' (non-profit organisation). The largest Hasidic group in Antwerp, the Belzer, are divided into two separate communities (Chassidé Belz – Mojsdis Chasside Belze v.z.w. and Chassidé belz (Bis) – Synagogue Klaus Belza – Haichal Aharaon v.z.w.), reflecting the

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schism that happened at an international scale, when a separate branch – Belz Bis - evolved out of the refusal to acknowledge the present Rebbe Issachar Dov Rockach (°1948), and sees a descendant of Rebbe Joseph Meir as their spiritual leader. The Mojsdis Chaside Belze is not officially affiliated with the Machsike Hadass, as is the Chassidé Przeworsk – Beth Jischok v.z.w., the only actual Hasidic court which more or less originated in Antwerp, thus both functioning as ‘de facto quasi independent communities’ (Rosenberg 1999).

According to Rosenberg, although the Przeworsker Hasidim originate from the Polish town of Przeworsk, in fact this dynasty is ‘typically Antwerp’. The dynasty was founded by Rebbe Isaac Gewirtsman from Przeworsk, who came from Paris to Antwerp after the Second World War. *Reb Itzekel* built up a considerable reputation in Antwerp, according to Rabinowicz (1996: 40), he was visited by many Hasidim from other European countries and was known as a miracle worker. Reb Itzekel died in 1976 and was succeeded by his son in law R. Jakob Leiser (°1906) (descendant of the rebbes Teitelbaum), or *Reb Jankel*, who was simply called the ‘Antwerp Rebbe’. Rabinowicz (1996: 40) notes this Polish Rebbe is currently ‘the most charismatic rebbe in Europe.’ On his website Rosenberg (1999) claims that ‘he died a year ago’ and that he was succeeded by his own son, R. Leibish Leiser, or *Reb Leibish*.

Rosenberg names further independent communities, synagogues or beth midrashim in Antwerp originating from one court, such as the Chasidé Sanz Sienowa – Beth Morchedai and the Chasidé Sanz-Zmigrod and also Chasidé Lubawitch – Huis voor Joodse Jeugd en Cultuur v.z.w. and Chasidé Lubawitch (Bis) – Beth Menachem. The development of the latter is also reflective of an international schism in which one branch acknowledges the late Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn (1902-1995) as the true Messiah. The Vischnitzer have also separated into the Chassidé Wiznitz and the Chassidé Wiznitz (Bis) – Ahawat Israel Weor Hachaim – Synagoog Chaside Wisnitz v.z.w. The reason for this schism is to be located in the mutual antipathy between the more pious bearded members and the more modern non-bearded men who remained in the original location in the Jacob Jacobsstraat. Besides this much more detailed specification of the communities than in the lists provided by Abicht (1988; 1994) and Rabinowicz (1996), Rosenberg (1999) adds a few Hasidic communities which do not feature at all in those lists, such as the Chassidé Shotz – Synagoog en School ‘Daas Sholem Shotz’ v.z.w., of which there is also a community in London, and the Chassidé Square – Synagoge Toldos Jacob Josef Chassidei Square v.z.w., a relatively recent congregation in Antwerp. These prayer houses all have their own rabbis, and according to Rosenberg (1991) there is even ‘a whole series of rabbis sans synagogue’ in Antwerp, such as a Saloshitzer Rabbi, a Baaier rabbi, a Deesher Rabbi, an Amshenower Rabbi, a Naseter Rabbi, a Przemyslany Rabbi and even an Ostender Rabbi.

As for the other fundamental institutions of a community, the Jewish educational facilities similarly cater to different Orthodox communities

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depending on their degree of observance or communitarian affiliation.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps more important than in the case of the synagogues and beth midrashim, is the case that here, Jewish schools also have to be acknowledged in order to receive state subsidies. The problem here lies in the fact that officially the state requires schools to provide certain subjects and an educational content which cannot be accommodated in their own (religious) curriculum. In practice this entails that the more traditionalist the school is, and opposed to the adoption of secular learning materials as an essential strategy in the resistance towards the surrounding society, the less likely it will receive financial assistance and must therefore revert to self-sufficiency. In 1843 five Jewish elementary schools were known to have existed in the cities of Brussels, Luik, Ghent, Aarlen and Antwerp. In 1912 the first secondary school was established with German as the main teaching language. The Tashkemoni school for boys was founded in 1920 and taught entirely in Hebrew. There were also a few Orthodox religious schools for different subgroups, but as Abicht (1994: 61) emphasises, before the Second World War most Jewish children went to regular public schools, a situation which would completely change after 1945.

The now mixed and state subsidised Tashkemoni school (belonging to the type of 'free education' which is subsidised by the Flemish government) which is supervised by the modern-Orthodox congregation of the Shomre Hadass, has three departments, including an elementary, a middle school and an 'atheneum'. The school follows the official Flemish curriculum – which is the general education in the Dutch language -, next to some 10 hours per week of 'Jewish subjects', including Hebrew, Jewish religion and tradition, history of Judaism and the Israeli state. According to Rosenberg (1999a), the school has some 850 pupils. The teachers' corps consists of both Jewish and non-Jewish teachers.

The other Jewish major school in Antwerp, the Jesodeh Hatorah – Beth Jacob, caters to the more traditionalist Orthodox Jews and is supervised by the Machsike Hadass. Like the Tashkemoni school, the Jesodeh Hatorah is recognised and subsidised by the state, offering the official Flemish curriculum and equivalent diplomas. The Jesodeh Hatorah on the other hand, in compliance with its more stringent observant character of the more traditionalist Orthodox Jews, has separate classes for boys and girls, the girls' part of the school going under the name Beth Jakob. These schools include elementary, middle education and athenaeums for boys and girls separately and a teachers' education program in Hebrew and Religion for girls (Gutwirth 1968; Rosenberg 1999a). The subsidised Yavne-School caters for the religious Zionist Mizrachi movement, and according to Abicht (1994: 141) can be regarded as somewhat 'in between' the more worldly Tashkemoni school and the 'pure' Orthodox schools. Classes are mixed and the secondary school curriculum offers twenty-four hours of secular subjects and fifteen hours of religious subjects.

Apart from these state subsidised schools that offer both profane and religious education, there are a number of smaller schools which are religious,

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yet do offer private profane education on demand (Abicht 1988: 64), such as the Beth Rachel and Benos Jerusalem (for the Belzer Hasidim) for girls and the Talmud Torah (also Belz) and Torah Veyirah for boys.<sup>12</sup> Abicht (1994: 127) claims that at the time of his writing, the 'B'noth Jerusalem' for girls is in fact subsidised by the department of education, which means their curriculum differs significantly from the Belzer boys at the Talmud Tora, including many more secular and much less religious subjects.

Finally, Antwerp has a number of Orthodox and separate Hasidic schools which offer intensive religious education (all supervised by the Machsike Hadass). Hasidic elementary schools, the 'cheder' in Rosenberg's (1999) list, include the Bobover Cheider, the Satmar Cheider, the Wiznitzer Cheider. There are also a number of yeshivas for boys including Yeshiva Etz Chaim, which is the only religious school that dates from before the war and is a boarding school in Wilrijk (Abicht 1988: 65). Other yeshivas are Jeshiva Daas Sholem (Shotz), Jeshiva Lazeirim Belze, Jeshiva Tichonit, Jeshiva Tal Toïre, Jeshiva Wiznitz and Jeshiva Satmar (Rosenberg 1999).

As for other institutions and associations founded by and catering for Antwerp Orthodox Jewry, Abicht (1988: 68) notes that again the pre-war and contemporary offer reflects the profound differences in the character of today's Antwerp Jewish community. Whereas the political and social associations before the war were vastly diverse – from Zionistic, socialist (the Bund), and many workers unions, these have now disappeared, making place for wholly different types of organisations.

These are numerous<sup>13</sup> and their purposes range from scientific, historical, cultural, museological associations to medical funds, organisations that help war victims and refugees or that combat racism and anti-Semitism. The Romi Goldmuntz Centrum is quite well known; it offers all kinds of courses, has a small library and hosts cultural evenings, debates, lectures, folklore, etcetera. There are youth and student associations, sports clubs such as the (Royal) Sports club Maccabi, which was founded in 1920. There are Antwerp branches of all kinds of international Jewish organisations, such as W.I.Z.O, the Women's International Zionist Organisation. Most traditionalists are not involved with these non-religious or Zionist associations though. There are organisations that offer specific services such as the Goedkosjer – Joodse Verbruikersvereniging (°1989) ([www.goedkosjer.org/](http://www.goedkosjer.org/)), or the Israelitische Begrafnisvereniging Freiche Stichting (°1884) which together with Chewra Kadisha of the Machsike Hadass runs funeral arrangements and owns the Jewish cemetery in Putte (the Netherlands). Other centres offer community services such as counselling, such as Shalva – Joods counselling bureau (psychological and physical well-being for Jewish marriage and family life).

As early as 1920 a superstructure 'De Centrale' (Centraal Beheer van Joodse Weldadigheid en Maatschappelijk Hulpbetoon) was erected to co-ordinate the many social services, in that time for children's clothing, taking care of orphans, and an old peoples home (Abicht 1988: 71). After the war the

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'Centrale' still co-ordinated many services directed at 'giving material and moral help to the least beneficent and those suffering' (Rosenberg 1999a). Hasidic communities sometimes also have their own organisations such as a Satmar social service with its own children's holiday camp in Namur (Abicht 1988: 71). Gutwirth (1968: 131) noted more than thirty years ago that 'the community has an international (and well deserved) reputation for generosity.' To date this statement is equally accurate, as the official and unofficial voluntary organisations directed at charity, fundraising for the most diverse causes remain numerous. As we shall see in the following chapter, many of these activities are the province of Jewish women.

*Local and Global Contexts*

The existing – however limited – research (mainly by Ludo Abicht and Jacques Gutwirth) that has been carried out on what is sometimes called the last European shtetl in Europe, offers us a basic insight, or 'glimpse' into a particular segment of the population of Antwerp which we could define as 'Orthodox Jewry'. Recently, the website 'JewishAntwerp.com' by Henri Rosenberg (1999) gives us even more information on the institutions within the community. The majority of the Jews living in Antwerp are members of one of the two major religious 'Orthodox' Jewish congregations, which at least shows the probability that these members both identify as observant Jews (adherence to halakhah) and are involved in affiliated institutions and networks, such as the schools.<sup>14</sup> Particularly telling is as Abicht claims (1988: 64), that some 85-90 % of Jewish children visit Jewish schools.<sup>15</sup> Antwerp Jewry thus gains its unique character through the fact that while it relatively speaking may be small compared to say the number of Jews living in other cities throughout the world (including other European cities such as London and Paris), it is unique in its degree of observance and cohesion. This religious and socio-economic cohesion is strengthened and also explainable by factors such as the large involvement in the Diamond industry (Gutwirth's thesis), although in recent years both its importance and the Jewish participation has slightly diminished, with many Antwerp Jews working in other professions and industries.

The description of Antwerp as a shtetl can furthermore be attributed to the fact that the area of and around the Diamantwijk, from the central station southwards to the Stadspark and beyond, is populated by a large number of Orthodox Jews, and this is also where the main community facilities lie such as the synagogues, both midrashim, schools, shops, etcetera. The title of a shtetl is also given because although they are but a minority amongst a minority, the strictly Orthodox and Hasidic population are visibly very noticeable to the outsider in their outward appearance, especially the typical old Eastern European style of clothing worn by men. The cohesion of the community is furthermore produced and recognisable by the network of other institutions,

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such as the social services, charitable organisations, cultural and youth associations. The Jewish community has its own telephone book, and even its own exchange and market paper ('koopjeskrant').

It is important to emphasise the fact that Antwerp Jewry is to a great extent not only a community defined by *ethnicity*, but also by *religion*, as the majority of the population both self-identifies and is a member of a religious congregation. Despite this cohesion and the possibility of viewing Antwerp Jewry as one type of minority community with its own 'boundaries' and markers of difference (ethnicity and religious observance) vis-à-vis the surrounding gentile society, in the last paragraph it also became clear that there are internal differences, regardless of dominant traditionalist religious orientation. Although we obviously cannot assume that the individual differences are reflected in membership association, a first demarcation at the level of structure is to be made along the members of the two major congregations. The Shomre Hadass, which can be roughly described as 'modern Orthodox' or 'conservative' and the Machsike Hadass, whose members are generally speaking 'Orthodox' or even 'strictly Orthodox.'<sup>16</sup>

The latter congregation also functions as a co-ordinating and supervising structure for a variety of 'sub-congregations', including the Antwerp Hasidic communities that belong to the different international Hasidic courts. In this respect, Antwerp Jewry itself is also internally differentiated, whilst the different Hasidic or Misnagdic communities for example, belong to even larger supra national communities, of which the members are dispersed over the world. That the internal diversity can sometimes even turn into adversity – sometimes even within one Hasidic court – is no less the case in this European shtetl than in for instance Brooklyn, yet the relative smallness of the Antwerp community both requires and further reproduces the structures, networks, and relations of mutual interdependence.

Henri Rosenberg's articles on his own website give some insight into the differences amongst Antwerp Jews. Particular Rosenberg's article (in three parts) on the 'representation of the Antwerp Jewish community' (1995) both criticises and relates the problem of Jewish organisations acting as 'representative' for the whole community. This involves the 'Forum der Joodse Organisaties' or 'het Coördinatiecomité van Joodse Organisaties van België' or even the Consistoire itself to the much broader questions of the possibility of representation of Jewry at a political, socio-cultural or religious level at any scale, even to the international level of the 'Jewish World Congress' itself. Rosenberg argues that often the most factual 'representative' organisms – with large numbers of active members at different levels – are often those that do not proclaim themselves to be representative of 'the' Jews. As for Antwerp Jewry, Rosenberg nonetheless claims that both the Shomre Hadass and the Machsike Hadass and thirdly the Centrale (het Centraal Beheer voor Joodse Weldadigheid en Maatschappelijk Hulpbetoon) would be the most likely candidates for

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'speaking for' Antwerp Jewry, as they have thousands of members who actually participate in the yearly meetings and elections of the board of directors.<sup>17</sup>

As for other associations and institutional networks, the differences among the schools themselves showed how even Orthodox Jews differ as to their views on the way to bring up their children as religious Jews. Particularly the strictly Orthodox and the Hasidim often not only have their own synagogues, prayer houses and schools, but also their own social and cultural centres. Most traditionalists would not even consider visiting the Romi Goldmuntz centre or joining the Maccabi sports club. According to Rosenberg, most Orthodox Jews do not even consider Reform Jews as their 'co-religionists'. According to Rosenberg (1995), only recently at the Second European Congress of the Orthodox Agudat Israel, did the majority of the European Orthodox rabbis pass a motion, reminding the religious prohibition to perform any act whatsoever towards the Reform and even the Conservative movements, which 'could be interpreted as the recognition that these Jews have any kind of binding with the Jewish people' (from *Jedion*, the twice monthly journal of Agudat Israel, nr. 32 June-July 1996, p. 5).

As in Heilman and Friedman's (1991) typology of traditionalist and fundamentalist communities, the internal diversity in the Jewish community/ies of Antwerp can also be characterised using a framework in terms of the degree of acculturation or resistance towards modern society and the surrounding secular world. In general, Conservative and 'modern Orthodox' Jews are inclined to interact with broader society more than the more traditionalist, strictly Orthodox groups. The latter tend to be more separatist, i.e. avoiding the usage of facilities available in the general society as much as possible, in favour of the communities' own services and institutions within not only the religious, but also socio-economic and educational spheres. This form of separatism or isolationism is obviously only relative, as the present-day context of the nation-state does not allow for any possibility of 'autonomous' communities. In fact, most of the Antwerp Jews are Belgian citizens, many of which Belgian born, thus both subject and entitled to the same duties, rights of any other member of the state. However, the more observant and committed to halakhah, the more restrictions upon the possible forms of interaction with non-Jews or non-observant Jews. The more traditionalist, the more far reaching this form of separatism and isolation from the surrounding society appears to be.

The relative degree of local autonomy and internal cohesion accompanied by separatism and isolationism of Antwerp Orthodox Jewry is typically aligned with an enormous internationalism. There is the very complex and special relationship to the state of Israel, which varies even amongst many Orthodox Jews in and outside of Israel. Apart from this, the meaning of the Diaspora, especially amongst those Jews that do embrace a strong Jewish identity, whether this is religious, ethnically or historically defined, has coincided with the growth of the current 'global village' and the facilitation of international communications and travel. The internationalism of Hasidic

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communities is especially apparent. Although the communities are even somewhat separatist amongst themselves, having their own community networks and institutions, at the international level, the contacts, travelling, and often emigration, temporary relocations – particularly through marriage bonds – are considerable. Among the Hasidim the rebbe and the contact with his administration is paramount, in whatever part of the world he may be residing.

Besides these two main characteristics of Antwerp – but also global – strictly Orthodox Jewry, both the relative separatism and autonomy at the level of locality on the one hand and the inter- – or supra - nationalism on the other, an important recent historical shift has taken place in this traditionalist type of communities. As previously remarked, the Antwerp community has also undergone a process of chassidification in the post-war period, a process which is likely to have continued and possibly intensified – together with increasing isolation and separatism of the strictly Orthodox – during the last decades. That the post-war community of Orthodox Jews in Antwerp appears to be much more traditionalist and religious observant than the community before the war had already been noted by Abicht (1988, 1994). Gutwirth's (1970) ethnographic work dating from the sixties then again, points to the intense religious character of the Hasidic Jewry in Antwerp at the time of his study. However, he sees this as the seeds for a decrease in traditionalism – much in line with most of the predictions in Hasidic studies at this time (see previous chapter) – rather than the birth of a 'new' phenomenon. New Hasidic immigrants coming to Antwerp after the war obviously directly contributed to this process of chassidification. However, there is also much reason to believe that a process of growing religious observance and social control has taken place amongst a large part of Antwerp Jewry ever since the post-war period. These shifts can furthermore possibly be understood in the context of and in comparison with the growth of many other traditionalist and religious fundamentalisms since the sixties in many parts of the world.

An interesting personal account and viewpoint on the chassidification of Antwerp Jewry is that of Henri Rosenberg (1991) in an article on his website titled 'Those were the days: About Past and Present. The Metamorphosis of a Shtetl seen through the eyes of a sociologist.' Rosenberg claims that the past thirty years - considering the time of writing, that would be from the sixties onwards – a 'large-scale metamorphosis of a generation which transformed itself from orthodox Jew (old style) into the new look orthodox Jew' has taken place. Although the author confesses to the influence of some nostalgia, he nonetheless is very adamant in his own evaluation of this transformation. His personal opinion is characterised in expressions such as: 'After all a particular type of orthodox Jew is disappearing, a trend which is particularly amusingly and profoundly illustrated by the post-war Bobover chossid who resolutely refused to follow the herd by growing a beard and explained his stubbornness by saying that he wanted to be able [to] show his children and grand-children what a Bobover chossid looked like.'

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Rosenberg furthermore gives an account of his carefree childhood growing up in Antwerp, when being Orthodox did not entail a complete segregation and prohibition on contacts with the surrounding secular society. Jewish children watched television, went to department stores, and bought sweets in the local store. This involved a great deal of ‘tolerance’ towards the degree of religious stringency, which was also reflected in exterior demeanour: ‘Few of our parents bothered to grow a beard (even those who had been forced to shave them off by the Nazis). Nor were head coverings for women widely used. After all moderately priced fashionable wigs in synthetic hair did not yet exist’.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the kosher food industry had not really gotten off the ground, which meant kashrut rules were rather lenient. In Rosenberg’s point of view, the increasing restrictions on the Orthodox life style towards an ideal form of piety has meant things have changed for the worst: ‘the times of liberal views, nonchalance and a tolerant morality have long disappeared’. Children have become more devout than their parents, they have adopted a stance against modern and profane society and aspiring to what they see as the original Jewish religious way of life. Rosenberg regrets this development and sees the birth of the ‘homo chassidicus’ as aligned with the rise of other sorts of fundamentalisms throughout the world.

### **3. Entering the Field – Enter Women**

The previous two paragraphs provided both important background information on the history and social organisation of Antwerp Orthodox Jewry as a unique ‘religious’ community. They also tentatively offered some analytical frameworks on how to situate the community in terms of collective identity and the contemporary resurgence of religious traditionalism on a global, comparative scale. As explained before, the original focus of the case study was meant to be a traditionalist religious community, which would give the opportunity to illustrate the main hypotheses on the study of gender and religion most poignantly. Thus in the case of the Antwerp Jewish community, I hoped to gain access to some Orthodox Jewish women, and hopefully even some of the more traditionalist or even Hasidic women among them.

#### *The Research Population*

The available information I had on Antwerp Jewry, in terms of both general information and existing research, was limited to Gutwirth’s (1968, 1970, 1978) older ethnographic work on the Belzer Hasidim and Abicht’s (1994) more recent introductory books for a general readership, including his appendix with some addresses of the community’s institutions such as the congregations and their synagogues. Rosenberg’s much more elaborate and detailed information

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on his website was unfortunately not yet online at the time of the interviews. In one respect, the determination of a particular research population seemed relatively straightforward in the case of the Antwerp Orthodox Jewry. The community itself is relatively small, cohesive, and as for the more traditionalist Jews, the literature suggested that a first parameter would be affiliation with the Machsike Hadass congregation. As William Shaffir (1991: 73) notes on his experiences in researching Hasidim, Hasidic Jews live in select areas with 'demarcated boundaries' and they can be identified through their institutions, such as 'their own house of worship that serves as a central meeting place' (Shaffir 1998: 51). However, an attempt to make contacts by 'hanging around' in the neighbourhood of the synagogue or prayer house, or directly contacting any of the secretaries or directors of institutions seemed to be the best way to go about contacting Jewish *women*. The main research questions, my own positioning and the people I wanted to reach motivated the choice for an alternative route of entry into the field. Epistemologically, I a priori realised that as an outsider, both my gender and 'ethnicity' (as a 'goy') would place severe limits on the methods of entry that had been used by most of the researchers whose work I covered in the previous chapter.

First of all, 'hanging around' synagogues or visiting prayer houses (e.g., Eisenberg 1996) would not at all prove effective, both because of my gender and in trying to reach any women rather than men, these locations being precisely areas of the male dominated public sphere in Orthodox Jewish and especially strictly Orthodox communities. Simply putting on a skullcap and walking into a synagogue to join in a prayer session (Shaffir 1991: 74) or paying a visit to the men's ritual bath – another male communal sphere – (such as Heilman 1992), would have been quite inappropriate and simply impossible. perhaps I could have tried visiting the women's section of the synagogue on the Sabbath, but somehow as a gentile, this step seemed far too big and I anticipated this would have been felt as an 'intrusion', an act totally out of place.

I compared my situation to that of the other researchers who, despite their secular life style and unfamiliarity with strictly Orthodox Jewish communities and life styles, were their 'jewishness' has somehow played an important practical role in gaining entry to their field of research. Many of them had, after all, a familiarity with certain rituals, or the knowledge of languages such as Hebrew or Yiddish. Those researchers focussing on the Lubavitcher Hasidim have the additional 'advantage' of – as Jews - being conceived of as potential 'converts' or 'returnees'. Naturally this gives their research process its own ethical dilemmas, such as the explication of research intentions, and so forth (Shaffir), but a priori their 'jewishness' did give these researchers an enormous 'home advantage' in gaining access and being tolerated by these otherwise 'closed communities'. The ethnographic research on strictly Orthodox Jewish women conducted by David man, Kaufman, Morris, Levine and Podselver discussed in the previous chapter, similarly focussed on

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Lubavitcher women, and research methods were usually applied by visiting and joining in programmes of institutions specifically directed at potential returnees.

Both the fact that traditionalist strictly Orthodox Jewish women do not – or peripherally – participate in public religious ritual and their institutions, and the feminist epistemological premise that I wanted to start my research ‘from women’s lives’, further supported the feeling I would have to gain entry to a ‘field’ that was precisely not that of the institutional, official or ‘public’ sphere. The fact that I wanted to meet women rather than men, also ultimately made me consider less evident people than the secretaries of the congregations or school directors. I anticipated that this would lead me to men, and precisely those men who hold important positions of authority and the responsibility of ‘representation’ in the religious community. In view of one of the main hypotheses, that is countering the focus on texts and institutions in religious studies, this seemed exactly where I should *not* to look. Besides, my contacts with some men merely provided dry, official accounts of Judaism. This insight was in fact later confirmed by one of my female informants (see the quote by Leonie under *The Research Questions and Methods*). Questions on the subject of ‘women in Judaism’ had only brought me the kind of responses such as ‘yes, of course women are important in Judaism, look at the matriarchs in the Bible.’

I consciously avoided making use of the evident channels for establishing contacts, such as university professors. Not only did I expect to receive both information and the type of contacts that probably many students before me had received (and mostly failed in pursuing).<sup>19</sup> I also set out to cut out as many male contact persons and informants as possible in the complete research process, deciding to bypass the ‘male point of view’ as much as possible. As I did not have any personal contacts with any Jews in Antwerp or any other acquaintances that in some way themselves have Jewish friends or colleagues, I decided that ‘anyone would do’ to start with, as long as she was female, and I would see where this would lead me. In general my first contacts were more ‘progressive’ Jewish women, or women who at least were involved in activities outside of their own community, such as Jewish cooking lessons or guided tours of the synagogues in Antwerp. From some of these women I then received further contacts of more traditionalist or more ‘strictly’ Orthodox women, although this did not turn out to be so easy, as most of them had to think hard of anyone whom they thought would be willing to speak to me.

Both the literature and general knowledge had taught me it would not be easy to gain entrance into the closed communities of strictly Orthodox Jews, especially the Hasidim (e.g., Eisenberg 1996; Shaffir 1985, 1998). Starting with some names and addresses I managed to get hold of through informal contacts and organisations, I succeeded in arranging meetings with three different Orthodox Jewish women in their private homes in Antwerp, after sending them a letter explaining my research intentions and stating I would contact them later by phone. My first meetings were with more ‘modern’ Orthodox women affiliated with the Shomre Hadass, who assured me that they were ‘very

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emancipated' and there was no difference between their lives and that of secular women of today. Through the well-known snow ball technique I managed to get hold of further addresses of Orthodox Jewish women, and using other available information and contact persons at the time, I sent copies of the same letter to some of the new names and addresses, explaining my project and my intentions. I also wrote letters to the wives of the rabbis and judges listed in Abicht's appendix (1994), but only a limited number were willing to arrange a meeting, while others immediately rejected any idea of a 'study' on the phone. From spring 1998 autumn 1999, some twenty-five in-depth interviews were conducted with women affiliated with both the Machsike Hadass and the Shomre Hadass congregations of Antwerp.

The reasons for the resistance and the wariness towards my requests and interest in speaking to strictly Orthodox Jewish women of the Machsike Hadass, was I believe not merely attributable to the general isolationist strategy of minimising contacts with the society at large. Thus the fifty-two year old Diana, one of the first 'Hasidic oriented' woman I spoke to told me:

I don't think everybody will think it necessary to wash out dirty linen in public or even clean linen in public. There was a TV program about two years ago, about Judaism... I didn't watch the program, I wasn't there, but it seems that a woman I know who's active in the community was talking on the programme about the laws of family purity, and what happened the next few days, you had taxi drivers... I mean anybody can see who's Jewish here, you cannot mistake me for not being Jew, nobody did it to me but I heard it was done... They said: 'Oh are you ok now, are you in your clean days with your husband?' You know that was a big shame that this was talked about on TV, it wasn't necessary... [...] To put this on TV, is appealing just to the really... you know, the voyeurism of the public and I think this is why many people will not talk to you. I would even say it is normal, because what do people watch TV for? To get the juicy bits and then they can laugh at the Jews the next day...

Another Hasidic woman, forty year-old Tina, stated that my difficulties in speaking to anyone in general was due to the fact that 'we are closed community', and when I brought the issue of the taxi driver incident up and asked whether it also had to do with mistrust, she added:

If you would have been from a newspaper or something, yes of course I would be more careful. Of course you want that when you say something, this is also the way it comes across, and if there then are things you never said or said differently, then it isn't very nice, because of course the Jewish people also want people to think positively about them. Or not to think at all about them, but negative is of course not

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interesting, we've had enough with negative... we don't look for it. Then you must not know us and leave us alone...

As for the subject of the family purity laws as referred to by Diana in the TV documentary, the reticence pertaining to this subject will be discussed further on. But the point on 'washing out your linen in public' makes clear many people are not interested at all in being represented in the outside world, in a way which could have negative effects on the community itself. For another woman, the fifty-four year old Hassidic rebbetsin Liddy, the issue of representation was precisely the reason she was willing to speak to me and she insisted that I should not be speaking to the 'wrong people':

If it's about something like this, I'm so sorry that people get the wrong picture and I'm deeply religious. My husband is a rabbi, I'm a rebbetsin, and I feel a tremendous responsibility that people get the wrong picture about the Jewish woman and what Judaism is, because I have often given lessons to nurses and midwives to enhance their understanding of the Jewish patients...

Many women also simply thought that often language might be a problem. As previously noted, the internationalism of the Antwerp Orthodox Jewry was also attested in the diversity of the origins and places my informants had lived. Only two women I interviewed were actually born and raised in the city of Antwerp itself. Although many parents and grandparents or their husband's parents had come from Eastern Europe, consistent with their often Hasidic or Misnagdic backgrounds, some of the women I interviewed were originally from the U.S., from England, Israel, the Netherlands, etcetera. One woman, Leonie, of sixty-one, had been born in the Netherlands and still spoke Dutch with a distinct Dutch accent, but she had since lived in places as diverse as Indonesia, India, Switzerland before she settled in Antwerp. Another woman from the Netherlands, forty-nine years old, Nicolette, had moved homes twenty-seven times in her life, living in Antwerp for a few years, then on to Israel and then back to Antwerp after she married. She had been there for eleven years now. A Fifty-three year old Misnagdic woman, Rachel, was born in England, moved to Tangiers and later studied in Strasbourg, worked in London and Israel, where she married and bore her first child before coming to Antwerp. National identity was definitely diverse and not an issue for this 'diasporic' strictly Orthodox Jewish community. Many women had been raised in different places, then went abroad to study and then emigrated again upon marriage. Many of the women were married to men who were brought up and had lived elsewhere, a pattern, which equally applied to their children, or grandchildren, who would be living in different parts of the world themselves.

Language fluency was high among the women in my case study. Most of the women appeared to speak Yiddish at home and with other community

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members, whilst they were also all fluent in both biblical and modern Hebrew. Apart from these languages, they often spoke English and those who had lived in Antwerp for some time spoke Dutch. Thus, half the interviews were conducted in English, the other half in Dutch. It seemed that many strictly Orthodox Jews living in Antwerp today in fact do speak the Dutch language, in contrast to what Gutwirth (1970) says in his research dating from the sixties. Incentives and pressures to be in command of the Dutch language are both imposed by the Flemish government, and initiatives such as the *Belgisch Israelitisch Weekblad* and the 'Genootschap ter bevordering van de Nederlandse taal' have definitely stimulated this development. In one of his articles on his website, Rosenberg does mention the highly separatist strictly Orthodox are not attempting to follow this trend.

One rebbetsin (wife of a rabbi) I contacted on the phone said neither her English or Dutch was good enough for her to feel confident enough to speak to me and what some also called simply being 'articulate' enough, or sure about themselves for 'saying the right things.' The Hasidic rebbetsin Liddy on the other hand, claimed to be able to speak thirteen languages, and had to assist her rabbi husband who could speak Hungarian, Hebrew, Yiddish, German and English very well, but no French or Dutch, so she had to act as a translator for him on certain occasions. Confidence rather than language appeared to be a problem in being able to reach the younger women of my age, in the community. It so turned out that my research population were middle-aged to senior women. Tina thought women between their twenties or thirties would not be self-assured enough to speak to me:

They wouldn't be sure of themselves, sure of their belief, but not in talking and explaining it. We know more by experience and we also know that it isn't so bad if we don't know something, but the youngsters want to know it for sure, and they will think, 'ah, I'll make mistakes and...'

And finally, another crucial factor in determining the character of the entry process, was gender-related in that strictly Orthodox Jewish women themselves were perhaps less used to interaction with outsiders, compared to their husbands who are more involved in the public secular world, often due to their profession. Secondly, the very subjects I wanted to talk about, female religiosity and religious practice, on many accounts is itself a highly private matter according to strictly Orthodox Jewish religious discourse. As will be explained later, a private-public dichotomy coalesces with the gender roles and ideology.

After I had began to feel further contacts and meetings with more traditionalist Orthodox Jewish women were actually possible, I decided to concentrate on the strictly Orthodox rather than the more 'modern' Orthodox women. Although my criteria for deciding whom to count as strictly Orthodox and who not were

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somewhat arbitrary and all these categories must be seen as relative, I opted for limiting my research population to women affiliated with the Machsike Hadass. However, as warned in the previous chapter, the boundaries here are also relative. Thus some of the modern Orthodox women (affiliated with the Shomre Hadass) I interviewed did not wear wigs, or just a hat, their husbands would shake my hands upon greeting me, etcetera. In contrast, the more traditionalist women seemed to confirm more to the exterior rules of modesty as commonplace in the more strictly Orthodox communities.

At the outset of the process of referrals to further contact persons willing to give an interview, it became quite clear that I was to meet quite a diversity of Jewish women in Antwerp. It is my assumption that due to the relative small size of the Jewish community of Antwerp, the familiarity between Antwerp Jews is quite large, everybody 'knowing everybody else'. I furthermore suggest that even amongst the different 'sub-communities' such as the different Hasidic courts, the networks, contacts and interaction between these groups is probably much higher than say, in the larger more separate communities of New York and Jerusalem. Perhaps this is even more so the case between Jewish *women*.

Although most of my informants affiliated with the Machsike Hadass shared certain characteristics such as their age range, their position as 'community spoke persons', such as the wives of rabbis, or otherwise rather important women involved in community affairs and jobs, they differed in that they all came from different sub-communities, such as different Hasidic courts. My case study also included one Misnagdic woman, and a few women who refused to identify with any one court, stating they were merely affiliated with a particular synagogue or were 'Hasidic oriented'. These self-identifications furthermore underscore the insight that the sub-communities and the identities of 'strictly Orthodox Jews' may not always be so clear cut in actual reality. Perhaps there was indeed more networking and contact between these women through their specific activities as teachers, counsellors, voluntary workers and other structures which often crossed the boundaries of the sub-communities, rather than there would be between their husbands, who spent a great deal of their time in their 'own' synagogue and beth midrash. Anyhow, I decided to let my informants continue to control the research process in this respect, and thus let them determine which women I ultimately spoke to.

At one point, one informant, a rebbetsin who was often referred to and obviously very much respected by many of the other women I spoke to, tried to exercise her control over the research process by questioning me about who I had spoken to and telling me who I definitely shouldn't be speaking to. This rebbetsin wanted me to collect the 'right' information, she was therefore very much concerned with the issue of representation of the community in the outside world.

The research population that consequently was 'formed' and is the basis for the interview analysis in the following chapter consisted of women all affiliated with the Machsike Hadass. Most of them self-identified as 'Hasidic',

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from the Ger, Vischnitz, Belzer, Satmar, Slonim<sup>20</sup> Hasidic courts, one Misnagdic, (or rather a 'Litvish' woman as she called herself) and a number of 'Hasidic oriented' women, claiming they were more 'mixed' between being Hasidic and non-Hasidic or 'Orthodox with Hasidic tendencies.' The fluidity of the category also proved interfamilial. Some women had become more Hasidic because they had married a Hasidic partner or vice versa. Some children were more Hasidic than others, etcetera. Very basic introductory questions on the religious identification and affiliation beyond membership of the Machsike Hadass were therefore far from evident. As I tried to 'categorise' sixty-five year old Tirza for example:

C: I understood the different communities are not so clearly separated or do they have clear boundaries?

T: Yes, that's correct, I'm Orthodox with Hasidic tendencies

C: So do you belong to a particular congregation?

T: There is a synagogue here which my husband and I are very much attached to

C: Were you raised Hasidic?

T: No, my husband is Orthodox and learned in the Talmud, but within time we have become drawn to the atmosphere of Hasidism.

C: What appealed to you?

T: The warmth, it's not dry or cold, it's a different atmosphere... in the religion itself, people sing more...

Nicolette (49), also could not straightforwardly answer my question as to whether she was Hasidic:

N: I find it very difficult to describe myself, I am much more Hasidic than my sister and my children are a little more Hasidic than I am. They go to the Satmar school, and that can be called ultra, ultra-Orthodox...

C: Is true that the different communities are not so strictly delineated?

N: Yes, that's special for Antwerp, it's not like the US, where there are almost wars between the different communities, by us there is no uh... racism or classes. My parents were, how do you say, 'Hasidic minded.'

A few women who were affiliated with a particular synagogue and others simply refused to state exactly to which type of community they did or did not belong. The research population of women consisted all of married mothers and grandmothers, aged between 38 and 65. Many of these women's husbands were prominent rabbis in the Machsike Hadass and other associations. All of these women lived in the Jewish area in terraced houses or apartments, in the proximity of the Stadspark and the Belgiëlei. Although no questions were asked on financial situation or income, I inferred from the houses these women lived in, their interior, and other cues throughout the interviews that the vast majority

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were comfortable to quite well off as to their standard of living.<sup>21</sup> Only one family seemed to be not so well off, although they owned a house, the furniture and decoration was quite decrepit, and the rebbetsin herself alluded to their meagre income.<sup>22</sup>

The appointments were often difficult to make, taking into account not only the many Jewish holidays which many Orthodox women have a fundamental role in preparing, but also the full agendas many of these women seemed to have. Many worked as teachers and on top of that they had their responsibilities within the home, especially if they still had small children. Others were occupied with all sorts of activities in receiving travelling guests at home and many voluntary activities involving schools, charity, etcetera. One rebbetsin was so busy, that it took a few weeks just to reach her home on the otherwise permanently occupied phone, and another approximately six months of waiting before a meeting could take place due to her schedule and responsibilities inside and outside of the home.

*The Research Questions and Methods*

My main and general objective in view of the main arguments set out in the previous chapters, was to find out how ‘religious agency’ and, more broadly, how ‘religious identity’ could be characterised from the *standpoint* of the strictly Orthodox Jewish women I interviewed. As has been emphasised earlier, the literature and current research had taught me that strictly Orthodox Jewish women do not partake or only ‘peripherally’ partake in what is generally counted as religious practice, that is the public institutions and domains, and particularly the religious duties or paradigmatic ‘mitzvot’ of study and prayer controlled and performed by only men.

After preparatory reading up (such as much of the literature discussed in the previous chapter five and paragraphs of this chapter), a rudimentary research guide with basic open-ended questions was designed and used during the interviews. The interviews themselves were all conducted in private homes, and usually took place in the living room or occasionally in the garden if the weather allowed for it. At the time of the majority of the interviews, usually no one else seemed to be at home; sometimes children or a nanny would appear. As for the husbands of the women I interviewed, apart from maybe three occasions, they were not at home, nor in the same room in which the interview took. The rare times I did see any men, they remained very briefly, did not greet me or take much notice of my presence. Only once did one of my informants ask her husband to answer a question, which he answered to her in Yiddish and she then translated for me.<sup>23</sup>

The original interview guide consisted of a cluster of main questions, all directed at gaining insight into the religious life and identity of the woman in question, in an attempt to elicit her own standpoint, or personal experience and

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point of view. As the conversations took place in an informal setting, obviously not all the questions on my list were asked or answered, but rather I attempted to let the respondent determine the nature of the conversation, although sometimes I had to return to the subject of the women's perspective or role. My respondents also revealed much personal information, referring to their family and their own relationships, which I assumed to perhaps be very characteristic in interviewing women in this case study. I am convinced an interview with for instance their husbands would have elicited a wholly different type of answers, referring to the 'formal and official laws' or the 'theoretical' matter these men study every day, whilst the women not only conveyed more practical knowledge, but also how this related to their own daily lives and relationships. As Leonie (61) – an anti-Zionist - told me herself, men talk about other things:

Men will probably talk more about Torah, because they have to talk about this all the time, it's their obligation to learn Torah all the time, so they will probably talk more about such subjects. So if they talk about Judaism, they talk about Torah, they talk about the Second World War or they talk about Israel. That's their escape you know, that's not real, that isn't it, but then they think they are talking about something Jewish...

That the conversations took on this very informal and often personal character, can also be attributed to the fact that women's religiosity itself is connected to daily life, her family and the private sphere, as will be discussed in the analysis further on.

The research questions thus centred on the main goal of defining strictly Orthodox Jewish women's experience of religiosity, in terms of their own identity and religious agency, in the first place in order to find out whether in general terms, an alternative view on 'religion' could be given from a gendered perspective within this religious community. The main hypotheses as stated in chapters three and four, in countering androcentrism in its focus on both 'scriptures and elites', and 'religion as *sui generis*' will be illustrated with a 'reflexive' analysis of a selection of these interview results. I shall return to the notion of reflexivity and some of the related insights on politico-epistemological issues in chapter four towards the end of the chapter and in the conclusion.

In each interview I would first pose some introductory questions such as 'tell me about yourself and your background' in order to elicit some basic objective data such as geographical and cultural background, age, profession, number of children, etcetera. As noted above, I also tried to elicit which religious community or congregation my informants were affiliated with, what they considered their role in the community to be, if they were religious, etcetera. The main interview guide thereafter focussed on the general question of how they saw the differences between women and men (chapter seven,

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paragraph one). My following questions were both based on what I had already read and knew about the (prescribed or researched) role of Orthodox Jewish women, whereby I often asked my respondents to comment on what I had read, such as:

- Although women and men have different roles and religious obligations in Orthodox Judaism, women are by no means inferior, how would you explain this?
- What are the most important mitzvot for women and why are they exempt from many of those incumbent upon men?
- Are women any more ‘naturally’ equipped to perform certain mitzvot, such as *hesed*?
- Tell me about the differences in school and study for boys and girls?
- What is the role of women in the home, is her duty as a mother and housewife equally religious and/or equally important to that of men?
- Describe an ideal religious man and an ideal religious woman for me
- What are important religious values for you?
- How important is the family in Jewish life?
- Could you tell me more about the family purity laws and *tzniut*?
- Who raises the children to become religious?
- Do you think Judaism is a religion dominated by men?
- Do you think that women are any more spiritual or religious than men?
- Do women and men live in ‘separate spheres’?
- What is your opinion on the roles of women and men today in the outside world?
- What do you think about feminism, the emancipation of women and the idea of equality? Has this had an impact on the role of women in Orthodox Jewish communities?
- In what way do you think you live differently or the same to your mother and grandmother?
- Has life in Orthodox Jewish communities changed in any way compared to when you were younger? Has religious life become any more stringent?

Obviously, the more interviews I did, the more I learned and the more I could adapt these questions or for instance, start applying the concepts and themes informants kept bringing up themselves. Besides the interviews, the data which served for the analysis in the following chapter also consisted of other primary sources which could teach me more on certain aspects of women’s religiosity such as novels which are widely read by women in the strictly Orthodox Jewish communities, and practical guides, such as books or booklets on the family purity laws. In the analysis itself, I confront my findings with those in other research, both social scientific and the more feminist Jewish studies as discussed in chapter five.

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The basic research methods of qualitative research and ethnography<sup>24</sup> themselves were naturally guided by a constructionist type of methodology informed by postmodern feminist critique set forth in the previous chapters. In the context of qualitative interviewing and a reflexive approach towards this process of research, knowledge(s) or meanings are not so much acquired, but seen as produced or 'constructed' in a two-way process, as the product of the *interaction* between the inquirer and the respondents (e.g. Guba and Lincoln 1998; Pinxten 1997). This constructionist view on research methods as such I believe is fully in line with the feminist 'postmodern' epistemology of *situated knowledges* appropriated in chapter four.<sup>25</sup>

In view of the typical dilemmas in feminist anthropological research which were also discussed in chapter four, and the fact that my respondents can be characterised as 'non-feminist women', I did not set out to apply any of some 'older' one-dimensional feminist research methodologies and their accompanying research methods. As has meanwhile become clear, it was certainly not my intention to conduct any action or participatory research, or act upon the assumption of an 'equal relationship', full collaboration, reciprocity, nor did I embrace the goal of directly 'empowering' those researched (see also Armstead 1996; Kelly, Burton and Regan 1994; Millen 1997). Furthermore, even though tensions and ethical dilemmas may not be 'solved' through reflexivity, attention is given to the way both positionings on the axes of gender, class, ethnicity, religion 'etcetera.' affect research and interpretation, including the *power relations* involved at the sites of 'gathering data'. For example, as referred to above, at one point one of my respondents expressed the desire to make sure I did not talk to the 'wrong' people, in order to be able to portray the 'correct' picture of the strictly Orthodox Jewish women of her community. However, I soon felt she would want to control too much of the research process, and the more control I would allow, the more problematic this 'collaboration' would turn out to be in view of my own 'feminist' interpretation and analysis. However, my interpretation is that the standpoint of this woman – within the context of the interaction - was one which was clearly politically charged in that she was concerned with the way women in her community were often (mis)represented in the 'outside world'.<sup>26</sup> Beyond a portrayal in terms of 'victims or agency', I hope to allow for more nuanced view of what I was told, including the representation of what I understood as both moments of 'compliance' or 'resistance' from the interviewee's point of view.

Two important factors concerning the research itself and the analysis must be reminded or noted. First, my empirical research consisted of a small 'population sample' only; serving illustrative ends in function of the main theoretical arguments, rather than a 'proper' or classical ethnographic or holistic representation of a particular group or community. Secondly, I did not partake in any participant observation, which next to qualitative interviews is generally considered an essential part of ethnographical research in the tradition of cultural or social anthropology. As my research was limited to one-off, in-

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depth, open-ended interviews, the following analysis can therefore primarily be seen as a kind of *discourse analysis*, in that I compare and confront both the interview transcriptions with primary and secondary literature and research (partly discussed in this and the previous chapter). So although women's 'religious agency' portrayed in the following chapter will conceptually centre on gender and religion 'as practice', often of the non-theoretical or discursive kind – including 'practical knowledge' and 'bodily praxis' –, the analysis is based on the discourse *on* these practices.

Within the context of what I have termed a 'feminist postcolonial anthropological approach' towards gender and religion, feminist anthropologist Henrietta Moore (1994) offers some interesting suggestions on the appropriation of feminist poststructuralist theory for anthropological research. Firstly, Moore argues that mainstream anthropology is in need of a 'theory of the subject'. Despite anthropology's emphasis on the cultural variability of constructions of gender (chapter one), Moore (1994: 54-55) argues, gender identity is merely seen as the outcome or the product of the exposure and socialisation into cultural categories. In this view of 'culture', the theorisation of the *process* of the acquisition and reproduction of gendered identity as such is neglected. Opposed to the modern idea of the unitary subject, the rational – supposedly ungendered – individual as the locus for action and thought, feminist poststructuralist theory proposes the idea of the internally differentiated subject, made up of multiple and contradictory positionings and subjectivities. Individuals can be seen as 'multiple constituted subjects', who take up multiple 'subject positions' within a range of hegemonic and less dominant discourses and social practices on femininity and masculinity, whilst 'reproducing' or 'resisting' these. As Moore remarks however, this theory of the subject is not without its own problems in terms of analysis, especially in understanding *how and why* certain acts of reproduction and resistance, compliance, etcetera. take place.

However, Moore does offer some theoretical ideas and methodological tools on how to study identity in a non-essentialist way I think, taking into account all levels from the symbolic, to the institutional, practical and the 'internally contradictory' subjective level of the individual. A focus on positionings or 'locations' furthermore allows for a more intersectional perspective of identity as proposed in chapter one, one in which the markers of identity and difference such as gender, ethnicity, etcetera. exist in complex relationships and hierarchies with each other without being reified into 'abstract universals' (Alcoff and Potter 1993: 3). In terms of methods of analysis, I apply Moore's conceptions of 'discourse' and 'discursive practices', in viewing these as kinds of situated knowledges that are produced or *inter-subjectively* produced within the context of a particular interview setting or 'location'. This discourse as the product of a particular subject positionings is then confronted with other types of discourse (primary and secondary literature), equally considered as forms of situated knowledges as determined by particular

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locations or as the product of certain subject positionings. The main objective is to find out how or to what extent my interviewees' views subscribed, reproduced, questioned, modified or rejected these types of both 'hegemonic' and counter-hegemonic discourses on a number of topics, most often those concerning 'religious ideology'.

It is important to note that I do not set out to discuss or interpret religious scripture or law on its own plane of reference. This would take me in to a 'theological', religious or 'insiders' debate. Rather, I attempt to show if, when, how and in the context of which discourse, and to what purpose religious texts are appropriated - or not - by the subjects under study themselves (interviewees, community brochures, apologetic literature) and contrasted with other anthropological research and feminist literature. In this way the methods of research and analysis in the case study can be seen as the practical application of an approach towards the study of gender and religion suggested in chapter one. As I argued in this chapter this involves linking the social scientific perspectives on real – engendered – people engaging in religion (the levels of structure, agency, roles, (discursive) practice) *and* the humanities approach (focussing on 'discourse' as text, ideology, symbols, metaphors, etc.) on – gendered – religious 'constructions', *and* their distinctive methodologies.

<sup>1</sup> Jews who had converted to Christianity (under force) yet secretly continued to practise their traditions in private.

<sup>2</sup> The Central Consistory of Israelites in Belgium

<sup>3</sup> The official numbers of the Consistoire for 1892 is 13.200, whilst the historian Ephraïm Schmidt estimates some 20.000 for 1903 (Abicht 1994: 44).

<sup>4</sup> Again, estimates considerably differ. Sylvain Brachfeld (2000: 187) claims that in 1940 some 50.000 Jews lived in Antwerp on a total of 80.000 in the whole of Belgium.

<sup>5</sup> Janet S. Belcove-Shalin (1955b: 212) borrows this term from Marvin Schick in: 'Borough park: A Jewish Settlement', *Jewish Life Magazine*, Winter, New York: Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregation of America, 1979), denoting a cultural dynamic of the way in which 'American Orthodox Jews from relatively "modern homes" (which means, among other things, a positive attitude toward college and secular education) have adopted Chassidic dress and life styles, reflecting the strong Hasidic presence in the neighbourhood'. The process refers to a 'reversed form of assimilation' whereby Hasidim have contributed to the traditionalisation of the ethos and world view of much of the surrounding Orthodox population that lived in the community before their arrival. Here I appropriate the term in a similar yet more general way in referring to the dynamic whereby in time and over different generations Orthodox Jews adapt an increasing traditionalist, Hasidic, or strictly Orthodox lifestyle.

<sup>6</sup> In 1996 the Georgian Jews in fact founded their own organisation 'La Georgian Jewish Community v.z.w.' (Rosenburg 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Willy Bok (1986: 376) comments on evolution of the Consistoire towards a more and more traditionalist attitude throughout the years: 'In the US the conservative and liberal denominations are in the majority. The Orthodox leaders from Israel and the US have succeeded in convincing their European colleagues to form a front, to prevent the formation of a

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conservative or liberal movement in West-Europe. Their purpose is to recover the unity of the Jewish people on religious grounds, according to the Orthodox opinions.'

<sup>8</sup> According to Bok (1986: 371) this translates as 'keepers of the faith', according to Abicht (1994: 136) as 'defenders of the faith', and according to Julien Klener the literal translation from Hebrew is: 'strengtheners of the faith' (personal communication).

<sup>9</sup> According to Bok (1986: 371) this translates as 'guardians of the faith', according to Abicht (1994: 'protectors or carers of the faith', and according to Julien Klener 'defenders of the faith' (personal communication).

<sup>10</sup> For the internal structure of the Machsike Hadass and all committee members, see the home page of the Machsike Hadass at [www.jewishantwerp.com](http://www.jewishantwerp.com). This includes lists of names and addresses of all the supervised schools, mikvahs, restaurants, butchers, bakeries and other 'announcements' pertaining to, marriages, publications and other services.

<sup>11</sup> Rosenberg's (1999) website lists some 33 Jewish educational institutions in Antwerp in total, including elementary and secondary schools, but also yeshivas (seven in total), kollels (advanced institutes of Talmudic learning for married men (thirteen), a centre for mentally and physically handicapped Jewish children and adult education.

<sup>12</sup> On Rosenberg's website (1999a) these two schools are called Bais Rachel and B'noth Jerusalem. The Talmud Torah and Torah Veyirah do not seem to be included in this list, unless under different names.

<sup>13</sup> For an extensive list of Jewish organisations located or active in Antwerp, see Rosenberg's website (1999, 1999a).

<sup>14</sup> The only reference in which the large membership of Antwerp Jewry to these two congregations is disputed, is to be found in an article in the *Belgisch Israëlitisch Weekblad* (ed. Louis Davids) form 15/01/88. Rosenberg (1995) refers to this article citing the claim that not even half of the estimated 25.000 Jews living in Antwerp is in fact affiliated with the Machsike Hadass or the Shomre Hadass.

<sup>15</sup> In contrast, Rosenberg (1995) refers to an article 'Hoeveel joden wonen in België' in the *Belgisch Israëlitisch Weekblad* of 15/01/1988 that claims that only 4000 children followed Jewish education in 1988, and less than half of the Antwerp Jews send their children to Jewish schools.

<sup>16</sup> It is very dangerous to generalise here. It has been noted for example, that whilst the leadership of the Shomre Hadass is very observant, the members may be much less so. When I attempted to arrange an interview with a wife of a leading rabbi in the Shomre Hadass for example, she claimed there were no differences between the two communities at all as regards to religious observance. Other women from the Shomre Hadass seemed to replicate this view, seeing these differences as merely trivial matters. My informants from the Machsike Hadass however, mostly disagreed.

<sup>17</sup> In another article, Rosenberg's (2000) personal viewpoint becomes even more explicit, such as in his critique of the Shomre Hadass, which he claims to be 'hardly doing anything for the Jishoev' as opposed to the Machsike Hadass, which is a 'very active and dynamic institution which supports its members and takes numerous initiatives for its own members, which all Jewish "Sinjoren" [the slang term for all inhabitants of Antwerp] can benefit from.'

<sup>18</sup> Rosenberg's characterisation of and opinions on the changing gender roles and ideology will be compared with those of the strictly Orthodox Jewish women I interviewed in more detail in the following chapter.

<sup>19</sup> Before starting work on my own case study I sent out a group of students to conduct a 'pilot study' on women in Orthodox Judaism as part of a course on fieldwork methodology. Although they managed to speak to some men, they completely failed to access any female informants. Another graduate student had met complete resilience in trying to speak to Orthodox Jewish women and gave up the empirical part of her project entirely. Some of the women I was to interview later, in fact mentioned that they had received requests from other students before, but usually had not conceded.

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<sup>20</sup> Slonim is an Israeli Hasidic court, of which only a handful of members are living in Antwerp.

<sup>21</sup> One woman I interviewed was said to belong to the richest family of Antwerp by another informant

<sup>22</sup> Gutwirth (1970) has noted that the Belzer are quite typically 'shabby', this was indeed a Belzer family.

<sup>23</sup> This then concerned some information on the history of Hasidism, the kind of knowledge the woman thought her husband would be more cognisant of.

<sup>24</sup> The literature on ethnographic research and qualitative interviewing applied was e.g., Creswell 1998; Denzin and Lincoln 1998; Fetterman 1989; Michrina and Richards 1996; Rubin and Rubin 1995; Wester 1987.

<sup>25</sup> As Kelly, Burton and Regan (1994: 46) argue, there are no distinct methods of feminist research as such, although in social sciences the tendency has been towards qualitative and constructionist methods. Even 'reflexivity' is not specific to feminist research. Rather, the authors argue, 'what makes research "feminist" is not the methods as such, but the framework in which they are located, and the particular ways in which they are deployed'. This has also been my main perspective on the questions of theory, epistemology and methodology set out in chapters two to four.

<sup>26</sup> The 'outside world' was used by many of my interviewees in describing the broader non-Jewish or gentile society in which they lived.

**CHAPTER SEVEN**  
**OF EXEMPTION AND EXCLUSION:**  
**STRICTLY ORTHODOX JEWISH WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS AGENCY**

**1. Gender Ideology: Equality as Difference through Practice**

*The Premise of Sexual Difference*

When I only just began my interview with sixty-five year old Tirza, - who described herself as 'Orthodox with Hasidic tendencies' - to simply first tell a little about herself, she immediately refuted the assumption that Jewish Orthodox women are 'oppressed':

I have eight children, but now I am very involved outside the home, I am in the managing board of a youth movement, that is girls and ladies, so I am very active socially... I never used to be too busy with the outside world, but I never felt enclosed as in a prison with my children, and together with my husband, we have built a life together. You can compare it to apples and pears, they are both very tasty and form a fruit together, they are not identical, but still they form a whole. I never felt as if my husband had any power over me or anything like that...

Whether Tirza was directly picking up on what I had wrote in my introductory letter on the possible misperception of the outside world on women's status in Orthodox Jewish communities – my wordings were certainly never this strong - , or she was referring to what she perceived or had experienced to be a serious distorted viewpoint on behalf of surrounding society, I cannot be sure. In any case, Tirza's fruit metaphor of the complementary roles of women and men in the mutual partnership of marriage founded on a gender ideology of 'different but of equal value' appeared to be the hegemonic religious gender ontology in my own interviews, and other research and literature on both real and ideal lives of Orthodox Jewish women.

All my interviewees unanimously agreed that men and women were different, created differently by God, having different obligations and responsibilities according to halakhah (religious law), yet by no means could one be conceived of as inferior or superior to the other. The difference between women and men was taken to be 'obvious' – and my questions therefore often interpreted as somewhat non-sensical – and in the first place founded on a taken-for-granted ideology of natural, essential sexual difference. When I tried to probe further, the differences between women and men were differentially legitimated and explained through applying a multiplicity of discourses, besides that of merely 'religion.' Like Tirza's statement though, this understanding of

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gender difference as sexual difference, was nearly always referred to in the context of marriage as the expression of 'complementarity' or 'harmony', ultimately founded on the divine commandment of marriage as God's purpose for the creation of 'two halves' becoming 'one whole'. Marriage itself is therefore conceived of as imbued with religious meanings. According to Susan, a fifty-two year old Hasidic-oriented mother of five:

Marriage definitely has a religious meaning, because we are taught that God actually created the whole world and especially men and women as opposites, but the whole world in order to bring harmony. To achieve harmony man and woman were created differently and in opposite ways, and have to learn to live together and become a whole and marriage is sacred...

According to halakhah, marriage is in fact a mitzvah (divine commandment or precept) in itself, yet together with the mitzvah of procreation – to be fruitful and multiply – these mitzvot legally only apply to men. Most of my interviewees were in fact keen to emphasise the fact that women are legally exempt from these mitzvot, sometimes suggesting this could be understood as a token of more 'freedom' and choice for women than for men. However, both historically and in social reality in contemporary traditionalist Orthodox communities, both men and women marry sooner rather than later, and the same goes for the bearing of their first child (Heilman 1992: 278-9). As Orthodox Jewish scholar Michael Kaufman (1995 [1993]: vxiii) states:

Those who marry demonstrate that they do not live for themselves alone but that they choose to live lives of continuous giving. This finds fruition in procreation, bringing children into the world and establishing a family...

Later on in his book, Kaufman (1995 [1993]: 14) also emphasises women's exemption from the duty of marriage and procreation. He attributes the exemption to a variety of reasons, such as that the man actively must seek a wife and not vice versa, or the man being more incomplete than the woman and therefore actively in need of searching a woman 'who will make him whole.' Kaufman then mentions certain Sages from the Mishnah and Talmud who did include women in this duty, but concludes that the final halakhic ruling is women's exemption from the command to procreate, based on Maimonides (1135-1204) and other codifiers of Jewish law:

Yet Maimonides and R. Joseph Caro advise women to disregard this exemption and marry to avoid facing male impudence and immortality. They therefore make it incumbent upon Jewish parents to arrange marriages for daughters as well as for sons. Marriage, then, is the

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preferred state for women, but Jewish law does not mandate it. Halachah encourages the woman to marry, but does not condemn her if she chooses to remain single.

Whilst God created men and women in order to complete each other by marriage, the purpose of marrying is procreation and 'building a family', thus inextricably placing childbirth in the context of the heterosexual institution of marriage. Although – in theory – the woman may choose to remain single, this is not seen as an ideal but more of a pitiable state, and in practice is almost nonexistent in traditionalist Jewish communities. Thus the fifty-four year old Belzer rebbetsin Liddy, who herself had eight children, told me about a woman she knew:

It says in the Bible that a woman may remain alone, but it is never good to be alone... Loneliness... I know an old lady, she passed away recently and she said this proverb to me with tears in her eyes... and she said, I have learned a lot from her... An old lady, she lost her husband in Auschwitz after two years of marriage and unfortunately never had children. She is the kind of woman who socially was totally... She started up the Jewish Women's Commission, she paid visits to the sick in the hospital through the rain and snow... She died in a Jewish old peoples' home, but she was lucid till the very end... And she wrote to me: 'La solitude est un beau lieu pour visiter, mais pas pour l'habiter', being alone is nice to visit, but not to live in...'

So despite the halakhic exemption for women to both marry and procreate, in practice the creation of the two different sexes, the purpose of which is to form one unit, a 'whole' in the institution of marriage meant for procreation, forms the basic gender ideology to which both the literature and my traditionalist Jewish interviewees subscribed. Secondly, a conviction that informed everything I read and researched on the position of women in Orthodox Judaism, was the tenet of women and men as 'different but of equal value'. According to all the literature and my research subjects, this premise could not be emphasised enough in any discussion of religion – what Kaufman (1993 [1991]: 58) calls 'theological equality' - and daily life. All my research subjects agreed that although women and men were viewed as 'different' in their community and religious tradition, they are equal in worth; no one is intrinsically superior or inferior to the other.

I shall return to some of these important topics of marriage, the family and halakhic rulings for women later on. But first I shall concentrate on the specifics of the gender ideologies as presented by the women I interviewed, beyond this hegemonic religious discourse of sexual difference in the context of marriage and procreation. This paragraph shall therefore concentrate on the plurality of gender discourses within traditionalist Orthodox Jewish

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communities, as applied by Orthodox Jewish writers, Orthodox Jewish women themselves and my own research on strictly Orthodox Jewish women in Antwerp affiliated with the Machsike Hadass. The primary focus here will be on the types of discourses that are appropriated to 'construct' sex or gender, and their immediate connection and function in legitimising the gender ideology in traditionalist definitions of Jewish religion. In what way are men and women seen as different? How different are they, and how are these differences understood? As innate, natural characteristics, or merely consequential of their divergent social roles? The answers to these questions will provide some first cues to both the 'official' prescribed roles of women in Orthodox Jewish communities, religious gender ideology from their own real life point of view in the contemporary world, and whether and how the understanding of Jewish religion itself may be gendered.

*Multiple Gender Discourses*

In his introduction to *The Woman in Jewish Law and Tradition*, Orthodox Jewish scholar Michael Kaufman (1995 [1993]) applies both religious and scientific discourse in order to provide legitimation for the distinctive 'gender spheres' in Judaism. Kaufman (1995: xxix) sees the differences between men and women as 'innate' and 'noninterchangeable' within an essentialist framework that does not delineate and thus conflates the categories of sex and gender:

Traditional Jewish society is based on the essential dissimilarity of the sexes. Where there is insistence on gender *equality* and unawareness of, or lack of sensitivity to, the natural *inequality* of the sexes, men and women suffer, as both are forced to compete with members of the other sex on unequal terms.

Kaufman's (1995) ideology of sexual difference *as* gender difference serves to support his rejection of feminism (or what he calls 'masculofeminists') that in his view wrongly glorifies men's public role in Judaism, opposed to women's devalued role within the private sphere of the home. Kaufman critiques these 'masculofeminists' for their view of gender differences as culturally determined, for seeing the new-born infant as a 'tabula rasa' upon which society and rearing practices can inscribe anything, including masculinity and femininity.<sup>1</sup> The author then reverts to other scientific 'evidence' that would support his idea of sexual difference. First he claims recent studies in the 'physical and behavioral sciences have substantiated the thesis of a predominantly biological basis for sexually differentiated behavior in humans' (xxx), and that evidence from 'genetics, brain research, sociology and

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psychology confirm that the primary determinant of sexually differentiated behaviour is biology and not culture' (xxxix).

Interesting in Kaufman's appropriation of scientific 'evidence' in order to defend sexual difference and gender, or particularly women's role with Jewish law and tradition – including his vision of the proper contemporary Jewish religious way of life – are his brief references to Carol Gilligan's (1982, 1997 [1977]) famous research on women and moral development. Gilligan's theory of 'an ethics of care' has in time become one of the classics of feminist research. In *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan sets out to expose the androcentrism in mainstream developmental theory and hegemonic theories of identity by Piaget, Erikson and Kohlberg, which view the woman as deviant or deficient against a norm for moral development which is solely determined by men's experience, thereby excluding 'women's voice'. Kohlberg's 'six stages of moral judgement' for example, views ideal moral development in a sequence starting with 'an egocentric through a societal to a universal ethical conception' (Gilligan 1997 [1977]: 551). Whilst men seem to represent the higher ideal stages when moral judgement becomes capable in terms of universal principles of justice and rights, free from individual needs and social conventions, women's conception of the self and morality 'sticks' at a stage three, characterised by a strong interpersonal bias in judgement, relationality, responsibility and care. Gilligan's research concentrates on women's construction of the moral domain, in order to show that their 'voice' or language challenges the definition of what counts as 'development' according to developmental theories such as that of Kohlberg. Gilligan's study is therefore a 'classical' example of feminist research that deeply challenges androcentric forms of research that take the male to be the universal and the normative at the level of research question, data, interpretation and theory.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, and more recently, Gilligan's research has been criticised by feminist scholars on several accounts, but foremost by those suspicious of the premise of sexual difference that informs the research questions and methodology.<sup>3</sup> Although Gilligan does not per se take any biological deterministic stance, an essentialist perspective on the – moral – differences between women and men looms in this kind of feminist research, and especially the way such conclusions as to psychological and sociological differences between the sexes are sometimes used requires attention. It therefore comes as no surprise that a religious and gender conservative scholar like Kaufman, includes Gilligan's findings as 'scientific evidence' in his plea for gender differentiation in the religious sphere, and in this case every sphere in daily life (Kaufman 1995 (1993): xxxix):

As sociologist Dr. Carol Gilligan points out, psychologists from Freud to Piaget have formed misperceptions of the female personality by treating women as if they were men. When women failed to develop in certain areas as men do, they concluded that something might be wrong

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with them, when what they failed to perceive is that they are merely different. Gilligan determines that men and women have different behavior orientations and perspectives in regard to nurturance, caring, morality, and justice.

Kaufman similarly uses research by social anthropologist Melford Spiro on sex role differentiation in an Israeli kibbutz dating from 1975. Here Kaufman replicates Spiro's argument that despite egalitarian surroundings in a 'sexually neutral environment', men and women 'gravitated to occupations coinciding with their natural propensities' (xxxii). Kaufman's amalgam of borrowings of arguments from biological, psychological and social scientific research thus serves to prove that Orthodox Jewish religious prescriptions on men's and women's roles and behaviour coincide with their 'nature' (xxxii):

For more than three thousand years Judaism has postulated psychological gender differentiation, from the Sages of the Talmud and down through the ages. Judaism provides a way of life that is sensitive to, and halachic parameters that are uniquely responsive to, the divergent attributes of the sexes.

Kaufman's discourse in attributing essential characteristics in terms of sexual/gender difference to women and men, thus functions as a justification for a commitment to halakhah and its traditional gender prescriptions, in spite of changes in women's role in modern society. Opposed to the 'masculofeminist' version of feminism that aspires for the equality of men and women based on patriarchal values, Kaufman claims the essential differences between women and men do not necessarily coincide with women's subordination, but can be exalted within the framework of Jewish tradition. Distinct gender roles and the valorisation of essential feminine values, attributes and institutions thereby appear to be in accordance with the high legal status of women in halakhah and the importance of the family. Women's proper role is located within the family and the private sphere, in contrast to men's proclivity to the public domain (Kaufman 1995 [1993]: 25):

Intrafamilial responsibilities require personalities with sensitivity, perception, gentleness, and flexibility. Women manifest these qualities *par excellence*. The male personality, having an abstract and analytical mentality weaker in these spheres, possesses the rigor and forcefulness necessary to represent the family in extra-familial confrontations.

Note how the writer discursively constructs femininity and women's role as revalorised, highly valuable or even of higher value than those of men, i.e. women's 'qualities' versus men's 'weaker' capacity. Contemporary Orthodox Jewish scholars like Kaufman 'require' both an ideology of sexual difference

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and revalorisation of Jewish women's role in the context of the dominant liberal ideology of gender based on sameness that reigns in much of modern Western society, versus distinct gender roles as central to traditional and present day traditionalist interpretations of Jewish religion.

According to halakhah, which contains the totality of rules for living and acting to which the observant Jew must abide in his/her relationship to God, and to fellow human beings and nature, amongst the total of the 613 mitzvot, or precepts, distinctions are made dependent upon gender. Whereas the majority of the mitzvot are equally incumbent on both women and men – the 365 negative precepts apply to both sexes – like keeping the Sabbath and holidays, blessings, etc., women are exempt and effectively become barred from performing certain mitzvot, some of which are often conceived of as paradigmatic religious commandments for men. These include the study of the Talmud, the wearing of tefillin and tzitzit, the daily recitation of the Shema prayer<sup>4</sup>, the hearing of the shofar<sup>5</sup>, and others, which all can be seen as paradigmatic – male – religious public rituals. The rationale usually put forward for this exemption, is that ritual obligations such as these are bound to fixed times, the performance of which could interfere with women's familial and domestic responsibilities in the home. The question which specific commandments are included and excluded, and the consistency of this main argument have been a matter of debate from time to time. Then again, in practice, women have generally assumed rituals from which they were officially exempt, and neglected others that originally were required, such as certain prayers (Greenberg 1998: 79).

The ideal Orthodox Jewish woman's role in contrast, is in the home as homemaker and mother, where she can nonetheless lead a 'full' religious life. Whereas religious roles available to women in strictly Orthodox Jewish communities will be discussed in more detail later on, here the focus will be on what (strictly) Orthodox women themselves have to say on the differences between women and men. I examine whether they apply ideologies of gender such as that of Kaufman that in any way serve in grounding the divergent gender roles as paramount within the realm of halakhah and observant religious life.

Other research and some more personal accounts indeed show how strictly Orthodox Jewish women themselves often emphasise elements within Orthodox Jewish religious discourse that valorise women's 'unique' spiritual, biological, and psychological qualities, rituals and imagery, often to the extent of a 'celebration' of an ideology of sexual difference. Tamar Frankiel (1990) for example, a lecturer in comparative religion and convert to Judaism, in her well-known book on the position of women in traditional Judaism, attempts to reconcile feminism with a traditional (Orthodox) Jewish way of life. Much in line with traditional feminist theological methods of 'rereading the scriptures'<sup>6</sup>, Frankiel looks to the 'Mothers' (or matriarchs) of the Torah as inspirational role models for the contemporary Jewish woman. The prophetic abilities of Sarah,

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Rachel, Rikva and Leah are seen as the counterpart to 'male logic', akin to 'woman's intuition', 'inner knowledge, or ability to read a situation and produce an insight into character' (Frankiel 1990: 6). According to Frankiel, the Mothers furthermore symbolise dimensions of generativity, creativity and care. These maternal archetypes similarly exercised their great power within the family rather than in the political sphere. Hence the title of Frankiel's book *The Voice of Sarah*, referring to the moment when God spoke to Abraham (7):

'All that Sarah says to you, listen to her voice' (Gen. 21:12). This is indeed a piece of advice often given by rabbis to husbands down through the ages; for women are regarded as having a greater degree of insight in many circumstances.

Frankiel continues on the theme of Jewish women in the Bible and tradition, as related to the power of prophecy until this became overshadowed by men ruling the public realm and offices, first as priests and later to the exclusion of women from the public sphere in rabbinic Judaism. Frankiel argues that despite their exclusion from institutional offices, religious law and prophecy, women in fact enjoyed a different kind of spirituality (43). At this point Frankiel seems to suggest that this may be a universal phenomenon and women's exclusion from the institutional and 'analytical' dimensions of Jewish religion may not be entirely accountable in political terms. Here Frankiel is of the opinion that the qualities attached to prophecy may be related to women's 'psychological make-up', women having strong tendencies to be 'receptive', capable of 'letting go of our ego boundaries': 'Thus the egolessness of the ecstatic or prophetic kind of religion comes easily to many women' (Frankiel 1990: 46).

Frankiel mentions two other essential characteristics women possess which legitimise their particular role within Judaism. Referring to the halakhic exemption for women of studying Talmud, Frankiel suggests women are less apt to the 'conscious and disciplined intellectual activity' or 'critical thinking' or 'abstract learning' typical of men. Frankiel's essentialism does not seem to be entirely biologically deterministic though. For example, after making the point about women's receptiveness and specific 'feminine abilities', Frankiel includes between brackets 'whether these are natural or cultural I will not debate' (46). Her more careful approach to the question of the cause or 'naturalness' of women's qualities is furthermore expressed in phrases such as the following (46-47):

Not all women are comfortable with this [critical thinking] as their predominant style; those who excel in it tend to rebel against conventional female roles. Thus, a woman might be exposed to abstract learning, say in Talmud studies, but ultimately not find it satisfying because it does not call forth her capacities for relationship and involvement.

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Like Michael Kaufman, Frankiel refers to feminist scholar Carol Gilligan – and other colleagues in the areas of morality and knowledge – to defend women’s unique form of spirituality, claiming ‘a strongly relational orientation prevails, giving feminine spirituality a definite communal and moral ethical bent from the beginning’ (109). As an academic and observant Orthodox Jewish woman, Frankiel nonetheless also seeks to legitimise gender roles according to halakhah through a discourse of sexual difference in terms of psychology and morality. Both Kaufman and Frankiel make their arguments in the context of Western modern liberal and predominantly secular society, where gender equality has become the ideological norm.

When asking Rachel who is Litvish or Misnagdic (aged fifty-three) about the reasons why girls did not study Talmud, Rachel first explained this to me because they simply ‘had other interests’ such as general knowledge and philosophy:

...the way thought is being developed in the Talmud is something less attractive to women I would say than to men. The logic, just to sit and study the whole day, plain logical discussions, the ‘how much is the retribution, how much must the return’ and just to go on calculations on end...

C: Would you say men are more naturally inclined?

Yes, we believe that man is by his nature is much more attracted by this you know, this logical side of learning, and lets say women who are more intuitive, you know, who have more feeling, they’re more interested in general knowledge and philosophy and other parts of the Torah...

Esther, a forty-six year-old mother of eleven who was born in Israel and brought up in the States, belongs to the Satmar community of Antwerp and describes herself as ‘very very extreme Orthodox’. When I asked her how she would describe the ideal religious man and woman, she started with gender neutral characteristics, yet using the pronoun ‘he’, but then also reverted to some stereotypical understandings of men and women in terms of the same logic/feeling dualism:

Someone who does what he is supposed to be doing, his duties, being correct and honest in business, truth is very important, trust, not to steal from others, not to slander, not to be jealous, this goes for men and women, but I think women are by nature more jealous, they babble more...

C: Do you think women have any other traits by nature?

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A man uses his head, whilst a woman uses her heart. She has more, how do you say, instincts, softer feelings. A man says 'do it or don't' but a woman finds loopholes...

Miriam, a thirty-nine year-old Belz mother of ten, directly related to what she perceived as the intellect/feelings dualism to religious discourse instead of general psychology:

C: Do you think that women have any unique qualities?

Yes certainly, the way a woman speaks, thinks and feels, this she brings into her family and work. The woman makes the home, if she is patient and radiates warmth, then this gives atmosphere to the home.

C: And in a more spiritual sense?

This is difficult to say, it is true that a woman acts more upon her feelings than a man, a man more upon his intellect. This difference is good, because the feeling alone does not always work. There are things in the Bible that might go against the feelings, sometimes you feel something is not right, but it is so because it says so in the Bible. On the other hand the feelings are very important as with prayer, the holidays... With everything you need feelings too. The intellect and the feelings of a man and a woman complement each other, you need both. It may happen that a woman doubts whether a chicken is kosher, and if she goes to the rabbi to ask this and he says it is kosher then it is so, even if this goes against her feelings. So she must not act upon her feelings alone.

When I asked about the spiritual differences between women and men to the Vischnitz rebbetsin Norma (a great grandmother in her early sixties with eleven children), she claimed something similar, but could not elaborate on it extensively:

It is written that a woman has more *binah*, more natural wisdom than a man. For example the Sages say that a woman can find out about for example with her feelings, she sees if a guest comes, if he is an honest person, she can feel it and tell. A man is maybe cleverer, but the feeling of a woman is finer without using her brain...<sup>7</sup>

The Belz rebbetsin Liddy similarly used religious discourse in her explanation of the brain/feelings dualism:

A woman sometimes has... There were things in our history that women felt they could do and they could not do, and that's how we could also save the men... And that's something, the feelings is something that God has given us, but of course as with every gift, you must know how

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to handle it... If you have feelings there is only one danger, do not let your feelings overpower you. And that's why you need a man, who not with his less, uh feelings, but with his brain can tame us in our feelings...

Leonie, a Hasidic-oriented 'very Orthodox' sixty-one year old, gave me a complex religious philosophical explanation for the differences between women and men, presumably derived from her own knowledge of *Kabbalah*<sup>8</sup>:

This is the world of two-ness, and how do you know this? By us, one thing is for sure, that's Torah, the word of God, so that is it, absolutely. Now the Torah begins with the letter two, and then you can think letter two and letter B, but in Hebrew the letters are numbers, so then the world begins... in the two-ness it says, in the beginning you had heaven and earth, darkness and light, man and woman, that is also the two-ness in our heads, because we also think in categories, you have man and woman. The word male in Hebrew also means memory, inside, core and the word female means covering, the outside... , so a woman gives a being to everything, but in the form in thought, in the design, you and me, give form to the outside and men to the inside. Now the meaning of religion is sanctification, ... so what must men develop to become whole? He gives form to the outside, he must develop the outside, and woman the inside, so that's why men in religion step outside, the outside activities are for men to do, he must be a verger and a chorister and a rabbi and what have you, but the woman, she cannot even do it... So if by you for example the Pope says women cannot become priests, then we find that very normal, why should she become a priest? Because she is it already, she is it already... So religion isn't a hobby or a chosen or a... something in terms of better or worse, no its just finishing something what you have not yet become...

On the international website of Chabad, the Lubavitcher branch of the Hasidic groups, a series of articles devoted to the topic of Hasidic women also offers some insight into the construction of gender in the framework of religious discourse.<sup>9</sup> In 'Jews are from Sinai, not Mars or Venus' Dr. Yisroel Susskind (2001) for example, takes his dualistic metaphors describing the 'inherent differences' between women and men even further:

...the feminine forces have more of a connection to G-d through profound faith that is beyond rationality, that is trans-rational. In comparison, the masculine forces achieve more of their connection to G-d through rationality and flashes of insight; the experience of ecstatic insight in Torah ultimately leads men to mystical faith. Endurance and breadth are characteristic of the feminine forces, while intensity and

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focus are masculine. In football, the wide receiver is the feminine, while the quarterback is masculine. The transcendental number pi is feminine, while logarithms are masculine. Analog is feminine, while digital is masculine. My favorite metaphor for the difference is that gravity is a feminine force, while lightening is a masculine force.

Susskind consciously uses the word masculine and feminine 'forces' rather than women and men, because he does not find that all women and all men equally and mutual exclusively possess these attributes:

For while it is true that a majority of women (but not all women) will tend to have more of the feminine forces, and a majority of men will show more of the masculine, all of these characteristics are found in both men and women.

Liddy, who was quite adamant about the essential differences between women and men, similarly made some nuances:

Women are more sensitive, that's why God has given us the assignment of education. Because by us, as the Sages describe it, the creation, the man has half feelings and half objective judgement, and we have a portion of that feeling, that, fine, Fingerspitzengefühl, that is typical feminine. Of course towards every rule there is an exception, you can have men with a feminine nature and you can have women who are more male by nature, but that is also not at all attractive and really not what you need...

Debra Renee Kaufman (1993 [1991]) and Lynn Davidman (1991) in their research on ba'alot teshuvah, (American women who have chosen for or are in the process of a 'conversion' to a traditionalist Orthodox life style), also pay attention to how in both official religious discourse in the communities, and the ba'alot teshuvah themselves discursively construct the differences between women and men. In Davidman's study (1991: 156), both the modern Orthodox and the Hasidic Lubavitcher women she interviewed reverted to 'essentialist' understandings of women's nature. Whereas the rabbis in the modern Orthodox community seemed to mix traditionalist views on women's roles in the home with more modern views on egalitarian gender roles, in the teachings in the Hasidic classes Davidman participated in, women's role in childbearing and nurture was seen as 'a metaphor for her essential nature' (166). The process of resocialising these modern women towards Orthodoxy according to Davidman required a 'radical reconceptualisation of femininity', including the idea that 'women's nature is rooted in their biology and expressed in all aspects of their beings' (166).

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In primarily focussing on the women's own motivations for their attraction to Orthodoxy and its gender role differentiation, Davidman does not specifically probe her respondent's own understandings of how women and men are sexually differentiated or whether women possess any innate qualities that are reflected in halakhic religious observance or religious discourse. However, in some of the interview fragments it did become clear that these women on the verge of becoming traditionalist Jews were attracted to the very movement on grounds of its clear cut gender roles, including 'conventional definitions of masculinity and femininity' (Davidman 1991: 109). These women derided what they perceived as the pitfall of the feminist movement in the denial of differences and especially what 'it meant to be a woman', the search for both a feminine role and a subjective identity being the prime motivators for turning their back to modern secular society.

Neither does Kaufman (1993) interview her informants as to their precise views on the way the fundamental differences between women and men can be explained. The ba'alot teshuvah do however employ a discourse that constantly valorises 'femininity' or feminine values in their justification for choosing and remaining in an Orthodox religious community. As in all of the accounts above and in Davidman's study, one of the most central features is the association of women with and their fundamental role in the familial sphere, which is similarly valorised in traditionalist Jewish religious ideology. The 'profamilial' stance of Kaufman's subjects of study, again accompanies the view of women as essentially inclined to harbour values associated with care, nurturance and relationships. As in the tendencies in Frankiel's (1990) account to delineate specific feminine forms of spirituality, Kaufman's research also points out to a strong celebration of sexual difference amongst ba'alot teshuvah, often to the extent of imbuing the sacred itself with feminine attributes, or even asserting women may innately possess certain spiritual abilities which are superior to those of men. Thus many of the women in Kaufman's study elaborated on their important role as women in Jewish symbolism, mythology and ritual, for instance by referring to the Sabbath as feminine or the *Shekhinah*, the indwelling of God, as feminine. In Kaufman's (1993: 53) words:

The selected bits and pieces of tradition and theology they chose to relate strongly suggest that they consciously reformulate that orthodoxy in their own image. They associate the sacred and themselves with positive purpose and positive self-definition. This ideology is held in place through the structure of their everyday lives.

Many of Kaufman's Hasidic interviewees went so far as to claim that women may be more spiritually inclined, closer to God and in some ways 'superior' to men, which would be proven by the assertion that God told Moses to teach the Torah first to the women and afterwards to the men. Or they claimed that the reason why women were exempt from time-bound commandments (see next

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paragraph) was that they were by nature more spiritually inclined. According to Kaufman, the contrast with the non-Hasidic women she interviewed, can be explained by the fact that Hasidism incorporates mystical and kabbalistic thought, and her interviewees had capitalised on feminine principles that exist within Jewish mysticism, such as the importance of binah or wisdom which is referred to as feminine or the Shekhinah.

By contrast, even the most Hasidic among the frum-born women in Antwerp I interviewed did not revert to this extent in their usage of feminine principles and symbolism, in order to explain anything like women's superiority in spiritual terms. As frum-born women I suspect, this type of discourse was not 'consciously' required as in the construction of religious gender identity among the ba'alot teshuvah.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the women I interviewed in Antwerp in general did not all revert to religious discourse to explain the essential, innate differences between women and men. Accounts such as that of Leonie, who had clearly studied some mystical writings – in fact Leonie completed a psychology degree at a later age and even published her thesis which dealt with Jungian theories – were more of an exception to the norm. My general impression was the more Hasidic the woman I interviewed, the more essentialist their discourses on gender were and the more eager they were to explain these in religious terms, such as the dualistic attributes of logic/feelings, women having more 'relational' capacities or as more 'intuitive', etc. These differences were then explained in religious terms, as in 'God created women and men that way', and these abilities concurred with both their proper roles and sometimes their spiritual make-up. It became clear that it was crucial to underline the location or position from which each voice was speaking, next to the context of the expression of opinions, in comparing my interviewees, other research and primary literature.

The Orthodox Jewish writer Blu Greenberg (1998 [1996]) for example, similar to Tamar Frankiel – and to a less extent Michael Kaufman – attempts to 'reconcile' or even appropriate feminist discourse with complete observance to halakhah and its distinct gender roles. Greenberg is what can be called more 'modern' Orthodox though, arguing for halakhic reformation in realms such as Torah study for women and issues such as religious divorce. Despite her refutation of what she considers oppressive practices to women that may attest to their subordinated position in the past, Greenberg nonetheless defends the gender roles in traditional Judaism, in view of preserving the 'categories of male and female' and 'a healthy sense of sexual identity'. As with the other Orthodox writers, women's role in the family stands utmost central, as one of the most important units in Jewish religious life. To different degrees, these authors see the family as being 'threatened' by feminism and the eradication of distinct gender roles.<sup>11</sup>

Greenberg, who believes gender equality can be taken further within the realm of religious observance and commitment to halakhah, is more nuanced on the question of essential differences between women and men. In contrast to

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both Michael Kaufman and Tamar Frankiel, she does not attribute any qualities such as relationality or care to women, opposed to ‘analytical thinking’ to men. Nor does she explicitly attempt to seek legitimisation through scientific or religious discourse. For example, Greenberg’s opinion on the rule of exemption for women from time-bound mitzvot is to shrink the period of exemption to women’s child rearing years, or even to extend this halakhic ruling to fathers when they are the primary nurturers of young children. However, conservative views resurface relating to the issue of sexual difference, although Greenberg does take on the challenges the blurring of gender boundaries pose to halakhah. In other passages, she seems to straddle between the dualistic categories of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, e.g.: ‘... weight must be given to social reality and biology. Most women, I believe, will continue to want the edge on nurturing the young’ (91). Elsewhere, more essentialist notions of femininity are assumed without further justification (168):

As Jews, we must articulate a wider definition, one that includes the following: the experience of extending the biologically natural role to one in which the soul, the character, the sensations are all stretched to their outer limits; a role in which the intense encounter, the ability to give and receive love, and the act of giving one’s self must be perceived as a significant expression of the feminine self.

The women affiliated with the Machsike Hadass congregation I interviewed, similarly did not exclusively rely on religious notions of gender difference as in behaviour and personality traits between women and men. As became clear above, while some women attributed certain absolute differences to sexual difference, the ‘nature’ God had created, others maintained differences were more psychological and social, following from women’s and men’s proper roles rather than their biological make-up. Others even denied any absolute differences that could be ascribed to religious philosophy. Here the gender ideologies women applied, were clearly borrowed from a multiplicity of ‘Mars and Venus’ types of discourse, beyond religion, such as popular psychology and medicine, magazines, ‘common sense knowledge’, or personal viewpoints inferred from experience. Here I doubt that these women’s viewpoints would differ dramatically from those of many secular ‘modern’ women in their same age category. Whereas men in general were described as for instance ‘tougher’ or ‘go-getters’, opposed to women who were more ‘empathetic’, ‘tender hearted’ ‘spontaneous’ or ‘emotional’, many doubted this was universally so, as there were always exceptions. Hasidic-oriented Susan (aged fifty-two), who started studies in psychology when she was younger, but stopped when she finally got pregnant after several miscarriages, and now works as a counsellor in a counselling office for Orthodox Jews with psychological and marital problems, did not believe there were any essential differences between women and men:

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C: Do you think men and women have any different qualities, for example psychologically or religiously?

Biologically it's obvious, and psychologically, I'm a little bit trained, so I can talk from my training that in general women are more emotional and men are more practical and sometimes don't get along because they don't know how to talk to each other, this is something you can read in a hundred books. As far as religion is concerned we have a hierarchy which does not only consist of men and women but also within men, something called cohen levi Israel, depending on which tribe they descend from... And each member of our society has different obligations as the women also have different obligations, according to the law, and women are not obliged to do the mitzvot, the laws which depend on time. For instance, we don't have to do some prayer, to pray every day, but not a specific prayer, we can say a specific prayer but if we're not really obligated, and men are obligated to pray three times a day, because women are occupied with the home and taking care of the children and are therefore exempt from these obligations, so there is a sense in which women are supposed to be taking care of the children...

Sixty year-old 'broadminded' Hasidic Chana, similarly had to think hard on any essential differences between women and men:

Perhaps to certain degree you could say women, perhaps they are more... mostly being tender-hearted... I'm not saying they always are, but there is something in them, they are softer on the whole... I'm not saying all women are softer than men, cause that's all rubbish 'all men are tougher than women', no, but on the general I think you can look at... men are go-getters on the whole, women are trying to become go-getters, which is also fine, if they need it, fine...

According to Susan:

Theoretically you might say that women are better at listening and being empathetic, but I don't know, you can't generalise at all, just like saying woman are more emotional than men, men are more practical, it's a generality which isn't always... There are women who are very good mathematicians and engineers even though you would say men have a more mathematical mind...

Taking all forms of internal and individual variability into account, it can be carefully suggested that certain patterns are to be discerned in elements of the gender discourse applied by the various traditionalist Jewish women hereto discussed. First of all, they may be some differences between the very 'ultra'-

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Orthodox women belonging to clearly defined Hasidic courts, opposed to slightly more 'modern' or 'Hasidic oriented' women, in that the latter seem slightly less essentialist and less apt to use religious discourse in their explanations of gender difference.

Another crucial remark on comparing the answers of the women of the Machsike Hadass and the women in the research by Davidman and Kaufman (including Morris and Levine), is that this entirely focuses on ba'alot teshuvah of the Lubavitcher Hasidim, women who previously led secular lives. In contrast, my research subjects were all 'frum born', although some of them may have gradually become increasingly Hasidic ('chassidified') during their lives. Ba'alot teshuvah had not only been re-educated into religious philosophy and observance, but their reasons for consciously returning to a religious life and community had often precisely been motivated by the attraction of traditionalist gender ideology. The difference I suspect to some extent explains the fact that many of my informants were less cognizant, or better put, less interested in religious discourse on gender. For them, difference was more self-evident, something they did not have to question or legitimise. Often when I tried to probe further about women's spirituality or feminine symbolism, many women answered they were not exactly sure, and this would be a subject their husband would know more about.

Finally, when looking at the literature on women's role in contemporary Orthodox Judaism by Tamar Frankiel and Blu Greenberg, these authors share the same overt interest in religious discourse on gender and gender ideology such as the ba'alot teshuvah. The reason may be that from a personal quest these women have similarly been confronted with the issue of feminism and gender roles in modern secular society. Even more so, these authors have studied Jewish gender ideology and often even scientific research in order to – albeit to different degrees – defend and justify traditionalist Jewish views on women and men.

Although the gender discourse pertaining to the essential differences between women and men varied amongst my interviewees, both the fact of sexual difference itself and the tenet of 'different yet of equal value' were understood as ultimately always connected to women's childbearing capacity and role. That the woman is the one who raises the children and is therefore more bound to the home was seen as obvious and evident in universal terms. This emphasis on women and men's proper roles, rather than their essences was in fact a shared characteristic of both my own research, other research and the literature discussed up to now. Both those women I interviewed who did and those who did not use essentialist discourses on gender, were adamant on centrality of the different religious obligations for women and men in any discussion of gender. Many women even answered my questions on whether women had any innate abilities or characteristics which explained their differences in Orthodox Jewish religious tradition and communities, in terms of women's different religious obligations, thus what women and men *did*

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differently rather than how they essentially *were* different. Even those who emphasised the fact that women and men were created differently, immediately related this to the fact that they had different religious obligations (mitzvot), that they were meant to act differently: men's intellect and brain as more attuned to his fundamental religious obligation, which is to study Torah, and 'logical objective thinking' as needed to practise Talmud study. Women, on the other hand, as mothers and keepers of the home, need such qualities such as 'feeling and softness' for their proper role of instilling and continuing religious tradition.

So in a way, my interviewees replicated a two-sexes/two-genders model, for besides the 'fact' of sexual difference, gender itself was not essentialised into any one kind of discursive formation (religious, psychological, subjective), at least not to the extent one might expect to be the case in such a traditionalist community. In the next paragraph, I will return to this argument and in turn link it to my main argument on going 'beyond scriptures and elites' in a gendered approach to the study of religion. I thereby argue that gender difference – according to the women I interviewed – is seen as fixed in the realm of *practice*, which in itself forms the core of traditional Judaism as a religion. For instance, women and men are viewed as different for what they are commanded *to do*, rather than exclusively at the level of gender ontology.

## **2. Beyond Religious 'Scriptures and Elites'**

In the next two paragraphs, rather than looking at the variable types of discourse my interviewees used in their own 'construction' of gender, here the main research question will be whether an alternative perspective on 'religion' is possible from a gendered perspective *within* a particular religious tradition (see also chapter one). So here I will be discussing the way the strictly Orthodox Jewish women of the Machsike Hadass constructed 'religion', rather than gender. In this paragraph, I shall be testing the first main hypothesis in accounting for the androcentrism of mainstream religious studies in its emphasis on merely the doctrinal and institutional dimensions of religious traditions, that is its limited focus on religious 'scriptures and elites.'

### *Believing and Doing Religion*

You can never say 'what does Judaism say?' we do not say that, we know that every Jew will say something else, but if it boils down to what you must do, because Judaism is a religion of doing, then that's the Bible... You can say I believe this or I believe that, or I don't believe that, but that's personal, that everyone decides for himself, in that you are free... In Judaism it's all about the Torah, what makes a Jew a Jew?

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Two things: on the one hand you are born from a Jewish mother, that's the biological side and on the other hand it's all the prescriptions you have taken upon yourself given at Sinai, and which you keep to... .. So belief in Judaism isn't even essential, we have been chosen to do, orthodoxy is a wrong word, orthodoxy means right in the teachings, with us it's orthopraxis, what you must do... .. You might have more belief, that's the emphasis in your religion and we have more doing... .. We have truly been chosen for the concrete deeds, that's our task...

Leonie was very explicit in expressing here what has often been emphasised in more scholarly descriptions of Judaism as a religion determined by a 'modus vivendi', a way of life, focussed on wordly experience and practice rather than theological 'content' or dogmas (Zuidema 1988: 148-9; Goldberg 1994: 98). Or according to Julien Klener (1992: 12), an occupation with 'things of the world, the afterlife, social justice and ethics, rather than with metaphysics and abstract speculations'. Contemporary Orthodox Jewish communities furthermore refuse to compromise this understanding of Judaism as traditionally a religion of deeds or practice rather than for example a belief system, which could be said for Christianity. According to Fackenheim (1999: 130):

Christian theology has often taught that a Christian is saved by faith and faith alone. Among the teachings that the Jew Jesus himself derived from Judaism, however, is that by his or her fruits shall a person be known.

Contrary to Christianity, Judaism lacks an official creed, which makes it difficult to point to official beliefs, although generally Maimonides' (1135-1204) Thirteen Principles or Articles are often referred to (Klener 1992: 12). De Lange (2000: 196) notes that whilst faith can be viewed as the primary goal of any Jew (the patriarch Abraham serving as the main model), during the Middle Ages, Jewish philosophers like Maimonides came to redefine faith as belief.<sup>12</sup> Attempts to formulate a creed predominantly then refer to the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1-17), among which only the first however, is directly concerned with belief<sup>13</sup> (Gordis 1990: 60). Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of belief for example, fall into three groups, the first concerning the existence, unity, incorporeality and eternity of God. The second group is about Torah: prophecy's validity, the uniqueness of Moses' message, the divine origin of the Written and Oral Torah, and the eternity and changelessness of the law. The third group is on reward and punishment, the omniscience of God, divine compensation for good and evil, the coming of the Messiah, and the resurrection of the dead (Smart 1997: 263). Although the existence of God is a fundamental assumption within the canon of accepted Jewish writing, even Orthodox rabbis still consider the Jew who rejects belief in God a Jew, which technically allows for downright atheism (De Lange 2000: 157).

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Both Leonie's statement and the 'technical' possibility of atheist Judaism according to the Orthodox rabbinical view, point to the centrality of *orthopraxis* above orthodoxy and belief in traditionalist Jewish religion. The Hasidic and Hasidic-oriented women I interviewed, next to all traditionalist Jews obviously do consider belief or faith in God as of utmost importance and connected to or enhancing their experience of religious practice. Chana, for example, gave the following personal viewpoint on the meanings of belief, spirituality and religion:

There are people that carry out the letter of the Lord in a very sort of particular way and they are not spiritual at all: I think spiritual is something much deeper than carrying out the letter of the Lord. I've met people who are completely irreligious, atheists, and they are very spiritual. I don't think it's got anything to do with religion, this is the way I look at it, I don't know if I'm right or wrong, but this is the way I see it... [...] For me religion means the law, but whether I want to be... I wouldn't be satisfied with just being a religious person, I would need to be a spiritual person, because for me... I've got friends who are Jewish, are non-Jewish, this goes beyond that, right? There are among us special people, there are average people, there are less than average people like anywhere else, I'm not one of those whose thinks that all Jewish people are wonderful...

Whereas Chana interpreted 'religion' as the 'Law' and belief as essential, she did see deeds and belief as not necessarily mutually interdependent:

I wouldn't do the laws if I didn't believe... Why should I do the laws? It would be ridiculous without belief... Let's put it this way, if I didn't have belief, it could happen, it could happen to anyone... You could lose your belief, how do you get your belief back? It's by doing things that perhaps you have a possibility to get your belief back, but to wait till it happens, perhaps it will, perhaps it won't...

As in other contemporary traditionalist Jewish perspectives however, the Torah as the 'teaching' of God and the 'Law' is taken to be ultimately true. According to Susan:

For me belief is something which transcends any scientific proof. Now two days ago I put on the BBC and they said, 'Well in five minutes after the news we're gonna have "Discovery: was the universe planned?"' Unfortunately I had to get out of the car and go somewhere, so I couldn't listen to it, but this is something which is very much in the news today, that it could be planned... Even scientists are beginning, and there is also Bible study and computer research that seeks to show

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that the bible could not have been written by so many different people and that everything is true in the bible by showing the sequences of words which couldn't be coincidental. Now all this is used by some of our people when we want to show the bible is true, let's say scientific proof can be used to show that the universe was created by someone and didn't exist forever. But we believe that even if there were no scientific proof, we accept it anyway, because that is what belief is, if it's proven then you don't have to believe it anymore. This is pink [points to sweater] I don't have to believe it, right? And we have this as a tradition from father to son, and from father to daughter or whatever, this belief in God and the Bible...

Central to Jewish religious life and practice is of course the Torah, the 'teaching' or 'law' as God's revelation to the prophet Moses on the Mount Sinai. According to rabbinical tradition, Moses received both the written law (the Torah of the Hebrew Bible) and the oral law, which was codified in the Mishnah during the second century and later the Gemara, the written commentaries to the Mishnah, known together as the Talmud.<sup>14</sup> Torah in its most limited usage refers to the five books of Moses or the Pentateuch, but broader also the Scriptures and in its broadest meaning the complete context of the Scriptures including the Oral Law in its totality (Goldberg 1994: 107). From the Torah one knows what to do and how to live; it is not only to be understood as 'law' in a strict sense, but containing revealed history, wisdom and liturgy.

In the Mishnaic period of rabbinic Judaism (first to third century C.E.) rabbis maintained that besides the Ten Commandments, Moses received all the rest of the exact 613 mitzvot at Sinai. The rules of halakhah, whether they are specifically mentioned in the Torah or were deduced by rabbis themselves in the Talmud, all originated with God at Sinai and are therefore to be observed (Fackenheim 1999: 128; De Lange 2000: 192). Halakhah (the 'Way') itself, thus refers to the whole 'body' of mitzvot (civil, criminal, family and ritual law) from the Torah or in its deduced form in the Oral Law of the Talmud, opposed to *Aggadah*, which refers to the more narrative or speculative elements (ethics, religious thought, folklore and legend).

A primary characteristic of Orthodox Judaism is its attempt to preserve the classical definition of Jewish religious tradition and the acceptance of the Torah as divinely revealed and therefore authoritative next to the centrality of halakhah and its rulings in everyday practice. Contemporary Orthodox Jews are what can be called 'mitzvah centric' (Beaver et al 1983: 292), as the acceptance of the covenant, the Torah and the divine commandments, means to practise them. As the Torah has often been mistakenly understood as the 'Law'<sup>15</sup>, halakhah is similarly much more than a legal system in a modern Western secular sense, but it contains the totality of life and behavioural rules to which the observant Jew must abide in her/his relationship to God, to fellow human beings and to nature.

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*Orthopraxis as Moral Practice*

Interesting from the perspective of gender, was that many of my interviewees did not see belief itself as in anyway related to gender, nor did they conceive men anymore or any less 'religious' than women or vice versa. Rather, gender differences in religion were only relevant in the realm of religious deeds, the performance of the mitzvot, which are halakhically prescribed along gender lines. According to Tirza:

Spiritually there are no differences between men and women, the belief is the same but the obligations are different, in the first place a woman does not have to do all of the obligations... Above all is belief which is the same for men and women, and besides that, men have to fulfil religious duties. But Orthodox life is not just prayer, it is also being honest, for example in doing business, it comes down to bringing your belief into your daily life, like benevolence... This is the same for men and women, but then she has obligations in the home, but she must also pray, but not so often and at set times, she looks after raising the children ...

And Tina:

There are men who are more religious than women and there are women who are more religious than men, the difference is that they have much more to do, those men, they have more obligations, so it is more visible, they go to the synagogue three times a day or twice a day...

Returning to the Decalogue, only the first of which is directly concerned with belief, the next two commandments revolve around ritual practice. According to Gordis (1990: 60) the second 'You shall have no other gods besides Me' addresses the exclusive worship of the God of Israel. The third, 'You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain,' apparently forbids associating God with any object, act, or word unworthy of Him. The fourth commandment would be both ritual and ethical in character, 'Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy,' serving as a bridge to the six remaining commandments, which according to Gordis (1990: 60-61) are exclusively *ethical* in character.<sup>16</sup> Not only do the Ten Commandments, - as they were revealed by God to Moses - as the content of the covenant between God and Israel illustrate how Judaism is at its root an ethical religious tradition. The commandments are predominantly practice-oriented and inherently ethical in character, a characteristic of the whole Torah in both its written and oral form. Jewish morality can

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simultaneously be viewed as an *ethic of practice*: 'Moses did not preach morality; he created practices for embodying it in life' (Gordis 1990: 60).

The mitzvot and the Halakhah in its totality as an ethical system and central to normative, rabbinical Judaism, functions and is interpreted in the same way in contemporary traditionalist Orthodox religious communities. According to Zuidema (1988: 167):

Contrary to our western judicial system, the Halakhah involves the totality of life of man and the community, in both his relationship with God, as to fellow human beings and to nature. This means that the Halakhah regulates both liturgy and ethics, that both belong to one organic whole: life itself.

The Halakhah as the embodiment of God's will is therefore the foundation of all morality. According to the Orthodox Jewish scholar Michael Kaufman (1995: 4), through performing the divinely ordained precepts, men and women partake in the 'moral completion of the universe.' As an absolute moral authority and 'role model'; Jews must aspire to emulate God through ethical virtues such as love, justice, mercy and compassion. God must therefore not only be obeyed by believing but by behaving ethically. There is no distinction between moral, religious or ritual commandments, which makes faith and moral action inseparable from each other.

When I asked different women of the Machsike Hadass what they would characterise as the 'ideal religious person', many effectively claimed that this in the first place involved following the laws. According to Tina:

That is a person who keeps to all of the laws, the laws between God and man and between fellow human beings. If you can keep to them, both, not just the one or the other... Someone who really combines the two...

Many of my interviewees also emphasised the different types of laws, those more 'purely' ethical in content, generally referred to as those 'commandments between man and man' and the more ritual or ceremonial focussed laws, the 'commandments between man and God'. Both types were viewed as equally important, as illustrated by Susan:

We have two kinds of religious laws actually, laws between man and God and laws between man and man. The ideal religious person, is one who is perfect... Well no one can be perfect... Who is as good as possible in both domains. Because you see very often people who are praying all the time and who look very religious or whatever, and they keep the Sabbath and the holidays and they are not always so nice to their wives, or to other people in their business dealings or whatever... And you see on the contrary people who don't look religious to you at

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all and they drive on Shabbes or whatever, but they give a lot of charity, and in fact one of the Rabbi's was talking about one of these people and he said: 'I don't know what God's gonna do when he dies, because this man gives so much and he is so good, but between man and God he doesn't... fulfil the requirements, so this is... and I think this would probably include someone who is tolerant of other people, as part of the relations between man and man, someone who can understand...'

C: Do you see a difference between women and men in that aspect?

I don't think so, except that there are different laws...

Susan's last answer indicates that at the level of both belief and ethics as expressed in the mitzvot between 'man and man' there is no gender differentiation. By contrast, gender differentiation concerns those obligations in the domain of the ritual mitzvot.

Many scholars writing on Judaism have often attempted to rectify the accusation that because of the centrality of the 'Law', Jewish religion has often been viewed as primarily legalistic and ritualistic, obsessed with correct conduct and therefore less occupied with ethics and faith (Gordis 1990: 64).<sup>17</sup> Although both the commandments between man and man and those between man and God are equally binding, Gordis argues ethics remains 'paramount.' A number of other women I asked the question how they would hypothetically describe the ideal religious person and subsequently the ideal religious man or woman, first answered in terms of the fundamental ethical relationships between human beings. Nicolette for example, immediately responded in terms of both 'goodness' and the laws:

For me that's just being a good person, being good for others, someone who keeps the laws but is also open to other people. It is important to raise your daughters so that they become good housewives, that they learn that study is important, that they are helpful, but that goes for both boys and girls...

Others responded spontaneously in referring to the so-called 'Golden Rule', 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself', which goes back to Hillel's summation of the essence of Judaism in a Talmudic tractate (B. Shabbat 31a) (Gordis 1990: 65). Rabbi Akiba, a first/second century Sage taught that this was the most important verse in the Torah and according to Kaufman (1995 [1993]: 9) therefore the 'foundation of Jewish morality.' Such as Chana's answer to the question of the ideal religious person:

First be a Mensch... As a truly honest person, a person who knew himself or herself, and loved himself and it spilled over to the rest of humanity and understood himself as much as you possibly can and as a result spilled over to humanity. You see the love of God cannot go

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without the love of man, it does not exist... If you don't love people I don't think you really love God... A convert came to a rabbi and asked the rabbi 'I'll become a convert if you will tell me while I'm standing on one foot, what's the whole Jewish religion about?' So he said: 'Do not do to someone else what you will not have done to yourself.' This is the whole Jewish religion, from beginning to end, and I would say this is Jewish religion and any other holiness and goodness or what preaching... If that's not present, then it means nothing...

Kaufman (1995 [1993]: 11) applies the idea of *imitatio Dei* in the practice of the mitzvot in terms of belief, practice and morality. God as the ultimate moral role model must be followed in behaving as God behaves, with 'love, justice, mercy, and compassion'. Accompanying the Golden Rule is the obligation to perform *hesed*, acts of loving-kindness towards others. Again, the idea of love for both God and for other human beings itself must be translated into practice and specific actions. Whereas God constantly performs *hesed* for humans, humans must emulate God by doing *hesed* for one another.<sup>18</sup> Susan gave me a similar explanation of why *hesed* was so important:

This is really getting into religious philosophy... First of all, we believe that God built the world on *hesed*, God didn't have to build the world, he made the world in order to be able to give, that's number one... And the second thing is that we are supposed to emulate God, we are supposed to be merciful, have patience, I mean we are supposed not to get angry at people... Just as God built the world with *hesed* so we do *hesed* and one of our biggest ways of doing *hesed* is to create another individual, to have children, by creating our own new worlds...

C: What about charity?

Charity is because we are responsible for each other and the Bible is full of exhortations to help your fellow man, if you see someone who is loading or unloading we have to help him, don't leave him to his own devices. We must help each other, this is really very, very principal, just as important for men as women...

In her ethnographic research among elderly illiterate Jewish women in a Kurdish neighbourhood of Jerusalem, anthropologist Susan Sered (1992) found that these women defined their own religiosity as correct moral behaviour. Despite their exclusion from formal religious practices, such as the mitzvah for men to study the Talmud, the wearing of tefillin and tzitzit and other paradigmatic religious commandments reserved for men, the women in Sered's research had reinterpreted and 'domesticated' certain rituals and symbols from the male-defined official institutional religious sphere of religious study and practice. Sered furthermore discovered that the women interpreted the essence of the mitzvot in the context of their domestic concerns. From their viewpoint,

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while a man could be religious yet behave immorally, for women religiosity itself was defined as correct moral behaviour. For men, religion meant the correct observance of certain rituals (learning, prayer), whereas for women the most important mitzvot were moral practices such as not to slander, gossip, steal or cheat and to help and feed others, all of them injunctions and practices that focus on religious behaviour as interpersonal and contextually determined. For the women, the greatest mitzvah of all was to give charity, to give small sums of money, to cook for the sick, help the poor and the orphans, and so on. Sered furthermore relates her findings to the earlier mentioned Carol Gilligan's (1982) research on women and moral development, equating women's moral judgements with helping and pleasing others, opposed to men's moral judgements, more often resting on universal principles of justice, equality and reciprocity (Sered 1992: 47-48). Although the men in Sered's study were halakhically also commanded to give charity, the latter took to contributing or raising (much larger sums of) money, usually for ritual purposes.

According to the women of the Machsike Hadass I interviewed, charity (*tzedakah*) and much broader, the performance of hesed towards others was indeed often seen as the way in which to act upon the Golden Rule as a great religious and moral principle of Judaism. In spite of the differences between Sered's and my research communities and research settings, giving charity also showed the same gendered pattern according to the women in my case study, a similarity due to the same religious ideology of gender roles. Men occasionally collected larger sums of money, by going round houses for example. Women perform voluntary work, drive people to hospitals, and similarly visit the sick and bring them food, but they also organise charitable events for fundraising, for schools, Israel, etc. If they are not working full-time (as teachers), many are extremely occupied with all kinds of voluntary activities, involved with school activities, girl scouts, holiday camps, or even editing children's magazines.

In contrast to the elderly illiterate women of Jerusalem however, the women I interviewed, who were mostly well-educated and cognisant of both secular and 'official' religious knowledge, did not see any of the gender neutral mitzvot as more important for men or for women. Nor did they see the capability to perform these mitzvot as gender dependent. Men have to be equally honest, i.e. in their business affairs, while women have to be altruistic with others in interpersonal contexts and in the domestic domain, like when they receive guests. The fact that women and men perform these deeds in a different way, was ascribed to the fact that they have different roles, and therefore as merely consequential to these roles. I asked Rachel whether performing hesed was more important for women or men and if they express it differently:

C: And what are differences between men and women in the way they work?

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That's because men are more tied down to business and they have less time, I mean materially they often have less time than women. Women who do not have to work, I'm not speaking of the working woman who is very tied down to her job and to her family life, but let's say you have women who are quite independent, and who are materially well off, they have much more free time to do these things, but it doesn't have to do with being materially well off, a lot of women here do voluntary work.

C: Would you say women are any more naturally inclined, maybe they are more naturally altruistic or not really?

Uh, it could be, but I believe its because they have sometimes less responsibilities, the men are taken up more by the work, by financial responsibilities, and such other things, so, that's why the women have perhaps more time for these things than men.

Susan similarly explained gender differences pertaining to hesed solely in terms of gender roles:

Men and women do hesed, the men are more into giving money, and the women are more into doing practical things... And we learn that cooking a meal for a person is on a higher level than just giving money to go out and buy himself something, because here you're giving him something which is ready, he doesn't have to do anything, that is a very high form of hesed... The women who are not working full time... I'm also part of an organisation that drives, when people are sick here they don't always go here, they go to Leuven or Aalst or Brussels to hospitals and I drive them and bring food because they don't get food, they only eat kosher food. So we drive them and this is a very important part of hesed, this is something that we can do, if you have money, you can give money as well...

C: So do women and men do hesed in different ways?

Because of the circumstances, because men are the ones making the money, they can give the money, if there's a woman who makes money then she's obligated, we're obligated to give ten percent of our earnings, to charity. There are men here who are extremely involved with sick people, we have people coming from all over the world to hospitals here, for various treatments which are better here than other places, the men don't really cook, so they can't really give the cooked meals...

Leonie gave me some more examples of how men and women differently perform hesed and charitable activities. I asked her if women were more involved in activities such as fundraising, and she replicated the official law on collecting from door to door:

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Yes, perhaps more women than men, no, in fact men as well, but in their own way I think. Women organise more shows, tea evenings, lectures, plays and men... My husband goes with someone, because you always have to make money with two by us, because otherwise you can put it in your own pocket... He goes along and then you go from door to door and ask... They will give more to a man, because then they think that maybe it's more serious, which it often is, so for a school...

C: Could you say that women are more involved in social activities?

More social activities, and they raise hundreds of thousands of franks, and men... I don't think men raise so much, but maybe they raise more in one go, but then they do not do it so often. But my husband isn't that kind of type, I'm more that type...

Regardless of this emphasis on individual variation, in contrast to the previous respondents, Leonie did give a more essentialist account for these differences based on religious gender ideology:

Women have *rechem*, a womb, so per definition they are already charitable. And men have to practise: that's why it's the man who must give, because a woman would give anyway, by men it's more of a duty to give, because the duties are that which you are not yet, to awaken them, a woman does it already... The woman does not have this duty, because she does it by nature, but that's why so many women are involved. O.k. there are men who do it a lot, you always see the same types who are at it, as with women as well. But in Antwerp here it is very special, people who really need it, people who are sick or poor... As it is in Antwerp it is no where else, that's the Flemish influence probably, Flemish people have that as well, such cordiality, and kindness...

Perhaps Leonie was more cognisant of and interested in religious philosophy on women and *hesed*.<sup>19</sup> Orthodox Jewish scholar Michael Kaufman also notes women have innate qualities which lend them to be naturally inclined to practise *hesed* (1995: 31):

The Sages teach that women extend more *hesed*, acts of selflessness and loving-kindness, to others. Women are more hospitable, more considerate of the stranger, and more empathetic to the needs of others. Women initiate and participate in communal charitable endeavors more than men. The Talmud tells of women conducting campaigns for the support of people confined to the Cities of Refuge and of noble Jerusalem women personally proffering medicines to the dying in order to ease their misery.

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### *Religious Roles for Strictly Orthodox Jewish Women: Of Exemption and Exclusion*

*With the Feast of the Tabernacles, then we sit in a booth... Men have to do this, because it is a mitzvah, a positive prescription bound to time... So the weather is cold and my husband says: 'Do you want to come and sit with me in the sukkah?' And I think to myself 'no way, it's pouring', so I'll just go and sit indoors, nice and warm and cosy reading the 'Libelle' [a Dutch women's magazine, equivalent to 'Women's Own'], and I just bring him his soup! [laughs].*

From an interview with Hasidic -oriented Leonie.

In chapter five, under 2. *Studying Strictly Orthodox Jewry*, it was shown that even in more anthropological studies of traditionalist religious Jewish communities that focus on people and practices rather than texts, the focus often remains on those handling and interpreting the texts, the so-called 'scholars' society' in these communities. From the age of three, Hasidic boys start to learn Hebrew and visit the (c)heder, where they will first be taught of the stories from the tradition and scripture. They later take to Talmudic 'lernen' at yeshiva and even as married men, the ritual of studying next to prayer, forms the greatest mitzvah, or religious commandment, the observant male Jew must perform. The world of the yeshiva, or the 'scholars' society' in general and the type of religious practice it represents, are therefore usually assumed to be paradigmatic for the traditionalist Jewish religious way of life in most contemporary ethnographical research on strictly Orthodox Jewish communities. Thus even a shift from 'scripture as representation' towards the much broader realm of 'religious practice' – including, rather than limited to the particular function the scriptures serve within these practices – that would appear more accurate in the description of Orthodox Judaism as a religious tradition, does not necessarily entail a more women-centred or gender inclusive focus.

In the previous paragraphs on the other hand, it has gradually become clear that women are officially barred or exempt from those paradigmatic mitzvot such the rituals of wearing tefillin and tzitzit, the Shema prayer, Talmud study, and official religious functions such as rabbi, judge or cantor, etc. which are reserved for strictly Orthodox Jewish men. Nevertheless, the women of the Machsike Hadass I interviewed did not conceive themselves as in any way inferior, nor did they see themselves as less 'religious' than men. In the previous paragraphs, it already became clear that despite their exclusion from those all-important religious roles in the construction and reproduction of official religious knowledge, rituals and the religious institutional frameworks

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such as the study house and the synagogue, these women clearly do 'practise' religion as it is defined in the normative Orthodox Jewish interpretation. Whether the women in my case study in any way negotiated or even resisted their prescribed religious roles, or perhaps practised a female-defined form of religion which took place outside of the official framework – such as in Sered's study – will be the main focus of the following chapter.

Here, it suffices to put forward the first argument that the strictly Orthodox Jewish women in my case study do count as 'religious agents', in spite of their predominant invisibility in both the religious scriptures, the scholars' society and religious institutional domain, and in the representations thereof in mainstream scholarship on such religious traditions and communities. That the women I interviewed do have religious roles coincides with the dominant religious gender ideology in these communities, and which my interviewees largely reproduced. The definition of Orthodox Jewish religion as both practice-oriented and its claim to all aspects of daily life and contexts – for example as in ethical practice – thus allows for a *sacralisation* or sanctification of many spheres of life, including those which are the proper domain of women, such as in their role as mother and housekeeper in the domestic sphere. Other facets of what it means to lead a religious life appear to be considered as gender neutral or universal, such as belief or more abstract ethical principals, yet in their outward manifestation these appear to be practised differently, due to the different religious *roles* for women and men as divinely ordained and codified in rabbinic law. The specific character of Orthodox Jewish religion with its emphasis on law and religious practice thus fosters gender differentiation in religious practice, yet it is also true that women in this religious tradition do possess religious agency, an insight which will be further discussed later on.

First, the remainder of this section will focus on the direct implications for women's religious practice due to the so-called rule of exemption. Women are exempted from precisely the central religious rituals that are both normative in traditionalist Jewish religion and communities, where practice in the form of the mitzvot or commandments as revealed in scripture and interpreted through elites, are defined and controlled exclusively by men. Those forms of liturgy which are often taken as paradigmatic forms of religious celebration, take place within the visible public domain of institutionalised religious practice and are precisely those where women are absent or at the most peripherally present or involved.

According to the Orthodox interpretation and application of halakhah, women are exempt from those positive commandments which are bound to fixed times, as they may interfere with their own gender specific and all-important own religious obligation of raising children and keeping a household. These include the most prominent of what can be considered paradigmatic liturgical practices within traditionalist Judaism, such as the wearing of tefillin and tzitzit during

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prayer, and the daily recitation of the Shema prayer, but also the dwelling in a sukkah (booth) on Sukkot (Feast of the Tabernacles), the hearing of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah (at the beginning of Yom Kippur), counting the Omer<sup>20</sup>, and waving the lulav<sup>21</sup> (palm) on Sukkot. Cornille (1994: 32) includes the reading of the book of Esther at Purim in this minimal list.

Although all 352 negative precepts equally apply to women and men, according to Maimonides, of the 248 positive commandments, sixty in total are incumbent on every Jew at all times and in all places, among which forty-six upon women and men. Fourteen mitzvot are not binding upon women (Kaufman 1995 [1993]: 207-8). Besides the above seven most cited time-bound mitzvot which women are exempted from, in Maimonides' interpretation these also include the study of the Torah, the writing (or acquiring) of a Torah scroll, being 'fruitful and multiplying', marriage, and devoting oneself to 'one's wife' during the first year of marriage and circumcision. Both the secondary religious and scholarly literature vary on the inclusion and exclusion of certain mitzvot from which women are exempt other than those in the minimal list, which is especially apparent in the case of Torah study, perhaps the most paradigmatic of all positive religious commandments and ritual practice. This variation probably testifies to the variation in both rabbinical and Talmudic interpretation and discussion, and depending on the Jewish community and their authority's acceptance for one or the other final regulation.

Finally, and most importantly, there is an enormous discrepancy between both official law and the actual religious practice which Orthodox Jewish women historically and to date do and do not perform or participate in, as will be illustrated below. The official minimal precepts under the rule of exemption or even broader Maimonides' list of fourteen, have *in practice* fostered a development in which women's participation in many other liturgical responsibilities has become minimal. Whereas according to rabbinical interpretation women perform the commandments from which they are exempt *through* their husband, in practice the rule of exemption has led to an exclusion from all public religious functions, among which the possibility of rabbinic ordination (Cornille 1994: 32). In commenting upon the complexity of halakhic development on this issue, Orthodox Jewish feminist Greenberg (1998: 82) for example, states that next to the mitzvot of counting the Omer, hearing the shofar and reciting the Shema being derived from the initial exemption from tefillin, other derived rulings such as women not being counted in the minyan have followed.<sup>22</sup> The rule of exemption in rabbinical tradition itself however, is far from unambiguous, which shall become clear in the following discussion of the mitzvah of prayer.

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*Liturgy: Prayer as an Illustration*

Both Blu Greenberg (1998) and Irwin H. Haut (1992) point out how the minimal or non-existence of Jewish women's historical and contemporary practice of prayer is by no means a reflection of halakhic regulations, but more of a lamentable consequence of the 'domino effect' of the rule of exemption (Greenberg 1998: 79), and historical development in general. Haut makes a first distinction between spontaneous and formal prayer, the first of which is not related to gender and serves to express the emotions and needs of the individual in his or her relationship with God. Thus, private, individual spontaneous prayer was open to both women and men. Formal prayer by contrast, is both liturgically and halakhically determined, and as an essential mitzvah, the rule of exemption as it applies to the particular mitzvot of tefillin and the recitation of the Shema prayer also has repercussions for women's participation in the broader realm of *tefillah* or prayer in general.<sup>23</sup>

These exemptions however, do not release women from the positive commandment of prayer altogether. Rabbis nonetheless disagree as to which prayers are exactly obligatory for women. Both Greenberg (1998: 79) and Haut (1992: 92) refer to the early masters of Talmudic law who claim that women are exempt from reciting the Shema and wearing tefillin, but commanded to perform the commandments of *mezuzah*<sup>24</sup> and grace after meals, as these are not bound to time. In the Mishnah, it is stated that women are obligated to formally pray. Later, Talmudic rabbis interpreting these texts somehow had to resolve the contradiction that in the case of this obligation, exemption due to the time factor does not hold. Later halakhists such as Nahmanides ruled that despite prayer being time-bound, from which ordinarily women would be exempt, they were nonetheless obligated as prayer was a special category with the unique function of the universal plea for mercy, for women and men alike. Nahmanides followed the view that the obligation of prayer was rabbinic in origin, concluding both women and men were to recite the *Shemoneh Esreh* at least twice a day (Haut 1992: 95).

Maimonides on the other hand, locates the obligation of prayer in the Torah itself, interpreting general informal prayer in which no set times are given as obligatory for everybody. He remains ambiguous on rabbinic formal tefillah at fixed times, neither exempting nor obligating women. To date the opinions by various Orthodox rabbinical authorities differ as to the specific details. In general the ruling has been followed that women must indeed recite the *Shemoneh Esreh* twice a day (in the morning and afternoon). This concerns those portions of the prayers that form an intrinsic part of the basic prayers, often leading up to other prayers such as the *Shaharit* in the morning or accompanied by the Shema in the morning and evening, otherwise incumbent upon men (Haut 1992: 97-98). In general and regardless of historical and contemporary discussion, it seems that halakhically in the case of formal prayer, the rule of exemption as bound to fixed times did and does not hold for

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women, but rather the element of the 'invokement of compassion' hold for prayer to be incumbent upon all. All other prayers are obligatory for men and mandatory for women.

Despite the official obligation of daily time-fixed prayer for women, in actual practice, according to Greenberg (1998: 78-79) 'most Jewish women, all across the religious spectrum, hardly open a prayer book from one Shabbat to the next, if that often.' Haut (1992: 99) similarly comments upon the contradiction between official law and contemporary practice as regards to this liturgical practice: '...it is quite clear that women's involvement with formal prayer under Jewish law has largely been underestimated, misunderstood, or ignored.' Shortly I shall turn to some of the statements by my respondents as to their own participation in prayer, and whether the discrepancy between practice and halakhic prescription is reflected in this case as well. First it is striking to note that the example of prayer in itself shows how the rule of exemption as bound to fixed times is not internally consistent. Besides prayer for example, women are commanded a number of other time-dependent mitzvot. These include the kindling of the Sabbath lights, *Kiddush*<sup>25</sup> on Sabbath, hearing the reading of the *Megillah*, the Book of Esther on Purim, drinking four cups of wine on Seder (the first evening of Pesach), eating *matzah* (unleavened bread) during Seder, rejoicing during the festivals, and finally *Hakhel*, the public 'coming together' gathering ceremony to hear the Torah read at the conclusion of the sabbatical year on Sukkot (Kaufman 1995 (1993): 208-209).

The rule itself therefore appears inconsistent and not universally binding. Gordis (1990: 180) notes that the rule pertaining to prayer for example was 'a rationalization after the fact'. In the Gemara, rabbis developed what they saw as an underlying principle, a generalisation of a series of concrete statements on different subjects in the Mishnah. Besides this inconsistency, the actual reason for the exemption according to Greenberg (1998: 82-82) is not even stated in the Talmud. Subsequent scholars (thirteenth to the twentieth century) offered various explanations, which are reflective of social attitudes towards women. Some of these are explicitly misogynous, such as the attribution of the exemption to women in order to be free to serve their husband's needs, or even stronger because of their 'lack of mental control.' Other explanations put forward are characterised by the 'equal yet different' perspective, sometimes even referring to women's innate moral and spiritual superiority, in celebrating women's special role within the home and family. A number of contemporary scholars also apply the 'time-control theory in reverse', which excuses women of the time-bound mitzvot. Because of their menses and their biological clocks, women would not need certain mitzvot that mark time as opposed to men. This version was expressed by one of my interviewees, Leonie:

There are prescriptions that are bound to time, negative ones, such as not working on the Sabbath, for men and women, and praying at set times

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which has to do with sunrise and sunset, men must do this and women may... Because us women we have time in our bodies, we are cyclically ruled, we have time in us, built in, and a man hasn't, so the man must build in time, because in Orthodox... the men are running around and looking at their watches... In the synagogue you hardly see women, because they don't have to go... So, I just pray at home if I like, if I can't pray or if it isn't convenient for me I don't even have to pray, not because I'm less...

Rachel then again explained the different mitzvot for women and men in terms of the 'equal but different' position and women's exemption due to her role in the home:

They have different obligations but I can't say the woman is in a position of inferiority, there is an obligation to study, there is an obligation to pray, the Jewish woman is limited... I mean we believe family duties come first, so she's very happy that she doesn't have to go to a synagogue three times a day, she doesn't feel that she's in a position of inferiority... Let's say that she won't go to, that she's not tied down to certain hours, on the contrary, then she feels she's freer for... We share responsibilities, put it that way, so if my responsibilities are different from those of my husband, I wouldn't say that I'm in a position of inferiority, we're sharing, sharing our life together... He's taken on certain privileges, certain responsibilities, he has his and I have mine. I'll give you an example, he goes to pray, he doesn't have the obligation to go to the ritual bath, which you know also Orthodox women have, so I can't say... There's no superiority or inferiority, there are differences, that's how we Orthodox women, I suppose you have heard it from others, that's how we look at this part of life...

Interesting in Rachel's statement is also the comparison she makes of men's mitzvah of prayer with women's mitzvah of visiting the ritual bath (laws of niddah). In this way she seems to immediately refute the idea that women's exemption in one area would be indicative of a more limited role in religious practice by juxtaposing this with one of the few positive mitzvot, which is exclusively incumbent upon women.<sup>26</sup> The majority of the women I interviewed however, all replicated the viewpoint that women's exemption from certain religious obligations had to do with their primary duties in their role as wife and mother, which they interpreted in the most positive way.

As for prayer, my informants seemed to confirm Greenberg's observation that for contemporary Orthodox Jewish women, prayer is more of a personal choice, and no one replicated the halakhic regulation that women are indeed to practise formal prayers at set times twice a day. The extremely ultra-

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Orthodox Esther for example, practises prayer in an informal context and often directly related to her role as a housewife and mother:

Men do prayer and studies but God understands every language. If I pray that my child will come home safely, so I do pray and this makes you feel good afterwards. Especially the older you get, the more you feel the intensity of life, you just feel that there's someone out there who keeps you safe. I pray that when my husband flies abroad, the flight will be safe, so a woman does pray.

Although many women interpreted the rule of exemption as a matter of freedom and choice compared with the religious duties of men, diversity of opinion among rabbinic authorities exist as to the options and effects of women performing those time-bound mitzvot from which they are 'free'. In most cases, if a woman performs such an optional precept, according to Kaufman (1995: 211), halakhically this is perceived as a 'meritorious deed' but according to a certain rabbinic principle this is then considered: 'a meritorious personal *minhag* (custom) or *neder* (religious vow) rather than a precept directly commanded by God'. Therefore, the woman's reward for performing the mitzvah is reduced because the significance of the performance of the precept is reduced (ibid.).

Orthodox Jewish feminist Blu Greenberg (1998: 85) claims that in the case of prayer, the principle and practice of exemption has yielded 'negative self-images of women regarding a discipline of steady prayer'. The exemptions would not only have 'weakened women's commitment to prayer but also repressed any desire to be formally considered equal members of the holy community.' Although the domino effect may have taken place in the area of formal prayer, it is nevertheless striking how in practice women have accepted certain time-dependent mitzvot, which were not officially obligatory. In the case of prayer, whereas most women do not perform the daily Shharit and *minhah*<sup>27</sup> prayers contradictory to the fact that these are halakhically required, they do perform the additional Sabbath and holiday prayers from which they are officially exempt (Greenberg 1998: 79). According to Kaufman (1995: 211), in practice women have also accepted the reading of the Shema, the counting of the Omer, the hearing of the sounds of shofar on Rosh Hashanah, taking the four spices on Sukkot, and eating in the sukkah *as if* they were obligatory. I confronted one of my informants with such an example, and although she did not know of the exact halakhic ruling, she did not seem surprised and attributed this to the primacy of custom (*minhag*):

C: I read somewhere that hearing the shofar wasn't even obligated for women originally?

It's possible that they do not have to because this is bound to time, but there are things that were established by the Torah and the Sages after

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the destruction of the Temple... Also the prayer books, that then becomes accepted as law, like common law, law grows and that's one of the things I think, the shofar that has to do with time, but then over time becomes established like that, then it counts as a law...

Kaufman states that although the custom of women performing these optional mitzvot has been sanctioned, this does not hold for the two important time-bound mitzvot for men, tallit and tefillin. These are not optional but actually forbidden to women. Although in my own case study on a strictly Orthodox Jewish community, the issue of women wanting or performing tallit and tefillin would not even be considered, it comes to no surprise that these forms of paradigmatic ritual practice are precisely hotly debated in any feminist critique of halakhah. Kaufman (211-212) does not discuss such a thing as concrete sanctions that may be brought upon women who transgress these prohibitions, yet uses rabbinical rhetoric in order to severely condemn such an act as a revolt against the will of God. Performing a mitzvah one is not commanded to perform and has not been sanctioned as an elective mitzvah might possibly fall into the category of 'sinful arrogance':

Women who follow their own impulses in this regard rather than the directives of Halakhah might consider whether, fundamentally, their primary motivation is to fulfill God's will or to pride themselves for performing a task given to men.

Whereas in practice Orthodox Jewish women have abandoned required formal individual prayer, they seem to have taken on communal prayers during the Sabbath and holidays which halakhically were not required from them. This has been accompanied by a number of other time-bound liturgical mitzvot that also seem to be communal, and carried out both in the private familial or public sphere of the synagogue. In discussing the androcentrism in ethnographical studies of Hasidim, it was noted that often the synagogue is given a central place in the representation of the life in the community.<sup>28</sup> From the perspective of mainstream religious studies the synagogue, the study houses and the schools are similarly considered central religious institutions, where in the case of traditionalist Judaism, paradigmatic public religious activity takes place, both liturgy and Torah study. Although neither men nor women are halakhically obligated to pray in the synagogue, as noted, traditionalist Jewish men do go to the synagogue to pray at least twice a day. The reason for this is that communal prayer is preferable to praying privately, although as with all other halakhic regulations, in this formulation, again the man is taken as the normative subject. Men must aspire to pray in a 'congregation', with at least ten individual men that then make up the required *minyan*. Praying in a minyan is more 'desirable', 'preferable', or according to one informant 'of higher value' than private individual prayer. In a minyan, there is a situation of communal

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interdependence as each person enables every other person to fulfil the requirements of the minyan (Greenberg 1998: 85). Leonie illustrated the practice of this requirement:

C: As for prayer, women are not obliged to participate in communal prayer or go to the synagogue...

No, men don't have to either really, men have to pray with ten because as Jews we want to do as much as possible, you can pray more if there are ten of you, so if there aren't ten of you... We used to live in Jakarta for three and a half years, and there weren't any other Jews there, so we always prayed at home, my father as well, there wasn't anything else, so then you can pray less. So if you want to pray more you go to the synagogue, women do not have to, so some go and some don't, it depends on what you fancy. With men it's not a question of if they feel like because they really have to go. Imagine you go to the Ardennes for a holiday, in a small village, you don't want to meet any Jews, no Jews for two weeks... You will still ask a few families and if they have a few sons above thirteen, then that's a plus, because then you have ten men, men must and women may... So a lot go, I don't go because I don't like it, but that's personal, it's not about more or less pious because you're just not obliged...

Even though halakhically women are obligated to pray, they are not to be counted in a minyan, a law that was rabbinically derived from women's prohibition on performing tefillin (Greenberg 1998: 82). Thus the logic according to Kaufman (236) goes, that as a woman is exempt from time-fixed precepts such as congregational prayer, which may interfere with her domestic responsibilities, her 'obligation may be fulfilled privately, independent of a minyan.' In Progressive strands of Judaism, these halakhic rulings on women's exemption or exclusion in liturgy and all other forms of institutionalised religious practice and frameworks have gradually been abolished or are critiqued under pressure of feminist voices within these communities. The exclusion of women from a minyan and the possibilities of more active communal forms of prayer is currently even a highly debated area within many (modern) Orthodox and traditional Conservative congregations in the U.S. (Haut 1992a; Umansky 1999).

Rather than arguing for the full equal access of women to those rights and privileges in the religious sphere which traditionally have only been reserved for men, feminist critiques in these communities are directed at expanding the traditional women's role and retaining a notion of gender difference rather than abolishing it completely (Umansky 1999: 180-183). The most notable demands for increased religious participation have concentrated on the expansion of religious education and Torah study, including Talmud in some Orthodox communities. However, the formation of women-only prayer-

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groups (also known as the women's tefillah movement), particularly in the U.S., but more recently also in the U.K.<sup>29</sup> has grown among women who wish to remain observant to halakhah, but feel that individual and private prayer alone does not offer them complete religious satisfaction. These more traditionalist Jewish women do not claim that the prayer groups are replicas of the men's minyan, and hereby opt to continue abiding to what they perceive as the halakhic prohibition of this practice. The groups conduct a full service, yet refrain from certain prayers which are absolutely necessary in the men's minyan, including *Kaddish*, *Kedushah* and *Barekhu*, or the so-called 'sacred sayings' *devarim she-be-Kedushah* (Haut 1992a: 140; Shalvi 1995). Only the prayers that otherwise may be said by women or men privately and individually are allowed in order to remain within the parameters of halakhah. This includes complete Torah readings and *haftarah* readings<sup>30</sup>, which are normally technically allowed for educational purposes.

In some of the least traditionalist tefillah groups for women, bat mitzvot are even celebrated where young girls may read from the Torah and receive the aliyah in the private context of a small 'congregation' of women. Some groups are developing new prayers for brides, or for women going on *aliyah* to Israel or even special prayers for *Agunot* ('chained women') (Haut 1992a: 142). Despite the overall evidence for both historical precedents of women prayer groups and the halakhic possibilities, women's tefillah groups have been severely condemned in many Orthodox communities. Obviously, as with many other matters pertaining to women's status and halakhah, past and present scholars are by no means unambiguous or clear on the matter. According to Haut (1992a: 141), some of the contemporary rabbis are even in favour of women's prayer groups, claiming they can halakhically count as minyanim. The resistance by the majority of Orthodox rabbis however, seems to be directed at what is perceived as a 'feminist' innovation, and therefore 'other' to Jewish tradition. The 'public' aspects of women coming together are similarly denounced as improper and untraditional, despite the fact that this takes place in private women-only context and by no means entails a threat to the rules of modesty<sup>31</sup>.

Among the traditionalist Hasidic and Hasidic oriented women I interviewed, only Susan claimed to be involved in a women-only prayer group, occupied with the singing of psalms:

We're not obligated to pray as the men are... We are obligated to pray, and there are various opinions among our rabbis, some say that whatever prayer you say, whatever language, it's not the prayer that's written down in the prayer book, is sufficient, and others say that there are set prayers and there is a set order of preferability of prayers. That's if you only have five minutes or ten minutes a day to pray then you say so much and so much, and if you have more time then, you say this, and that or whatever. And then we also say psalms, we believe that this is

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very..., this is a way of our reaching God, men and women sing, but we have different groups of women that come together and we say all the books, of the psalms in order to, for sick people to recover, or there's other occasions...It depends how many women come, because for one person to say the whole thing would take three hours, so if you've got ten people, then it's half an hour or whatever, everybody in sections and they say, that means all the women together are saying the whole thing.

Orthodox Jewish writer Tamar Frankiel (1990: 98-99) claims the 'books of Tehillim or Psalms' are especially favoured by women and the formation of so-called 'Tehillim clubs' where the saying of the whole book of Tehillim is shared, is a typical custom of many pious Jews:

This special feeling that women have for the psalms comes, I think, from the fact that their themes are often more congenial to women than are the formal prayers. They speak of concrete situations in which King David found himself rescued from distress, or they praise God's handiwork in nature. Personal, poetic, and oriented toward real life, a psalm can combine praise, inspiration, and petition into one meditation.

Susan was also quite adamant when she insisted these were not the same as in the minyan, and expressed the same opinion as that of many Orthodox rabbis:

C: And prayer in a minyan has higher value than private prayer?

Yes, that's right, so men as much as possible, depending on how they feel also, because my husband only goes in the morning, he doesn't go in the afternoon, he prays at home, but many men try to go three times a day, ten is definitely more valuable than one alone. And we don't have a minyan of women, in America this has also started, this is the same thing I said about the learning, the Torah, the oral law, it's a manifestation of feminism...

Interviewees like Susan thus seem to replicate the dominant normative view on this matter, such as the opinion of Orthodox scholar Michael Kaufman. Kaufman (1995) is tolerant of the idea of women's prayer groups as an expression of the desire of many contemporary Orthodox Jewish women to increase their active religious participation, yet adamant on the halakhic prohibition on women's minyanim: 'A women's prayer group may not perform *Hazarat HaShatz*, the public reading of the *Amidah*, or the public reading of the Torah. If they recite the blessings, their utterance of God's name is considered in vain and thus a transgression' (237). The crux of the issue seems to be the difference between congregational prayer as a public and communal mode of religious practice, reserved for men only, opposed to private prayer as 'proper' for women. Communal prayer for women in the contemporary hegemonic view

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in Orthodox Jewish communities is 'tolerated' to the extent that it takes place in the private, all-female sphere, yet is sanctioned halakhically only in so far it does not replicate and therefore threaten the exclusivity of the male, which is the paradigmatic institutional form of prayer. Kaufman (236) again relates these differences to men and women's innate characteristics:

In keeping with the private nature of women, women's prayer is expressed in a private manner. Communal prayer is more in keeping with the essentially public personality of the male and consequently, his more public role. Public prayer is an expression of the public functioning of the community, and hence the responsibility for public prayer is limited to males.

When Orthodox Jewish women do participate in congregational prayer, feminist critiques are often directed at what first sight seems to be their role as mere passive 'spectator' or consumer of religious celebration, as is evident even in the division of space within the synagogue. Separated from the main field where the men are standing and praying by a *mehitzah*, the women's section is mostly on the periphery, being smaller and further removed from the *bimah* (raised platform in the synagogue from which prayers are led and the Torah is read). Haut (1992: 136) therefore claims that 'their presence is not recognized in any meaningful way.' Women cannot receive any synagogue honours, nor will they become rabbi, cantor or a choir member. The presence of a bat mitzvah girl will not be reflected or acknowledged in the religious ritual as a bar mitzvah is: 'It makes no practical difference if hundreds of women are present, or if none are there, for they have no active role in any part of the service.' When and if Orthodox Jewish women do go to the synagogue in order to participate in or at least be present at congregational religious practice, they will do so on the Sabbath. Apart from one or two women who did not visit the synagogue very often because it just was not their 'kind of thing', most of the other women I interviewed did go every Saturday, like Hasidic Tina:

Yes, I do go every Saturday.

C: The men are obliged to pray and with women it seems to be more of an option?

It's just a bit to get of the house really, Saturday morning, then I leave the children here, I am away for a little while, I see my girlfriend and then we pray a little, it's more social for the woman, going to the synagogue. And of course you have those who go really out of religious... but most do not, it's fun, it's not like in the church where you must be very quiet or something, not like that...

When I confronted Rachel with the suggestion that women going to synagogue on Saturday might be more of a social event, she rectified this, presumably not

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to give me the impression that women's participation in communal prayer is less serious or indicative of their possible 'subordinate' role:

C: So do you go to the synagogue yourself?

Yes, yes, let's say I try to go, I mean during the week naturally not, but on a Saturday, let's say I try to...

C: And do you join in with the prayer or would you say it's more of a social...

No, no, no, I sit and pray, definitely, I mean I'm sitting and praying. Perhaps people go to the synagogue for the social life, but when you're in the synagogue you don't talk, you pray, you follow the prayers, I mean after the prayers when you leave the synagogue you talk for five minutes to those who are coming up, but when I'm in the synagogue I come to pray, not to talk...

Miriam emphasised the fact that although women may have been severely limited in participating in religious practice in the past, this was no longer so today:

In the synagogue it is very pleasant for the woman, there is a nice entrance and the women are taken care of, so they are also satisfied.

C: Do you go to the synagogue?

Yes, but only on Saturday

C: Do you pray along?

Yes, in the olden days many women didn't even know the prayer, but a lot has changed, women know much more...

In finally hearing Tirza's experience, we can perhaps conclude that women's exemption in liturgy such as prayer, and to an extent their exclusion from the most institutional public forms thereof that count as 'paradigmatic' for the normative male traditionalist Jew, have led to a situation where women's role in public liturgical practice is peripheral compared to that of men's religious practice as institutionalised in the 'public sphere'. However, the extent to which women do participate in that which is optional for the large part depends on personal, individual choice:<sup>32</sup>

Yes, the Saturday, not many women go in the week, but when I go myself I do have the feeling that spiritually I have something for myself, but it's not like I have to... Of course I can just lie in bed on Saturday, but many women do get something out of it...

C: And what is that like, I mean you are seated separately, and you see the men...

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We pray along, we have books, we hear the singing... You do feel something, it gives me a warm feeling and I want to improve myself in this and that...

Traditionalist Jewish women's practice in the realm of liturgy is limited compared to that of men in that women are exempt for some, and prohibited from other religious obligations which are legitimated by appealing to religious law. According to the women interviewed affiliated with the Machsike Hadass and in what seems to be the dominant view in most traditionalist Jewish communities, this exemption can then be interpreted as an instance of more 'justice', freedom and flexibility for women, as their proper role is defined as that of mother and housewife. Religious gender roles are furthermore defined according to notions of the private and the public domain, like in the case of prayer, the former being linked to a more individual mode, the second to a communal context. The male communal public sphere then represents the institutionalised 'face' of religious community, tradition and practice. Whereas women officially and halakhically nonetheless appear to be equally obligated to pray, the fact that this is somewhat less formal, binding and ritualised has in practice led to a situation in which women's experience of liturgy is much more limited to that of men. Women's religious 'participation' and experience is therefore largely individually determined. In some cases, the peripheral place of women in the communal space of the synagogue is even experienced as a 'social' rather than a 'religious' event.

Using prayer as an illustration, both the religion 'as text' and the religion *sui generis* conception have been challenged by carrying out an empirical study of both ethnographic practice (interviews) and discourse in scholarship on Jewish women and religious practice that primarily depart from the 'insider's point of view. In 'Between Law and Custom: Women's Experience of Judaism', anthropologist Jonathan Webber (1983) underlines the important methodological distinction between taking a legal, jurisprudential or normative approach versus an ethnographical, sociological or behavioural perspective on the question of women's status in Judaism. Judaism is not a 'religion' in the same sense as Christianity, - as I have already emphasised - as Webber (144) suggests it can be viewed as more of a system of law, philosophy and ethics, next to the fact that 'Jews' can be seen as a people and a nation, 'not a simply voluntary group of believers in a religious creed'. As I have similarly tried to show, Orthodox Judaism can primarily be viewed as a religious tradition with an emphasis on practice, the foundations of which lie in halakhah or Jewish law. As Webber argues, theoretically, the legal system 'remains aloof' for real life social and cultural environments (144-145):

Thus the rules are supposed to generate behaviour; it is quite contrary to the theory of this system (blasphemous even, for some) to suppose that

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it is behaviour that is responsible for the rules. To say that the halacha effectively codifies – or should – codify Jewish social realities existing at a particular moment in historical time is open to any sociologically-minded cultural historian, but it is not a traditional mode of explanation which sees biblical commandments as timeless and externally valid.

Depending on one's viewpoint therefore, as Webber notes, and as has been illustrated above, feminist scholars taking 'evidence' from both halakhic sources and custom and practice can arrive at a multiplicity of interpretations including 'both a feminist justification for the desirability and appropriateness of fundamental change and also apologetic arguments for maintenance of the status quo'. Even more so than in the case of doctrinal or 'theologically' defined religion therefore, any feminist perspective on Orthodox or halakhic Judaism is complicated by the fact in that historically it has responded to its social environment and change, and in both explaining and prescribing behaviour and daily practice it is in some sense 'sociological'. However, halakhah being 'patriarchal' in the sense that women have been excluded in the study or making of halakhah, feminist scholars are confronted with a paradox: 'In any case women are in no position to rely on halakhic categories alone to describe their experience of Judaism. Yet they have no alternative except to use them if their experience is to appear as authentically Jewish, and legitimate moreover to their menfolk.' (Webber 1983: 146-7).

Any gendered perspective moreover, is complicated by what Webber argues, that from the halakhic viewpoint – in its own frame of reference - the 'experience of being a man, or the experience of being a woman' are not halakhic preoccupations, that acts exclusively on the basis of a set of principles originally laid down in the Hebrew bible: "'Women' do not form a self-evident, self-contained halakhic category in opposition to 'men'; it is even doubtful whether they form a halakhic category at all' (148). In my analysis and consistent with my arguments on the insider/outsider problem in its relationship with a feminist approach, my intention so far has been not to get involved in a religious, or in this case a 'halakhic' debate. From a feminist social science perspective, I have aimed to show how halakhah in practice may or may not be appropriated in addition to other forms of discourse in the construction of gender and religion. In the following paragraph, I turn to the exclusion of traditionalist Jewish women from the contemporary sphere of halakhic study and practice.

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*Women, Knowledge and Texts*

*Study of Torah is not confined to an elite among the people of the covenant. In  
however varying degrees, it belongs to them all.*  
Emile L. Fackenheim (1999: 160).

Historical and contemporary traditionalist Jewish women's participation in religion has not only been excluded or reduced to the level of spectator or consumer within the public religious institutions and their rituals, such as liturgy and the space of the synagogue. It has already been noted that among the greatest mitzvot for men such as tefillin and tzitzit, is the mitzvah of Torah study, in its broadest sense including the study of the Talmud. 'Torah' in this context not only refers to the five books of Moses, but all literature including commentaries, law and interpretation (including the Talmud). The all-important public domain of Jewish religious life has been men's 'natural' domain, exemplified in both public worship and the making and study of religious texts. The status of women when it comes to Torah study in historical and contemporary times appears even more complex and strife with more contradictions than women's place in the synagogue and their participation in liturgy. Before focussing on some of these discussions, it can be emphasised that the importance of Torah study in Jewish religious life is again represented as paradigmatic and normative in much of the academic literature. Umansky (1999: 189) for instance critiques - among others - the famous Jewish Studies' scholar Jacob Neusner, for precisely this sort of mainstream representation. Umansky cites Neusner in those statements where the man's experience is clearly taken as the normative and representative of religious tradition, such as 'The important Jew is the learned man', or that according to rabbinic Judaism the study of the Torah is '*the* [Umansky's emphasis] central expression of [Jewish] piety.'<sup>33</sup>

As many religious studies' scholars have emphasised for Judaism, and is evident in most ethnographical accounts of contemporary traditionalist Jewish communities as discussed in chapter five, in Judaism, traditionally and as is the case in contemporary communities such as the Hasidim, the study of sacred texts itself was, and is not confined to a remote religious elite. Fackenheim (1999: 149-150) contrasts the situation with medieval European Christianity, where generally only priests and monks could even read or write. Not only was the relationship between celibacy and religious specialisation unknown in Judaism, Torah scholars were of 'this world', married with children and living in the midst of the community rather than in a secluded monastery. According to an important rule, a Torah scholar is to spend eight hours of the day earning a living (and providing for his family), eight hours a day sleeping, and eight hours a day studying Torah. Umansky (1999: 189) cites Neusner in his

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androcentric perspective that Judaism was exceptional in holding that everybody could become a 'religious virtuoso.' Fackenheim is more nuanced, in noting that although in theory everyone could potentially become a Torah scholar, women were the first exception to the rule. The poor could not permit themselves to spend eight hours a day studying and the very rich were unwilling, yet supported scholars, in turn being revered by the poor. In any case, Fackenheim (1999: 152) argues that despite the deep respect these men enjoyed, Torah scholars were certainly not an isolated group cut off from the rest of the community.

The study of the Torah is so central to Judaism, that it is often referred to as the most important mitzvah, 'surpassing all other mitzvot' (Greenberg 1998: 47), or according to the Sages, the equivalent itself of all other mitzvot (Frankiel 1990: 90).<sup>34</sup> As a mitzvah, Torah study itself can also be conceived of as a form of religious ritual, in the same sense that it is seen as kind of ethical practice characteristic of Judaism as a religious tradition. Ever since the destruction of the Temple, Torah study came to replace the older rituals, becoming a form of ritual practice in itself. Torah became central to Judaism as a religious tradition, and crucial was the transfer of the knowledge of the holy texts from one generation to the next. This involves much more than the accumulation of knowledge as such, as the study and understanding of the texts is conceived of as a spiritual kind of practice. More than simply adding dimensions to ritual, ethical and spiritual practice, studying Torah – as the thoughts of God - can 'become a mystical experience', an 'opening to many dimensions of our own soul in connection with God.' (Frankiel 1990: 91).

Torah study is often described with the Yiddish word 'lernen', the name of an activity that is difficult to translate. According to Willem Zuidema (1988 [1977]: 69-70) lernen refers to 'studying in the plural', in the form of a dialogue or discussion, yet also a prayer, a religious act, 'standing in a thousand year old tradition' (transl. from Dutch):

A Christian can study the Talmud and the Torah, besides all the other Jewish scriptures, even for a whole lifetime – but it is still not 'lernen.' The religious Jew begins with 'lernen' at a very young age. He keeps on doing it until his death, even though he may not become a great Talmudist. Because the Rabbi, the teacher, at the core does also not teach the Torah, but he 'learns' together with his students because he is someone who knows how to 'lern'.<sup>35</sup>

Although Torah study may be conceived of as even a spiritual kind of experience, Fackenheim (1999: 154) argues the traditional lernen of the Talmud is also 'as disciplined, methodical, and intellectual as the way it is now often studied in modern western academic institutions.' On the other hand, it is also different to academic study in that it more closely resembles prayer: 'The *shechina* dwells between those studying Torah' (163). Lernen is therefore not

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an act that must take place in an ivory tower, but concerns a deep kind of knowing that what one learns, has implications in daily life. According to Zuidema (1988 [1977]: 70): it is also 'a knowing that word and deed are so very much two sides of one and the same reality and that man cannot profess that God is the Lord of heaven and earth, without also expressing this in an intense reverence for all creations from the animal to humankind and the surrounding nature'.

The study of Torah as described above in the contemporary world is mostly only practised in traditionalist Jewish communities such as the Hasidim and the Misnagdim. In academic settings the study of Judaism often includes the study of Talmudic texts, but from a much more 'objective' and intellectual approach, and not in the traditional meaning of *lernen* (Fackenheim 1999: 153). As has become evident throughout the preceding chapters on contemporary traditionalist communities and their educational system, Torah study still counts as the most important *mitzvah* for those who abide to *halakhah*. In the short historical overview of the development of Hasidism in chapter six, it was also pointed out that the present centrality of Torah study may seem somewhat of a contradiction considering the original context in which Hasidism evolved, as it initially opposed scholarly elitism, emphasising more charismatic, mystical and alternative forms of expression in the realm of religious ritual. On the other hand, when reading what scholars like Zuidema and Fackenheim have to say on the interrelatedness of spirituality, prayer, ritual practice and intellectualism in the practice of *lernen*, it may be that contemporary Hasidic men are practising Torah study in a similar mode. As in the early days, these men today also have families and – mostly – jobs, and indeed not all of them become great scholars or rabbis.

Halakhically, women's position vis-à-vis men's *mitzvah* of study is similar to that of their relationship to the practice of prayer. Although Torah study is not included in the seven positive precepts which are clearly bound to fixed times, it is included in the total list of fourteen from which women are officially exempt. There does not seem to be any absolute prohibition on women studying Torah, yet again, contradictory and especially negative interpretations during the rabbinic era, and finally the general implications of the rule of exemption like in the case of prayer seemed to have created a precedent whereby women hardly studied at all. According to Berger and Lipstadt (1996: 303), Torah study in fact left the realm of family life where it was taught 'from parent to child' in the rabbinic period and then 'entered the academy' where it became a communal affair rather than a family one, one in which women were obviously excluded. This is not to say that religious education did not take place at home at all. Jewish women's education during the Middle Ages for example, was not formally or systematically taught, but primarily mothers taught basic observances by way of observation and in an informal way. Most Jewish women up until the nineteenth century could not read Hebrew, prayed in Yiddish and were completely incapable of studying any

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Jewish texts (Joseph 1995: 61-62). In the twentieth century this situation changed, yet the historical and political context behind this transformation does not allow for an interpretation of this shift as wholly in the interests of women's emancipation in the religious sphere.

In 1918 the Hasidic seamstress *Sarah Schenierer* (1883-1935) who was born and raised in Krakow (Poland) founded a Jewish women's library and study group in the space of one of the town's orphanages. Schenierer is said to have envied her father and brothers as they were permitted to study Talmud, which had always exclusively been a male prerogative in the religious practice of Judaism. The success of these meetings incited her to make a formal request of approval for the foundation of official religious female education, which was subsequently granted by various rabbinical authorities throughout Eastern Europe. The very same year the first *Beit Ya'akov* school was established in Krakow and by 1937, 260 schools bearing the same name were teaching Hasidic girls the Bible, Ethics, the code of Jewish Law, prayer, commentaries and Hebrew grammar across Eastern Europe, and in Austria and Palestine (Morris 1998: 36)

After centuries of religious illiteracy, when mothers taught their daughters the observance of the mitzvot in a practical way, finally during the second decade of the twentieth century, religious education for girls became permitted and later considered indispensable by rabbinical authorities. From a contemporary vantage point this development could possibly be interpreted as a first step in Jewish women's struggle for emancipation: the right to gain access to fundamental knowledge of both the richness of their cultural heritage, but also to the discourse that determines their proper role and fate. Sarah Schenierer most definitely challenged conventional gender hegemony by studying the Bible, the Oral Law and Jewish Ethics at night and on Sabbath, despite being made a laughing stock by her friends (Weissman 1976: 141). Schenierer's 'feminist' protest against the lack of religious intellectual education for women paradoxically seemed to be accompanied by a fear for their assimilation into 'modern' society (Brayer<sup>36</sup> in: Kaufman 1995: 107-8):

She writes that she was dismayed when she witnessed the many hasidim who would flock to their rebbes during the fall festivals to be inspired by the Torah while '...we the wives and daughters stay home with little ones. Our festival is an empty one, bare of Jewish intellectual involvement. For our women have never learned anything about the spiritual content that is absorbed within a Jewish festival. The mother goes to schul. The services ring faintly into the fenced and boarded women's gallery. There is much crying by the elderly women. The girls look on them as being of a different century. Youth and desire to live a full life shoot up violently in the strong-willed young personalities...leaving behind them the wailing of the older generation, they follow the urge for freedom and self-expression. Further and

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further away from schul they go, further away to the dancing, tempting light of a fleeting joy'.

Rabbinic authorities yet again reinterpreted prior injunctions on women's education and granted Schenierer's request, which it appears, was at least motivated by a concern for the future of the tradition in its entirety. Societal, political and economic transformations in Eastern Europe since the nineteenth century had resulted in a need to redefine Jewish identity. *Maskilim* (adherents of the Jewish *Haskalah* or Enlightenment) supported the notion of adaptation and facilitated assimilation into the modernising of surrounding society, which led to a decline in the importance of tradition and rituals. Particularly young Orthodox Jewish women became receptive to this process of secularisation. In some countries, education had become compulsory for all citizens, and girls had no choice other than to attend non-Jewish institutions and follow their modern secular curriculum (El-Or 1994: 67; Hyman 1995: 50-4). Around the turn of the century, traditional Eastern European Jewish boys received classical Torah and advanced Talmud education, whereas many girls visited public schools or were provided private general tuition, their formal Jewish education not extending beyond elementary Yiddish and Hebrew (Hyman 1995: 54).<sup>37</sup>

The paradoxical effect of this gender differentiation is that young women from middle and upper classes became more familiar in the languages, history and tastes of their host countries rather than those of their ancestors. This we can imagine led to intergenerational and interfamilial conflicts, and in the worst cases led to them 'leaving the fold'. Historical records indicate that in the last decade of the nineteenth century, more than two thirds of Jewish converts to Christianity in the city of Krakow were female (Hyman 1995:73). Schenierer's fears thus came to be shared by a number of prominent rabbis, who acknowledged that withholding Jewish girls from Jewish religious education would entail the loss of these women to the forces of secularisation. Although women were not seen as necessary for the survival of the 'scholars' society' and the transmission of its culture, they were quite literally regarded as essential to the reproduction of Jewish religious tradition in terms of ethnicity.<sup>38</sup>

When in an interview I asked Hasidic-oriented Tirza about arranged marriages in her community, she herself pointed to this episode in the history of the education of Jewish women, which showed she was quite aware that these transformations were needed for the survival of the tradition in the face of the modern world:

I don't know if you have seen the film 'Fiddler on the Roof', then you must see it, that was Russia then, and it's not like that now, but it does give you an idea where we're coming from, because it was like that. Many Jewish people are against that film, because that man, the milkman, he has four daughters, whom one of which marries a non-Jew and one marries a revolutionary and that's not so nice to know, but it

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was like that... Girls did not have an education, no school education and at a time when the world became more open, a little after the revolution, after those things... Then those girls became lost, they had... We now have a firm education and we know who we are, where we stand, and then they didn't know it and so a lot of girls... So before there was an education for girls in the Jewish community, a lot of girls left the community, so that is shown in the film...

Susan also interpreted the need for religious education for girls as a means to counter the temptations of the surrounding modern society and prevent 'losing' them to secular society:

Men are obligated [to study Torah], women are not obligated, but it is a very, very important mitzvah... Women are obligated in the sense that they have to know what to do, we have to learn very much in order to... It doesn't all go with 'don't put on the light', there are things that we really do have to learn, and then in the past seventy or eighty years women have become... have been learning more in school, which they didn't used to do, because of the influence of the modern trends, I would say. Seventy or eighty years ago you had a lot of girls who were leaving Orthodoxy because they weren't occupied with this and they went to schools and they saw other things... They didn't see the richness of our Torah, so schools were open for girls and now all the girls go to school and they learn as well, so that they don't have to get satisfaction from other...

The politico-historical context behind the introduction for religious education for girls some eighty years ago, then appears not to be that dissimilar to the reasons behind religious education for girls in present-day strictly Orthodox Jewish communities. Thus Jewish Studies scholar and Orthodox Rabbi Walter Orenstein (1995: 58) cites the 'renowned rabbinic authority for Ashkenazic Jewry of the last generation' Rabbi Israel Meir HaKohen<sup>39</sup>, also known as the Hafetz Hayim (1838-1933):

But today, due to our many sins, parental influence has become very weak; most people no longer live where their ancestors lived, and many women are exposed to a secular education. It is unquestionably of great merit, therefore, to teach women Bible, Prophets, the Writings, and the ethical treatises of our sages [which is Oral Law]... to authenticate our holy faith within their minds. For if not, they are prone to stray completely from the way of God. Heaven forbid, and become totally uprooted from our religion.

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Orenstein's (1995: 60) similar views are even more explicit that in the case of this particular mitzvah and women's relation to it, 'societal reasons' prevail above - which we will see below are rather ambiguous - halakhic rulings:

What is clearly evident from these words [those of Rabbi Israel Meir KaHohen] is that society changes – for better or for worse – and we must determine in each generation how best to preserve and foster adherence to Judaism. In a society such as ours, it is important to teach Torah to women; indeed in some circles, it is a necessity.

Here, this contemporary Orthodox rabbi and scholar clearly shows that the survival of Judaism is the primary motivator for whether or not to allow women access to religious education, which is not seen as an objective in its own terms. Jewish women themselves furthermore, do not seem to have much to say on the matter according to Orenstein's view, which is clearly expressed in this phrase, the 'we' in 'we must determine on the issue of women', clearly referring to those having the ability to determine, that is male rabbinic authorities, over the subjects who are women.

Whereas the rationale behind the religious education in schools for Jewish women as given by both scholarly and halakhic authorities, including its replication by my own informants, does not seem to have fundamentally changed since the beginning of the last century, the same can be said for the curriculum contemporary Jewish girls at traditionalist schools follow, including the Antwerp community. These girls do receive education in the written Torah, they learn Hebrew, history, Jewish philosophy and then only certain parts of the Oral Law (presumably from the Mishnah), what many of my informants referred to as 'these little green books', 'the Ethic of the Fathers' and law insofar these relate to their own mitzvot and practical matters. Before hearing what some of my informants had to say on the fact that women do not study Talmud, go to the yeshiva or ever do any real 'lernen', I shall return to the question if there is any correspondence between halakhic rulings on Torah study for women, and the actual practice that has been followed and rationalised for almost a century in many Orthodox Jewish communities.

As with many other issues pertaining to women's status and their religious practice in Judaism in general, the secondary literature shows that the actual Torah for example, does not harbour any proscription against women studying. The Talmud, the later interpretations and commentaries on the Torah however, do testify to many a discussion on the matter. The biblical command on Torah education states 'And teach them *livneikhem*' (Deuteronomy 11:19), which according to the more liberal perspectives in the secondary literature is generally translated into 'children', but as *livneikhem* is masculine, it was referred to as 'your sons' in the rabbinic interpretation. (Joseph 1995: 61; Greenberg 1988: 75). The Talmud furthermore states that only those who are

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commanded to teach Torah - men - may study Torah, which seems to rule out any possibility for such education or even self-education for daughters.

On the other hand, there are some examples of famous learned women in Jewish history, such as the great female scholar named Beruriah, who is supposed to have lived in the second century C.E. Beruriah was educated by her father, a learned rabbi himself in the Oral and Written Torah. Her views on religious, scholarly, and secular matters were highly respected and decisions in law were made in accordance with her opinion, including her own husband, the famous Rabbi Meir (Gordis 1990: 165; Kaufman 1995: 69). Depending on the opinion on women's education of the rabbi in question however, this story has been reinterpreted as both a positive precedent, yet also in terms of misogynist warnings. Rather than acclaiming her faith, wisdom and success within men's domain, following an incident of Beruriah mocking the general rabbinical attitude towards women, her husband is said to have put her to test, by instructing one of his students to tempt her into adultery. According to this story from the eleventh century, Beruriah finally consented and committed suicide upon discovering the plot (Goodblatt<sup>40</sup> in: Young 1993: 26; Gordis 1990: 165).

The Sages in the Mishnah offer more contradictory interpretations. Two Tannaitic Sages are cited on the subject of Torah education for women, both expressing a different viewpoint. The first is the well-known statement from Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus from the second century, who is said to have claimed that teaching the Torah to women is tantamount to teaching them 'obscenity' (Jerusalem Talmud, Sotah 20A) and therefore it must be forbidden (Cornille 1994: 31; Gordis 1990: 90; Jackson 1997: 130; Morris 1992: 33). In the Mishnah, Rabbi Eliezer's statement is contradicted by citing Ben Azzai, who claims teaching Torah to women is obligatory. According to Kaufman (1995: 250) the passage is as follows:

...Ben Azzai says: A man is obligated to teach his daughter Torah... R. Eliezer says: Whoever teaches his daughter Torah is considered as if he teaches her frivolity [*tiflut*]. (Mishnah, Sotah 3:4)

Simon Greenberg (1988: 74-75) furthermore refers to the rabbinic opinion that women's intellect is viewed as *kallah*, to be roughly translated with 'lightly esteemed, 'held of little account' or 'treated with contempt', the rationale for not teaching them Torah, as they will 'misuse what they learn.' Orenstein (1995: 56) explains Rabbi Eliezer's words – translating 'tiflut' with possibilities diverse as 'subtlety', 'triviality' or 'immorality' – in terms of the requirements of dedication, time and effort being so great for the 'mastery of Torah', that women, whose primary responsibilities are to the home and family, are not 'predisposed' to such demands. Gordis (1990: 90) finally, makes the important point that despite law rarely being decided in accordance with Rabbi Eliezer's viewpoints on many other matters, his particular view on forbidding Torah

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education for women rather than that of Ben Azai prevailed throughout the greater part of diasporic Jewish history.

In the twelfth century, the authoritative commentaries by Maimonides were less severe, not completely prohibiting women from studying, but by nonetheless claiming their reward to be smaller, for contrary to men, women were not commanded to perform this important mitzvah. Commenting on the Sages, Maimonides did make a distinction between the Written and the Oral Torah. Contrary to the study of the latter (the Talmud), he who taught his daughters the Written Torah did not necessarily encourage her to turn these words into mere 'frivolity' (Kaufman 1995: 253).

Maimonides codified what thereafter seems to have become the dominant ruling, as was also expressed by a number of his contemporaries. The rather awkward issue of keeping women entirely ignorant on what was otherwise deemed to be the 'key to living the rich Jewish way of life', was solved by giving women access to what Kaufman (1995: 250) calls the 'first level for Torah learning', namely the *practical* one. The Torah as an embodiment of the Divine plan for the actions of mankind, thus had to be taught to women insofar as it was related to the performance of mitzvot, and in particular those that were specific for the woman as a mother and housewife, such as the laws surrounding Sabbath or the Kashrut. The second levels of a more 'theoretical' or 'esoteric' kind, were therefore not deemed necessary for the observant Jewish woman who was merely required to perform her own 'practical' duties in a nonetheless halakhically correct way.

With the introduction of official formal religious education for girls, both the method in which the curriculum was transferred became more sophisticated and the scope and depth of the knowledge itself obviously widened. This sophistication presumably continues to grow, as traditionalist Jewish communities have to provide for the intellectual 'satisfaction' of 'their' girls in modern society and must prevent them from 'leaving the fold'. Whereas the position of women in society has changed and girls receive advanced secular education, traditionalist communities can only respond by upgrading their religious curriculum. The dominant viewpoint by leading Orthodox rabbis nowadays has taken a dramatic turn, in that Torah education for girls is held as an absolute necessity, far removed from the earlier discourse on the dangers of obscenity or mere frivolity. The boundaries between the Written and the Oral Law, the latter confined to mere 'practical matters', thus excluding the practice of 'lernen' and the institution of the yeshiva, are nonetheless abided by gender lines, also among the women and girls in the traditionalist community I interviewed. According to Miriam:

We study the written Bible, we study the Prophets, and some Jewish philosophy and from the Oral Law, basically the Ethics of the Fathers, and the rest we really don't study except if in explaining the Torah. The commentators bring some of the laws and we do that as well, and then

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we study practical law. We don't eat meat and milk together so we have to know a lot about that, 'what happens if some milk spills into the pot', or details of the mitzvot that women have to know, because otherwise we don't know how to do what's right, just as much as the men... The men are learning more about 'how this decision was arrived at by the rabbis', like you said the logic of the law...

C: And women more the practical side?  
Right...

Rachel assured me that the fact that girls did not study Talmud or go to the yeshiva did not mean their opportunities for religious study were limited nowadays and that this was not really an issue for the women and girls in her community:

Oh, but even in the Torah, the Torah you know it's the five books of Bible, the Torah is not just the Bible, you have the Torah, you have the Prophets, you have the Proverbs, you have many, many, many, books and loads of literature which is attached to the Torah, it's the halakhic laws... And what shall I tell you, it's Jewish philosophy... If a girl just starts studying, if she wants to study all the various trends of Jewish thought, which have developed since the last thousand years I mean, she can go on for years on end... But besides the Talmud there are many, many things to study, we don't believe that women have to study the Talmud, there are many, many other things that she can study besides that, so it has nothing to do... And if you would ask me, 'does a woman...?' Well, in our circles, women they aren't even... I wouldn't say they are even interested in studying the Talmud, because there is a lot of theoretical discussions, which a woman wouldn't even be interested in developing...

According to Tina, study itself was one of the most noticeable markers in the differential upbringing of girls and boys and the learning of their later gender roles:

A boy who studies at school, religious lessons, and there is a party or an excursion, then they will be prone to say no quicker, 'you stay at school', for them that's really important. And a girl who doesn't go for once, that's not the end of the world... So a man must have a very good reason not to go and study, or not to go and pray, or... He must be ill or something. With a woman... For example we just had a celebration in Switzerland, a family celebration, and I let my daughter come over from England, where she also studies, and that was allowed, that's no problem. But my son in Israel couldn't come, not from my husband and nor from... Anyway, that wouldn't be accepted: 'Oh, you have let him

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come over from Israel for that party...' He would have liked to be there, but he's studying and he's doing something more important and he knows it himself, and there is no family celebration for him... Ok, if he had been at home, it would be... But because he's in Israel for that period, he stays there, he wouldn't come over...

The difference starts when boys are sent off to the heder, and young girls have more time to play, consistent with the general attitude towards 'exemption as more freedom' for girls, as explained by Chana:

Heder is school that is especially for boys, that applies to uh, two hours of secular studying in the whole and the rest is... but the other schools have got... The boys are working under great stress, from early in the morning till late at night, because they've got to have the usual, required curriculum of secular studies plus the religious studies which is a lot, its very strenuous...

When I asked Chana why boys studied Talmud and girls did not, she answered as if my question was rhetorical, thus expressing the self-evidence in this gender-differentiated upbringing focussed on roles:

But there's... Look boys, as you said at the beginning have got this uh... They end up, they have a certain obligation to learn Talmud so they have to learn it when they are younger, because if they are not going to learn it when they are younger then they'll never know it. The girls do not have that, the girls are geared up, even if they do get married, let's say most of them get married, and even if they do continue with a career, but they focus on the home, you understand, so they do not focus... And they don't have to learn any Talmud, so why should they learn the Talmud?

Although the women I interviewed from the Machsike Hadass and their daughters and granddaughters received even more of an advanced religious education, the halakhic ruling that they are exempt remains in place. None of them even consider studying Talmud, although the dominant Orthodox view is that this in itself is not prohibited. In the 'modern' Orthodox view, Talmud study is then optional. Kaufman (1995: 253) for example takes the 'brilliant female scholar Beruriah' as an example that 'if a woman is capable and motivated, the prohibition against Torah study might not apply.' The 'might' naturally gives away his and the dominant viewpoint on the matter, and a certain insolubility is also expressed by Orenstein (1995: 61). Orenstein first states that in the contemporary world, it is 'permissible – and perhaps even obligatory – to teach women Torah, the Written as well as the Oral Law, in those areas of Halakhah that are relevant to them'. However, he continues and

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concludes his chapter on the subject by mentioning what the ‘revered rabbinic decisor of our time, the late Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik’ once remarked, that the above would ‘include most of the Talmud’.

Feminist critiques of Judaism as a patriarchal religion often focus on the issue of women and Torah study, their exclusion being a barrier to the most fundamental method for the transmission of religious insights (Adler 1995 [1983/1973]: 15). The historical exclusion of women from the process of halakhic interpretation and rulings that have determined their religious roles and their rights, parallels the contemporary vicious circle in which their exemption from Torah study as a religious form of practice, is directly linked to the religious institutional sphere and ultimate authority over the religious community. Modern Orthodox Blu Greenberg (1998 (1996): 47-48) confronts this fundamental dilemma head on:

If the study of Torah and Mishnah is not forbidden to women, why does Talmud remain off limits? And if certain study is permitted to women, why is it not encouraged? The answer is clear: because direct access to learning is the key to religious leadership in the traditional Jewish community. Without it, there is no way a woman can qualify as a scholar, a halakhic decision maker, or a rabbi. With equal access, women will begin to raise disturbing questions. A woman with a sense of her innate potential will begin to ask, ‘Why shouldn’t I, too, strive to be learned?’ A woman the match in learning of any rabbinical student will sooner or later ask, ‘Why can’t I, too, be ordained?’ Ultimately, a new generation of parents who place high value on Torah study will ask, ‘Why not expect the same from our daughters as from our sons?’

The number of Modern Orthodox Jewish women becoming Talmudic scholars is in fact slowly progressing, and a number of communities have established facilities for advanced Jewish studies for women, such as the Stern College of Yeshiva University and the Drisha Institute in New York (Gordis 1990: 166). As with the recent tefillah groups and initiatives such as the celebration of bat mitzvah, however, these changes are highly contested and as Greenberg states, it is not yet sure what the outcome of these initiatives will be and where they may ultimately lead. Susan stated what is the dominant viewpoint on women’s education in traditionalist communities such as the Machsike Hadass, what the writer Gordis (1990: 166) refers to as the commitment to ‘a perception of Jewish law and practice as immutable’:

Women don’t learn the Oral Torah, in our Orthodox community, except for certain parts, like ethics, we have these little green books, Ethics of the Fathers and then all these things are things which I can look into as well as my husband, because I read Hebrew very well and I do study them, but I don’t study the Oral Law, the Gemara, that’s something

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else... No other parts in our community do. In America there are more feminist Orthodox movements, which consider themselves Orthodox, I wouldn't say that they are Orthodox, where the women say, 'Well now since we are already learning, we want to learn as much as the men', and they do, but we don't accept that, in our particular community.

The fact that women's religious curriculum would be more limited in scope to that of boys, was countered by some of my informants emphasising girls learned different things, for example their knowledge and philosophy was 'different' or even went 'deeper' than that of the boys. According to Leonie, who applied her 'inside-outside gender ideology' to the object of study – men study the tradition, the outside, opposed to women who study the Bible, the 'core':

Women go more into the depth, that's what women do, so much deeper, deeper, deeper, deeper, and deeper, that's what women do and men don't. We might say that's more favourable, but it's not favourable at all, it sounds nice, but it isn't. It's deeper in everything, many more meanings at many levels, that's really feminine. For example, speeches. Men who speak in front of women must really have it together, they must have a well developed feminine side. As a psychologist I talk about this, and that's really what the men learn, what men have to do, Torah study, the woman must give the man the opportunity for that, she doesn't have to, because she is it already, she is the outside already, so men have to develop the outside, those oral traditions...

Rachel also claimed women's interest in the Torah was different to that of men:

Yes, we believe that man by his nature is much more attracted by this you know, this logical side of learning, and lets say women who are more intuitive, you know, who have more feeling, they are more interested in general knowledge and philosophy, and other parts of the Torah...

In her ethnographical study of Haredi women from the Gur community in Bene Barak in Jerusalem, Tamar El-Or (1994) argues the educational system for women is wholly geared towards keeping these traditionalist Jewish women 'ignorant', in order to maintain the status quo and keep men in charge of the reproduction of religious tradition. Consistent with the rabbinic opinions and some of my informants' views, and El-Or's observations in some study groups for women on subjects such as law, the Book of Psalms, etc., the women at Bene Barak are educated into attaining 'practical' knowledge, directed towards action rather than thought on how to behave and perform as the ideal wife and mother. Men who belong to the 'learning society' on the other hand, and study

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the Gemara, represent 'the source of literate and social power in the haredi world' (201). El-Or uses Samuel Heilman's sociological description of a Gemara class for men, in order illustrate the fundamental differences between men's *lernen* and women's formal religious education<sup>41</sup>. A group discussion follows interpretation, which in it self is described as the sociological event of interest (108):

During the discussion, the knowledge of the participants comes into play, as does their familiarity with the material being studied, their worldview, and their understanding of their Jewishness. The social reality is clarified during their discussion; doubts are expressed, and refined. The study room invokes a far-off historical reality that is connected with the reality of today. There are differences among the participants, the same differences raised thousands of years before in other places. In these classes, contradictions are resolved, as they have been resolved millions of other times. This social repetition of fundamental personal differences is the heart of the study process. It is the *lernen*.

El-Or furthermore cites sociologists like Heilman who have argued that *lernen* is a phenomenon that should be understood as 'making Judaism'. Whilst 'learning' can be understood as a process of study to attain a certain piece of knowledge, '*lernen*' is study for the sake of study, and concerns a reproduction of culture (132-133). Through discussion, social reality is constructed and culture is reproduced. The act of study for men does not need to be justified; it is 'the pinnacle of Jewish existence' (109).

Not so for women. In the classes El-Or was participant observer, no real discussions took place: 'The high point of the lesson is not the social reality, reconfirmed by group discussions. Instead, it is the interpretation, preaching and *ex cathedra* reproof of the teacher that confirm the social reality' (109). The curriculum for women and the way in which they are taught, does nothing more than 'culturally describe and reproduce' their gender status and the social reality in which they perform their accompanying role. The paradox according to El-Or is that contemporary Haredi women are thus educated, through literacy, in such a way as to culturally resemble a non-literate group, the 'duplication of the Jewish mother's home in Poland' (89). What was once learned at home and passed on informally by their mothers, became institutionalised education some eighty years ago due to the socio- and political transformations in surrounding modernising society, and remains all the more necessary in facing the challenges of the contemporary world.

Alyse Fisher Roller (1999)<sup>42</sup>, critiques El-Or's interpretation of these Haredi women being 'educated in ignorance'. Roller claims that one of the reasons El-Or, - despite her careful observations - has drawn the wrong conclusions, has to do with her failure to understand Torah study from the

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'native point of view'. Firstly, according to Roller's interpretation of El-Or's observations, contemporary strictly Orthodox Jewish women are faced with the dilemma of excusing themselves from their primary mitzvah, which is their mothering and housekeeping activity, in order to perform the act of Torah study that for them is merely secondary. The women feel relieved that they then study Torah that is concrete and applicable to their daily lives, which partly justifies their momentary absence from the home. Roller (1999: 47) notes that the difference between 'Torah study [as] a means for understanding how to act according to the Torah's commandments, and a goal in itself because it is a Torah commandment' is crucial here. El-Or would then be misinterpreting that strictly Orthodox women study in order to understand that they should not study – that they are educated to become ignorant -, but rather 'that they should study in order to understand that the deed, the action, in Judaism is always primary'. At this point it seems that Roller's critique is merely focussed on El-Or's framing of the mothering role as one of plain ignorance. Roller appears to be underlining the meaning of *all* mitzvot for *both* men and women as forms of religious practice, a point that El-Or perhaps fails to emphasise.

Roller continues with what she sees as a profound misinterpretation in El-Or's observation that the women in a particular study session (reviewing the laws of the Sabbath) seemed to approach a theoretical argument from a practical standpoint, an indication that they may lack the ability to think in abstract terms. Roller claims that here El-Or from her academic background, does not see that in fact 'Judaism deconstructs the dichotomous tension between the abstract and the concrete, between the theoretical and the practical', which are both 'different shades of the same unified reality, which is informed by Torah/truth, a reality that then informs human constructions of knowledge and action' (49). Roller then refers to a later article by El-Or (1997), in which El-Or reports on the reactions of an audience of other strictly Orthodox Jewish women to her description of a debate that took place in one of the women's study sections, as described in her former ethnography. Here Roller sees El-Or's interpretation as closer to what would be the correct understanding of Torah study from strictly Orthodox Jewish women's standpoint or the native point of view, when El-Or admits for instance that the women's 'discussion that ensued in that example presents the halakhic way of thinking as a manipulation, as a juggling of "truth"'. However, according to Roller, El-Or then makes the mistake of applying a Foucauldian-informed gender studies perspective, by asserting that the women in the study group were critically reading, and resisting 'male defined constructs', as part of the movement to 'negotiate men's literacy.'

Roller on the other hand, claims that the critical or resistant tone that was displayed could not be explained by an analogy to feminist literary resistance, but rather by an analogy to the male Jewish learning that surrounds the women through the men and boys in their lives (50): 'The whole thrust of Jewish knowledge constructions is based on resistance. This is what fills the

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Talmud.' In Roller's viewpoint these women were merely reproducing the type of resistant reading they experienced in their environment through their fathers, husbands, sons and teachers, they were simply 'learning like Jewish men.'

In my own interviews, obviously I could not go so far as to compare El-Or's observations and findings with the educational system for girls and women or informal women's study groups among members of the Machsike Hadass. Nor could I really find out more about the way in which girls and women of the Machsike Hadass actually learned, whether the educational system was entirely focussed towards the reproduction of their (future) role as mother and wife (El-Or), or whether the styles of learning themselves differed or were similar to those of men. Whatever the answer to that question might be, I believe that Roller's critique of El-Or's interpretation is to a great extent directed at the way the latter's feminist perspective and theoretical framework 'prevents' her from acknowledging the native viewpoint. Roller is critical of the way that El-Or cannot grasp the standpoint of the 'other' woman in terms of cultural difference', a problematic issue in feminist anthropology as discussed in chapters three and four.

What I could learn from my interviews was that the religious education that is given to girls in the Machsike Hadass community, does appear to be sophisticated, even though it may not cover the content or the learning styles open to boys and men. Firstly, the women I interviewed gave the impression that the education that they received when they were younger could not even compare with the sophistication of that for their daughters and granddaughters nowadays. Leonie for example, went to school in the period just after the war:

I was born in thirty-seven, and when I went to school there were very few Jewish children. You didn't have Jewish schools like now, which is very handy, those Jewish schools, I mean for integration it isn't so appropriate... But integrating into the world perhaps isn't so right, maybe it was appropriate in those days... So I always went to non-Jewish schools and after that I had Jewish classes, which wasn't so nice, because everyone went to ballet, tennis... I did as well, but less, because I had to go to Jewish classes. But in my youth... My daughters went to England, to the seminary, to Jewish teachers training college. I went there for a few days, to see what it was like there, and that is definitely a level higher you must know...

A few of my informants alluded to the fact that due to the high level of religious education, girls nowadays even knew *more* than boys, certainly in secular subjects, but sometimes even in the domain of religious law. In my interviews, possibly a different kind of paradox in the contemporary community surfaced, one in which girls knew more than boys, although it was not possible to find out how much of an issue this potential threat to gender ideology was. When I

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asked Miriam what she thought about the fact that girls nowadays study all kinds of things, in contrast to the old days, she answered positively:

Personally I find this very positive. Some parents I know are not very pleased because they find their daughters are perhaps too intellectually occupied, that they should be at home, they should be calmer... More important are the boundaries, that there are priorities, the home and the children, that is the real goal, work is only a side goal...

Esther (Satmar) could be viewed as one of these parents expressing the paradox girl's education offered:

Girls learn too much nowadays I think. There's a difference because girls don't have to study contrary to men. This isn't a law for girls. The problem is if you have to do something you don't want to do it. So a lot of girls study with much zeal and some know more than the boys. The boys have to study Talmud and sometimes the girl knows more in detail on for example Sabbath transgressions. When she knows more she may start to feel superior and this may give conflicts. Even though the woman is superior, the man is king of the house, if you have a king for a husband and if you treat him this way, then you are a queen, if she knows too much however... You and I know that she sometimes knows more, but the thing is not to show it, if you know what I mean... This is a good recipe in life, because no man likes to have a wife who's cleverer.

Interesting in Esther's claims, is that on the one hand she appeared to reproduce what seems to be the hegemonic viewpoint in a strictly traditionalist community, accompanied by personal observations on what perhaps were actual conflict situations growing from the paradox of girls' religious education. However, this was immediately rectified with a counter-discourse shared with me on the basis of gender. Esther had pleasure in confiding to me the 'truth' that women did sometimes know more or were cleverer than men, yet the trick was to let them continue believe in their own superiority. I believe Esther's statement here was one of the rare moments where some kind of 'resistance' towards male supremacy was discursively expressed and shared with me.

Rachel (Litvish) then again, was more positive on the education girls nowadays receive and told me what she experienced as a paradox because girls 'knew more' than boys, but then in the area of *secular* education. This she used in order to make clear what she saw as the 'superiority' of girls above boys, at least as far as their broader Jewish and secular education was concerned:

But we do study, it's not an obligation, but we study, and I would say today we're growing up in a society where the girls are studying very much, much more I would say than thirty, forty years ago, and when

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girls now... Let's say girls from our community, they want to marry, we're coming to a certain paradox where the girls know more than the... Even though boys are sitting in the yeshiva, and they are studying the whole day, girls are brought up with the secular education, but I would say with a very broad Jewish education, and I wouldn't say the girls are not at all in an inferior position, on the contrary... I would say that they are more mature, in certain things, even much more developed than the boys, because the boys have been closed into their yeshiva circle. My daughter as an example, she studied to the age of eighteen, we sent her off to Israel for one year, it was a very intensive course in Jewish education in Jerusalem, she came back here and she's been teaching here for three years, so she knows an enormous lot. She's been working, she's very mature, so I would say on the contrary, I wouldn't see her... I see her as superior to the boys...

Rachel considered girls more mature, more of the world than young men:

Girls seem more mature because they are more... Many of them tend to work and to assume responsibilities whilst the boys are staying more in the yeshiva and studying the whole day, so automatically a girl who is confronted with problems and, I'll give you an example, my daughter has a class of thirty girls and they are... That's thirty different worlds, and each child has his own problems and you confront the problems and you have to know how to overcome them, have good communication, you have difficult children, how do you cope with them... This automatically brings on maturity...

C: would you say more social skills?

Social skills, I would say more maturity mainly because they are more responsible and she's earning and automatically you look at things differently, when you are secluded, you know, from the difficulties of life and you know who's just sitting studying, he doesn't have many difficulties, I mean he's studying and he concentrates on... I don't say, it's not an easy thing, but he has to concentrate mainly on his world of study whilst the girls are confronted more with daily problems of life.

Hasidic rebbe Hannah then again was more critical over education for girls, when I asked her opinions on the changes that had taken place:

There's no question that this has changed, but are they better girls than their parents and grandparents? My grandmother didn't study, but she was very wise. She learned herself a lot, she read a lot and she knew a lot like stories and common sense. She passed on her knowledge orally. Mind you there has never been much illiteracy amongst Jewish women. Women learned their prayers by heart. My mother did learn to read, but

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not at school. But the development cannot be turned back, nowadays you must give girls an education. The world has become so open, she has to have some immunity, she has to know the right approach to a problem. For example she must know about going to the moon, and learn this from secular subjects, and about the media, although we try to keep this at a distance. I think slowly but surely people have started seeing what damage the media has done in general, especially in the U.S. It is a shame because TV could have been very educational.

C: Like internet?

Yes, it could be educational, but there is much damage.

I also asked Hannah whether she thought sometimes problems did arise between young women and their husbands because girls had enjoyed more secular education and other skills. Hannah assured me this was not a dominant pattern:

If a girl has the right approach this shouldn't be a problem. You must know that girls don't even learn a fraction of what the boys learn. A grandchild of mine who is thirteen-and-a-half, and goes to yeshiva, he is studying from six-fifteen in the morning until ten-fifteen at night, with three breaks in between. This is a very, very deep kind of learning, which the girls do not do. Maybe they are not the same subjects, but if a girl understands she will not feel superior, it is only a slight part of what the boys learn. If she is over self-confident she might feel superior, but it is far from it. I admit that there are sometimes are problems, but there shouldn't be, it's not justified.

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<sup>1</sup> Kaufman does not include any references here.

<sup>2</sup> See chapter three for this type of methodological critique of androcentric scholarship.

<sup>3</sup> For 'postmodern' feminist critiques of Gilligan, see chapter four under 4. Beyond the God-Trick: Postmodern Feminist Anthropology and the non-Religious Viewpoint: *From the 'View from Nowhere' to 'Views from Somewhere': Feminism Critically Appropriates Postmodernism*.

<sup>4</sup> 'Hear O Israel,' a central prayer of Judaism, consisting of three biblical paragraphs. It is considered the basic statement of faith, accepting the sovereignty of God (Glossary in Grossman and Haut 1992).

<sup>5</sup> The horn of an animal, usually a ram, sounded on Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) (Glossary in Kaufman 1995 [1993]).

<sup>6</sup> See chapter three.

<sup>7</sup> Binah can be translated as 'understanding, discernment, insight or perception' according to Kaufman (Glossary 1995 [1993]).

<sup>8</sup> Literally, 'received', or 'received lore'. The term is used for the esoteric teachings and mystical lore of Jewish tradition (Glossary in Kaufman 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Some of the writers who have contributed articles to the Chabad website, like Rivkah Slonim, who has written extensively on the mikvah (ritual bath), are read extensively by many Hasidic groups beyond the Lubavitcher Hasidim.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

<sup>10</sup> In my article using Pinxten and Verstraete's (2002) model of identity, I argue that for the ba'alot teshuvah in Kaufman and Davidman's studies, individual gender identity is paramount and imbued with cultural and religious meanings. For the strictly Orthodox Jewish women in my own case study however, I argue that ethnic/religious identification appears to be more relevant than gender (see also chapter eight), and is more a question of roles and practice, determined by the dimension of sociality in Pinxten and Verstraete's model (Longman 2002).

<sup>11</sup> See chapter eight for more on my own interviewees' perception of feminism.

<sup>12</sup> According to Fackenheim (1999: 130) the inclusion of belief as among the commandments by Maimonides can be attributed to the fact that he was 'probably provoked by medieval controversies, with Christianity, Islam or both.'

<sup>13</sup> 'I am the Lord your God who brought you from out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage', according to Gordis (1990: 60) deals with the fundamentals of faith: that there is only one God to be worshipped and obeyed, the liberator from bondage and oppression, thus to be identified with justice and freedom: 'The First Commandment enjoins loyalty to one God, who is identified in the cause of justice and, by implication at least holds universal sway.'

<sup>14</sup> The Mishnah was edited by Rabbi Jehuda ha-Nassi (135-217) in Israel. Two different Gemaras developed following the diverse schools in and outside of Israel. The Mishnah together with the Jerusalem Gemara was completed in Tiberias around 380 and is called the Jerusalem Talmud (JT) (written in Hebrew and Eastern-Aramaic). The second Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud (BT) is more extensive, consisting of the Mishnah and the Babylonian Gemara and was completed around 500 (written in West-Aramaic) (Klener 1992: 16-17). The Oral Law included the Tosefta, which is largely legal in nature, and the Midrash, a vast literature, primarily Aggadic in content (Gordis 1990: 62).

<sup>15</sup> The word 'Torah' is related to the verb to 'teach', and phonetically linked to the Hebrew verb to 'see' and to 'show'. Torah thus refers to notions such as 'revelation', 'education' and 'teachings.' 'Torah' was translated into Greek as 'nomos', which later became to be affiliated with a more legalistic meaning, far removed from its original meaning (Zuidema 1988: 26; Goldberg 1994: 107).

<sup>16</sup> 'Honour your father and your mother'; 'You shall not murder'; 'You shall not commit adultery'; 'You shall not steal'; 'You shall not bear false witness'; 'You shall not covet your neighbour's house...your neighbour's wife, his male or female slave, his ox or ass or anything that is your neighbours.'

<sup>17</sup> This interpretation obviously has its roots in Paul's message of freedom from the Law as central to the development of early Christianity.

<sup>18</sup> According to the Sages, the Torah begins with an act of hesed, loving-kindness, by providing clothing for Adam and Eve in Genesis, and closes with an act of hesed with God's burial of Moses in Deuteronomy (Kaufman 1995 [1993]: 10).

<sup>19</sup> *Rachmanut* (compassion) originates from the word '*rechem*' (spelled *resh chet mem*) meaning 'womb' (from: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/4581/heblang.html>).

<sup>20</sup> The biblical wave-offering (Glossary Kaufman 1995). According to Michael Kaufman (1995: 228), the counting of the Omer during the seven weeks between the second evening of Passover and Shavuot is a duty incumbent on Jewish men, but one from which women are excused as it is a time-dependent positive commandment in Maimonides' view. Nahmanides however, disagrees, maintaining it is a precept that is not time-dependent and is thus equally obligatory for women. For disagreements on other precepts, see further.

<sup>21</sup> Palm, one of the 'Four Species' held during part of the morning services during the Sukkot festival (Glossary Kaufman 1995).

<sup>22</sup> It should therefore come to no surprise that in contemporary liberal feminist critiques of Judaism, the rule of exemption and women's exclusion from these paradigmatic ritual practices, is often taken to be one of the root causes of women's inferiority in Judaism, see chapter five.

<sup>23</sup> Haut (1992: 91) distinguishes between tefillah – the Hebrew word for 'prayer' – in a broad sense connoting prayer in its general meaning, and secondly in its narrow sense as used in referral to the paradigmatic prayer called the *Shemoneh Esreh*, or eighteen benedictions.

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<sup>24</sup> Lit. 'doorpost'. The small parchment scroll enclosed in a case attached to doorposts of Jewish homes. On the scroll are written verses from the Bible which set forth the commandment (Glossary in Heschel 1995).

<sup>25</sup> The Sabbath and festival 'sanctification' ritual, usually conducted over wine (Glossary in Kaufman 1995).

<sup>26</sup> See chapter eight for more on the 'woman's mitzvah' of ritual purification in the mikvah.

<sup>27</sup> Also spelled Minha, Mincha, or Minchah, Hebrew *Minḥa* ('offering'), in Judaism, the second of three periods of daily prayer. Minchah prayers are offered in the afternoon; to facilitate attendance at the synagogue, the afternoon service is often scheduled so that the evening prayers (maarib; Hebrew: ma'ariv) can follow as soon as night has fallen. The morning period of daily prayer is known as shaharith (Hebrew: shaharit) (Encyclopaedia Britannica, www.britannica.com).

<sup>28</sup> Greenberg (1998: 93) notes the three Hebrew terms used to refer to 'synagogue', bet midrash (house of study); bet tefilah (house of prayer) and bet kneset (house of gathering), the latter showing the importance of the synagogue as a place of both religious practice and the central orientation point of the Orthodox community.

<sup>29</sup> See also chapter five under 1. Jewish Feminists and Feminist Jewish Studies: *Sameness or Difference: Across Denominational Divides*. In the early seventies in the U.S. Jewish women wanting to expand their possibilities for female religious ritual participation reclaimed the 'lost women's holiday' of Rosh Hodesh, the new moon holiday in the liturgical cycle of religious of Jewish holidays. Jewish women's groups were founded, some study groups and others prayer groups, meeting on the new moon, monthly on the Sabbath or on a weekday night. According to Joseph (1995: 51) some of these groups are explicitly feminist, focussing on new patters of ritual, others copy male forms of study or prayer. Initially, the first prayer groups consisted of halakhic observant Orthodox women who felt the most excluded and in need of separate forms of ritual practices (such as the Women's Tefillah Network). Even Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative congregations and even secular Jewish women in the U.S. who do have access to all formally male defined and controlled rituals are often involved in women-only prayer groups. Rosh Hodesh groups for women were introduced to the U.K. from the U.S. since the late eighties and according to Shalvi (1995: 234-235) have grown and in 1992 many of these groups held a Shabbaton, 'with full prayer and Torah reading, expertly conducted by the women, who omitted those "sacred sayings" (*devarim she'be'kedusha*) for which a minyan (prayer quorum) is required.' In the U.K. where the religious Jewish community and institutional framework is less pluralistic than the U.S., in 1993 a traditional Rosh Hodesh group joined with the Reform Movement women's group to establish a Jewish Women's Network.

<sup>30</sup> A portion from the Books of Prophets (Joshua through Malakhai, according to the canon of Hebrew Scripture) chanted during Sabbath and holiday services after the Torah reading (Glossary Grossman and Haut 1992).

<sup>31</sup> See chapter eight for more on the rules of modesty.

<sup>32</sup> Another parameter which must be taken into account is the fact that most of my respondents did not have children at home anymore and therefore were at a stage in life in which they had more free time from household duties in order to – theoretically – participate more in time-bound mitzvot.

<sup>33</sup> Jacob Neusner, 'Introduction', in: J. Neusner (ed.), *Understanding Rabbinic Judaism: From Talmudic to Modern Times*, New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1974, p. 9, 19.

<sup>34</sup> According to Fackenheim (1999: 158) the question of which is more important, the study of Torah or the 'doing' of Torah, deeds, is much debated in rabbinic texts and 'answered in characteristic rabbinic fashion: It is the study of Torah that is greater – but only because it leads to the doing of it!'

<sup>35</sup> Like Jacob Neusner above, Zuidema also takes the normative Jew to be as male.

<sup>36</sup> Brayer, Menachem M., *The Jewish Woman in Rabbinic Literature: A Psychohistorical Perspective*, Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1986: 2: 172.

<sup>37</sup> The gendered consequences of secularisation and modernisation were therefore notably different in Eastern Europe compared to the West, where the influence of the 'middle-class cult of domesticity' was far-reaching in the emergence of a kind of religious domesticity in the private sphere of the home and 'embodied' by many Jewish women in the West (see chapter two and Hyman 1995).

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<sup>38</sup> Although women may not hold official public roles or positions within traditional Judaism, only they, by virtue of their sex and child bearing capacity, can ensure the continuation of physical Jewish identity. Despite the overtly male-dominated character of Judaism, according to halakhah, besides the somewhat rare practice of conversion, it is only the mother and not the father, who determines her child is a Jew.

<sup>39</sup> In: *Likute Halakhot*, Sotah 20a, p.11a.

<sup>40</sup> Goodblatt, David (1977). 'The Beruriah Traditions', in: William Scott Green (ed.), *Persons and Institutions in Early Rabbinic Judaism*, Missoula MT: Scholars Press, p. 221.

<sup>41</sup> El-Or refers to the following studies by Heilman, S.C. (1976), *Synagogue Life*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, Heilman (1983), *The People of the Book*, Chicago: Chicago University Press and Heilman (1984), *The Gate Behind the Wall*, New York: Summit Books.

<sup>42</sup> Alyse Fisher Roller's study *The Literary Imagination of Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Women: An Assessment of a Writing Community* (1999), is not discussed in chapter five among the ethnographic studies of strictly Orthodox Jewish women as it concerns a literary analysis. However, Roller's approach in terms of a feminist analysis is utmost interesting in that she is highly critical of studies that portray strictly Orthodox Jewish women as subordinated or as in this example 'ignorant'. Through an analysis of different types of literature by strictly Orthodox Jewish women including personal narratives, anthologies, holocaust testimonials, self-help literature and fiction, Roller argues that this literature allows for an insight into their lives 'from the native point of view'. Roller (1999: 4-6) defends the theses that opposed to portraying these women as 'other', their literature 'provides a valid, untapped primary source for hearing them talk in their own voices'. Secondly, Fisher argues that their literature is 'reactionary' in that it offers a response to liberal feminist and Jewish feminist ideals while 'nominally denouncing feminism'. Thirdly, Fisher notes a difference between the literature by the ba'alot teshuvah and frum-born women. Where's the former is aligned with 'post-modern, feminist, self-reflecting narrative styles, the latter aligns with traditional, masculine, universalising narrative styles'.

**CHAPTER EIGHT**  
**THE DIFFERENTIATED SUBJECT IN CONTEXT:**  
**BETWEEN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC IN THE POLITICS OF**  
**RELIGIOUS IDENTITY**

In this second chapter on the discursive construction of 'religion' by strictly Orthodox Jewish women affiliated with the Machsike Hadass congregation in Antwerp, I will predominantly be illustrating my second main argument in accounting for the androcentrism of mainstream religious studies. The preceding chapter mostly dealt with the consequences of limiting one's focus to religious 'scriptures and elites', first by the characterisation of strictly Orthodox Jewish religious tradition as one of first and foremost religious practice. The gendered regulation of this practice, embodied in the mitzvot as determined by Jewish law (halakhah), formally bars women from the paradigmatic central public religious institutional sphere through the principle of exemption, which in practice has often led to a situation of effective exclusion. Two paradigmatic forms of male religious practice, liturgy – prayer – and Torah study then illustrated this empirically, and were both placed in their concrete historical socio-political contexts.

Here, the second main hypothesis on the study of religion and gender will similarly be illustrated by empirical material and relevant secondary literature. In an attempt to disclaim *sui generis* religion as a decontextualised phenomenon, in what follows, I will be focussing on precisely the social and the political content, and 'power' in a broad meaning as integral to religion as studied from the perspective of gender. This implies a shift in the object of study from 'scriptures and elites', by looking at those areas which are often absent, peripheral or even considered irrelevant in the mainstream, ungendered representation of religious traditions such as strictly Orthodox Judaism. Rather than looking at the kinds of religious activity the women I interviewed were excluded from, I will be analysing some of the instances of what my interviewees claimed were the most important religious forms of activity for the (married) women in their community and tradition. This involves both their 'official' religious role, as well as the realms which are more difficult to strictly identify as religious, thus deconstructing boundaries between 'religion and politics', the 'public and the private' and the religious from 'everyday life' all-together. A selection is made, concentrating on three important topics, including the notion of woman as 'enabler', the family purity laws, and the ethic of *tzniut* or 'modesty'. Towards the end of the chapter, I will be moving from the ethnographic level of a particular locality to an analytical and comparative level concerning the relationship between gender and religious traditionalism, or fundamentalism, in a global context. This discussion will be partly continued in the general conclusion.

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**1. 'Behind Every Great Man...' The Priestess of the Miniature Temple**

*The Jewish woman is the soul and inspiration of the Jewish home. Through building this home she achieves her ultimate Jewish self-definition, and the stamp she leaves on the home expresses her own uniqueness and individuality.*

Moshe Meiselman (1978: 18)

In feminist critiques of Judaism as a patriarchal religion, the issue of 'exemption as exclusion' from religious activity has also been critiqued for one possible interpretation, in that women would remain observant through their husbands' performance of mitzvot *for them*, which is most evident in the institution of marriage. Women are discussed most extensively in the context of marriage in the Torah, conceived of as a religious act and regulated according to halakhah. Within marriage, the wife can maintain her mitzvot *through* her husband, by complying with her primary role as a wife and mother (Cornille 1994: 23). In some of the most androcentric interpretations of the rule of exemption, women are exempt in order to be available to the needs of their husbands, to whom they must be wholly devoted and subservient. Sue Jackson (1997: 131) cites an explanation by a fourteenth century commentator from Spain:

The reason women are exempt from time-bound mitzvot is that a woman is bound to her husband to fulfill his needs. Were she obligated in time-bound positive mitzvot, it would happen that while she is performing a mitzvah, her husband would order her to do his commandment. If she would perform the commandment of the Creator and leave aside his commandment, woe to her from the husband! If she does her husband's commandment and leave aside the Creator's, woe to her from the Maker! Therefore, the Creator has exempted her from his commandments, so that she may have peace with her husband (David ben Joseph Abudurham).

Again the male Jew appears as the normative religious subject, the woman as an 'other', her role being limited to what Susannah Heschel (1995 [1983]: 4) calls a mere 'facilitator' for husbands and sons. Women's physical labour in the domestic domain allows men to concentrate on more 'spiritual' activities, such as prayer, ritual and study. Opposed to these feminist critiques of religious gender ideologies that place women in a position of exclusion and subordination in the religious sphere, is the normative traditionalist Orthodox Jewish view of different gender roles. As I have shown, this sees men and

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women in terms of their roles, considered 'different', yet of 'equal religious worth'. This view was shared by the strictly Orthodox Jewish women I interviewed, in that woman's role as a mother and housewife in the domestic sphere is not seen as exterior to religious activity, but as a mitzvah *in itself*. As Susan saw it for example, women were not excluded, yet exempt from certain of men's mitzvot, in order to perform their own mitzvot, those connected to their domestic and mothering role:

Take the analogy of an army, everybody in the army has his own job: 'For want of a nail the horse was lost', I don't know if you know that poem, 'for want of a nail, the shoe fell off the horse...' So everybody does his job, is what counts, and all of us are responsible for everybody else, as well as for ourselves. So to say that one is more important than the other, is very... is not correct. We may have a feeling which mitzvah is more important, which less, but it may absolutely be not true, we are taught that we must be just as meticulous in our observing of mitzvot which we feel that are more or less important...

Orthodox Jewish feminist Blu Greenberg (1990: 2-3) speaks of a tension in the Torah between on the one hand a notion of male and female as 'biologically and sexually distinctive, yet having the same godly attributes and strengths'. A second paradigm on the other hand, gives a derivative definition of femaleness. The two paradigms are expressed most poignantly in the Creation story, presenting two different versions of the construction of gender (Young 1993: 2-3). The oldest, the second version Genesis 2:4b-3:24 was compiled during a more stable period of the kingdom of Israel, approximately around 850 B.C.E., and emphasises the creation of human beings. The first version, Genesis 1:1-2:4a dates from c. 400 B.C.E., after the loss of kingdom and Babylonian exile, emphasising creation itself, and the creation of humans only until the sixth day. Thus the first (Gen. 1:27) 'And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them' is mostly interpreted as referring to the equality of man and woman, created together and equally in the image of God. Adam and Eve are created simultaneously and equal, both are given dominion over all other creatures and there is no mention of the concepts Eden or the Fall.

In Gen. 2, however, 'man' (Adam) alone was created and placed in the Garden of Eden upon which God decides (Gen. 2:18): 'It is not that the man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him'. God then removes of Adam's ribs and with this, He forms a woman. Adam reacts (Gen. 2: 23): 'This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman (*ishah*), because she was taken out of Man (*ish*)'. The episodes that follow have often been emphasised as illustrative and constitutive of women's subordinate status to men in society. Eve is seduced by the serpent to eat from the tree of knowledge in order to become wise, in turn convincing Adam to eat from the

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forbidden fruits. Cornille (1994: 22) attributes the idea of how woman is seen as the seducer and the root of all evil and sin to this passage. Greenberg (1990: 3) by contrast, notes that even within this version of the story itself ‘we witness a “dialectic” in the definition of women as equal or conversely inferior<sup>1</sup>:

Is Eve, the mother of all human life, a temptress, progenitor of disobedience, and source of human downfall – as a surface reading would indicate? Or is she ‘more appealing than her husband... the more intelligent one, the more aggressive one... By contrast the man is a silent and bland recipient... not a decision-maker... follows his wife without question or comment, thereby denying his own individuality’.<sup>2</sup>

Greenberg (3) similarly asks how ‘the single most romantic verse in the Bible’, the one that immediately follows the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib in the same version of the creation story (Gen. 2: 24): ‘Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and cling to his wife, and they shall be as one flesh’, should be read. Do questions of gender and hierarchy not merely deflect our attention to what could be seen as the real issues, such as ‘intimacy, romance, sexuality, procreation and eternal love?’

God’s punishments for Adam and Eve nonetheless attest to the central ideology of both sexual difference and gender role differentiation (Gen. 3:16): ‘Unto the woman He said: I will greatly multiply thy pain and thy travail; in pain thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee’. Again, interpretation is possible in terms of women’s subordination to men, yet Greenberg (1990: 4) points to the ‘desire’, or what she translates as the ‘hunger’ of the wife towards the husband. This possibly alludes to ‘a magnificent contribution of Judaism - the affirmation of women’s sexual passions to be accounted for in a relationship’.<sup>3</sup> Greenberg maintains that this kind of dialectic appears in the very first definitions of gender in Judaism, and continues in the sources, from Bible to Talmud, commentaries and philosophy, to modern-day halakhic decisions (4): ‘Always there exist two poles of thought vis-à-vis women – as distinctive, special, and equal on the one hand, as subordinate and inferior on the other. A times one definition surfaces, at times the other.’

Opposed to what Orthodox Jewish feminist like Greenberg interprets as both negative and positive attitudes towards women within authoritative religious discourse, the women I interviewed seemed to do more than merely reproduce the forms of hegemonic strictly Orthodox discourse on gender, which promotes equality through gender. Besides the more positive or even celebratory attitudes towards, and constructions of femininity, many of my informants even interpreted what is conceived of as deeply androcentric or almost misogynous in the most moderate to the most radical feminist point of view, as instances of women’s *agency* rather than their subordination.

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That the creation stories are often taken as foundational in what is viewed as gender role ideology in strictly Orthodox Jewish society, is illustrated by the way in which the notion of woman as *ezer kenegdo* or a ‘helpmeet’ for a man, features in the Talmud, and in the traditionalist religious discourse that was applied by some of the women I interviewed. Orthodox Jewish scholar Michael Kaufman (1995 [1993]: 11-12) attempts a ‘dialectic’ of his own in his interpretation of the meaning of helpmeet. Adam is conceived of as an originally single androgynous being, and then separated into both female and male entities, as God declares the single state incomplete. A helpmeet is then created for ‘him’, which Kaufman understands as the existential explanation for the institution of marriage. Only a married couple can ‘re-create the original unity’. In the previous chapter, I noted how my interviewees made the same emphasis on the complementary roles of husband and wife within marriage. Sarah expresses the same opinion:

So we believe that Ha-Shem<sup>4</sup> created them to complete each other and to create a harmony and only by the differences of their nature and set up and roles, that brings the harmony. It says in our sources that an unmarried person is like half a person, and that makes the harmony, that they complete each other and live to each other, and each one does his own job and that’s how, we believe that they are created quite different...

In the passage under discussion, Kaufman interprets ‘helpmeet’ as neither male, nor female. Pnina Navè Levinson (1990: 47) similarly points to the Hebrew male noun *ezer*, which is used in the second creation story, and to be translated as ‘help.’ According to Levinson, the same word is furthermore used of God (Psalms 121:1,2), therefore carrying an expression of strength rather than second-class existence. *Ezer* does refer to the woman in both later Talmudic and Orthodox interpretations though, and some of the women I interviewed also literally referred to the woman’s role as that of a ‘help’ to her husband. Like rebbetsin Hannah:

The task of a woman is actually to be a help for her husband, she has to be ready, be free for him, ‘ezer’, a help for him. Secondly, she has to educate her children. She is free of certain mitzvot which are bound to time, a mother cannot start praying at a certain time when her children need her, her children then come first.

Rebbetsin Liddy also drew on the idea of woman, as a helpmeet for the man, but interesting was the way in which she interpreted what would seem the inferior position according to the Creation story:

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Why does one say 'l'asile le plus sûr est le coeur de la mère', the most certain safety haven is the heart of the mother? And there is another saying which says: 'perdre un père, c'est perdre beaucoup, mais perdre une mère, c'est perdre tout.' Now, you can see, a man all alone, that's very awkward, women get along much better by themselves. What is the reason for this? In the Creation story it is written, God first created the man and afterwards, he saw that isn't any good, the man by himself, he needs a help at his side, and he created the woman... from the man. So our 'raison d'être' is to help the man develop himself.

Later in his book, Michael Kaufman (1995: 38) does equate *ezer kenegdo* as the Jewish women's position, which he directly links to their specific role as *enabler*. This is first expressed in the mitzvah of 'being fruitful and multiplying', which is halakhically only incumbent on men. Whereas according to Jewish law the woman is exempt from the commandment of marriage and procreation, by marrying she *enables* her husband to procreate. In a similar manner, the exemption for women studying the Torah can indirectly be 'compensated' by enabling their husbands to do so.

Rebbetsin Liddy told me how she had to end the confusion that existed among some women in her community as to the size of the 'reward' a wife receives by enabling her husband to study. In doing so, one can imagine, she elevated much of the pressure some husbands were under. According to Liddy, the women thought that if their husbands studied for three hours, they would similarly be rewarded for three hours for doing their job of seeing to domestic responsibilities and taking care of the children, so he need not worry about matters at home. During a lecture, the rebbetsin had to rectify the misunderstanding that wives received 180 minutes of reward against 180 minutes of study. If the husband does not perform his best, say is distracted by a friend, and ends up studying only 60 minutes of a three hour period, his wife still receives the three hour reward. For she has given him the *opportunity* to study for three hours. According to the rebbetsin:

It's not a question of proportion, you cannot learn in his place, you can only do everything possible, not ask him for help, give him the chance and all the circumstances to do so, make sure dinner is ready on time, so he cannot accuse you and say 'it's her fault... that's why I couldn't study'. No, she gives the chance and she is rewarded, because she is the one who went to all the trouble.

This information not only reassured the women, but also some of their husbands, who paid a special visit to the rabbi, thanking him for the rebbetsin's lecture with the accurate information. 'From that day on', Liddy told me, 'the men were allowed to go and study, the women didn't object, whether the men studied or not, that was their problem, they were given the chance and the

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women receive their reward'. The rebbetsin interpreted this anecdote as an example of the great justice of God, both in terms of individual responsibility towards God – everyone rewarded according to his or her effort -, and simultaneously within a social system of different, yet balanced gender roles. All my informants unanimously and repeatedly underlined this. They did not conceive themselves as in any way of less value or inferior to men. Everyone simply has his or her role to fulfil, which she/he must do to her/his best ability.

A number of women pointed to the importance of their role as mother and housewife as a kind of 'indirect' kind of agency in enabling their husbands to fulfil their mitzvot. Hannah for example:

It is a fifty-fifty reward. Not all men learn so well, but when she wants him to learn and gives him the possibility, she gets fifty percent of what she wants him to be, whether he fulfils this or not, she gets fifty percent of what she made him possible to do.

Kaufman (1995: 38) even goes beyond the fifty-fifty idea, by attributing the enabling act as *the* motivating, or causal factor in the study of Torah. He refers the Talmudic saying 'Greater is the one who causes a good deed to be performed than the one who actually does it'. In both this and in the women's own interpretations, the woman can be attributed a kind of indirect power to act religiously, 'empowering' the man to study through her own enabling activities in the domestic sphere. A wife also has the agency to prevent her husband from performing his mitzvot. According to Tina:

The woman is the support pillar of the home really, a woman who cannot keep to her mitzvot, then her husband can also not keep to the mitzvot, because he has to know, 'It's ok at home, I can eat when I come home', I don't have to ask: 'Where did you buy this or that meat, are you sure...' That causes tension, and he must know 'I have a wife, so that's all taken care of, I have nothing to do with that, she knows how to do it...'

C: And this is a religious commandment for the woman in itself?

Yes.

This dependency of the husband on his wife in order to be able to perform his mitzvot, and the religious 'capital' that women perhaps have in controlling it, was also expressed by Miriam:

A woman can put her foot between the door and prevent her husband from fulfilling a religious obligation. If she wants him to stay at home and help her with the children, then he cannot go off and study, if he has some heart he will stay with his wife. But if she says 'you can go, I'll manage', then he will. You must try and do everything so he can do

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what he must do and you can do what you must do, but not everyone is like that, everyone is only human. A woman is just a woman and if she say's 'no, my friend has a fur coat and I want one too', then he will have to work to be able to give her a fur coat.

Although the Halakhah defines women only in the way in which they relate to men, the women I interviewed were very much cognisant of the laws that seem to construct them as 'other', reducing them to subjects, such as expressed in the duties men have to perform towards their wives. Yet, they knew and interpreted these in terms of their 'rights' and how they could enforce them in actual practice. My respondents thus seemed to confirm their status as 'other', but did this through their own subjectivity and emphasis on agency. Many women referred to men's duty to 'love their wife as they love themselves, but honour her even more'. This is also understood in very material terms, such as making sure a wife receives a new dress for a holiday. While men and women are obligated to give to charity (*tzedakah*) for example, a woman can prevent her husband from donating money. For example by stating she needed the money for herself to buy jewellery so he couldn't give *tzedakah*; she was the one at home, 'waiting for his money.' According to Miriam:

Somewhere in the Bible it says: 'A bad wife is worse than death', but the Bible also emphasises the rights of the woman, the duties that the man has towards the wife. He must give her money, honour her... It is also said that for the honour of the wife a man should sell his own clothes to be able to honour her, he must love her as himself but honour her even more than himself. For example for a celebration, he must see to it that she has a new dress...

Many women literally referred to the 'power' of the woman in her task of seeing to the home enabling men to study. They were of the opinion that although women did not participate in mitzvot such as Torah study and public prayer, their 'mitzvot' of housekeeping and seeing to the 'practical' side of life, was a mitzvot in itself. Although women's religious agency is therefore less visible, it is seen as equal, or even more powerful than that of men. Or as Liddy told me: 'Behind every great man there is a great woman...' According to Sarah:

Women and men are equal in their value, but not in their roles. In the family and in the community and that's why our load is different... Obligations to men and women, keeping and looking after the respect for both of them... But our theory is that the family which is the part of the community, like in a kitchen when you have two, like in the office when you have two bosses, or on the boat when you have two captains, it does not... So the leadership, the spiritual and not the everyday

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practical leadership but the line of the culture, of the whole, is by the hand of the man, but the woman is the power behind who channels and who builds up the home, her power is more indirect. And there are many, many laws who make sure that's she's not inferior, she will have a ... have you heard of the Rambam? So he defines it clearly, I think. He brings the Talmud that says that 'love your wife as your body and look after her and respect her more than you do to yourself'. So this is the law, but the obligation of the woman is to follow her husband of course which includes giving him his food and looking after the home, so that he should be free to do his obligation, which are to provide the financial side of life... Or men who devote themselves to studying, to teaching like my husband, so this is an agreement, like I want him to do that, so I take upon me the art of the providing...

The act of enabling may be conceived of as a mitzvah or commandment in itself, and therefore as religious agency in its own terms. The fact that women are more occupied with the 'practical' rather than the spiritual, does pose some questions whether domesticity in itself is to be seen as a form of religious activity. Tirza for example, despite her insistence on the important role of women in Jewish religion, made a differentiation between domestic responsibilities on the one hand and religious responsibilities on the other:

The family forms the basis and it is the woman who fulfils her domestic duties and the man who has his religious duties and together this forms a whole, this goes together. So the role of the woman is very important, even if she does not step into the spotlights in the public world, but for us she is the guiding light, but she has another part, people only think that the man is the guiding light.

Women's role in providing, supporting and enabling at least does include the performance of activities which in themselves do not belong to the religious sphere, such as earning a living. Returning the Creation story once more, opposed to God's punishment towards Eve with the labour of childbirth for eating from the tree of knowledge, Adam was punished with the labour of producing food (Gen. 3: 17-19):

And to Adam He said: 'Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying: Thou shalt not eat of it; cursed is the ground for thy sake; in toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life. Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken; for dust thou art, and to dust shalt thou return'.

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Michael Kaufman (1995: 35-36) refers to this 'key passage' in emphasising the differences between women and men, and in arguing for the woman's dependence on the man. Women must labour to bring forth children, diminishing her physical abilities, and increased reliance upon the man. Men in turn are the breadwinners for their wives and children. This basic principle is also expressed in the institution of marriage in Judaism, which is regulated by halakhah. According to Cornille (1994: 33) the ritual of marriage was the only one in which women played any role at all: 'In the Talmud, particularly in the beginning and the end of the marriage, there are moments at which the woman managed to escape from the control of the man, surrounded by numerous laws'. Besides being a ritual and legal institution, marriage as *kiddushin*, meaning 'sanctification', is also conceived of as a spiritual union between woman and man. Legal and simultaneously 'ethical' principles are embodied in the *ketubah*, the Jewish marriage document. As it is the man who 'acquires' the wife – as he is one who is commanded to seek a wife –, he must write the *ketubah*, which contains the husband's obligations to his future wife and vice versa.

According to Maimonides's delineation of the mutual obligations between spouses embodied in the *ketubah*, a man assumes ten obligations toward his wife and 'acquires' four obligations from her (Kaufman 1995: 113). These ten obligations are mostly related to providing for her maintenance and protection. The four obligations of the wife to her husband, according to Kaufman are (114) 'designed only for the establishment of goodwill and to compensate her husband for some of his obligations towards her'. For example, the woman must 'relinquish the earnings from her labour'. Halakhically the woman does have the option of unilaterally abrogating the obligation to supply her husband with her earnings and become financially independent, opposed to the husband who does not have the right to abrogate his responsibility for her sustenance. Even if the woman chooses to be financially independent, she still has the right to support from her husband for expenses such as clothing, cosmetics, and personal needs.

It can be severely doubted whether many strictly Orthodox Jewish women do choose to become financially independent. The ideology of the man as the breadwinner and head of the house in financial matters was upheld by my all my informants, although both historically and in contemporary, strictly Orthodox Jewish communities, most women in fact do work outside of the home and contribute to the family's income. Historically in many traditional Jewish communities, women were economically active outside the home. Many even provided for all of the family's income, so that their husbands could devote themselves to Torah study (Cornille 1994; Hyman 1995).<sup>5</sup> In many families nowadays, women working outside of the home has become a pure financial necessity. Liddy told me why in practice many strictly Orthodox Jewish women work:

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It is true that to every rule there is an exception, so sometimes we do things that really belong to the man. We help in earning a living. Earning a living is really something that the man has to do, but because we want to let him study, not as something for myself, that wasn't my task, but then God gives me the strength to do this, but this does not take away that I must say 'voila, I do this...' No, I must know that a priori I must be a woman, and if I take something else on, then that must not be at the cost of my real 'raison d'être' on earth. So in that sense the woman has the spiritual strength to support her husband and help her husband rise, that is true piety, God trusts the Jewish woman tremendously...

Contrary to this practice and the long tradition of women working in enabling their husbands to study, the ideal wife remains at home and is in any case committed to her role as housewife and mother.

Orthodox Jewish women's peripheral, yet facilitating or enabling role can also be identified in the nature of their participation in the mitzvot of celebrating the 'festdays', which mark the religious rhythm of the Jewish calendar. According to Willem Zuidema (1988 [1977]: 112-113), the liturgical year is connected to nature and original agricultural celebrations – opposed to the Christian based calendar it is based on the moon cycle -, and the dates of the celebrations all have historical backgrounds or are associated with historical facts. Finally, the year is perceived to be religious in that it is seen as a 'gift of God', of being 'underway with God towards the future'.

The periodic celebrations include Pesach (Passover festival of eight days, including the Seder eve feast), Shavuot (Feast of Weeks), Rosh Hashanah (New Year, some time at the beginning of Autumn), Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), Sukkot (eight-day festival of booths in September-October), Hanukkah (Feast of Lights, eight-day midwinter celebration), and Purim (Spring). Both men and women are obliged to observe these festivals, apart from women being exempt from the time-bound mitzvot connected to these liturgical celebrations as explained in chapter seven. During these celebrations, which often involve family get-togethers, the practice of prayer and going to the synagogue is performed by men. Women mostly fulfil a domestic role of preparing the festivals, such as cooking and cleaning. It can be argued that their role during the festivals is often that of facilitator or enabler, at least compared to that of men. Women's domestic, enabling role is furthermore reflected in the weekly celebration of Sabbath. While the Sabbath starts on Friday evening before sunrise, housewives have already started cooking and cleaning on Friday or even Thursday, including the preparation of food for the following Sabbath meal and meals on the Saturday. When I asked Tina if men performed the 'religious' part of the festdays, she illustrated how role divisions were 'natural', like on the Sabbath:

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Going to the synagogue... it's the same again, for example the blessing over the wine at the dinner table, the prayer over the challes<sup>6</sup>... is done by the man, the cooking and the preparing... You sit as a family together at the table and the man sits at the head of the table, and he really leads... How do you say, there will be singing and readings... It's up to the father to say... It's not like 'sit here and now we're going to tell about the weekly parashah<sup>7</sup>', you know the Bible reading, I don't think so... enfin, maybe in other families, but probably not, it is father who just does this and he starts to sing a song or so...

C: He takes the initiative?

Yes, the initiative of the whole course of the celebration, and the wife sees, 'yes we have finished with the fish, let's bring the soup...' It's the man who... You don't really feel it, it's so automatic, that's just the way it is, it's not like I think 'now I would have liked to say something...' That the woman doesn't think 'Why can he always decide what we are going to do', or that he says 'I would have liked to prepare the fish...' It's just the way the roles are divided...

Even if in practice many women in strictly Orthodox Jewish communities work outside of the home – among my interviewees were women who assisted in their husband's business, others were occupied with their role as rebbetsin, and many others teachers at the community schools – the ideal of the man as primary breadwinner is upheld. At the same time, women's enabling domestic and mothering responsibilities in the private sphere are 'sacralised' in religious terms, and put on par, or even above men's religious obligations in the public sphere. One of my interviewees literally appropriated the saying 'my wife is my home' to show how it was women's responsibility to 'build the home', which she considered 'the centre of Jewish life'. The same kind of rhetoric is used by Orthodox Jewish scholar Michael Kaufman (1995: 19) on the importance of the family as 'the foundation for of Jewish life'. Moshe Meiselman (1978: 16) similarly presents an account of a kind of 'religious domesticity', claiming that it is the home rather than the synagogue, which is the centre of Jewish life:

The Jewish woman is the creator, molder, and guardian of the Jewish home. The family has always been the unit of Jewish existence, and while the man has always been the family's public representative, the woman has been its soul.

Many of my informants applied similar discourse, literally referring to the home as an 'institution', a 'fortress' or even the 'miniature temple', where the fundamental religious responsibility of women lies. Liddy for example, claimed the woman could be seen as the 'priestess of the home':

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...The two highest functionaries of the Jewish people are the king and the high priest. The king is the head of the people and the high priest is the spiritual leader of the people, the king also to some extent because he is the spiritual leader of the people and the high priest of the Holy Temple, that unfortunately was destroyed and the wailing wall remains... No one was allowed to do what he did, he was the only one allowed into the holiest place of the Holy Temple, and to the services of Yom Kippur, the King was never allowed there... [...] There are two, they are equal in greatness, but totally different... He is the head of the temple and he was the head of the people... The family of a Jew is the miniature temple and we must and this is obligatory... [...] The man builds the house and the woman the home, so the woman is the manager, the minister of interior affairs and the man the minister of foreign affairs... [...] They are both important, the man is the king of the home but the woman is the high priestess ... [...] You cannot have but one crown, and two kings, but if there are two crowns... Then there is no problem, everyone has their crown... The only thing you must watch out for, do not exchange the crowns...

Many of my interviewees also emphasised the fact that whereas men studied Torah, women were the ones who were responsible for the initial and practical religious education of the children. They were responsible for 'bringing up the next generation, and to be in the home, making a strong cosy secure place and the children and for the needy people...'. Women taught their children the fundamental basics of Jewish religion, in the sense that as a religion of practice, the mundane is sanctified. According to Sarah:

The studying is given more by the father, but teaching practically how to do things, how to eat, how to wear clothes, how to refrain from doing forbidden things on Shabbat... So a lot of this is given to the mother, a lot of customs, to do Shabbat and the festdays, is mainly the part of the woman.... How she prepares the home and the table and how she cooks, how she explains to the children, the meaning of many, many things that happen in the house and in life...

Rachel who is a teacher, emphasised the importance of this basic education:

I have so many pupils in school, as much as I try to instil to my pupils... If they are not going to get the real backing at home, I don't know if they will always have the moral strength to live up to all what they are being taught... ... I find that if the family doesn't live up to what the school is demanding, they are creating a big conflict with the child... So therefore religion begins at home and not in the school, the school can

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only perfect, let's say, elevate a bit what's been done at home, but there has to be the religious background of the family life...

Mothers take care of the basic but fundamental religious education, opposed to the father who according to halakhah is responsible for the more theoretical religious education, and sees to it that their boys study from the age of three. Mothers take care of the more practical education which is taught by way of 'positive example'. This concerns Sabbath observance right down to the way children must dress, and undress, which shoe to put on first and all aspects of living which take on a religious meaning. The mother is the one who provides the right 'atmosphere' and 'feeling' of religion. Perhaps in a less tangible, less explicit, and less easily 'representational' way, she contributes to the formation of religious practice and tradition.

Orthodox Jewish scholar Moshe Meiselman (1978: 17) also points to women's important role in 'communicating the fundamentals of Jewish belief and practice to her children'. Contrary to some of the feminist critiques on the separation between the physical and the spiritual in Judaism, Meiselman argues that homemaking involves more than providing for the family's physical needs: 'In a such a context, even the physical aspects of homemaking achieve a spiritual dimension' (ibid.). Alyse Fisher Roller (1999: 83), in her analysis of literature written by ultra-Orthodox Jewish women<sup>8</sup>, similarly points to the way in which 'giving' and 'caring' is sanctified, and 'personal domestic experience is seen as fertile ground for the religious woman to focus her divine service'. Roller (1999: 96-97) includes a poem by a widely read Hasidic ba'alat teshuvah (returnee), Sarah Shapiro, in her analysis. She hereby attempts to show how for the writer 'godliness combines commonplace activities with an awareness of the sanctity inherent in them':

Washing dishes, watching the dishes,  
not really seeing  
her hands wash the dishes, because  
it's always like this, and the sun  
lengthening along the floor.

One,  
two o'clock, and then she's done  
the laundry. Get the baby crying.  
Sweet baby.

Because.  
There is no because.

But one day the sun hits a frying pan in soapy water  
and she's holding a rainbow.  
The thought flashes through her like a lightning:

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“G-d’s creating light!” and she sees all this,  
the light the water her hands herself  
are miracles.<sup>9</sup>

### 2. Niddah: The Prototype of a Women’s Mitzvah?

In the previous discussions of women’s religious agency, the focus has been on ‘indirect’ forms of religious practice, including those which according to my strictly Orthodox Jewish interviewees are ‘sanctified’ to the extent of counting as mitzvot. Next to the official mitzvot from which women are exempt or excluded, however, and apart from the gender-neutral precepts, it must be noted that there in fact are three mitzvot, thus official religious obligations that are *exclusively* incumbent on married women. At least, so the impression is given in much of the secondary literature. These mitzvot are often referred to with ChaNaH,<sup>10</sup> an acronym for challah or *hallah* (taking of dough), *niddah* (laws of family purity)<sup>11</sup> and *hadlik ner* (lighting of Sabbath candles). A closer inspection of the secondary literature reveals, that even these three mitzvot do not appear to officially or halakhically exclusively apply to women, and perhaps through tradition have come to be interpreted as ‘women’s mitzvot’. Kaufman (1995: 212) for example, notes: ‘There are three commandments that, though they may be discharged by men, have primarily devolved on women, are mitzvot in which women take precedence over men.’

Therefore, even though two of the mitzvot centre on the celebration of the weekly Sabbath in the private, familial domestic sphere, whilst niddah is bound to women’s sexuality, the precepts as such appear to be halakhically open to both women and men. This again seems to confirm the ‘androcentrism of halakhah’. It also appears to support Jonathan Webber’s (1982) argument that the question of women’s experience or agency is utterly problematic from the halakhic point of view, in that women as such cannot be conceived of as a ‘halakhic category’ (see previous chapter). Niddah, according to Tamar Frankiel (1990: 72) and opposed to Kaufman’s statement, is in fact the only mitzvah which is unique to women. Although for strictly Orthodox Jewish women today the religious practice surrounding the laws of niddah is indeed perhaps the most important form of religious activity they perform and men do not, the laws in themselves, generally referred to as *taharat hamishpachah*, or the ‘family purity laws’, appear to be halakhically incumbent on all observant Jews. Almost consistent with the thesis of ‘women as enabler’, the woman must ensure that *through* her own correct ritual practice, the ‘family’ remains religiously observant.

In chapter five, paragraph two (Studying Strictly Orthodox Jewry), on the lack of ethnographical research on and representation of strictly Orthodox Jewish women in mainstream accounts, I showed how the topic of sexuality and religion was not featured to a great extent in contemporary research. If the topic

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is discussed, then this is usually conducted from a male-centred viewpoint, concerning both the ethnographic subject and writer himself. The same can be said for the laws and practices surrounding niddah, the menstruating woman, and broader, the theme of the ritual purity of the completely observant Jewish family. Whatever the reasons for the brief references, or altogether passing by of these laws in the mainstream literature, this in any case shows a remarkable contrast to some of the statements by the women I spoke to. They claimed that the laws of niddah were among, or even were *the* most important laws of all.

However, perhaps the negligence or reticence on the laws of family purity cannot only be ascribed to the fact that most of these traditional and more recent ethnographies have been conducted by and predominantly on men. The laws of niddah and any other issues concerning women and men's sexuality is a highly private subject in strictly Orthodox Jewish communities, let alone to be discussed with outsiders. For this reason, possibly combined with an commitment to principles of professional anthropological ethical – or perhaps especially feminist<sup>12</sup> – scrutiny, Israeli anthropologist Tamar El-Or (1994: 7) chooses to refrain from bringing up the topic in her ethnography of Hasidic Gur women and their status in religious education<sup>13</sup>:

During the course of the study I developed a strong antipathy to deliberately exposing private matters, such as the relations between wife and husband and between women and their bodies. Contrary to the prevalent image of anthropological work, and contrary to the expectations of my friends, colleagues, and family members, voyeurism was not my purpose. I was well aware that the material collected on my computer diskettes revealed a society and individuals for whom privacy was of utmost importance. As a result, I preferred to focus on social processes that are not centred on the individual.

Several remarks can be made regarding this citation. On the one hand, El-Or appears to be concerned with her informants' integrity, which would be compromised by exposing their views and practices surrounding sexuality. As far as we can infer, this concerns a subject her informants would not like to see in print. On the other hand, El-Or's conclusions in a feminist framework, and especially her word choice represented in the very title of the monograph *Educated and Ignorant* do not strike as particularly flattering, and one can imagine would be equally offensive for the women in question. This doubt is expressed by El-Or in her word of thanks in the last sentence of the preface (1994: x):

I have not expressed my thanks to the women I studied. I am aware that this book does not convey my gratitude in a way they would appreciate.

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Later, El-Or (1997) in fact did confront a public of Gur women with her findings – although not the same women she studied –, addressing the very ‘feminist dilemmas’ this particular type of research on ‘non-feminist women’ represents. On the other hand, and as touched upon in the final part of the previous chapter on the subject of women’s literacy, Alyse Fisher Roller (1999) reacts just as critical to the manner in which El-Or seems to denounce the extent of strictly Orthodox Jewish women’s agency and lack of representation from their standpoint or ‘native point of view’. However, leaving this particular kind of critique aside for now, I argue that the meaning of ‘privacy’ in relation to the laws surrounding sexuality rather – and similarly – needs to be explored rather than assumed. In the first place, and as argued from the reflexive point of view, we still need to remain aware of how our own assumptions on sexuality and gender influence our research. This is required inasmuch as both traditional and contemporary ethnographers’ preconceived cultural views on sexuality need to be taken into account.

Although strictly speaking sexuality and niddah can be viewed as highly private matters, surprisingly only one of my informants literally left it at this, refusing to discuss the topic at all. Others were very insistent – despite the importance of ‘privacy’ – on what they perceived to be the wholly different meanings of sexuality in their society, compared to that of the ‘outside world’. Susan’s statements on ‘washing our dirty or even clean linen in public’ in referring to outsiders’ ‘voyeurism’ can be reminded of here.<sup>14</sup> It was not so much problematic that the laws had been discussed in a documentary on national TV. Rather, it had been the subsequent disrespectful remarks by goyim<sup>15</sup> taxi drivers concerning women’s sexuality and menses that had caused the trouble. This was interpreted as damaging to the integrity of the whole Jewish community. I will later return to El-Or’s final remark on the subject, on sexuality being an *individual* matter rather than a social process.

### *Taharat hamishpachah: Historical Development and Cultural Diversity*

Etymologically, the roots of the Hebrew *niddah* (in general meaning ‘menstruating’, ‘menstruant’ or ‘the menstruating woman’) are *ndh*, meaning ‘separation’, connected to the root ‘*ndd*’, or ‘to make distant’ (Meacham (leBeit Yoreh) 1999: 23). As with all other halakhic laws, the fundamentals surrounding niddah are to be found in the Torah, appearing in what is called both the Priestly Code and the Holiness Code in biblical literature (Wasserfall 1999: 4; Cook 1999: 47). In the biblical period, most of the laws surrounding niddah and many other physical conditions applied to maintaining the purity of the Temple cult, at least until the second Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. The relevant chapter referring to niddah is Leviticus, divided into the two sections of the Priestly Code (chapters 8-15), and secondly the Holiness Code (chapters 18-27). The Priestly Code includes niddah among other ‘impure’ states such as

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childbirth, death, seminal emissions, unexplained genital discharges and skin diseases such as leprosy. The Holiness code on the other hand, deals with forbidden sexual relationships, keeping the Sabbath, not worshipping idols, offering sacrifices, not damaging the body, etc.

The main difference between the two codes is that in the Priestly Code 'purity' refers to states that are natural and do not imply violation. Holiness refers to those practices which are perceived as capable of being abided to or transgressed. The two categories are also differentially related to the question of morality. In the Priestly code, it is not a sin to be impure as such, as long as the correct rituals of purification associated with the physical conditions are observed. In the Holiness code, sin is about making the wrong choice. Leslie A. Cook (1999: 48) states that Leviticus as a whole defines the relationship between God, human beings, and nature, as embodied through both ethical and ritual practice: 'Holiness is essentially a moral category and a representation of similarity [to God]. Impurity, generally speaking, is not a moral category but is, rather, a representation of difference'.

In Leviticus chapter 15 several forms of genital discharge and their accompanying laws are treated, distinguishing between men's abnormal genital discharge (presumably gonorrhoea) (*zav*), seminal flow following or not following coitus (*baal queri*), women's menstrual flow (*niddah*) and uterine blood flow outside of menstruation (*zava*). Men and women with abnormal forms of discharge must count seven 'clean' days after the discharge has ceased; only men must then bathe in 'living waters' (a spring or running water), yet both must bring a sacrifice. Both forms of normal seminal discharge must be purified by bathing and waiting until sunset. Normal menstruation only includes a waiting period, yet those contaminated by a menstruating woman must bathe in order to become pure.

A number of scholars has suggested that the medical or 'scientific' paradigm underlying these biblical laws and subsequent Tannaitic sources, is one in which menstrual blood is understood as the female contribution to conception, as female 'seed' analogue to male seed. In this paradigm, while on a time scale women's entrance into the temple was more limited to that of men, an interpretation in terms of women's subordination and exclusion from the cultic sphere may be inaccurate. Together with the insight that a state of ritual impurity in itself was not sinful, it is possible that the rules were simply concerned with both the male and female pollution of 'seed' (Meacham 1999: 25). Blood symbolism was nonetheless particularly central in the ancient biblical Jewish tradition. According to Leonie J. Archer (1999) it was a means in which gender identity was constructed in terms of a hierarchical nature-culture model.<sup>16</sup> According to the Priestly code, predominantly male animals were selected for the more important sacrificial procedures, and female ones for minor sacrifices for which the sex of the offering was altogether irrelevant. In Archer's analysis, the rites involving blood that then survived the destruction of the Temple carried the same gendered hierarchical structure. Men's

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circumcision represented 'covenant', the 'culturally' manipulated spilling of blood as an act of inclusion within the religious community, opposed to women's 'natural' bleeding as a source of pollution and exclusion from the public religious sphere. Cook (1999: 50-52) by contrast – at least as far as the biblical period is concerned – argues against what she calls feminist interpretations, such as the association of male blood with purification (as in the ritual of circumcision), and that of women with contamination. In Cook's point of view, gender as such was not relevant in the Priestly literary system, but rather the context in which women's or men's blood was discharged. Thus in a particular ritual such as Yom Kippur, blood could be a means of purification, whereas in another context it could lead to a state of impurity.

In Leviticus 15, 18 and 20 prohibitions are formulated on sexual contacts between men and women, during the menstrual impurity of the latter. In the Holiness Code in Lev. 20:18, sexual intercourse with a *niddah* is even threatened with the punishment of *karet* (excision from the community). In contrast to the laws of the Priestly code, this prohibition does not refer to the Temple cult. In Lev. 20:21 the sin of adultery with the wife of one's brother is described using the word *niddah*, whilst in other parts of the Bible *niddah* is also used to describe abominable acts, objects, or status, including sexual sins and idolatry (Meacham 1999: 27). So on the one hand, *niddah* is viewed as a natural or even positive process, whereas in other parts of the Bible the term is associated with various forbidden acts and immorality. In any case, the biblical laws surrounding the (normal) menstruating woman were limited to a waiting period of seven days, with no particular purification rituals or sacrificial acts attached. Menstruating women were segregated and stayed in a separate house, where they ate alone.

Rabbis substantially reinterpreted the laws of *niddah* after the destruction of the Temple and its sacrificial cult, as evident in the Mishnah (192 C.E.). During the Tannaitic period (first century until middle of third century) of the compilation of the Mishnah, the distinction between the *zava* and the *niddah* was eliminated. The seven-day waiting period was upheld (the so-called 'white' days after menstruation ceases), but the practice of purification through bathing in a *mikvah* was introduced for menstruating women (rather than merely for those contaminated with menstrual blood). Laws for the construction of the *mikvah* were made, such as the requirement of the pool to contain natural waters, collected from rain, spring water, or water from a river. Other rules were added such as the prohibition on sexual contacts for twelve hours before menstruation, the usage of cloths for vaginal self-examination to check the beginning and end of menstruation, and numerous detailed laws surrounding the size and colours of blood stains, pregnancy, childbirth, etc. The association of *niddah* with immorality, sin and pollution – one pole of the original biblical ambivalent attitude – presumably grew during this period. Rahel R. Wasserfall (1999: 5) furthermore notes that as only married women were obligated to

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immerse in the mikvah, the laws surrounding menstruation and ritual purity entirely shifted to conjugal relations.

If a focus on the written normative religious (biblical and talmudic) scriptures on niddah shows tremendous historical shifts as to the laws and their interpretation, then a multitude of interpretations of niddah from the perspective of gender of these sources is possible. Cook (1999) for example, argues against a 'feminist' interpretation of women as having a subordinated position in Jewish ritual life, including the transition from biblical to rabbinical practice of the laws of niddah. In Cook's view, the replacement of the Temple sacrificial system (the priestly worldview) with the reconstruction of Jewish ritual practice without the Temple and its priests, entailed ritual self-determination and 'empowerment' for both women and men. In particular, Cook regards the new laws of self-examination and the increase of detail surrounding niddah in the Mishnah as a mode in which women themselves become the 'structural equivalent of the priest'. Having the information necessary to examine and determine their own bodily status, the women in effect became their own 'judges' on being, or not being niddah.

Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert (1999) on the other hand, focuses on the figure of the rabbi as the new expert and hegemonic authority, following the reinterpretation of biblical laws on niddah during the rabbinical period. Almost diametrically opposed to Cook's point of view, Fonrobert argues that new rules that were introduced by rabbis in the Mishnah Niddah diminished rather than enhanced women's control over their own bodies. Halakhic discussions of the *ketem* (the bloodstain) and the distinctions of various types or colours of women's genital blood, would have instituted the rabbis as the sole legitimate experts on menstrual bleeding. According to this 'new rabbinic science', women are 'disowned of knowledge of their own bleeding since the projected scientists of the science of blood, are, of course, the rabbis' (Fonrobert 1999: 67). Fonrobert critically searches the scriptures for instances of 'gender trouble' where women may have resisted this rabbinic control. This is perhaps evidenced in passages (with the story of Yalta in the Talmud and its subsequent Talmudic discussion as a case in point) where it is at least shown *within* the normative text that tensions must have been negotiated. This kind of reading of the scriptures brings us to the question of more examples of actual practice pertaining to the laws of niddah in history, and especially those forms of practice that went against official law.

More changes took place during the Talmudic period, following the transfer of the laws of purity from the context of the Temple to that of the synagogue. When prayers came to replace the earlier sacrifices, the notion developed that prayer, Torah study and entrance into a synagogue required ritual purity (Cohen 1992: 106). Initially, and as stated in the Mishnah, all forms of genital discharge (including normal menstruation) did not prevent one from entering the synagogue and reading or studying Torah, except for the male ejaculant. Both the Jerusalem and the Babylonian Talmud furthermore state that

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the purpose of this prohibition was to restrain male sexuality. This matter was intensely debated until the Middle Ages, until a more lenient position was adopted by R. Joseph Karo, permitting the ejaculant to both pray and study Torah. In the Post-Talmudic period however, as Cohen (1992: 107-108) argues, despite the non-existence of any kind of legal basis in the Talmuds, in actual reality, Jewish women began to be excluded – or excluded themselves – from the ‘sancta’ during their menstruation. Menstruants kept away from the synagogue whereas impure men did not, even though the authoritative view was that they could not pray. Thus the only form of impurity (such as the categories of ejaculant and leper) to actually retain its practical consequences after the period of formative rabbinism, was that of women’s menstruation (Steinberg 1997: 9).

The extra-rabbinic text *Beraita de Niddah* (composed in Israel in the sixth or seventh century) signalled another change in attitudes towards menstruation. This text was to have a profound influence on later Ashkenazi practices during the Middle Ages, next to its impact on Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalists (Koren 1999). In the *Beraita de Niddah*, the association of menstrual blood with pollution and danger increased, introducing prohibitions on the participation of menstruating women in many rituals, both in the synagogue, yet also even pertaining to the lighting of the Sabbath candles. Those who indirectly came into contact with a menstruant, for instance with her nail clippings or the ‘dust upon which she trod’, developed boils. Food and utensils touched or made by a menstruant rendered others impure. According to the text, a menstruant’s spit, breath and speech may even cause impurity in others. Sex with a menstruant would lead to leprous births. Meacham (1999: 32) notes that all these ideas entered both the normative legal works and influenced daily behaviour and the negative or even superstitious beliefs were taken on by uneducated Jews. Therefore, even though the identity of the author of the *Baraita di Niddah* is unknown, its influence on later Jewish piety was great and its ideas were internalised by both women and men. Similarly, by the tenth century, the restrictive view on women’s entrance to the synagogue prevailed. The Sephardic codifiers of rabbinic law Maimonides and R. Joseph Karo explicitly omitted prohibitions such as these. Yet in the Middle Ages, in Ashkenazic communities all prohibitions on women entering the synagogue or praying were accepted ‘if not as law then as custom’ (Cohen 1992: 109).

Shaye J.D. Cohen (1992, 1999) analyses the conflicts between law, custom and practice in a number of instances surrounding women’s menstruation. Menstruating women in medieval France for example were ‘oblivious’ to the law that did not prohibit their entrance into the synagogue. However, this was often wrongly sanctioned by local rabbis, whereas in other parts of Europe the practice appeared to be completely unknown. Other examples of ‘incorrect’ practices surrounding menstruation revolve around the rite of purification after menstruation and the required waiting period. Cohen (1999) infers after the reading of four medieval polemics discussing incorrect

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purification practices, that many of the women thought they were acting at least as legitimate as the rabbis, despite some efforts of the latter to correct their improper behaviour. Ashkenazi women in Northern France and the Rhineland at the time of the Tosafists (disciples of the rabbinic Sage Rashi (1040-1105)) in the eleventh century for example, simply bathed after their menstruation ceased. They neglected the required cleansing before their immersion in the mikvah after the seven required 'days of whitening'. Reading other legal commentaries, including that of Maimonides, it becomes clear that the deviations by women of medieval Spain, Byzantium and Egypt were even more serious. Spanish and Byzantine women observed the seven days of whitening, yet simply washed in baths instead of immersing in a mikvah. Egyptian women apparently refrained from waiting the seven days altogether and sprinkled themselves with water instead of immersing.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Hebrew *Taharat hamishpachah* became used in referring to the menstruation laws, meaning 'purity of the family' or 'family purity'. The term seems to have derived through German from the Yiddish 'reinheit das familiens lebens'. Meacham (1999: 32) suspects the term came from traditionalist circles, responding to the rejection of some of the laws by the Reform movement. At this time the family purity laws basically implied the prohibition on sexual relations between husband and wife during menstruation and for the seven following 'white' days, upon which the woman must immerse herself in a mikvah. Like many other halakhic laws that were conceived archaic, the Reform movement abolished those surrounding family purity. Initially the immersion in the mikvah was abolished and later the prohibition on sex during menstruation was explicitly condemned, in line with the feminist movement's interpretation of the laws of menstruation as an expression of sexist views of the woman's body.

The history of menstruation in Jewish religious tradition and communities shows that not only the laws themselves and their hegemonic interpretations developed, but also that the actual customs and practices continuously evolved, varying from one time and place to the other. Contemporary anthropological and sociological research on, and interpretations of the practices and meanings surrounding niddah and mikvah, shows a similar diversity throughout Jewish communities all over the world. Lisa Anteby's (1999) article on Ethiopian Jewish immigrants in Israel shows the extent of cultural diversity inasmuch as historical continuity in menstruation rites, despite forced adaptation to new living circumstances. Ethiopian Jewish women had been continuing the practice of monthly segregation and isolation in menstrual huts, a custom that was discontinued in Europe ever since the end of the Temple period. Once immigrated and housed in Israeli hotels, mobile homes and finally urban apartments, Anteby's study shows how these women accommodated to their new environment by introducing new forms of spatial and verbal metaphors in order to continue their rites of purity.

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Historical continuity is also proven in Jacob's (1999) discovery of the survival of – albeit similarly transformed – rituals of purification among so-called crypto-Jewish women in the Southwest of the U.S., descendants of *conversos* in fifteenth century Spain during the Inquisition. The forced conversion to Christianity had not eradicated but transformed the practice of Jewish religion. This had led to a privatisation of rituals, of which only monthly sexual abstinence during menstruation and immersion in the mikvah survived until the twentieth century. A further illustration of contemporary ethnographical diversity can be given by referring to Sered, Kaplan and Cooper's (1999) research into the phenomenon of voluntary mikvah parties. Certain Jewish North African and Asian brides-to-be in Israel have parties on the night before a wedding. The practice is virtually unknown among other groups in Israel, whereas immersion itself before marriage is legally required for both secular and religious Jewish women in the state of Israel. The authors compare the conflicting interpretations of the parties from different viewpoints of both the brides themselves, mother-in-laws, mikvah personnel, rabbis and local and national religious authorities, that appear to revolve around hierarchical axes of gender, ethnicity and age.

Most of the ethnographical studies referred to above, all belong to a unique collection on menstruation rites in Jewish life (*Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*). As editor Rahel R. Wasserfall (1999) notes, they point to the great diversity in how rituals were used, resisted and manipulated in different ways, always depending on broader social, historical and political contexts. The collection furthermore shows how purity, pollution and the purification rites pertaining to women's bodies and their reproductive capacity, are fundamental for any understanding of the relationships between gender, power, authority, identity, and the public/private divide in Jewish religious traditions. Both historical and contemporary ethnographic illustrations not only show how official religious law appeared to be multi-interpretable, resulting or sometimes even irrelevant of actual custom and practice. It also shows how the scholarship on these different forms of discourse and practice itself appropriates different and often conflicting paradigms and interpretative-political frameworks. The studies in Wasserfall's volume approach the topic of menstruation rites in Judaism focussing on the multiplicity of power and agency, as related to the status of women in Judaism. Other types of research referred to above can perhaps be called more explicitly 'feminist' in the sense that discourse and practices surrounding women, purity and menstruation have been interpreted as instances of the patriarchal control of women's bodies and sexuality, exemplary of women's absolute subordinate position in Judaism (e.g., Archer 1999; Steinberg 1997).

A similar perspective is shared by feminist critiques of Judaism as a patriarchal religion since the second wave and discussed in previous chapters. The harshest critique is by revolutionaries like Susannah Heschel (1995 [1983]: xl): 'Woman as Other is expressed, for instance, by Judaism's "purity laws", in

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which women convey impurity not to themselves or to other women, but only to the men with whom they come into contact.' For Heschel, the purity laws are but one fitting example of not only women's peripheral role in Jewish religion, but also of the complete absence of attention to their own lives and experiences. The laws and rites that do exist for women are only and consistently in function of their relationship to men, typical of the way women are associated with the physical and sexual opposed to men's capacity for spirituality. Pnina Navè Levinson's (1990: 58-59) critique by contrast, can serve as an example of the perspective of a reformist feminist, and simultaneously that of a Reform Jew:

In the Reform tradition, no differences are observed with regard to synagogue activities based on the bodily functions of men and women. Long ago the biblical rules for men were removed. Reform Halakha did the same for women. [...] Except for Orthodoxy, the private dates of women are not pried into when setting the wedding date. The Mikveh, or ritual bath, likewise is no more practised. Instead, sexual ethics are taught and discussed.

As noted above, feminist critiques of the purity laws appear to coincide with the redefinitions of Judaism and subsequent development of Jewish 'denominations' from the mid-nineteenth century. This started with the Reform movement that designated many of the commandments connected with physiology as 'primitive' (Meachem 1999: 33). After the abolishment of circumcision for boys, and women's immersion in the local mikvah, in a much later stage the critiques of all aspects of the menstruation laws within the Reform movement functioned as a dismissal of traditionalist or Orthodox Jewish practices as sexist, such as expressed in the quotation above. As for the Conservative movement, Meacham notes that as far as the menstrual laws are concerned, as with many other laws, the attitudes are more ambivalent. Many rabbis simply avoid the subject and observance therefore varies considerably.

Practices in contemporary modern Orthodox Jewish communities also vary, regardless of the legal requirement, in line with halakhic observance of laws such as kashrut and the Sabbath. The 'family purity laws' reinterpreted in normative Jewish Orthodoxy vis-à-vis the growth of liberal strands, to date include the basic prohibition on sexual relationships during menstruation and the waiting period of seven 'white' days, followed by immersion in the mikvah. Modern Orthodox Jewish mikvahs may take on the appearance of modern-day beauty parlours in the U.S.. Opposed to the Diaspora, the context in the State of Israel is different again, having a system that does not separate politics from religion in many aspects of family law, where marriage is controlled by religious authorities.<sup>17</sup> Rabbis require official proof of ritual purity of even secular Jewish women who must immerse themselves in a mikvah before a wedding (Sered, Kaplan and Cooper 1999: 145).

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### *Contemporary Strictly Orthodox Jewish Rules and Practice*

From a feminist perspective that does not aspire to the norm of liberal equality based on a notion of sameness between women and men, the abolition of the laws of niddah as ritual practice and central in the definition of Jewish religious tradition, - as in the case in contemporary Progressive Jewish denominations in the Diaspora - appears perfectly consistent. On the other hand, the eradication of the only law and form of ritual, exclusively incumbent and reserved for women, - despite its multi-interpretability and differential forms in all traditional Jewish communities - can also be interpreted as acquiescence to the male as the normative form of religion, eradicating the possibility of specific forms of female religiosity.

The family purity laws or the laws of niddah as practised by all strictly Orthodox or traditionalist Jewish women today, remain the only official mitzvah, halakhically designed and required of them as – married – women. As an utmost private form of religious practice, connected to what is considered equally or even more private issues of both women and men's 'sexualised' bodies and intimate lives, niddah does not particularly lend itself as an evident topic to be studied. The topic is all the more awkward following the methods of feminist social scientific research as proposed in chapter four. Returning to the above discussion on Tamar El-Or's (1994) refusal to probe into what was perceived as a private, perhaps even taboo subject as an act of voyeurism above, here I focus on what some women willingly and unproblematically communicated to me on the topic of niddah. This led me to cast some doubts on the absolute private, and especially the 'taboo' nature of niddah among at least some segments of women affiliated with the Machsike Hadass.

It must be added that as with the majority of the other subjects discussed in the interviews, the 'normative', hegemonic view of the purity laws was mostly reproduced. This is consistent with dominant views expressed in other research (e.g., Marmon 1999), and especially the discourse in so-called 'manuals' in the purity laws, which are always sanctioned by Orthodox religious authorities. Sexuality and the laws of family are a private affair, and presumably, reticence and an aura of taboo reign in many strictly Orthodox Jewish circles and communities. Sexual education as in the 'outside world' is viewed in disgust and a threat to the central notion of *tzniut* or 'modesty' (to be discussed in a later paragraph). On the other hand, one Misnagdic woman I interviewed, Rachel, informed me that changes definitely had taken place pertaining to both the laws and the ritual bath. Although she professed there still was much reticence and taboo, she frankly claimed that things were different nowadays compared to her own generation. She said that the 'young girls of today could not be fooled', and needed to be treated with more 'openness' than their mothers had been. When I asked Rachel (who is a teacher) if the laws of

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niddah were the sort of subject I would be able to bring up in my interview with her and other Hasidic or Misnagdic women, she thought this was possible:

You can, I tell you, when I got married thirty years ago there were certain things which were quite... which we call the family purity laws, it was something which was not spoken much about... Until I got engaged my mother never told me about these things and she didn't tell me that much about these things, but in the last thirty years because the world has become more open, automatically you just can't know, you just can't hide, behind, you know, curtains and say 'Well we don't talk about these things'... I for example... These are things I will bring up in a class room, other teachers will not, because perhaps they don't want to face it, they don't have the courage and they are scared of parents' reaction... I have never been, I mean, I'm not scared, so I'm not scared to approach the subject, so I believe that because our girls are hearing so much and there's so much going on with publicity, and they hear what's going on in the world... Let's not kid ourselves that they don't go... know what's going between a man and a woman, let's say by the Hasidim, this is a subject that will never ever be spoken about in public, even nowadays, in our circles, it depends, it depends who you talk to... Me personally I feel that girls have to be treated much more openly because even if the mothers don't want to admit it, but I'm sure the girls talk a lot among themselves and they know what goes on in the world...

As has been mentioned earlier, the laws surrounding menstruation and all the detailed procedures such as the internal checks and ritual immersion are only incumbent on married women, the only category conceived of as sexually active, or better formulated, as capable of reproduction. There are no special rites that accompany menarche. Menstruation itself amongst unmarried women does not involve any rites of purity, nor prohibitions on any forms of public religious participation like it did in biblical times. In line with the institution of marriage and the characteristic upbringing of boys and girls according to the rules of modesty, sexual contacts are only permitted once married. The laws of niddah as they are practised nowadays revolve entirely around women's sexuality in the context of a monogamous conjugal relationship and her capability of producing children. There is no sexual education for girls or boys, as sexuality is only deemed appropriate and conceivable within the marital relationship.

During the period of engagement between a young woman and man in strictly Orthodox Jewish communities, both bride and groom-to-be each receive their 'sexual education'. This is meant to prepare them for married life and their duties tied to the commandment of procreation. Some more 'conservative' women in the community will teach the girls the pure theoretical laws. They will basically explain the way to 'count' the period they must refrain from

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sexual or any physical contact whatsoever with their husbands, from the onset of their menstruation till seven days thereafter, until immersion in a mikvah. Some teachers or especially trained counsellors, however – as Rachel used to be –, try to turn these bridal courses into a more positive experience for young women. They try to offer more than the mere ‘dry’ legal aspects, or so Rachel told me. Listening to Rachel’s point of view, and following up on some arguments made in the previous chapter on education, it can be inferred – at least for groups or circles some of the women I talked to belong - that many young strictly Orthodox Jewish women nowadays, are educated and no longer ‘ignorant’. It is impossible to completely protect them from the changes and ‘openness’ in the outside world regarding gender and sexuality that prevail in modern society. According to Rachel, rather than for them to hear publicly, or by reading books that will:

...give them a distorted view of how the Torah considers, you know the physical intimacy between a man and a woman, I would like to show them what’s beautiful and what’s positive and they shouldn’t see the ritual bath as something very archaic, as something which is a formal obligation which woman has to do, you know as a real duty a bit against her will... A girl who gets married, I want her to be happy, she should feel privileged that she can keep these laws and she should not see it as some remnant of the past, like all kinds of laws... You hear African tribes, which are primitive and are archaic and have no logical reason, but I want them to understand why they are doing it, they should understand that it’s something that they ought to feel happy about...

The vast majority of both Hasidic and Hasidic -minded women I spoke to at least agreed to this viewpoint, in that they were convinced of the importance and the very positive aspects of the family purity laws. Most were also highly aware of the ignorance and misrepresentation of the practices in the outside world. Particularly the distinction between ritual purification and physical cleanliness was emphasised. During menstruation and seven days thereafter any form of direct or indirect physical contact between husband and wife is forbidden (e.g. passing objects to each other). The woman’s body is considered *tumah* or ritually impure, comparable to that of a dead person. This was explained to me by Leonie as the period when there is a breakdown of the possibility of a living creature to develop:

You mustn’t say clean and unclean... So during the week of your menstruation and a week after that... That’s your body developing, your body is developing for a baby, and after the ovulation it breaks it down... So imagine that body that was ready, that was the case already from that sixth day, so that’s still developing, and that’s nothing for ‘Tom Thumb’, so no bodily contact, no passing anything to each other,

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you put it down and he picks it up, I mean you don't throw it to the other side, you put it down...

Detailed laws exist as to when and how the niddah must count the five days from the onset of her menses. After the bleeding has completely ended, minimally counting a period of five days, the seven 'white' or 'pure' days commence, after the niddah has thoroughly inspected herself during the evening before sunset. According to one manual published in Dutch and distributed widely among brides of the Machsike Hadass (Zahler 1980: 34):

First the lower part of the body must be washed. Then a clean white and soft cloth must be inserted with the finger as deep as possible, and moved back and forth in every direction. The cloth must be checked during daylight. Even if the smallest kind of bloodstain is discovered, and it is no longer possible to repeat it on the same day before sunset, the checking must be repeated the next day in the late afternoon, as described above. Not until this check does not show up any trace of blood, can the counting of the 'seven pure days' begin. The woman now applies clean white cloths. Moreover, she covers her bed with clean white sheets.

In the chapter 'The Countdown' in another well-known manual on the family purity laws, also known to and used by some of the women I interviewed who themselves had counselled brides-to-be, Tehilla Abramov (1988) provides more information on the procedures to be followed after menstruation. The transition from niddah to *taharah* (ritual purity) is confirmed by what Abramov calls the *hefsek taharah*, the procedure quoted above. The cloth to be used, the *bedikah*, and the process of inspection must also fulfil all the necessary requirements. Details are given on the rules on all possible exceptions, such as status (pregnant, newly-weds, etc.), irregular periods, and irregular or questionable stains. When in doubt, Abramov (1988: 89-90) advises the following:

If questionable stains are found on the cloth used for the last examination before sunset, the cloth should be put in an envelope, preferably after it is dry, to be taken later to a Rav.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the woman should continue with the *taharah* process until the Rav's decision is made.

Additional procedures such as a *moch dochluk* are described, when after a first inspection a second *bedikah* cloth can be inserted and left in the vagina 'from before sunset until the emergence of three stars'. Numerous practical suggestions are made pertaining to underwear (preferably white), and keeping a personal calendar 'to prevent mistakes'. Abramov (93) furthermore stresses the importance of counting in a continuous and complete way. The obligation of

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the woman to count seven days is attributed to the verse 'And she shall count for herself' (VaYikra 15:29). Leonie though, informed me that she knew of men who assisted their wives:

So you have to work out beforehand when that is, the woman does that... The man can look over her shoulder... I do it myself and I don't like it if my husband, for example, if he comes into the kitchen and he starts talking about the soup I say: 'You know what, we're not both going to stir the soup, I do it or you do it.' I like fixed territories really, but anyway, that's my problem, that's my personality. But a lot of women do count together with their husbands.

In the descriptions of the actual technical procedures the woman must follow, such as the counting, the above manuals in contrast, do not mention any involvement of the husband in any of the ritual procedures, except regarding the prohibition on intimate contacts and other forms of 'inciting' behaviour, similarly according to detailed rules. Rabbi Zwi Zahler (1980: 33) merely notes that during the 'niddah separation' (tr. from Dutch):

...not only is intercourse prohibited, but also every approach and even every gesture, that may lead to an erotic impulse. Before everything, one must avoid all bodily contact, and definitely not sleep in one bed together.

The other manuals reviewed, go into more detail on what is understood by erotic or inciting behaviour. The 'hedge of roses' as the rules are called by the Sages, according to Abramov (1988: 111):

...will guide and instruct a couple how to behave in the wide variety of situations they will encounter while the woman is a niddah. Unless specified otherwise, these rules apply equally to both husband and wife.

Both Abramov's manual, and one by Rabbi Elyohu Blas (5752), another manual distributed by the Machsike Hadass, give further details on the prohibitions. Firstly, husband and wife must not touch each other, directly or even indirectly by using an intermediate object. They must not hand objects to each other, sit on 'moving' chairs such as rocking chairs or swings, nor on a sofa unless another person or obvious object sits or is placed between them. Different rules apply to travelling, some more lenient as to the seating arrangements; others more specific such as eating from the same plate, or the wife preparing the water for her husband to wash himself with (Blas 5752: 66). Abramov (114) applies this law to both husband and wife, both being prohibited from preparing water, or washing each other, or bathing in presence of one another.

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As for the bedroom, separate beds are compulsory; a husband must not sit or lie on his wife's bed, even if she is not in the room, as long as at the time she is in the same town. Gender differences regarding the regulations become apparent in both Abramov (1988) and Blaszczyk (5752). For example, the wife is not allowed to lie on her husband's bed in his presence, but is allowed to sit or lie on the bed in her husband's absence. This rule thus seems to suggest that in this context the husband is more 'easily incited' than his wife. In Blaszczyk (5752: 65), it is furthermore stated that the wife may not make her husband's bed in his presence:

La femme ne doit pas faire le lit de son mari en sa présence, ni s'étendre sur son lit en sa présence.

Abramov (1988: 114) does not make any gender differentiation here, applying this domestic activity to both partners:

They may not prepare each other's bed for sleeping in each other's presence.

Different rules applying to eating, carrying deviations from the usual norm, such as placing an object or unnecessary food item in between their plates. Abramov notes the wife may sit in a different place than usual. A couple may not eat or drink from the same plate, dish or cup. A husband may not eat or drink from his wife's leftovers in her presence, only if someone else has first eaten from her leftovers, if they have been transferred to another plate, or if she has left the room. A woman in contrast, may eat from her husband's leftovers. One can obviously pose the question to what extent the gender differentiation in these rules has to do with inciting behaviour, or bears connection with the more negative view on women's impurity as 'pollution' during her status of niddah. Blaszczyk (5752: 67) lists some forms of behaviour which are not permitted during a meal:

En général, on doit éviter tout ce qui pourrait amener à des relations plus closes. Pour cela il est défendu d'entretenir des conversations affectueuses, et d'avoir un comportement léger. Il convient pour la femme de porter un vêtement spécial ou un coiffe spéciale pendant la période entière de Niddah pour leur rappeler son statut.

Although Abramov (114) does not include any rules that have to 'mark' the wife, showing her status of niddah, similar rules preventing mutual sexual attraction are included under the rubric 'additional restrictions':

A husband and wife may not engage in flirtatious behaviour that may lead to sexual desire. (Obviously, this does not mean that during the

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time the woman is a niddah, he and her husband must appear grumpy or sour faced!) During this time, a woman should take care to appear attractive, but not provocative, to her husband.

Additional restrictions in both Abramov and Blaszczyk include the prohibition on the husband seeing his wife undress or any parts of her body which are normally covered. He may not smell her perfume, on her, or on her clothes. He may not listen to her singing. If one of the spouses is ill and needs to be taken care of by the other, the laws still apply or a rabbi must be consulted.

Many of the rules which apply during this period of ‘the hedge of roses’ between husband and wife, for the greater part seem to be directed at men’s possible initiatives upon being attracted to the woman, who is the one who must take care she does not provoke him. This is in line with the general rule of *tzniut*, or modesty to be discussed later on. My interviewees more or less seemed to repeat some of the same laws and details as stated in the manuals, which seems to suggest that they were important for what it meant to be religiously observant. Although they did not go into any aspects of private or intimate life, and they certainly did not comment on how they personally experienced the laws and their relationship, it did seem that there were no doubts as to the prohibitions on certain kinds of contact between women and men. Leonie for example, told me about a recent film she saw, a fictive portrayal of the Hasidic community of Antwerp in the seventies. Although she did not normally watch TV, she claimed she had had to watch the film for an essay by some student. She claimed the well-known director and actor of the film had simply gone to a rabbi in Amsterdam for advice on how to give a realistic portrayal, especially concerning the rules of interaction between women and men in Hasidic communities.<sup>19</sup> Leonie, however, claimed:

Simply every movement in the film is completely wrong. Like when she takes his coat... I mean, obviously they want to show how subservient the Hasidic wife is to her husband, of course she might well be subservient as far as I know, but she would never take his coat, she’ll never touch him, you never see that, never walking hand in hand in public and that...

The manuals similarly provide detailed proscriptions regarding the actual technical procedures of the ritual of immersion in the mikvah, the ritual bath. After the seven white or spotless days and nights of counting, after the last inspection, the woman must prepare herself for the evening visit to the mikvah for ritual immersion. The immersion must only take place at night, according to Abramov (1988: 134) ‘after at least three stars are visible’. If the woman for any reason cannot visit the mikvah on the particular evening, she may immerse on the eighth day, but only after consulting a rabbi. Abramov adds to this, that if a wife’s husband is out of town, ‘it is preferable that she postpone her

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immersion until his return. Nevertheless, the halachah allows her to immerse regardless'. From laws or interpretations of laws such as these, we can infer that not only are sexual relations permitted; they are even encouraged at the moment when the woman regains her status as ritually pure, a moment often coinciding with her period of ovulation. Husbands are encouraged to organise their business trips so they do not even miss the time of their wife's immersion.

For the preparation for immersion in the mikvah, the woman must wash herself from head to toe, so she is already 'clean' beforehand. Many informants appropriated this law as 'proof' that physical cleanliness had nothing to do with ritual purity. As explained in all the manuals on *taharat hamishpachah*, this is in order to be rid of any kind of 'intervening substance' (*chatzitzah*) between the body and the water. The washing procedure is thorough and detailed, requiring the washing, untangling and combing of the hair, the combing or separating of all other body hair, the cutting of finger- and toenails, cleaning of ears and earring holes, brushing and flossing of teeth, etc. All extra-bodily attributes must be removed such as jewellery, glasses, plasters or bandages, make-up, and even contact lenses and false teeth.<sup>20</sup> Extra regulations exist as to the body hair, dandruff or lice, hair dyes and conditioners, scabs, splinters, coloured or hardened skin, etc. The woman must inspect her body as to make sure there is no *chatzitzah*, any kind of substance, however minute, that may come between her body and the water and thereby render the immersion invalid. All the manuals advise her to 'take it easy', and make sure, the preparation can be started during the day and without a rush.

The manuals prescribe how the immersion in the mikvah at night must proceed (except for Zahler 1980). They refer to the assistance of the *balanit* (mikvah attendant, officially a Jewish female person above the age of twelve), who must supervise the immersion itself and pronounce it kosher. The immersion requires the whole body to be under water at once. The woman must therefore stand upright, yet relaxed and spread her legs and arms, gently closing her eyes and lips. After immersing completely, she must stand up again and recite the following blessing (*beracha*):

Blessed are You, God, our Lord, King of the world, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us concerning immersion.

Zahler (1980: 35) mentions that a second immersion is required after saying the *beracha*, whilst both Abramov (1988) and Blaszyk (1975) claim the procedure has ended, or ends upon final confirmation by the *balanit*. The *niddah* has now changed her status to that of *taharah* and may resume 'marital life'.

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### *The Personal: Re/Interpreting Niddah*

Although the women I interviewed would not discuss the laws of niddah at the level of their personal experience, or give the kind of technical details that I could find in the manuals, some women did tell me about their understandings and attitudes towards the laws at a more general level, as expressed in the quote from Rachel above. Similar to Rachel's perspective, there was definitely an emphasis on the positive aspects of the laws. They were legitimised through multiple forms of discourse, beyond that of religious law. This kind of positive reinterpretation is expressed in many types of literature on taharat hamishpachah. This includes some of the more autobiographical work by individual Orthodox Jewish women (Frankiel 1990; Greenberg 1998), the more proscriptive literature on women's role in traditionalist Judaism (Kaufman 1995; Meiselman 1978), and the educational or practical manuals used, or at least distributed in strictly Orthodox Jewish communities (Abramov 1988), including those by the authorities of the Machsike Hadass (Blasz 5752; Zahler 1980). Finally, some of the social scientific research on Orthodox Jewish women has focussed on the laws of niddah, albeit similarly at the level of how women interpret the laws during an interview (Kaufman 1993; Marmon 1999).

As argued above, the literature provides insight into the extent and the way in which more 'feminist' and also Progressive Jewish perspectives on, and condemnations of the laws of family purity are contested by counter-discourses in terms of legitimising the laws as central to Jewish women's ritual practice and identity. Debra Kaufman (1993 [1991]) in her interviews with ba'alot teshuvah in the U.S., places these women's own understandings and language central, rather than what may be perceived as the 'abstractions' in many Jewish feminist critiques of the laws of niddah, and women's status in Judaism more generally. Kaufman (1993: 68-70) argues that the interpretations of the family purity laws by her interviewees, serve as an illustration *par excellence* of one of her main theses. In reality and practice, whereas the ba'alot teshuvah may observe patriarchal law, they do reinterpret it, thereby 'accommodating and recasting' Orthodox ritual. Naomi Marmon's (1999) research into contemporary mikvah practice based on interviews with Boston Orthodox Jewish women (ranging from modern Orthodox to Hasidic) similarly focuses on the women's own feelings and experiences in regards to the laws of niddah. The differentiated research population and the results of the exercise nevertheless proved more variable in terms of positive and more ambivalent attitudes.

In my own interviews, the overall very positive attitude towards the laws of family purity was expressed through various kinds of legitimising discourses, including statements which often proved to be exact replicas of some of the ideas put forth in the manuals. Here I repeat the last sentence of the above quote by Rachel, when she emphasised that as for the young girls in the community of today, she wanted to go beyond a mere 'dry theoretical' explanation and teaching of the laws of niddah [emphasis mine]:

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...I want them to understand *why* they are doing it, they should understand that it's something that they ought to feel happy about...

Rachel gave me an example of the meanings of ritual immersion in the mikvah, she taught to her students:

So I explain to them for example, the mikvah, the purity of water, water in all ages and in all times, it's always been a symbol of purity for man, it connects between heaven and earth... I'm just giving you small examples, like you know, raindrops, they fall from heaven and they come, they fall on the earth, that's what brings growth, that's what brings blossoming to this world... When you go to the mikvah, it's a bit of a new birth, and because when a woman goes under the water she's a bit in a foetal position, like a baby in the mother's womb... And I explain to them, when the baby's in the mother's womb it also bathes in a liquid, and when its born and they pull the head up and then life begins... I tell them that's exactly what you do every month, after all the relationship between the husband and the wife is something which, it... How shall I tell you, it changes, it develops, there's a constant evolution, its not... Life would be very sad, very monotonous if we weren't developing and changing, constantly something new that comes up every month, and I try to explain them... Just as life changes, we make mistakes and we do sometimes things which we could have perhaps done differently, but every month God is giving us a new chance to start off anew, like a new birth... You go to the mikvah and you feel refreshed, you feel a bit pure and perhaps you were depressed before, perhaps you felt a bit low, and now there's life...

The identification of the mikvah with the womb is also made in an article excerpt of a book by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan called *Waters of Eden*, which is included in a collection of articles titled *La Splendeur et le bonheur Du Foier Juif* (1980), and distributed by the Machsike Hadass. Both Orthodox Jewish scholars Tamar Frankiel (1990: 83) and Michael Kaufman (1995: 146-7) also refer to the same Rabbi as an authoritative expert on the subject. Although the article is not specifically directed at the laws of family purity, - in fact, a person immersing is consistently referred to as 'he' - similar parallels between immersion and rebirth are made.<sup>21</sup> Immersion in water as the essence of 'impermanence', symbolises a state of non-existence and non-life, whereby a person completely 'subjugates his ego to God'. The mikvah also represents a grave, which according to the writer is not a contradiction with the representation of the womb: 'Both are nodes in the cycle of birth and death, and when a person passes through one of these modes, he attains a totally new status'. Some of my informants made the similar comparison between the

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mikvah and life, but related death to *tumah*, impurity during women's status of niddah, such as expressed by Hannah:

The principle is, that when a woman gets her menstruation, there is a certain breakdown of the possibility that there was for a living creature to develop. You can compare it to a dead person, it is *tumah*, impure. It's the same idea when a woman gets her menstruation, there was the possibility, but a living creature did not develop, which makes the woman impure and she has to be separated from her husband, they may not touch and so forth...

Abramov's manual (1988: 122-3) only briefly touches upon the philosophical and mystical insights behind the mikvah, similarly referring to the notion of *tumah* as revolving around the absence of life. So according to this viewpoint, and focussed on the specific experience of women and ritual purification in the mikvah, the loss of a potential life is a source of *tumah*, to be transitioned into *taharah* through immersion in water, according to Abramov (1988: 123), the source of new life:

The divine commandment of immersion in a mikvah can be seen as a transition from a connection to death to the renewal of life. Beneath the mikvah's waters, a woman rejuvenates herself and once again becomes a potential partner with God and her husband in the act of creation. She emerges from the life-giving waters 'born anew' and ready to conceive anew.

The two themes of both death and impurity on the one hand, and purification through living waters, symbolic of renewal and life as a privilege, on the other, according to Blu Greenberg (1998: 112) are typical of the dualistic, ambiguous (or what she elsewhere calls 'dialectic', see previous paragraph) perspective towards women and their sexuality in general. The two themes are then illustrative expressions of the two different contexts in which the laws of niddah are situated in the Torah alongside other laws of impurity, defilement and death, and secondly, those forbidding sexual relations. This dual influence is then reflected in contemporary literature. On the one hand impurity, defilement and minute details are expressed, whilst other times married love, the holiness of sex and mutual respect are emphasised.

Rachel felt that explaining ritual immersion in terms of its symbolism and possible philosophical background – the *why* behind the law – would facilitate the education of this mitzvah for brides-to-be. It would encourage and facilitate the performance of ritual practice by way of offering a interpretative framework. However, some of my informants, and Tehilla Abramov in her manual, modify the importance of philosophical interpretation. Thus, Susan claimed when I asked her if the mikvah was also symbolic:

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Yes, there are whole books about it because water is very important for us, water is life, is the Torah, water represents the knowledge of the Torah and as I said there are all sorts of books about the spiritual sign of this... But for us, besides the spiritual sign they are also commanded, so even if you don't understand any spiritual side of things...

C: To do it?

We do it, and we do it, because God commanded it, we are performing a commandment of God, when we eat a piece of cake, we say thank you for... Uh, giving us the cake, and whatever else we do, is because we were commanded.

C: Would you say me asking why-questions isn't right, that it's the performance itself...

No, you see all those books, so a lot of the books are on the question of why we do the mitzvot, but on the one hand we're not supposed to ask why, and the mitzvot are divided among really three kinds. There are mitzvot which we don't really understand the reason, there are mitzvot which we understand the reason for, like not to kill, not to steal, and there are mitzvot which we understand the reason in a different way. For instance Pesach, is a mitzvah to remind us that we went out of Egypt or Sabbath, is a mitzvah to remind us that God created the world, this is one of the reasons, right, uh, however, even the mitzvot like don't steal or be nice to your friends or whatever... If we do them only because they are socially uh, normal, not because God commanded them, then that's not enough, so we can find reasons for all the mitzvot, even the ones that we don't understand, it could be because of this, it could be because of that... But we're not supposed to do them because of that. Of course knowing the reason, even if we don't know that is *the* reason, giving spiritual significance to something enhances the performance of the mitzvah, it makes it more pleasant for us to do as well...

Both Abramov (1988: 122) and Kaufman (1993/1995: 146) similarly claim that the 'reasons' for the laws of niddah are very much subjugated to their acceptance as a mitzvah commanded by God. They simply must be performed, regardless of any philosophical content or ultimate rationale. Again, this would seem consistent with the general characterisation of Judaism as a religious tradition, and the way it is followed in contemporary traditionalist Jewish communities, with an emphasis on practice and law above belief and philosophical speculation as described in the previous chapter. The statements by both my interviewees and in the Orthodox Jewish literature and manuals, nonetheless appear to contradict on what seems to be a discourse of legitimisation, or even propagation of the laws of family purity, in terms of their absolute centrality and numerous 'benefits' for all.

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### *Apologetic Discourse and Additional Benefits*

The first part of a booklet (in Dutch) published by the Chabad community authorities in Antwerp (Zahler 1980), covers some thirty-one pages on what are conceived to be central issues concerning the laws of niddah, such as the 'contemporary family', marital problems, medical benefits (eleven pages in total!), and the general primacy of the laws according to halakhah. The second part of the booklet then again, discusses the more technical details – how to practice the laws - only compromising some six pages (including addresses of mikvahs all over Europe at the back).

The types of discourse presented in both explaining and legitimising the practice of taharat hamishpachah do not so much revolve around religious philosophy and symbolism, but concern the concrete functions and 'additional' benefits of maintaining the laws, primarily in medical, psycho-sexual terms and sociological terms. The medical benefits of the laws of niddah were not emphasised largely by my interviewees, nor are any detailed medical benefits mentioned in the literature by Orthodox Jewish women themselves. As far as some of the manuals, and the books by Orthodox Jewish scholars Michael Kaufman (1995) and Moshe Meiselman (1978) on the woman in Jewish law are concerned, however, the mode of offering various scientific 'proof' and citing medical specialists on health benefits takes on a typical form.

Zahler (1980: 13) for example, claims that the very laws that were historically honed by non-Jews, are nowadays acknowledged among all 'civilised' peoples. This includes the necessity of a weekly rest day, and circumcision in order to prevent many diseases as practised in many maternity clinics in the U.S. Before Zahler turns to his eleven pages of medical literature on the health benefits of taharat hamishpachah, the author builds in the reservation that 'the scientific meaning of a Godly law can never do justice to the deeper content thereof'. However, this does not prevent an exposé of all possible diseases and infections that according to the author can be avoided by practising the laws of family purity. By applying medical terminology, such as 'the bacteria of Döderlein' and 'microflora', Zahler (1980: 14-15) explains how during women's menstruation, described as 'the result of an internal wound', there is higher risk of infection as there is less resistance to bacteria from the outside. This includes venereal diseases such as syphilis, gonorrhoea, and infection of the oviducts, which is why 'according to the opinion of prominent gynaecologists' sexual contacts must be avoided.

Other more 'indirect' benefits of taharah hamishpachah would be the prevention of 'women's diseases', especially through the self-inspections that must be performed outside of menstruation. Zahler furthermore claims that for any general disease the woman is 'weaker', and therefore less resistant during her 'difficult days' when her 'organism is weakened'. The writer claims for example, that in seventy-five percent of the cases when polio is transferred, this happens during women's menstruation (15):

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...not only sexual relations, but even every form of erotic excitement such as cuddling or physical rapprochement during the critical days can bring damage to the already weakened female organism, even apart from the question of infection. This can lead to an overstimulation of the nerves and a serious disturbance of mental balance.

That this excerpt quotes an article on the ‘Sensitization of Guinea Pigs par Vaginam’, only underlines the extent to which the perceived authority of medical science is not only used to justify gender through sexual, physical difference, but also how the medical language itself is injected with gender meanings. In this discourse which is used as a means of justification for the practice of religious law and ritual, the feminine body is often constructed as passive, fragile and weak, susceptible to stronger dangerous forces ‘from the outside’, leading to all kinds of terrible infectious diseases, or as the channel for the development of other contagious conditions. The state of the ‘wounded’ womb is then extrapolated to the whole feminine organism. This is considered weak for a period of at least twelve days a month during women’s reproductive life cycle, and even affecting her psychological or mental state. All possible organs are perceived to be influenced by the monthly cycle, according to the writer this ranges from rectal temperature, pulse and blood pressure, endocrine system, pupils, blood vessels, lungs, metabolism, to urine, etc. (Zahler 1980: 17):

In America the non-Jewish doctor dr. M.MC. Stopes, a scientist by name, and whose own marriage broke up, has been trying to find a connection between the monthly oscillations in the functions of the different organs and sexual life for decades. In her important work ‘Married Love’, she leaves us a legacy, which once again proves to deliver a ‘medical certificate’, for the extraordinary meaning of Taharat Hamishpachah.

Despite the inbuilt reservations that scientific ‘proof ‘ as such does not function an ultimate rationale for the observance of the God-given laws of niddah, the author nonetheless pays a considerable amount of attention to what is considered the universal truth surrounding sex, health and the sexualised body. An altogether separate chapter discusses the ‘feared disease’ of cervical cancer, - also referred to in Kaufman (1995: 153-154) and Meiselman’s (1978: 128) books - which is stated to be much less frequent among women Jewish women.<sup>22</sup> Again, Zahler builds the argument that there would be a connection with those women who practise taharat hamishpachah, firstly ascribed to the Jewish marriage with its ‘sexual morals’ and abhorrence for promiscuity, and secondly the same greater risk of infection during menstruation, which is annulled by practising sexual abstinence, as argued above. Finally, it is argued

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that even the whole public health is benefited, as the Jewish child is conceived at a time when both the wife and the husband's health is in its most optimal state.

Typical of many contemporary traditionalist religious movements in the modern world, the hegemony of scientific knowledge is appropriated rather than posed as an antithesis to religious discourse, in this case mutually reinforcing each other as both heavily invested with the dynamics of gender, power and control.<sup>23</sup> In a recent analysis of the ways in which the rhetoric surrounding the otherwise fairly consistent set of rules and practices surrounding niddah has changed throughout history, Jonah Steinberg (1997) argues that it was paradoxically the very belief in the 'inaccessibility of divine intent' regarding the laws, which allowed for its changing theorisation. The rhetoric has developed from the dominant theme of danger and revulsion associated with menstruation in the work of classical and medieval rabbinic commentators, to the very different form of apologetics in contemporary popular modern Orthodox manuals and guidebooks on taharat hamishpachah.

Regarding justification through medical discourse, Steinberg notes this theme is not entirely new. Nahmanides, also known as Ramban, the twelfth-century Catalanian rabbi and physician, in a commentary upon Leviticus 18:19 gives a blend of medical and spiritual ideas. In the passage Steinberg (1997: 13-14) quotes, Nahmanides explicitly refutes the earlier biblical view on the prohibition of sexual intercourse during menstruation, in function of the blood being women's contribution to the formation of the foetus. Nahmanides does, however, attribute notions of pollution, danger, and literal uncleanness to menstrual blood. He views intercourse with a menstruant who is 'harmful' and 'contagious' for the formation of child, as well as for the men around her. According to Steinberg, Nahmanides' justification of the laws of niddah, drawing upon the medical knowledge of the time, is illustrative of a typical tendency - rather than an anomaly - in rabbinic commentary. Thus in Steinberg's view, the way scientific discourse is used in order to defend the laws in itself is not wholly 'modern'. It is a typical feature of the way wisdom external to Jewish literature is used to prove that the commandments of the Torah are the guidelines for an ideal life. In this respect, Nahmanides' account in terms of legitimising the laws of niddah and the gender constructions and discourse on sexuality, are not so radically different from those proposed by Zahler and in other recent manuals.

Another form of discourse in defence of the laws of family purity, and as presented by the majority of my interviewees and the majority of contemporary manuals does appear to be wholly new. This furthermore deeply contradicts attitudes such as prevalent in the Middle Ages that considered menstruation and the menstruant as polluting and dangerous. Steinberg (1997) goes so far as to speak of a complete reversal of the older rather misogynous view towards menstruation. In popular modern Orthodox rhetoric ideas of attention, affection and companionship between husband and wife are defended

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as intrinsic values to the laws of niddah. The rhetoric Steinberg is referring to may not be limited to modern Orthodox communities alone. Similar values and attitudes were presented by many of my own strictly Orthodox informants, and are presented in the manuals they are familiar with. The 'benefits' of sexual abstinence during women's period as a niddah, are described in terms of the marital relationship in its psychological function of sexual restraint and mutual attraction. According to Chana, who claimed there was 'a lot of wisdom' to the laws of family purity:

...When your menstruation begins, you're forbidden to your husband, right, and then the menstruation ends and then you count seven days, and then its so... To a certain degree it's lovely, you're never sick of each other, right, there's always something fresh to look forward to, so when you go... and then as a result, something else say...

Before she continued, Chana asked me if I was married, which I answered in the negative:

The most marvellous thing that God ever created is that when man and wife can be together, there's nothing more beautiful than that. But on the other hand this, when you have this sometimes, you don't need to talk so much, or sometimes you do talk, but what I have found, looking back... How old was I when I got married, about twenty-three? So about twenty, twenty-five years of menstruating and counting, in the days that we... We were not allowed for each other, there was much more closeness, verbal closeness, there was much more talking, because we couldn't touch, right... So it's another area whereas now there's a lot of touching, hah hah, and talking as well, but when you're young it's different, there was... I say all said and done, I think this is a wonderful thing, I think this is a wonderful thing, and I can't say I think everything is wonderful, that would be a lie right, but I see only benefits from it...

Hannah told similarly told me about the different kind of relationship that evolves when physical and sexual contacts are off limits:

It doesn't mean that the husband has to stop loving her... In a way a spiritual love is developed to the person and not to the body...

This type of discourse in both explanation and defence of taharat hamishpachah features even more prominently than the medical rhetoric in both interviews with (strictly) Orthodox Jewish women, and in many of the manuals and literature by Orthodox Jewish women and men. For example, Frankiel (1990: 81) notes that many women seem to experience a shift in the marital relationship, where love and care are not merely expressed in a physical way.

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Abramov (1988) devotes an entire chapter of her manual titled 'Making the heart grow fonder' to the benefits of physical abstinence in order to allow for the development of an even 'closer connection' between husband and wife. Abramov (1988: 98-99) points to the fact that many psychologists and marriage counsellors adopt similar approaches in guiding couples with marital problems, this time turning to psychological rather than medical discourse as a means of further justification. Kaufman (1995: 147) similarly argues abstinence can be viewed as: 'a medium through which Jewish couples can develop a strong, healthy relationship rooted in mutual attachment that is nonsexual'. Both authors claim that these benefits must not be seen as an end in and of themselves, and then shift to religious discourse and the laws of separation as first and foremost divinely commanded. They must be placed within the much larger goal and purpose of marriage, which is to develop a 'spiritual union', or a relationship founded on 'spirit, emotion and mutual understanding.' Moshe Meiselman (1978: 129), after stressing the tangible medical benefits, similarly recurs to religious discourse: 'The medical facts may well be an indication of some overriding divine plan, and one who views the Torah as God's word will stand awestruck at the coincidence of the laws of the Torah with the laws of nature. Beyond this, however, we cannot proceed'.

Steinberg (1997) argues that the emphasis in the literature on 'attention, affection and companionship' suggests a complete shift from the earlier view on the complete avoidance of the contaminating menstruant, towards the opposite of bonding, emotional proximity and 'intimacy without touch' during the period of menstruation between husband and wife. Steinberg furthermore notes that this type of literature is extremely selective in its presentation of earlier Jewish religious discourse on the subject, as the association of menstruation with pollution is completely denied. Kaufman (1995: 146) for example, notes that despite the 'blood taboos abound in primitive societies', critics who suggest the same of the laws of niddah 'reflect an unawareness of the reality of Halachah. Menstrual blood does not contaminate.'

It is obviously difficult to attain precisely how, and when, this form of psychological discourse evolved. The consistency with what many of my interviewees claimed was striking. Marmon's (1999) interviews with a variety of Orthodox Jewish women shows how the majority of the women at least claimed verbal communication in their relationships was heightened during their status of niddah. Although several women believed this contributed to the strength of their own marriages, others claimed physical separation caused emotional distance, rather than the closeness that is propagated in many of the manuals and contemporary literature. Debra Kaufman's (1993: 78) research on ba'alot teshuvah similarly claims a good number of women interviewed, suggested that the period of separation forced them and their husband to communicate differently, which was interpreted in a very positive way.

Another additional benefit of taharat hamishpachah for the marital relationship, - this time focusing on the explicit sexual component thereof -

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does not appear to be entirely novel, as much of the contemporary literature quotes the same statement by Rabbi Meir from the Talmudic tractate *Niddah* (Kaufman 1995: 149):

Why did the Torah require a period of seven days of separation? Because by becoming overly familiar with his wife [marital relations become routine and] repulsion sets in. The Torah therefore ordained seven days of separation so that she will be beloved [by her husband on the day of her immersion in the mikveh] as she was at the time she entered the bridal canopy.

Moshe Meiselman (1978: 126-127) translates the second sentence somewhat differently:

For, since the husband is accustomed to his wife, he may begin to find her unpleasing.

Steinberg (1997: 18-19) and Rachel Biale's (1984: 172) citations also focus on the husband's sentiments, yet then again apply much stronger and more demeaning terminology. Steinberg claims the husband to be 'repelled' by the wife, and Biale's translation is that the husband might 'develop a loathing toward her'. Whatever the exact intention of the Sages, it is clear that in this excerpt on the benefits of the laws, that not only is the man taken as the subject or agent, but it is definitely his sexual desire and pleasure (or absence thereof) for the woman that is central. Kaufman (1995: 147), however, uses this excerpt in order to argue that the laws can serve as an antidote to the 'monotony' of sexual relations for both husband and wife: 'Denying the married couple the right of constant access heightens mutual attraction and maintains a continuous fascination'. Steinberg remarks that for many of the manuals, a shift takes place from the man's perspective to mutual sexual attraction and the indirect acknowledgment of women's sexual desires towards gender neutrality, which is also expressed in Kaufman's (1993) and Marmon's (1999) interviews. Most of the ba'alot teshuvah claimed abstinence caused increased sexual interest and pleasure within the marriage. Marmon found that over a half of the women she interviewed experienced a 'sense of rejuvenation', and a temporal renewal, especially on the night returning from the mikvah. One-fifth of the women she interviewed by contrast saw abstinence and the subsequent pressure to have sex as a negative experience, which seemed to be determined by the general state of the marital relationship. In my interviews this form of benefit of increased sexual attraction was also mentioned, usually in the same gender neutral terms, as stated by Hannah:

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These laws are an education for both men and women, for example when you have a very special meal every day it's not so nice any more, when something is not allowed, it gets a certain freshness.

Rachel also stressed the advantage of the laws for breaking monotony, when she told me what she told her brides-to-be during their taharat hamishpachah education:

You're starting off a new relationship with your husband and life is not monotonous, because there's been a period of separation, and that sort of... It creates also a bit of a more of a physical attraction. I try to explain to them that physical attraction is something very positive, there's nothing to be ashamed about it. There is such a thing as feeling pleasure and it's very legitimate and it's a very positive thing, but a couple should feel mutual attraction and the mikvah a bit helps... It tends to bring back the physical attraction, you haven't touched each other for two weeks and then you sort of get together again, well, life's a bit more pleasant after that...

Esther also made some comparisons:

I remember a comic where a group of men are all looking at a woman who is covered at the beach, instead of naked women... If you see, then you don't lust for these things. It's like hiding jewellery, if you wear a piece every day, then it loses its specialness, whilst if you put it away for a few weeks and then wear it again, this makes it nice again. It makes it holy, this is not easy to explain...

### *The Sanctification of Sexuality*

The relationship between sexuality and holiness was another aspect emphasised by some of my interviewees. In Samuel Heilman's (1992: 329-330) ethnographic monograph, in a chapter on the subject of sexuality based on an interview with a married couple from the Reb Arelach Hasidim in Israel, the author infers that in this community, or at least as taught by their rabbi to men, the commandment of procreation completely overrides sexual pleasure itself. Sexuality must be suppressed, or at least one had to be aware that in bed, there 'were always three marriage partners: husband, wife and their creator.' In contrast to what may seem a very ascetic view on sexual pleasure - commanding the act, yet denouncing bodily pleasure (at least as directed towards the Hasidic men in this community) -, many of my informants claimed there was no such negative view on both sexuality or sexual pleasure itself. The important thing was that this remained within the strict boundaries of the law,

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accompanied with the emphasis on monthly self-restraint. Susan claimed the following:

There's not a split between the holy and the profane in Judaism, everything is a mixture and our sexual life is also a mixture. That means we don't believe as the Christians do that... I think it was Saint Augustine or Saint Paul who said it's better to marry than to burn, but that it's better to be celibate... That's absolutely not right, just as God wants us to be together, he wants us to be together in a physical way as well and enjoy it, and this is part of it just as much as any other part of any other spiritual... We have to imbue our physical life with spirituality, by saying a blessing when we're eating, we imbue our physical life with spirituality and by having sex with our husband, not just with somebody we meet on the street, we're doing the same...

In their books on the status of women in Judaism, both Orthodox Jewish scholars Michael Kaufman (1995: 123) and Moshe Meiselman (1978: 116) similarly claim how the Jewish view of sexuality radically differs from Christian doctrine, which conceives sexuality as a 'necessary evil' or debasing. In contrast, Judaism would recognise that sexuality is both natural, neither inherently evil or good, but to be elevated to the divine or 'to be imbued with holiness, sexual activity must be performed in a licit manner that reflects elevated human conduct'. Solely within the context of marriage and related to men's mitzvah of procreation and sexual relations, does the fulfilment thereof imply that sexuality is a means of sanctifying, of attaining *kedushah* (holiness).

Both Debra Kaufman (1993) and Naomi Marmon (1999) in their research similarly point to the theme of the sanctification of sexuality. A large number of women interviewed by Marmon (1999: 146) claimed – and as similarly expressed in the statement by Susan above – that for them, observing the laws of niddah elevated the sexual act from 'simple gratification of the basest carnal desires to a hallowed event with spiritual significance'. Sexual relations imbued with *kedushah* therefore do not necessarily imply the repression or denial of physical pleasure. As I did not probe into any of my informants' personal sexual life, it remains open whether this form of discourse can be viewed as mere justificatory rhetoric; presumably, much depends on the person and the relationship. Although Rachel for example, was quite open and positive about the laws of niddah, she also warned that this must not necessarily be the case among all the women in her community:

Let's say not everybody believes in this open way of looking at things, I don't know if in the Hasidic world they will agree with it always... I don't think it will be uncomfortable to talk to you about it, I mean unless they're not totally convinced themselves, it can be uncomfortable if you go to bring up a question which has been bothering a woman for years

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and she is doing something, let's say against her will, and she... And you bring it out in the open, it could be, then it could be at that moment...

It is also possible that there are differences between 'frummies' and the ba'alot teshuvah, such as in Kaufman's research, concerning both the extent they are prepared to discuss, and perhaps even experience taharat hamishpachah and sexual relationships. Kaufman suggests this in her own research, particularly as almost all the women she interviewed made references to the laws of *onah*, the commandment on men to sexually satisfy their wives.<sup>24</sup> According to Michael Kaufman (1995: 128-9), *onah* is in fact one of the three fundamental obligations the husband takes on upon marriage. Besides providing her clothing and sustenance, he is commanded to give her pleasure:

The Torah and the Talmud reveal a sensitivity of female sexuality. The Sages teach that the woman's drive is a more powerful one and that her passion is greater than that of the man. The married woman is granted a greater right to fulfillment than is her husband; the obligation is placed on the man to provide his wife with fulfillment.

The mitzvah of *onah* in fact appears to be halakhically required. The man has a minimal obligation to have regular relations with his wife, depending on his 'physical capabilities and his occupation'. A wife can prevent her husband from changing profession for example, if this will reduce the frequency of their marital relations. A husband is also required to have relations with his wife if she 'indicates a desire', or he can 'anticipate' her desire. Impotence, inadequacy or the conscious neglect of the wife's needs and inability to fulfil conjugal obligations appear to constitute legal grounds for financial compensation for the wife, or even divorce. Besides the emphasis on quantity, according to Meiselman (1978: 119), the Talmud also requires that the husband ensure his wife's satisfaction. Kaufman (1995: 133) quotes Maimonides on the wife's entitlement to divorce:

If a woman says, 'My husband is repugnant and I cannot willingly be intimate with him,' we compel him to divorce her forthwith, for she is in no way like a captive who is compelled to be intimate with one she hates.

Again the question can be raised whether what may seem quite a surprising acknowledgement of women's sexuality and her desires (apart from procreation), within such a patriarchal and male-centred framework, was equally important or legally compelling in actual practice in Jewish communities. The commandment itself remains directed towards men inasmuch as the mitzvah of procreation is incumbent on men and not on women. In

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reflecting upon the paradoxical view of women's sexuality as both more passive or 'hidden', yet also containing a greater 'passion' than that of men, it must always be remembered that these often conflicting sources remain those of men's attitudes and perceptions of women's sexuality. They do not 'firsthand' concern their feelings and experiences (Biale 1984: 122). The fact that the emphasis and discourse above on the laws of onah is mostly limited to the male Orthodox Jewish scholars' work and in the interviews by the ba'alot teshuvah, is perhaps again indicative of a selective attitude towards sources that may offer positive or empowering religious codes for Jewish women. Biale (1984), Greenberg (1990) and Plaskow (1990) claim that next to the ambivalent and often contradicting attitudes towards the laws of niddah, for the law of onah and the view on women's sexuality there are equally diverging viewpoints, from affirmation and relative permissiveness to more restrictive or even ascetic standards. There are many discussions for example on the times for sex proscribed by onah, whether these are to be interpreted as a minimum or a maximum amount. Authorities even differ in their perspectives on coital positions or the approval or complete dismissal of foreplay.

Firsthand discourse on the possible experience of Orthodox Jewish women is alluded to in some of Kaufman's (1993: 82-83) interviews with ba'alot teshuvah. The women, who stressed the importance of their own sexual satisfaction whilst referring to the laws of onah, were similarly positive about the laws of niddah for their sex life in general. As the night of the mikvah is encouraged for sexual relations between spouses, Kaufman inferred that for many of the women she interviewed, this was experienced as an erotic moment. Many of the women who 'celebrate the woman, body and soul' in fact found erotic fantasies in the cleansing of the body for purity purposes, their religious rituals thus heightening and being intimately connected to their own sexuality.

Taharat hamishpachah appears to have developed from an older range of laws surrounding impurity and purity in general as related to the public religious sphere of the holy Temple, then shifting to the private, yet equally potentially religious or 'holy' sphere of conjugal relationships and sexuality between husband and wife. As a mitzvah for married women, this elaborate system of rules and ritual for which the responsibility and performance involves the woman herself, simultaneously extensively regulates and controls sexual relations on both partners through the period of abstinence during women's status as a niddah. On the one hand, sexual relations are commanded upon the man through the mitzvah of procreation and that of onah. These are to be carried out by the husband, but directed at the pleasure of the wife, who in contrast to her husband appears to be entitled to a sexual life apart from the act of conception and reproduction itself.

This contradiction between restraint on the one hand, and active encouragement on the other - albeit ranging from permissive attitudes in the halakhah to more moderate or even ascetic views by later commentators and authorities - is related to women's monthly biological cycle. It considers the

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sexuality of the woman, although the sexual subject to whom the laws pertain is male. Although the theme of restraint and self-control as applicable to both partners is suggested in both the literature and by many of my interviewees, it becomes apparent in most of the contemporary religious discourse that primarily men's sexual desires and inclinations require being controlled. Female sexual desire is acknowledged, at some times seen as greater than that of men. At other times it is conceived of as introvert, private and non-initiating, the medium through which man's taken-for-granted active, extrovert sexuality must be circumscribed and controlled.

In both the contemporary literature and manuals, and the other, and my own interviews it become clear that the period of abstinence is interpreted as a time of 'tranquillity and repose' for the wife who can have a 'bed of her own.' Many of Kaufman's (1993) interviewees even interpreted this period as one of 'autonomy and control', as a time every month they had for themselves. Both Michael Kaufman (1995) and Tehilla Abramov (1988: 104-105) relate the period of abstinence as beneficial for women, in giving them some space for themselves and a 'welcome opportunity for privacy':

A man who observes the *harchakot*<sup>25</sup> does not view his wife's behaviour as a disinterest in himself. Obviously, such an approach avoids much frustration and insecurity. A man's ego may be extremely sensitive, especially when the issue is his wife! The *harchakot* guarantee a woman's rights to privacy while preserving a spirit of peace and harmony within the home.

For Michael Kaufman (1995: 152) these 'women's rights' are related to her biological rhythm. In contrast to men's libido, with no distinct periods of time 'when he is more or less prone to sexual arousal', Kaufman claims in response to the 'monthly physical upheaval' in the women's bodies, she only requires 'nothing more than rest – physical tranquillity accompanied by mental and emotional repose.' Another recurring claim is that *taharat hamishpachah* guarantees that 'the woman is not a sex object', which also replicated by my own interviewees. What many Orthodox Jewish women may interpret as their 'rights' to their own bodies and sexuality, guaranteeing respect from their husbands as persons rather than bodies, is nonetheless severely criticised by Steinberg (1997) and Plaskow (1990). Both scholars refute that the intention of the laws and contemporary discourse as such, would truly be liberating or empowering for women. Steinberg (1997: 20) for example, comments that *niddah* separation for the woman 'supposedly guarantees the Jewish wife a monthly period during which she will not be physically molested by her husband and allegedly forces the husband to contemplate his wife as something other than a sexual plaything, which (it is often made to seem) would not otherwise be possible'. Steinberg's view that the ideology of family purity would ultimately still express the monthly 'reobjectification of the woman as

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the target of an almost demonized male sexual desire', is similar to Plaskow's (1990: 184-185) interpretation of the Jewish view of sexuality. In this interpretation, women's sexuality is seen as a 'lure', an 'ever present danger' to male moderation, consistent with the general view of woman as 'other' to the normative male.

Regardless of the extent to which one considers the underlying sexism or instances of ambivalence in these original patriarchal constructions of sexuality within the Jewish religious tradition, in practice, the meanings and experiences of taharat hamishpachah are continuously reinterpreted and negotiated, which can definitely be said for both contemporary Orthodox Jewish authorities and Orthodox Jewish women. In literature such as that of Kaufman and Meiselman, the laws are clearly legitimised, denouncing what are conceived of as feminist and anti-Semitic critiques of so-called sexist traditions. Meanwhile, feminist discourse is simultaneously appropriated by making the laws and ritual accommodate contemporary gender ideology in which women are considered 'equal' yet different. Those readings and extra-religious discourse which attest to the practical benefits for women, or even her autonomous sexuality are selected. In my own interviews, for Susan for example, the laws of niddah served as proof of women's equal status:

You can't say that women are inferior to men, because a woman, she has to know when she stops menstruating, and this doesn't depend on the man... The man has to trust her, it's a very, very contravention of our law to have sexual relations without going to the mikvah and without waiting seven days after stopping menstruating, very, very serious... And this is something where the man trusts the woman, and the woman is really the one... You know, what she does affects the man and he trusts her, because he also is contravening even if he doesn't know about it, so to say women are less important than men is really not so, it is an enormous responsibility. After menstruation has finished, she has to count seven days and she has to see that there is no blood and then she goes to the mikvah and then she can resume sexual relations...

Susan clearly sees the performance of the laws of niddah as a kind of 'power', perhaps to be interpreted as a form of religious 'capital' in that the husband must totally rely on his wife to perform the ritual of self-inspection, counting and immersion correctly. The husband, who has sex with a niddah, is indeed transgressing religious law, even though he may be ignorant of the fact. Rebbetsin Liddy's following claim not only shows the dichotomy between women's mitzvot as related to the private sphere of female religious practice, versus men's public religious role. It also stresses the women's mitzvah of maintaining purity as an *individual* practice, which she saw as women's special status in their relationship to God:

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As far as trust is concerned, you see that God gives more trust to the woman than to the man, because the man must always be 'en public', he must come and pray in the synagogue, one sees whether he is with ten men, what time he comes and when he must study, by the woman all that is... No one can testify there, yes the woman can see which kosher products... but that which she must do with regards to purity, no one can testify there...

In her manual on *taharat hamishpachah*, Abramov (1988: 45) similarly emphasises women's religious agency in terms of God's trust in her, and God's attribution of tremendous responsibility on women's behalf:

The Jewish woman has been charged with the responsibility for the maintenance of this fundamental mitzvah. While there are laws and prohibitions, such as observing the *harchakot*, the laws of separation, for which the husband, too, is responsible, the practical observance of this mitzvah – checking her body, immersing in the mikvah, and keeping a calendar – is entrusted solely to the Jewish woman. No one is instructed to verify or check her actions. Her word is relied upon absolutely, and halakhic decisions are based on information which she provides.

This type of discourse which seeks to prove that the observant Jewish woman is a religious agent in her own right, with an amount – or even more - autonomy and religious capital vis-à-vis men, parallels Cook's (1999) interpretation of the rabbinical view of *niddah* in the Mishnah that the woman is in fact empowered through practices associated with *niddah*. As noted earlier, Cook claims that the introduction of the idea of ritual self-examination gave women the control of religious knowledge of their bodies, and the power of determination over their status as pure or impure, making the woman the 'the structural equivalent of the priest.' In manuals like Abramov's, it is nevertheless irrefutable that ultimate authority and control – including halakhic decisions of course – lie with rabbinic authorities. Typical in manuals such as these are the numerous injunctions that the woman should turn to a rabbi when in doubt. Abramov (1988: 56) thus claims a few pages after that of the last quote:

Nevertheless, meeting this responsibility requires the assistance and guidance of a Rav. In addition to his halachic knowledge, a Rav will have developed the sensitivity required for dealing with these delicate and personal issues. A woman must have a Rav with whom she feels comfortable to consult when questions arise.

In Zahler (1980: 36) the same advice is given:

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Answers to these and many other questions are hard to find in the available literature. It is therefore the duty of every Jewish woman with a feeling of responsibility in case of the smallest doubt to explain her problem in detail to a rabbi.

In explaining how to perform *hefsek tahara bedikah* (the internal check to see whether menstruation has ceased), Abramov (1988: 89-90) even advises women who should find questionable stains on the bedikah during the final examination the following:

...the cloth should be put in an envelope, preferably after it is dry, to be taken later to a Rav. Nevertheless, the woman should continue with the taharah process until the Rav's decision is made.

Next to elaborate explanations of the all possible rules and details in determining the status of stains and proper way to count, the consultation of a Rav is continuously emphasised throughout the book. For example, as summarised at one stage (Abramov 1988: 64-65):

1. Only a Rav can determine the status of spots and stains of a questionable type, size, or coloring.
2. A Rav can be helpful when problems arise which are related to difficulties in becoming pregnant.
3. A Rav can advise a woman who has difficulty in making bedikot, internal checks.
4. A Rav can provide superb Torah-oriented counseling in cases of marital difficulties.
5. Refraining from consulting a Rav is not considered an act of modesty. Quite the contrary, one must never be too embarrassed to approach a Rav.
6. When consulting a Rav, a woman should state her question clearly, providing all the necessary information.

The role of the Rabbi is not only understood as an ultimate authority on religious knowledge, but a helpful guide and counsellor in the most intimate sphere of a woman or couple's life. The fact that Abramov has to go to lengths to promote his consultation, and comfort her readers that they should not be 'embarrassed', is most likely suggestive of the actual practice in which many women probably do not visit their rabbi whenever they encounter a 'questionable' stain. Indeed, they probably are often very much embarrassed, even though they 'should' not be. This discrepancy between prescription and practice surfaced when Liddy told me about her role as a rebbetsin:

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For example, when women come with their ordinary questions, such as about the family laws, they come with questions to the rabbi... Then I am at home and sometimes they wish that the questions are passed on through me, it's more... Uh, it's not about decency, because if I'm not here then they will go to my husband, that's just a kind of, uh... modesty, that the women will go to the women... Bon, they also have other problems, like marital problems, I sometimes speak to the wife, my husband to the husband, sometimes together... It can also occur that women speak to my husband directly, sometimes couples who speak to my husband directly, there are also couples who just come to me... But sometimes it's just a question of language, I'm also an interpreter for my husband sometimes...

That the rebbetsin often plays an important role when women approach the rabbi on questions on the laws of nid dah, is suggested by Zahler (1980: 36):

Opposed to what one may presume, every rabbi is familiar with the subject and used to applying the required discretion. If the woman nevertheless still does not feel comfortable speaking about it herself, her husband can do it or she can appeal to the rabbi's wife.

Despite what may seem to be the dominant message in these manuals on the ultimate religious knowledge and control of women's bodies, many Orthodox Jewish women to appear to interpret and experience the laws of niddah as a mitzvah of their own, one in which they can feel empowered and exert control.<sup>26</sup> Although religious authorities would definitely not approve, it is known that in practice some Jewish women do 'use' the laws as a means of birth control, for example by postponing immersion in the mikvah. Others do not so much manipulate the laws, but clearly experience them in a positive and empowering manner.

### *The Political: Purity as a Symbol of Collective Identity*

In some of the opinions expressed by Orthodox Jewish women writers, and most notably by the ba'alot teshuvah, the celebration of women's bodies and their sexuality is taken even further. The laws of niddah are viewed as the essence of women's religiosity and their identity as Jewish women. Blu Greenberg (1990: 29, 1998: 119) for example, claims that 'niddah can generate a different sense of self for a woman, a feeling of self-autonomy'. Greenberg (1998: 119) thereby challenges many a (liberal) feminist critique of the concept of mikvah, suggesting mikvah could very well be the 'prototype' of a women's mitzvah:

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As I go about my business at the mikvah, I often savour the knowledge that I am doing exactly as Jewish women have done for twenty or thirty centuries. It is a matter not only of keeping the chain going, but also one of self-definition: this is how my forebears defined themselves as Jewish women and as part of the community and this is how I define myself. [...] The laws of niddah continually remind me that I am a Jew and niddah reinforces that deep inner contentment with a Jewish way of life.

Next to all the positive functions within the marital relationship and all the extra practical benefits taharat hamishpachah serve, as a prototype of the women's mitzvah, the ritual of immersion functions within a narrative of identity at the level of belonging to a community, one in terms of both female and Jewish subjectivity. This sense of belonging was also expressed among a number of Marmon's (1999: 237) Orthodox Jewish interviewees. They claimed that immersion in the mikvah provided a sense of 'womanhood', a deeply religious feeling of belonging to a 'woman's religious community'. Some women expressed sentiments similar to those of Greenberg, in that the observance of the mitzvah of ritual purification expressed a 'connection' to Jewish women across space and time.

What may be experienced as a deeply private, intimate, individual form of religious practice, this woman's mitzvah is indeed in stark contrast to the more public communal performance of mitzvot by men. A particular kind of rhetoric on taharat hamishpachah in much of the literature by Orthodox men and the manuals, furthermore contains an appeal to a more public level. It stresses the fundamental importance of the observance of the laws by women, not only for their direct family but even for the future of the Jewish people or 'the nation'. In their analysis of religious Zionist manuals on the laws of family purity in Israel, Niza Yanay and Tamar Rapoport (1997) show how the meaning of niddah has been expanded to the public national domain. According to the writers, this particular rhetoric on niddah is constructed in a wholly new socio-political context, instructing women to observe the laws, thereby producing 'symbolic domination in order to create and preserve, through the woman and her body, the symbolic unity between territory, religion, and the state' (Yanay and Rapoport 1997: 653). In referring to Mary Douglas's (1976 [1966]) classic thesis on the way the private body and the social collective mirror one another in the symbolic domain, the religious Zionist discourse similarly appeals to the individual woman in stressing the importance of the laws of menstrual purity and impurity, linking these to the Jewish nation in its whole.

Although the context of the manuals analysed by Yanay and Rapoport is specific in that these manuals are clearly religious Zionist in their orientation and directed at all members of the nation of Israel, - including secular Jewish women - there are certainly many parallels in the rhetoric of the manuals used, and distributed in the Diaspora in Orthodox Jewish communities. They similarly seem to produce 'a system of control which unifies individualized

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practice and penetrates individual lives through ritualized action, aiming to constitute a collective Jewish identity' (Yanay and Rapoport 1997: 656). On the one hand, the practice of niddah is utmost private, such as the act of immersion, stated by Abramov (1988: 143) for example as 'a private matter between husband and wife. No other people should know of it'. However, not merely gender ideology construction takes place in the contemporary discourse surrounding and propagating the laws; it also concerns the (re)production of a *collective* religious Jewish identity.

From what originally was a system of laws and ritual practice related to the public domain of cultic religion, in which those who were impure could not enter the Temple, the laws have historically shifted to the private domain of the family and the intimate relations between husband and wife. As a reaction to the rejection by the Reform movement of some of the laws, particularly the usage of the mikvah, in the late nineteenth century the neo-Orthodox response was the emergence of a philosophy of the 'elevated state of modern womanhood, along with her sanctity of her commandments to keep the family pure' (Meacham 1999: 32-33). Family purity later became connected with the idea of the purity of the nation. According to Meachem this happened among early Israeli rabbis like Rav Kook, and especially in the traditionalist attempts of 'rescuing the remnants of European Jewry after the Second World War'. A first level in which the 'private' is expanded to the public in the contemporary manuals discussed earlier, is through an appeal to the above noted woman's individual 'responsibility' in observing the laws, in order to guarantee the purity of her entire family. Zahler (1980) for example, before turning to the psychological and medical rhetoric in defence of the laws of niddah, opens his account on the importance of the family unit in view of the contemporary 'crises' in many families, and the general 'decline of morality' in the world of today. The special role of the woman as a wife and mother in the family, the Jewish home as a 'bulwark' for the survival of the Jewish people, is then directly connected to martial stability. This in turn would be guaranteed by observing the laws of niddah.

The Jewish (married) woman is consequently 'entrusted' with the responsibility of maintaining the purity laws, which are considered the foundation for a stable Jewish marriage and family. The utmost importance of the laws of niddah are underlined for instance, by referring to halakhic regulations on the mikvah, and presenting narratives of survival thanks to the adherence to the laws by Jewish 'foremothers'. Abramov (1988: 119), Kaufman (1995: 157) and Zahler (1980: 28) note that whilst the concept of community in Judaism is popularly associated with the synagogue, according to Jewish law, a mikvah is more important. Building a mikvah – in a poor community for example - would be more important than building a synagogue, purchasing ground for a cemetery, or even acquiring a Torah scroll. These items must even be sold to finance the building of a mikvah if necessary. As long as a group of

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Jews does not have a communal mikvah, according to Kaufman's interpretation of Jewish law, they do not even constitute an official community.

Abramov (1988: 39) offers historical and archaeological 'evidence' and even first hand accounts, to show how the observance of the laws of taharah hamishpachah 'has been one of the major factors ensuring the survival of our people.' From 'our ancestors' in ancient Egypt who observed the laws in the depths of slavery, to the women in 'the midst of a life-and-death struggle' at Masada; from the secret and dangerous travels for hundreds of kilometres across the Carpathian mountains, to the nearest mikvah of an observant Jewish woman in Russia... For Abramov these stories show women's 'heroic determination and unswerving commitment to fulfill God's will'. Zahler (1980: 28) shows how the observance of the laws of niddah on the face of extreme hardship or even death may be taken quite literally. The principle that in case of life or death the prohibitions of the Torah are even subordinate, does not apply to taharat hamishpachah, as according to another Toraitic impetus 'it is better to sacrifice life than to give up honour and purity'. Zahler (1980: 27) also stresses the importance of the laws of niddah by pointing to the consequences of not practising the laws correctly. A woman who transgresses the laws remains niddah, even for her whole life. This is officially accompanied by sanctions similar to those transgressing the law of circumcision, eating animal blood or the violation of Yom Kippur. Zahler invokes the punishment of *karet*, which he describes as 'the destruction of the soul and loss of children from the Bible'.<sup>27</sup>

The observance of the laws of niddah serves to secure the 'future' directly as it is seen as beneficial for children, e.g. 'molding the spiritual nature and well-being of our children' (Abramov 1988: 50), or 'the child who is received in purity will be more noble and better disposed' (Zahler 1980: 12). The meanings attributed to the laws are also expressed by the fact that mikvah functions as a means to define identity 'differentiating the Jew from the non-Jew', as the mikvah is also used and symbolic of any conversion process to Judaism. According to Kaufman (1995: 143-144), observance of the laws of family purity is regarded as among the most essential distinguishing factor between practising Jews and non-observant Jews. These writers thus shift between medical, psychological, marital, and familial 'benefits' of the laws of niddah to narratives of the survival of Jewish identity itself, for which the Jewish woman is held to be 'responsible' (Abramov 1988: 50):

...not just the woman herself, but her immediate and extended family, the entire Jewish nation and its future generations, are directly influenced by the purity and wholesomeness which the Divine plan inspires..

My own informants in Antwerp did not invoke any nationalist rhetoric on the laws of family purity, except for one woman who was in fact originally from Israel, and claimed that not observing the laws of niddah would 'ruin the health

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of the nation and society'. However, the idea of the transferral of personal 'purity' to that of the family and beyond was definitely present in many of the responses. Liddy for example, claimed, whilst adamantly defending the important role of the Jewish woman:

That is the purpose of the mother, to develop a defence mechanism to the epidemics from outside, and then the father comes along if there are problems, but the child has already received the basis... Those are the spiritual qualities of the woman, to support her husband, the upbringing... She is the foundation, she is kashrut, she is the purity... She has the responsibility to carry on pure generations...

The meaning of *taharat hamishpachah* in the context of a narrative of communal or collective public identity is expressed in Zahler (1980: 28):

That she [the Jewish woman] shall commit herself with body and soul to the idea of *Taharat Hamishpachah* and win the hearts of all our Jewish brothers and sisters. That is why Jewish parents, mothers and daughters must realise that the fate of our children, their education and even the future of the Jewish people is in their hands and those of us all. That is why *Taharat Hamishpachah* is never ever a private matter of the individual.

In the forgoing analysis I have attempted to challenge notions of private versus public, of individual versus social or communal practice and identity in a number of ways, through focusing on one of Orthodox Jewish women's most important form of religious activity, which has often been neglected or avoided in the mainstream research and literature. Halakhic, historical, geographical, and individual interpretations and experiences vary significantly, as multiple forms of discourse are currently applied, from the practical and symbolic to the psychological, relational and the medical, beyond merely religious rhetoric. In strictly Orthodox Jewish discourse, where the religious circumscribes all facets of 'everyday life', men, and more so women's physicality and sexuality are in any case sanctified and not seen as anti-thetical to the spiritual or the 'religious'. Opposed to radical and liberal feminist critiques like Susannah Heschel's (1995), who professes a fundamental dichotomy between nature/culture, aligned with physical/spiritual and men/women, I suggest that in contemporary strictly Orthodox Jewish discourse, although guided by a dichotomous and patriarchal gender ideology, women's religiosity itself becomes defined in sexual terms. Michael Kaufman (1995: 157) for example, claims that the 'the woman's *Sanctum Sanctorum* is her own body, and she must experience intimacy in a state of holiness'. Tamar Frankiel (1990: 83) sees sexuality as women's 'hidden power', connecting the waters of the mikvah to

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the waters of Eden: 'they make for us each month a rebirth of spiritual virginity'.

The re/interpretation of niddah in positive terms and by using very 'modern' terminology, is sometimes accompanied by what can be seen as almost a kind of feminist discourse in terms of sexual difference, emphasising the liberating aspects of the ritual practice and focusing on women's agency and subjectivity. However, against the private body as a means to women's experience and ritual, is the backdrop and circumscription of hegemonic patriarchal discourse, with 'ultimate' control over interpretation resting with halakhic and rabbinic authorities. The 'heterosexual matrix' and heteronormativity define gender ideology with an emphasis on sexual difference and women's reproductive capacity, despite the acknowledgement of the sexuality of men in the traditionalist view. The 'private' is therefore not so private at all, as women's bodies function as vehicles for the construction of communal boundaries and collective identity. In the last paragraph of this last chapter, I turn to broader and comparative contexts, and questions on the relationship between gender and religion in communities and movements such as those of the strictly Orthodox Jewish community under study.

### **3. Gender, Power, and Piety: Global Contexts**

#### *The Ethic of Modesty*

Connected to the laws of niddah is the principle of *tzniut* or modesty. My interviewees perceived *tzniut* as perhaps the most important religious principle for strictly Orthodox Jewish women of all. According to Michael Kaufman (1995: 28):

*Tzeniut* nurtures an awareness of privacy, a knowledge that the inner space takes precedence over the external. Sensitivity to *tzeniut* affects both attitude and behavior: speech, dress, appearance, and comportment. *Tzeniut* is incumbent upon all Jews. However, women surpass men in sensitivity and privacy.

Moshe Meiselman (1978: 11) similarly expresses the fact that *tzniut* is not restricted to women, but that according to the Midrash, 'implicit in woman's creation was a command that she develop a specific trait of the human personality to its maximum, the capacity for *tzniut*'.<sup>28</sup> *Tzniut* can be conceived of as a 'test of moral character' as one woman told me. It is also a matter of performance, as it circumscribes women's behaviour and appearance, tied to a dialectic of both emphasising and 'repressing' women's sexuality. In order to be 'good', 'pious' and to act properly, the strictly Orthodox Jewish women must take care in being modest in everything she does. As I inferred from my

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interviewees, the main purpose of tzniut is entirely relational to men's sexual desires (or rather the repression thereof), in order not to provoke or distract him. Whereas the strictly Orthodox Jewish man in the first place must see to it that he sufficiently turns up at the synagogue and that he studies and prays, which are public, or 'outside' activities, for the women I interviewed, female piety involved foremost modest demeanour and behaviour.

When they get married, strictly Orthodox Jewish women must cut their hair, and from that day on they must cover their hair with a kerchief or a wig, at least in public settings. Depending on the customs of the community they belong to, or the stringency some personally prefer, some shave their head entirely (such as the Satmar Hasidim), whilst others maintain a short hairdo under their wig. Some women wear their kerchief or wig at all times, while others may sometimes take it off at home when they are alone with their husbands. The practice of covering the hair or head, which is common to many Mediterranean religious and cultural traditions (Eilberg-Schwartz 1995: 9; Levine 1995), was interpreted by my interviewees as connected to women's sexual attractiveness and its necessary privatisation. For most respondents it was an evident and unquestioned part of tzniut, the details of which were determined by tradition, or so Hasidic-oriented Susan attempted to explain:

It's part of tzniut, not to have... for married women, not to have uh... wild hair... In some Hasidic communities hair has a very mystical significance, but I'm not so much into that, so I don't know...

Whereas the practice of covering the hair only applies to married women, all young women and girls must wear modest clothes, which minimally includes the covering of the knees, the décolleté and the elbows. Clothes must also be distinctively 'feminine', such as skirts, dresses, and delicate feminine shoes, although conspicuous items such as high heels or bright colours are prohibited. Susan claimed that 'We must not be *auffallend*, that's the main thing'. Like some of the distinctive features of men's clothing, such as the length of the side locks or the jacket, many Hasidic women also wear clothing specific to the style of the court or community. This may involve certain colours or types of stockings, with some being very strict, such as thick brown stockings with a seam in order to hide the leg as much as possible, whilst others are permitted permit themselves to wear lighter shades like beige or navy blue.

Some of the women I interviewed somewhat ridiculed, or at least understood the extremes one could go to in the exact length of the hems, the colour of the tights as a relative matter. Tina who belonged to the Ger Hasidic community for example, claimed: 'The Satmar, for them the wig isn't enough, they wear a hat on top of it. But you don't have to, as long as the hair is covered...' As long as basic rules were abided, one can go 'as far as you wanted'. Therefore, although it is halakhically clear what was tzniut and what not to my informants, it was also possible to differentiate between degrees of

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expressing tzniut, between both individuals and the customs and rules of the community (see also Greenberg 1998: 1). According to halakhah, girls must start to cover their arms and legs from the age of twelve, yet some schools and parents will gradually start as early as the age of six or even three, in order to prevent 'rebellious' twelve-year-olds later on. Hasidic-oriented mother, Nicolette, who sent her daughters to the 'ultra-Orthodox' Satmar School, claimed her daughters loved going there. Although Nicolette said that she herself had always dressed the same way, she would make fun of her daughters a little if they became 'too' pious, for instance when one of the girls would remark on someone else's sleeve being rolled up to high. Leonie told me that little Hasidic girls have separate swimming classes in pools with drawn curtains, and that they have to wear little dresses, like a ballet suit, which at first Hasidic-oriented Leonie found rather funny.

The impression I gained is that tzniut in terms of clothing, was not something that was limited to the public sphere or in the presence of men. Although the limits on interaction between the genders starts at a very young age in most Hasidic communities, I inferred that tzniut and the way women's bodies are 'sanctified' is also something that is internalised at the level of individual subjectivity. It appears to be *somatised*, embodied, into what Bourdieu (2001) would call a typical feminine disposition in the gender *habitus* of sexual difference within a cultural system of masculine domination (chapter one). When telling me about the way mothers are responsible for the 'practical' religious education of their children, for instance, Esther (Satmar) gave me the example of how the mother dresses the child, teaching him to 'put the left hand in the sleeve and then the right.... The little girl is taught to undress slowly', which Esther referred to as tzniut or 'bescheiden'.

However, regardless of the deep connection between modesty as a means of sanctifying sexuality that is localised in/on the female body, all my informants agreed that there was much more to tzniut than looks alone. Tzniut also means to behave appropriately, not to shout, sing or laugh aloud. 'Inner modesty' was described as not 'to be arrogant or proud', 'to be rough', or to 'display your wisdom or your wealth'. Being tzniut was even determined by the things you would read or talk about. Many women referred to the biblical passage 'the honour of the daughter of the king is inside', which they insisted not to interpret in a negative way.<sup>29</sup> Although some claimed it was not easy to explain, tzniut was connected to notions of privacy, interiority, of 'keeping the woman bound to the home'. This could also pertain to women being permitted to drive, although again this was very relative, and determined by community custom. For instance, Susan told me about the way traditions differ with regards to the particulars of tzniut:

I drive, but there are many women of the Hasidic community who don't drive, and one of my daughters didn't understand... One of the rebbetsins.... Right, she asked me to drive her somewhere, and my

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daughter asked me, she said ‘if they think driving is not proper for women, how can she ask you to drive her?’ And I said, ‘you know, I’m going to ask her’, so she said that this is her tradition that they don’t driven this is also... I don’t know whether this is called a breach of modesty... Anyway, she said since we drive and we can do many good things by driving, it’s not wrong for us to drive, with our tradition that we may drive... It says somewhere in the Bible somewhere that the honour of the daughter of the King is indoors. That’s not such a nice translation of it, but that’s what this phrase means, right... And that means that a woman should not show herself too much outside, and driving is an act which is for the outside, you’re going places, it’s not an inside activity. This is by us also one of our tenets, it’s just that by some people more than others...

Michael Kaufman (1995: 28) also refers to King David’s teachings in the Bible: ‘All glorious is the princess within’, and to the eleventh-century commentator Rashi who relates the verse ‘to the reserve and modesty of women and their relationship to the palace of Judaism – the home’. Sarah is said to ‘personify the idea of privacy’:

When the angles visit Abraham and ask where Sarah is, he replies, ‘In the tent.’ *Rashi* comments: ‘*Tzenuah hi*,’ She is a private person. Although he was the public person and she the private, Sarah surpassed Abraham in prophetic power. Can one postulate from Sarah a correlation between privateness and spiritual power?

Moshe Meiselman (1978: 12) refers to the same commentary and stresses it does not imply that ‘hidden from the public view’ implies inferiority. King David’s verse would have been used in rabbinic literature in two ways, according to Meiselman (*ibid.*):

First, it has been viewed as a statement of the private nature of the female role, and second, as a panegyric on the private nature of the religious experience in general. The Midrash unifies the two interpretations and sees the same underlying thread running through both applications of the verse – true achievement is always in the private sphere, hidden from the public eye.

As referred to in the previous paragraph, Orthodox Jewish feminist Tamar Frankiel (1990: 35-36) appropriates idea of a connection between modesty, women’s sexuality, spirituality and power:

It follows that Yehudit, Esther, Ruth, and Tamar had to be otherwise chaste, modest, and pious. And the reverse images, of the harlot or the

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adulterous woman, are such powerfully negative ones in Israelite literature precisely because the image of sexual holiness is so strong. [...] The feminine models in Judaism tell us that sex used in any other way than for holiness is dishonest to God, dishonest to the purpose of our feminine being. The woman who knows her sexuality and her inner, spiritual self can recognize her true purpose in life, can act with power and confidence at any moment, and can thereby affect her own destiny, the destiny of her people, and that of the whole world.

However, most of my interviewees claimed that the main reason for modesty was that the body of a woman was beautiful, to be treated with dignity and respect. The woman must be modest in order not to 'provoke other men', 'put wrong thoughts into their minds' or cause them to be 'lead into temptation'. Covering the body also meant not to expose or 'cheapen it outside' and to 'keep it beautiful and alone for the husband'. Interestingly, through behaving and dressing modestly, women also felt that they could control their husband's faithfulness to them. According to Hannah:

It's very important that the man only interacts with his own wife, and if you're in a company and there are women who are not dressed tzniut... We therefore do not want our men to go to other women, so that's why the sleeves and the wig... Then there's much less chance that they...

Being modest rather than 'ostentatious' or 'showing off' was linked to the broader context of women's place within the family or private sphere, and keeping her bound to the family and obligations in order not to be attracted by the 'outside world'. However, important to note is that my interviewees did not interpret this at all as submissive confinement. Being a pious woman did not mean that one could take on positions or jobs of responsibility and authority within the community. My respondents stressed that there was no *religious* prohibition on a strictly Orthodox Jewish woman even becoming a headmistress or even 'director of the Delhaize'<sup>30</sup> if she wanted. When I asked Tina if there were any religious objections to women working outside of the home, she answered the following:

Of course, you always have men who... but I think that that is the same everywhere, who don't want their wives to work... Maybe less nowadays, but twenty years ago it was like that, that men said 'You stay at home', I think and maybe we're a bit slower than... But religiously there is nothing against it. Of course if you go and work somewhere where they tell dirty jokes all day, than you're stuck there and it's not very nice at all. And you can think that is not encouraged for young girls, to go and work somewhere, where... Because who knows, maybe

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they will see someone there or someone will fall in love with me, or whatever and that is not appreciated...

Many of my respondents – and particularly the senior women who did not have to take care of small children anymore – were incredibly active, outgoing women, as rebbetsins and teachers or involved voluntary work, counselling and charitable activities. However, this activity mostly took place within the community. Like many of the young men who go off to yeshivas abroad, many of the women's daughters visit special Jewish women's colleges – usually for teachers' training – in Israel or in other cities of the Diaspora. In practice, the rules of modesty and the limits placed on interaction between women and men make it difficult or impossible for strictly Orthodox Jewish women to pursue certain studies and many jobs, due to the mixed and 'immodest' environments in the broader society. Especially in smaller diasporic communities such as that in Antwerp, the possibilities and opportunities may be more limited.

Whereas I read that other researchers had – or felt that they had - to comply to the norms of modesty in order to be able to conduct interviews, or enter strictly Orthodox Jewish women's homes (e.g. El-Or 1994; Morris 1998), when I asked some of interviewees about what they thought about the way I dressed, they answered this was not relevant. I suspect that as a 'goy', perhaps I was 'judged' less in terms of my own perceived feminine appearance and behaviour. Although they may have had their personal opinions, tzniut did not seem to apply to me in the same way it would apply to a modern 'emancipated' non-observant or secular Jewish woman. Tirza simply said to me: 'I know that you follow another path'.

### *Conflicting Gender Ideologies*

If the laws of niddah can be conceived of as the 'prototype' of a strictly Orthodox Jewish woman's mitzvah, then the above paragraph on what my interviewees stressed as fundamental in women's religiosity, tzniut, or modesty, can be interpreted as the very definition of female piety. Whereas the pious strictly Orthodox Jewish man is ideally committed to the activities of study and prayer in the public space, then piety itself for women is a gendered activity, related to the way religious discourse 'constructs' women as sexualised beings. When I asked my respondents their views on the status of women in the outside world, or what they thought of the feminist movement, then it became clear to me the paradox which a traditionalist community faces, in striving to retain and reproduce its religious identity, that is *patriarchally* and *ethnically* defined.

Davidman (1991, 1995), Kaufman (1993, 1994, 1995) and Morris's (1995, 1998) research on ba'alot teshuvah in the U.S. showed how newly Orthodox women who had previously lead secular 'modern' lives, often capitalised on a kind of cultural feminism, stressing an ideology of sexual

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difference which they found in traditionalist religious rhetoric. This they opposed to what they perceived as the 'failure' of liberal feminist ideologies of equality. In Bonnie Morris's study of women as proselytising agents within the Lubavitcher community, positive models of female spirituality and family are similarly propagated. Strong anti-feminist rhetoric is applied, despite their rejection of the idea that women who lead Orthodox religious lives would in any way be subjugated or inferior to men. Morris (1995) argues this anti-feminism can be explained through the priority given to ethnic survival and the association of both women's subordinate status, and the consecutive feminist movement, within the Christian or secularised majority culture. In previous chapters, I similarly drew attention to the way in which the relationship between Jewish identity and feminism is a complex issue; due to the way, historically, the feminist movement has marginalized the 'differences' between women along axes of 'race', ethnicity and religion.

Apart from the clear insistence on maintaining traditional gender ideology and roles - hegemonic in patriarchal religious discourse - as a part of simply 'upholding tradition', other factors certainly play a role in the way strictly Orthodox Jewish authorities and communities perceive feminism and the demand for gender equality as a 'threat'. The feminist movement and its critiques of patriarchal religions was not only often perceived as anti-Semitic. It was seen as a threat to the family, and women's role as mothers and a reproductive agents in both an educational and in a 'physical' sense. As an 'ethnically' defined religious tradition, and especially one in which according to halakhah Jewish identity is transferred only by the mother onto the child, the modern demand for the autonomy and equality of women was not only seen as a possible threat to the survival of religious tradition, but also the actual existence of ethnic continuity. Particularly since the holocaust and the great rate of assimilation amongst Jews, survival has been proclaimed a crucial issue by Hasidic and other strictly Orthodox authorities. This was similarly emphasised by a number of the women I spoke to. The invocation of the religious commandment of procreation, and the prohibition of, or at least restrictions on birth control that are propagated by religious authorities, ensure that women in strictly Orthodox Jewish communities are seen as 'the biological producers of children/people', and therefore quite literally attributed the status of 'bearers of the collective' (Yuval-Davis 1997).

As frum-born women, my respondents were less apt to emphasise ideas of women's special, 'superior', or innate spiritual qualities. As I showed in the way they 'constructed' gender, a multiplicity of discourses was applied, underlining a paradigm of 'different yet of equal value', primarily located in the realm of religious *practice* and gender roles. The status of women in the outside world, and the developments ever since the second feminist wave in Western society, could not have gone unnoticed to my interviewees though. Especially since they were middle-aged to senior-aged, and lived in a broader society in which considerable changes had taken place concerning gender relations and

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'sexual mores'. Whereas some women stated that feminism was simply 'not an issue' for themselves nor for the community in which they lived, when I kept on questioning, many had outspoken and expressed both positive and negative opinions on what they perceived was the state of the 'outside world', which was notably often understood in terms of 'gendered morality'. Susan for example:

I believe people are individuals, that you can't classify all men here and all women there... And I have an example, my mother in law, who is the boss in the business, she works all day, she doesn't know how to cook... But to say she is a feminist, she's not a feminist, this is her nature... She wouldn't even believe in having women making their own minyans, their own ten people to pray together, saying we're just as good as the men... That doesn't come into our realm of thought, we are just as good as the men, but we are different, so for me feminism is really not an issue... And my husband believes that women can do anything that men can do... My daughter in law tells me, Samuel, that's my son, 'Whatever I want him to do for me...' He says my mother changes the light bulbs at home, ha, ha, it's absolutely not an issue...

Leonie similarly thought gender relations were more of an individual thing:

I find that when I read about emancipation, I do think about it... I just mean, the world, especially in the time of 'Dolle Mina'<sup>31</sup>, it's a while ago now... But I thought what are they talking about? We are already much more emancipated by the Jews I thought, but that's something depending on the individual. I mean you always have insecure men who say 'This is my right'. [...] I mean of course you might have Jews who need it [feminism] but you will not reach them anyway, just like non-Jews, but I was brought up that way, so I thought that feminism was quite superfluous and insane, but I do see... The status of women in the world has improved the last years, but maybe not really... I don't know...

I asked Leonie if she could that say that for example economic equality between women and men was compatible with the position of women and men in Judaism:

Yes, every Friday evening, the man says at the table, he reads from Proverbs, a piece: 'Who can find a woman of valour...? So it's about her, about this world, God in relation to the world, so the women gives form to this world, so really we don't really need emancipation for Judaism, that's not really necessary, not relevant. Ok, I mean in society it's necessary, because in that way you can get jobs and so on, but no not really... There were always Jewish women who is told about what

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they did, that they did step outside to let their men learn Torah, all the things they did and earned... I mean you will always have men, who oppress their wives, but they are just imbalanced types, but as a principle that's not Judaism. Everyone just has his or her task in religion and what you make up around all that, that's up to you...

Many of my interviews replicated the general view of feminism, as in women 'wanting to be like men'. When I asked Chana on her views of 'women's lib', as she called it:

I feel sorry that people have to prove that they are the same, but I basically believe that... I wouldn't want to be a man, I mean I never had any visions... I'm very content to be a woman, and in a way and to a certain degree I think it's sad that you have to... who do I have to prove to, to myself that I'm equal? I think I'm equal in any case, I don't think I'm any less, I don't think any of us are any less, but this is the way I look at it... I mean it's normal, you know I can even understand how women's lib started, because women did feel suppressed to a certain degree and it could make sense, it could be... We, you know, I didn't feel this at all... ... I think because my father very much respected my mother, and because I married a man who respected me from day one onwards, right? Besides loving, respecting again is not always loving right, I think as a result, I think I have been exposed to men in my family... Later I've been confronted with different..., right? I never felt that we needed more... [...] There is an innate respect for women right, even so let's say he won't give you a hand when he meets you, but he'll talk to you... But there is an innate... Whether all Jewish people have it, I don't know, I've been lucky, I think many Jewish people have do have it, even though the one off you meet... I think the world sees us, them, as you know, black-hatted, you know, looking away and everything, but I think deep down underneath that we would be honest enough to say what they really felt, he, not all of them, but you'd be surprised what you'd hear, you'd be very surprised...

The more 'Hasidic' my respondents, however, the more they rejected what they perceived as feminism and the emancipation of women in the outside world. Miriam (Belz), who is a counsellor, claimed:

It is said that when Alexander the Great conquered a country in which only women lived, they said 'If you conquer us, what will the people say, that you have conquered a country with women?' And he left them alone, and they were right, because the feminists want to make the woman equal to the man, but this didn't work and led to bankruptcy. God created us this way, everyone has his or her role and everyone is

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happy with this. There is a harmony that fits, man and woman are equal in value, and must be able to develop and self-respect in everything instead of wanting to change the roles. ...

However, despite her conservative view, Miriam was not entirely negative about women's emancipation, a development with both positive and negative sides, from which traditionalist communities could not remain unaffected. Miriam even suggested that a kind of emancipation for men had to take place:

Much has been invested in the world of the woman and developments have definitely taken place, but there has been less emphasis on men, because so much has been done to save women... This cannot be turned around, women have learned to have self-respect, they are full of everything and know where they stand. This cannot be turned around, this is inevitable. But maybe something must change for the men, sometimes this causes trouble. The woman mustn't learn Talmud, but for everything there is a way... You basically do have the stronger and the weaker sex, the man is leader of marriage and the family and sometimes this is difficult for a woman if she feels stronger. But after the years this balances out when he's studying and working... But I have read that this is also a problem in the outside world, that girls study too much, and because of feminism women know much more, become more self-aware while men are just looking for a nice and sweet girl. Women are looking for men who can take on a man's role, like taking quick decisions and this is difficult. So I do consider the developments positive but it couldn't happen any other way, this is the way it is, but then nothing is like it is a hundred years ago, the world has changed tremendously.

Hannah, who is in her late sixties, and the wife of a dayan (religious judge), also expressed the viewpoint of changes in the outside world affecting gender roles in her own community as 'inevitable', but was more sceptic on the possible benefits of these changes. When I asked her what she thought of the fact that Orthodox Jewish girls study much more than they used to, she answered attesting to same kind of rhetoric referred to earlier, in that girls needed education in order to keep them within the boundaries of the community, rather than 'lose' them or allow them to 'glitch', as one respondent put it:

There's no question that this has changed, but are they better girls than their parents and grandparents? My grandmother didn't study, but she was very wise. She learned a lot herself, she read a lot and she knew a lot like stories and common sense. She passed on her knowledge orally. There has never been much illiteracy among Jewish women. Women

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learned their prayers by heart. My mother did learn to read, but not at school. But the development cannot be turned back, nowadays you must give girls an education. The world has become so open, so she has to have some immunity. She has to know the right approach to a problem. For example, she must know about going to the moon, and learn this from secular subjects, and about the media, although we try to keep a distance. I think slowly but surely people have started seeing what damage the media has done in general, especially in the U.S.A. It's a shame because TV could have been very educational.

Hasidic Sarah, fifty-years old, a teacher and wife of the head of a *kollel*<sup>32</sup> and mother of three, was utmost convinced of the natural and qualitative differences between women and men. She was much more critical of the idea of 'women's equality', when I asked her opinion on women's liberation and feminism:

We think that it was against the woman. When I was a child, then a man who took a heavy case from a woman and help her, nowadays they carry themselves, no one would get up for her on a bus... We think that the women lost a lot, a lot through this equality, they lost a lot of respect, a lot of consideration, a lot of... No, I don't believe... I rather prefer to be woman, have a family, to have less power and even less career, but to have the respect of my husband and my children and to keep my dignity, to keep my role as queen of the home, in the family... And I wouldn't like to compete, I give him respect, even though many things I know better! Ha, ha... But I think there must be some hierarchy, some people understand things better than the prime minister, but he is still the prime minister, ok, so to give respect...

Although the perspectives of my interviewees varied in what they saw as the gains and the setbacks of the changing status of women in society, often taking in ambivalent standpoints, they were consistent in their view of women and men as 'of equal worth' in their own communities and religious traditions. In order to be religiously observant and to retain their identity as strictly Orthodox Jewish, they necessarily insisted on gender role differentiation in line with what would be called highly 'conservative' from the general 'outside' – and definitely 'feminist' point of view. When I asked their opinion about the 'state of the outside world' in general, many of the answers pointed to the very conflict in diverging gender ideologies, often connected to notions of morality, or more precisely 'moral decline'. The problems of the broader society were often linked to the loss of security and values, particularly in relation to the demise of gender certainties, nuclear families and above all, the way in which 'modesty' and sexual morals had disappeared. According to Hannah for example, continuing on her opinion of feminism:

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It's quite clear that the woman is respected and she is also secure, she knows that he doesn't look... Normally, there are always exceptions, but ninety-nine percent, our women, even when we grow older, our middle age, I'm fifty... We're secure, and loyal, we are never scared that he will find a younger woman, I can sleep peacefully at night. I know he's loyal, it's for life and... There are sometimes disputes, but the percentage of destroyed marriages is not even a fraction of what... in the outside world. Our family life is always our strength, right through the generations, and this is because of the law and the very clear roles of women and men.

My interviewees often juxtaposed tzniut, as a fundamental religious principle, connected to women's role, and keeping her 'bound' to her family and the private sphere, against the detrimental 'openness' of the outside world. When I asked Hasidic-oriented Tirza (mid-sixties) about the meaning of tzniut:

It's difficult to explain, it has to do with the home and the family. If you make yourself conspicuous, and go around with other men, start cohabiting and so forth like happens in the open world, where everything is allowed... Does this bring you closer or further from your family? I've heard that girls just go off to study and live in a room... This is unheard for the Orthodox... Just letting your daughter go and live alone... I mean I do want to wear something nice, something classic and nice, not the latest model or anything, but not clothes from a hundred years ago... I mean in the Jewish world the morals have also changed... I remember when women first started wearing trousers, when was that?

C: In the sixties I suppose?

I stood on De Keyserlei and we saw women in men's trousers! And what things do you see nowadays? Girls showing off their bare navels... Everything is so open... I find it such a pity, the things that are allowed nowadays, living together, homosexuals... It used to be much more decent didn't it, in the open world too?

When I tried to find out whether morals, gender conservatism and stringency concerning rules of modesty had increased during the last decades in the strictly Orthodox Jewish community of Antwerp, or during my respondents own lives, the answers were again somewhat ambiguous. Although in principle my respondents claimed they were not living any differently or 'stricter' than they had done when they were younger, I inferred that an increase in stringency and isolationism opposed to the 'outside world' had taken place. Whereas many of my informants had been brought up in contact with secular culture, and many had even followed – if not finished higher secular education, their daughters and granddaughters (and sons and grandsons) had been more 'closed off' to the

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outside world. Many drew attention to the fact that divorce and broken families were on the rise, and they pointed to many other disastrous consequences of the 'permissive society'. In general they perceived society to have changed for the worst, contrary to decades ago when 'things were much less open', and decent, 'even in the outside world'. Whilst many changes had inevitably influenced and 'modernised' their way of life, some claimed that this did not imply that they lived any more or less observant than their mothers or grandmothers had done. Others admitted to an increase in religious stringency and separatism. The lack of 'boundaries', with everything 'being allowed' and 'having its price', did make it necessary to raise their children in a stricter and more isolationist environment, protected from the dangers of the media, sexual education, permissiveness, and 'vulgarity'. Many of my respondents used to go to the beach, but now they could not anymore because of the nudity. They used to read the newspaper, but were fed up with the headlines on murders and bikinis on the front page. Therefore, from the native point of view, it was not so much *their world*, but the *outside world* that had changed. According to Sarah:

The difficulty is coming from the outside, not the inside, the difficulty is the attitudes in the outside world. This is a big problem nowadays, to protect our youngsters. We know where we are, and to us, we see that the world is not going towards a happier society, healthier society. To us it looks as if they are going backwards, in morals, in justice, in security... But how to protect our youngsters of the influence? So we have to be much more strict nowadays. When I was child [after the war in Europe] they learned in the general schools, not Jewish schools, nowadays they can't do that, because they would be exposed to a certain kind of behaviour, or studying, or media, or videos, or immoral things like that... You can't do it anymore... So what can you do? Can you keep the children away from papers, from television? It's very, very difficult, so it becomes much more difficult, that's why we have to have our own institutions, we can't allow them to mix with the non-Jewish society, and we have to provide them with magazines, enough cultural material, we do that... .. So we have our own colleges, we have our own seminars, oh yes, our religion, believes very much in... Concerning what's going on in the outside world, and adapting also... We don't ignore, and just sit and wait for Moshiach, and close our eyes... No, we are always involved in politics, economical life, cultural life, but since nowadays morals are so different and so low, we have to be more careful, to protect ourselves and our children mainly, to the influence which we find is a dangerous influence... And there are youngsters who get swept, but it's a small minority...

Television, videos, and pc's were not so much the problem, it was their immoral messages, so they could be used, as long as this happened in a

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controlled, 'kosher' way. So on the one hand my informants claimed to have necessarily 'adapted' to the outside world (especially in its technological modernisation). On the other hand, they claimed that they had remained essentially 'the same' in terms of practising and passing on their religious identity and tradition. In order to remain the same and continue tradition, however, opposed to the downside of change in the surrounding society, this required partaking in a resistance toward the sexual and gender politics of secular modernity. For most this involved reproducing the discourse and practice of women's proper religious or moral behaviour, as a defining feature for both women's own religious identity, but also that of collective strictly Orthodox Jewish identity. In the final paragraph, I shift from my informants' voices and agency to the level of this collective hegemonic discourse on gender in traditionalist religious traditions. Here I end with a more critical feminist analysis, by situating my local analysis of gendered subjects in more comparative contexts of the relationship between gender and religious traditionalism or fundamentalism on a global scale.

### *Women as Agents and Symbols in The Politics of Religious Identity*

*As a secular Jewish citizen of the State of Israel, I watch the fundamentalist arena with resentment. As a feminist anthropologist, I try to decode their discourse and experience it as a form of communication as well as critique.*

Tamar El-Or (1997: 672)

That the notion of women as 'bearers of the collective' recurs in various contemporary religious traditionalist, fundamentalist and nationalist movements throughout the world has been argued by feminist scholars like Gita Sahgal and Nira Yuval-Davis (1992a), Yuval-Davis (1997), and is illustrated in various cross-cultural collections (e.g. Charles and Hintjens 1998; Howland 1999; Moghadam 1994a; Sahgal and Yuval-Davis 1992b). First however, the question whether the frum-born Jewish women from the strictly Orthodox Antwerp community I interviewed, and have hereto called 'traditionalist', may be straightforwardly considered 'fundamentalist' needs to be touched upon briefly.

In most of the general ethnographical studies of contemporary Hasidim discussed in chapter five (e.g. Heilman 1992; Kranzler 1995; Mintz 1992), the concept of fundamentalism in order to describe these traditionalist religious communities is somewhat curiously seldom appropriated.<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Webber (1987: 97) is highly critical of the pejorative and outsider concept of fundamentalism as applicable to contemporary traditionalist Jewish identities. Webber prefers to take a closer look at the ideological structures and

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circumstances that have given rise to the usage of this term, ‘whether it be seen as a “response” to modernism or simply as a re-statement of traditional orthodox tenets which modernists classify as “fundamentalist” so as to make sense of their position appear normative by contrast’. On the other hand, the type of publications on fundamentalism ever since Marty and Appleby’s prestigious Fundamentalism Project, and as unambiguously becomes clear in Heilman and Friedman’s (1991) contribution to the first volume of this series, the contemporary *haredim* of Israel are clearly identified as Jewish fundamentalists. Moreover, the authors consider the *haredim* as the successors to the historical Hasidic movement, an ‘early form’ of Jewish religious fundamentalism (chapter six). Other authors similarly consider the traditionalist movement of Hasidism originating in the seventeenth and eighteenth century as the ‘roots’ of Jewish fundamentalism of today (e.g. Armstrong 2000; Stump 2000). So there are obvious complexities in applying ‘fundamentalism’ as an overarching concept for what is identified as a worldwide growing phenomenon. Many scholars – however critically or thoughtfully – taking a comparative, rather than a strictly ethnographical viewpoint, nonetheless refer to the contemporary *haredim* as one of the two main forms of Jewish fundamentalism, the other being religious Zionism, predominantly embodied in *Gush Emunim* (the Block of the Faithful).

Whereas *Gush Emunim* oppose secular Zionism, in their vision of the erection – and territorial expansion or repossession - of a religious state, many Israeli *haredim* do not necessarily share what is often seen as one of religious fundamentalism’s defining features: the refutation of the separation between religion and politics, between the ‘church and the state’. Even though they do believe in the coming of the Messiah, the Satmar Hasidim for example, are adamant in their condemnation of the religious Zionist literal vision of the Land of Israel as the context for the Messiah’s arrival. For this reason, a writer like Lustick (1993) rejects the application of the term fundamentalism for the majority of any Haredi (Hasidic or Misnagdic) communities. For they do not politicise their messianism in the sense that they are seeking to transform society through state politics, although in practise they may be politically active in the securing and the preservation of their own ‘isolationist’ communities.

Madeline Tress (1994: 315) then again, argues that even *Gush Emunim* ‘in terms of religious orthodoxy’ cannot be considered ‘fundamentalist’: ‘Moreover, since the Jewish tradition is based upon the authority of various commentaries on the text itself, such as Talmud and Midrash, classical Judaism cannot be truly fundamentalist. If anything, secular Zionism, through its rejection of Talmudic tradition and reliance solely on the Hebrew Bible, is more fundamentalist than the very forces it accuses of being so’. Nira Yuval-Davis (1992b) similarly argues that even the attempt by secular Zionists to separate the spheres of religion and the state ‘as part of their attempt to “normalise” Jewishness into a European-type nationalist project’ ultimately fails, as it needed the Jewish religious legitimation for its most basic claims (being ‘for the

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land' and 'for the people'). Other authors see these differences in terms of degree, categorising the religious Zionists as the more active or innovative radical type, opposed to the more quiescent or conservative Haredi (Cromer 1993; Friedman 1993; Hyman 1999).

So even if many haredim do not ascribe to a conflation between the national and the religious in the definition of their collective identity, and Gush Emunim may be held to be the 'paradigmatic' form of Jewish religious fundamentalism, most authors appear to agree on the overwhelming similarities between haredim, and other forms of what is mostly identified as religious fundamentalism. The differential categorisation on grounds of Zionism, non-Zionism or anti-Zionistic perspectives can moreover be de-emphasised by broadening the definition of 'politics' to more than just party politics and state control. Most haredim in Israel in fact are politically active, and often do appeal to the state in order to support their own political and economic projects (Yuval-Davis 1999). Both groups are furthermore extremely politically motivated in that they reject secularism tout court, in that all spheres of life, including the private or the personal, are seen to be regulated by halakhah, religious law.

When the focus is shifted to strictly Orthodox Jewish communities in the Diaspora, categorisations become complicated even further, as within the context of secular states with freedom of religion, such as in the U.S., these communities do not share the same political struggles vis-à-vis their governments, but can take their isolationism even further. Thus, strictly Orthodox Jews can have a national identity that is that of a U.S. citizen, Belgian, British, etc. For the individual, Jewish ethnic/religious identification nevertheless remains paramount, as was also claimed by many of my own interviewees. The grounds for comparison are further supported by the increasing internationalisation of strictly Orthodox Jewry (see chapter six for Antwerp), and if not an overt orientation towards Israel, at least a positioning vis-à-vis Israel, lives in the consciousness of many diasporic strictly Orthodox Jews. In any case, in general, all strictly Orthodox Jews aim to 'sacralise the profane' in their daily lives, as for these traditionalists, religious identity circumscribes everyday life and experience. As one of the women I interviewed said to me: 'We live and breathe religion, it is not limited to the way you celebrate Christmas once a year'.

Taking into account the same reservations and stressing the necessity for continuous contextualisation and specification of the community or movement under study, I nonetheless believe that the discourse on religious identity and tradition reproduced by the women I interviewed, did show many of the same structural features that have been noted for the gender identity politics of many contemporary movements and collectivities that are referred to as 'fundamentalist'. The securing of identity vis-à-vis that of the 'other' – usually seen as 'modern', 'Western', 'secular' – who is perceived as a threat through clearly defined boundaries is one of these main characteristics. Although the

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context for the rise of fundamentalist movements and the contemporary 'crisis of identities' in general has been referred to as that of 'modernity and its discontents', the relationship with modernity is also often described as ambiguous or 'dialectic' (Silberstein 1993: 6). As I referred to in the previous paragraph, the growth of these communities has clearly depended on and is known for appropriating precisely typical 'modern' elements in order to thrive, in particular technology, the media, etc. Whatever important differences there may exist between, and within different forms of religious fundamentalisms, the battle to preserve what is understood to be the traditional religious identity of the community, almost cross-culturally involves opposing a specific feature of Western modernity. This I argue, concerns gender equality and in particular the disintegration of patriarchal society as a major historical development throughout the West and beyond during the twentieth century. In this 'control of women' through for instance strict gender segregation, or preventing women's access to the public domain and positions of (religious) authority, religious discourse is then often used as a means of justification, and always in the name of 'timeless tradition', defying the internal and cross-cultural dynamics of gender throughout time.

As I have tried to show, however, for many of the strictly Orthodox Jewish women in my case study, there appeared to be a tension between continuity and innovation of traditional gender patterns. Gender appeared as a pattern of generational sociality and practice, rather than the appropriation of overt explicit essentialist gender ideology in accounting for clear-cut gender roles. Typical of traditionalist Judaism in general, the preservation of religious identity is expressed through halakhic observance, thus in the realm of behaviour rather than, or at least above religious doctrine and belief. Beyond individual identity, the regulation of women's behaviour is nonetheless crucial in the definition and reproduction of both the identity of the group and the 'imagined' community. Gender not only functions as a marker of difference between women and men, but as a marker for the difference between the group's identity versus the 'other', in this case secular modern society, or as my informants referred to, 'the outside world'. Beyond the construction of women as the 'biological reproducers' of the strictly Orthodox Jewish ethnicity, and as the primary agents of socialisation of the young (Moghadam 1994b: 18), women also function as the 'symbolic border guards and as embodiments of the collectivity'. At the same time, they are its 'cultural reproducers' (Yuval-Davis 1997: 23), or the 'cultural carriers' of group identity (Saghal and Yuval-Davis 1992a: 8).

This 'burden of reproduction and representation' means women and their 'proper' behaviour in many fundamentalist, nationalist and ethnic projects often symbolise the integrity or 'honour' and the boundaries of the collective identity. The control of women's sexuality and her bodily praxis, as in restrictions on ways to comport oneself, dress and behave appear to be characteristic of many patriarchal societies, cultures and religious traditions.

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However, in those contemporary communities which are seeking to preserve and reproduce 'tradition', this control is often not only intensified, but takes centre stage in maintaining the difference between the own and the other's identity. In the case of strictly Orthodox Jewry, and as testified in many of my interviews, gender functions as a marker for further difference and isolationism, although from the 'native viewpoint', change is attributed to the other and therefore an external cause is identified for any increase of gender conservatism.

According to many of my interviewees *tzniut* or modesty is one of, if not the most important principles circumscribing women's religiosity. Besides the mitzvot, that are seen as gender neutral and thus equally incumbent on both women and men, in concordance with men's specific public ritual role, women as keepers of the home and the private world are to follow an ethic of modesty. The regulation of women's sexuality as an essential tool for the construction of collective identity is also expressed in the laws and rituals surrounding niddah, or the family purity laws. The individual responsibility of each woman to abide to these laws was interpreted by my informants as of enormous importance, not only for the husband and family, but for the community, or as one Hasidic woman said to me, 'for the sake of the nation.'

I also referred to the research on contemporary religious Zionist discourse on the laws of niddah in Israel, which shows how the meaning of niddah has expanded to the public domain, rhetorically linking the importance of the practice of the laws by women to collective Jewish identity (Yanay and Rapoport 1997). In an analysis of literature by Orthodox Jewish women from various backgrounds, Jody Myers and Jane Litman (1995) suggest the discourse on the traditional role of observant women, including the practice of the family purity laws, is more apologetic when written by the women who were formerly secular. In trying to reach a secular audience, they require a 'counter-ideology', incorporating concepts and symbols from the secular world in order to justify Orthodox practice. The literature by frum-born women, the authors argue, is not in need of the same level of sophistication in explaining the laws women must follow, as obedience to God and the fact that the laws have been practised for generations in itself suffice. My interviewees also appeared to have less essentialist understandings of gender and the idea of an ideology of female superiority was absent. There was also less emphasis on cultural or symbolic meanings in explaining and accounting for the laws of family purity among my frum-born respondents. Still, in my interviews, similar rhetoric was used in attributing collective responsibilities to women, as expressed in their correct individual behaviour, which will guarantee the 'purity' and the 'modesty' of the whole community. It therefore seems to be the case that women and their behaviour functions as an important *symbol* in diverse strictly Orthodox Jewish communities, and in similar ways in various identity politics in many religious traditionalist, fundamentalist or nationalist movements throughout the contemporary world.

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As frum-born traditionalists however, from their own perspective and in their own voice, many of my interviewees denied that they were not doing anything fundamentally different to what their mothers or grandmothers had done, although some did admit to a possible increase in gender conservatism in recent times. Interesting was that they attributed this to the 'outside world', which for them used to be 'decent', yet had evolved into a society of 'unisex', with too much 'freedom' and with 'everything is possible and everything is allowed', and in general serious moral decline. From the native viewpoint, I argued, paradoxically, change was necessary in order to remain the same. Although many of my middle- and senior-aged informants had been brought up in a society in which everyone was 'decent' - women still wore skirts and sexuality wasn't made public and for sale - their sons and daughters needed much more protection, so that they wouldn't be exposed to the dangers of modern society and possibly 'glitch'. In practice, this has meant an increase in isolationism and gender conservatism, the latter especially consequential for girls and women who must keep bound to the home and private world. The gender ideologies put forward by my interviewees were by no means always or completely essentialist. However, an increase in gender conservatism, as in more gender segregation at younger ages, a more stringent application of modesty laws, - such as applying the rules of dress at a younger age than is even halakhically prescribed - is deemed necessary. Stringency is required to oppose, and what my interviewees strongly disapproved of, as the decline in sexual morals and the dominant dangerous gender ideology in the surrounding society.

The principle of tzniut or modesty in itself was linked to the broader context of a woman's place within the family or private sphere, and keeping her bound to her family and obligations in order not to be attracted by the 'outside world.' However, this was definitely not interpreted as submissive confinement. As all my informants made clear, women's religious duties did certainly not mean that she could not study, work, fulfil herself, or even take positions of authority or responsibility. In practice however, and which is especially the case in diasporic and smaller communities outside of Israel within secular societies such as Antwerp, the rules of modesty simply make it impossible for strictly Orthodox Jewish girls and women to pursue studies or apply for many jobs, as mixed environments are out of the question. Many of my informants in fact had studied later on in life. One woman even solved the problem of a course in alternative medicine she could not follow because of the presence of male students, by inviting the teacher to her own home, with a number of other secular women eventually joining in the lessons that were given in the private sphere of the home. Another woman told me that perhaps new possibilities would open up with ICT, where the difficulties of the physical mixed gender, public secular world would become unnecessary. Above the possibilities for the strictly Orthodox Jewish women I interviewed to educate themselves, their interest even for secular culture and literature – within the boundaries of what

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they considered to be decent and non-vulgar – to travel, work, etc. individual self-fulfilment did remain subservient to their most important duty of maintaining the home. Through their religious obligations as mothers and in a domestic role – religious domesticity -, next to their practice of ‘piety’ through proper modest and sexual behaviour, they saw their role as of utmost importance in the maintenance of stability, tradition and religion.

In the course of the final chapter I have shifted between both levels of women’s religious practice, agency, and resistance or reproduction of dominant religious discourse, ultimately ending with the theme of women as ‘symbols’ of religious discourse (See Sered 1999 and chapter one). This has allowed for a feminist gender analysis, of the place of gender within diverse religious traditionalist, fundamentalist, or nationalist identity politics at the level of communities and movements within in a global context, thus from the level of intra- to intercultural comparison. However problematic the application of often used pejorative terms such as fundamentalism, it cannot be denied that a particular kind of patriarchal religious discourse is on the rise in culturally diverse forms, yet on a global scale. Typical for many of these movements is the appropriation of certain aspects of ‘modernity’ and the rejection of others, most notably gender equality, which is perceived as a threat to the ‘authentic’ identity, religion or tradition. Whether ‘tradition’ is simply being continued – religious traditions such as Judaism being inherently and historically patriarchal from a feminist perspective -, reproduced or innovated, an increase in gender conservatism is no doubt taking place: ‘Women, their roles, and above all their control, are at the heart of the fundamentalist agenda’ (Sahgal and Yuval-Davis 1992a: 1), becoming both part and the parcel of the community’s identity.

Throughout my account however, I have at least tried to give attention to nuances, be wary of simple objectification and over-generalisation, such as the ‘false consciousness model’ or ‘women as victims’ approach that characterised an earlier stage of feminist research - and to some extent still does - on cross-cultural communities. Lynn Davidman (1991, 1995) and Debra Kaufman’s (1993, 1994, 1995) studies of newly Orthodox women are precisely illustrative of a reactive trend in feminist research, which moves beyond the victim-approach. The objective of these analyses is to present more reflexive, fine-tuned, empathetic, and in general more feminist methodologically sound analyses of women’s lives, that are different to or probably almost the counter pole of that of their interpreters. Feminist writers like Sahgal and Yuval-Davis (1992a), Sered (1992, 1999) and (Yuval-Davis 1992a, 1999) are nonetheless critical of the apparent paradox that women who participate in fundamentalist movements - such as the Lubavitcher Hasidim – should actually ‘gain a sense of empowerment within the spaces allocated to them by fundamentalist movements’ (Sahgal and Yuval-Davis 1992a: 9).

Susan Sered (1992), in a book review of Davidman (1991) and Kaufman (1993) for example, takes Kaufman to task for accepting her informants point of view too easily, and neglecting to compare their perceptions with actual

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practice, or including interviews with women who had more negative experiences under patriarchal law, or left the Orthodox Jewish community. Yuval-Davis' (1992a, 1999) own research on what she calls people who become *Khozrim Bitshuva* (returnees) among the Lubavitcher Hasidim, is less extensive than that of Davidman and Kaufman, but nonetheless does portray the downside of the phenomenon, in line with her more general viewpoint on fundamentalism and its detrimental consequences for women's status. Despite all possible differences due to class position or other sociological determinants, the idea of empowerment for these women - e.g. emotional bonding between women in a separate, women's community - remains problematic for the author. Besides the basic halakhic inequalities that remain in place, some of the women and social workers Yuval-Davis interviewed, reported cases of physical and mental exhaustion, post-natal depression among the poorer large families and other familial problems.

The general paradox of empowerment and the necessity for a critical perspective revolves around the dilemma of identity politics of minorities or any kind of collectivities in general: 'Minority women often face the dilemma that the same particularistic collective identity that they seek to defend against racism and subordination, and from which they gain their empowerment to resist dominant oppressive systems and cultures, also oppresses them as women and can include many reactionary and exclusionary elements' (Yuval-Davis 1999: 40). In my own interviews, even if the legitimising 'rhetoric of choice' was absent, the frum-born women I interviewed nevertheless perhaps did paint a rosy picture of their position as women within their traditionalist community. Although I did not make any enquiries about their financial status or 'class', the vast majority of the women living in Antwerp did appear to enjoy comfortable, some even affluent life styles, with home helps for domestic chores or help with the children when they were young. Speaking towards myself as an outsider, from their subject positions as 'spokespersons' for their relatively tiny minority community within a dominant secular and potentially racist modern society, however, I had not expected them to do any different than make this type of 'political' move.

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<sup>1</sup> In a comparative volume on the variety of interpretations of gender in Genesis 1-3 throughout history, (Kvam, Scheering and Ziegler 1999), the editors argue that in all three Mediterranean religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), the Creation story has been interpreted in differential ways. Yet all three religious traditions have used the story of the first man in woman in order to understand and 'construct' gender relations, and in all three traditions, both worldviews, the 'egalitarian' versus the 'hierarchical' are present.

<sup>2</sup> Greenberg borrows this alternative interpretation from Phyllis Tribble, 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation', *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, vol. 41, no. 1, March 1973, p. 40.

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<sup>3</sup> In paragraph 2. Niddah: The Prototype of a Woman's Mitzvah the topic of women's sexuality in Judaism will be discussed more extensively.

<sup>4</sup> Ha-Shem is a euphemism for God, to avoid 'the careless use of God's name' (Glossary in Grossman and Haut 1992).

<sup>5</sup> In her study of gender and assimilation in modern Jewish history, Paula Hyman (1995: 66-67) notes that particularly in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth century women actively participated in secular public economic life. An elite of learned families, which realised the Ashkenazi cultural ideal of full-time Torah study for men even imposed upon the wives 'the primary obligation for sustaining the family economically'. This was a stark contrast to Western Europe where many Jewish women 'assimilated' the 'bourgeois cult of domesticity'.

<sup>6</sup> Sabbath breads, from *challah* or *hallah*, special braided Sabbath loaf. Hallah also refers to the mitzvah of taking of the dough portion during baking, or the part of the dough that must be given to the priest (cohen) according to halakhah (Glossaries in Kaufman 1995 and Zuidema 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Torah portion. The Torah is divided into weekly readings, to be read on each Sabbath (Glossary in Grossman and Haut 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, Alyse Fisher Roller's (1999) book was only published after I conducted my interviews. I did manage to find out more on what sort of fictional literature my interviewees read and even borrowed some books from one Hasidic woman. Whereas some of the more 'open-minded' women I interviewed also read 'decent' secular literature, or certainly had done so when they were young, the more 'ultra' Hasidic women limited their reading to strictly Orthodox Jewish publications. The 'writing community' of ultra-Orthodox Jewish women writers that Roller studies is definitely growing, although these books are not easy to find outside the community and its networks. Afterwards, I did find out that some of the few books I borrowed are included in Roller's bibliography and therefore presumably widely read, like Libby Lazewnik's *Between the Thorns* (1994) and the holocaust testimonial *The Scent of Snowflakes* by R.L. Klein (1989). Fiction by women in the Lubavitcher community is more easily accessible and known to a broader public, such as the recently published *Around Sarah's Table: Ten Hasidic Women Share their Stories of Life, Faith, and Tradition*, by Rivka Zakutinsky and Yaffa Leba Gottlieb (2001).

<sup>9</sup> From Susan Shapiro, *Don't You Know It's a Perfect World?*, Southfield, Michigan: Targum, 1998, p. 97, in: Roller 1999: p. 97.

<sup>10</sup> According to Tamar Frankiel (1990: 72), *Channah* is the mother of Shmuel the prophet, one of the great female leaders of the Bible.

<sup>11</sup> Niddah is translated as 'menstruant' but also refers to the 'laws of family purity', the body of regulations restricting contact between husband and wife during the menstrual period (Glossary Grossman and Haut 1992).

<sup>12</sup> See chapter four for the dilemmas and ethical conflicts in feminist anthropology.

<sup>13</sup> Tamar El-Or's research is also discussed in chapter five and in the final part of the previous chapter.

<sup>14</sup> See chapter six, 2. Entering the Field – Enter Women.

<sup>15</sup> Goy (pl. goyim) is Hebrew and Yiddish for someone who is not-Jew.

<sup>16</sup> Archer derives this model of analysis from anthropologist Sherry Ortner's (1974) famous thesis of the universal subordination of women through their association with 'nature', versus men and 'culture'. See also e.g. Bauman 1995 [1983].

<sup>17</sup> Whereas in Israel there is a strong democracy that ensures a high level of constitutional and legal protection for women's right to equality, affirmative action, etc., concerning issues such as equal pay, parental rights in the workplace, etc., and even familial matters concerning domestic violence, division of matrimonial property, abortion, etc., marriage and divorce are nevertheless regulated by religious authorities of the various communities. According to Frances Raday (1999: 157), the result is that in practice: 'women are excluded from participation in policymaking or public offices in those spheres of public life delegated to autonomous

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regulation by the institutions of the religious communities. Secondly, it subjects women to patriarchal norms in the spheres of social activity regulated by these institutions, particularly the family'. E.g., women are barred under the law from appointment to the judiciary on matters of marriage and divorce. Furthermore, not only are actively religious women subjected to inegalitarian norms. Even secular women's right to marry, divorce or remarry is officially governed by religious precepts. Regardless of their civil rights, Raday argues, their subjection in religious courts consequently 'undermines their assertion of these other rights in civil courts'.

<sup>18</sup> Rav is short for Rabbi or Rebbe.

<sup>19</sup> The film Leonie was referring to is *Left Luggage*, directed by Jeroen Krabbé (Netherlands, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> For many of these modern day attributes, obviously halakhic resolutions have continuously been sought.

<sup>21</sup> Strictly Orthodox Jewish men apparently also use a mikvah for ritual immersion, following the same ritual procedure of going under three times and pronouncing a blessing. Anthropologist Samuel Heilman (1992) describes – and even participates in – the event in his monograph. However, it seems to be more of a communal and social event, a 'social gathering-place of the first order. A place to while away time. A place to exchange opinions and information' (321), such as in the preparations for the weekly Sabbath. Women's immersion by contrast, is a totally private event, except for the presence of the mikvah attendant.

<sup>22</sup> In fact, Kaufman cites an article on research evidence by the same 'Dr. Serr' published in 1972 as Meiselman, including some additional, - but no more recent - medical literature dating from the seventies.

<sup>23</sup> See chapter one for more examples on the way in which 'scientific truth' is both used for, and invested with ideologies of gender.

<sup>24</sup> Onah literally means 'season', and according to Kaufman (1995) in his glossary, refers to the husband's obligation for marital obligations with his wife.

<sup>25</sup> Abramov (1988: 98) uses the 'rules of harchakot' in referring to 'maintaining a distance between husband and wife' during the latter's status as niddah.

<sup>26</sup> Apparently, recently some new women Jewish law experts on the purity laws in Jerusalem have set up some kind of hotline in which other women can call them up for expert advice instead of talking to a man (personal communication with Oonagh Reitman).

<sup>27</sup> According to Biale (1984: 155) karet translates as 'being cut off from his people.' In the Bible it appears as a capital punishment inflicted by God and in post biblical sources as punishment at the hand of heaven, presumably premature death. In any case, though in itself considered utmost serious, it does not seem to be punishable by society.

<sup>28</sup> According to Meiselman (1978: 11), the root of tzniut (*צניעות*), occurs twice in the Bible, once in a verse which translates 'Those who are *private* [in their Torah learning] will achieve wisdom' (Prov. 11:2), and once in the verse: 'He has told you, man, what is good and what the Lord demands from you, but to do justice, love kindness, and to walk *privately* with your God' (Mic. 6:8).

<sup>29</sup> Meiselman (1978: 14) refers to the verse as 'The entire glory of the daughter of the king lies on the inside' (Ps. 45:14), and claims it is entirely non-pejorative, and furthermore underlies much of the Jewish attitude toward the female role.

<sup>30</sup> Well-known supermarket chain in Belgium.

<sup>31</sup> Left-wing feminist activist group from the late sixties, early seventies in the Netherlands and Belgium.

<sup>32</sup> An institution for advanced Torah study, usually for married students (glossary in Kaufman 1995).

<sup>33</sup> A monograph-type of study by political correspondent David Landau (1993) of the haredim in New York, London and Jerusalem, by contrast, does explicitly feature the term fundamentalism.

## CONCLUSION: TAKING RELIGION SERIOUSLY

I have taken on the challenge of 'centring' women's religious agency and standpoint as a kind of situated knowledge from the perspective of feminist gender theory and analysis. Towards the end of my account I hope to have shown how a gendered perspective can reveal the methodological deficiencies of a non-reflexive and de-contextualised approach to the study of religion, that employs a notion of reified 'religion' and the 'religious subject' as an undifferentiated *homo religiosus*. Rather, power, politics, and control appear to lie at the heart of 'religion', especially in the context of contemporary religious traditionalist communities, where religion is appropriated as a vehicle for the construction and reproduction of collective identity. Without getting drawn into a 'religious' debate, e.g. on the feasibility of ridding historical patriarchal religious traditions of androcentrism, and adapting or transforming them according to feminist norms, I have nevertheless attempted to move beyond a 'God's eye view'. Next to the religious point of view, I have similarly proposed avoiding the 'god-trick' in the sense of detached 'objective' scholarship in which the researcher is viewed as detached from her/his own position, instead of being necessarily positioned according to axes of difference, and implicated in struggles and choices on how to live, act and reflect on the world.

Whereas my choice for a case study of women's religious agency in a traditionalist religious community defined according to explicit patriarchal or non-feminist norms has served my methodological theses most poignantly, in terms of a feminist assessment the challenge has been even more profound. Especially towards the end of my account, where I have taken my analysis to the level of comparison and current transnational contexts, new questions have been raised and alternative future directions of analysis have been tentatively proposed. In the very first chapter I referred to the UN Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing (September 1995) in order to illustrate the problematic status of gender as an analytical concept within the context of both contemporary transnational feminist policy and activism, and feminist research and theory in the academy. As an international and intercultural forum, the 'gender confusion' at this conference was multifaceted. Numerous feminist activists and researchers from different corners of the globe showed their concern for the way the mainstreaming of gender had led to a neutralisation of the concept, and its original intent towards a theorisation and eradication of women's subordinate status in many various communities and locations.

However, I also drew attention to another kind of attack on the concept of 'gender', from an entirely different corner and expressing components of a 'backlash' to contemporary feminist concerns. Conservative Catholic activists from countries in both the North and the South were highly represented at the conference and expressed their anxieties over what they perceived as the eradication of gender certainties, family values and particularly homosexuality

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and abortion. Nira Yuval-Davis (1997b: 122) signals how one of the most pronounced differences between the 1995 Beijing Conference on women and the 1985 one in Nairobi, was the prevalence of well-organised fundamentalist, religious and other 'traditionalist' groups at the first. Next to the above noted presence of Catholic conservatives, apparently at least seven Islamist workshops a day took place. Only a year earlier at the 1994 UN Cairo Conference on population and development, an '(un)holy alliance' was contrived between the Catholic Pope and Islamist Iran in their common fight against reproductive rights for women.

Women themselves are participating in what can be viewed as what Amrita Basu (2001) calls the phenomenal growth of transnational networks of the religious right. Both official state organisations and members of non-state organisations are furthermore 'able to achieve a striking degree of consensus' on issues relating to motherhood, sexuality and family values. According to Basu, the growth of these networks has contradictory implications for women's movements. Presenting themselves as local community-based, yet very much the product of transnational forces, these religious movements and alliances appear to lessen earlier polarisations between North and South, and particularly the kind of Western imperialist universalistic feminism that dominated during earlier decades. On the other hand, Basu warns, 'the religious right has really complicated the ability of women's movements to appeal to the language of human rights'. The Vatican for example, is becoming 'particularly adept' in appropriating the language of human rights, arguing e.g., against abortion in it violating the 'right' of the unborn child, while at the same time defending people's 'right' to a large family.

According to Basu, women's movements which are similarly the product of both local and global forces, cannot turn a blind eye, nor 'think about strategies for empowerment without appreciating the importance of the religious right, and the extent to which the agendas of the religious right intersect with those of feminists in peculiar and often unpredictable ways'. In view of these global and transnational contexts I conclude that feminism needs to *take religion seriously*, related to a similar plea I hold for contemporary feminist scholarship. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (1997: 17) for example, draw on the notion of postmodernism in their proposal for transnational feminist practice, and tools of analysis in a comparative mode, rather than 'the relativistic linking of "differences" undertaken by proponents of global feminism'. Instead of dismissing the notion of 'postmodernism' as the 'apolitical celebration of Western popular culture' or an aesthetic rather than a political debate, the authors argue that postmodernism can be read as 'the operations of transnational culture', the 'scattered hegemonies' which are the 'effects of mobile capital as well as the multiple subjectivities that replace the European unitary subject' (7). This would involve a non cultural relativistic approach in the analysis of the place of women in the nation-state in revivals of

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'tradition' and fundamentalisms, but also the relationship between gender, the nation-state and mobile, transnational capital.

Arguing against essentialism in the study of religion and gender, my analysis also draws attention to the way in which, in practice, the contemporary resurgence of traditionalist religion accompanies, and is simultaneously being fed by the representation of 'cultures' in relativist and essentialist ways. For feminist activists and scholars the phenomenon of contemporary identity politics – whether these be 'religious', 'nationalist', ethnic', etc. - that appeals to essentialist differences is problematic, especially when women 'voluntarily' seem to be active participants or capitalise on what appear to be ideologies and practices detrimental to women's status, reproducing or even intensifying patterns of subordination. As Nira Yuval-Davis (1997b: 63) and others suggest – the ba'alot teshuvah being an example –, one of the paradoxes of many fundamentalist and nationalist movements is that women seek comfort from the 'crises of modernity' - and even 'gain at times a sense of empowerment within the spaces allocated to them', in that they offer clear and coherent forms of gender and collective identity and roles. Yuval-Davis (1997b: 37) furthermore notes that it is often the older women who are given the roles of cultural reproducers of the collectivity, 'empowered to rule on what is appropriate behaviour and appearance and what is not and to exert control over other women who might be constructed as 'deviants''.

Movements applying ideological constructs in order to divide people into different collectivities and 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991 [1983]), whether these are 'ethnic' projects, or defined in terms of religious, national, racial, or cultural grounds, draw on various resources in order to establish inclusive – and exclusionary - boundaries of difference and belonging. In these political struggles, gender is often deployed as an important marker of difference, and often in very similar ways to which I have referred. The 'proper' behaviour of women is often used to signify the boundaries of the collectivity. Women are viewed as the 'cultural carriers' of the collectivity, whilst their sexuality is controlled through rules and regulations on marriage, divorce and reproduction, in order to ensure the future generation remains within the boundaries of the collectivity in both biological and symbolic terms (Yuval-Davis 1994: 413). The promotion of the patriarchal family implies an identification with women in their role as mothers and homemakers, often accompanying a restriction on their movement in the public domain.

In gender studies of nationalist movements, similarly, women's symbolic status is often connected to their reproductive roles, with 'only pure and modest women' being able to re-produce the 'pure nation' (Mayer 2000b: 7). Charles and Hintjens (1998b: 2) note how the nationalist ideologies that emerged in late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century Europe were grounded in a specific gender division of labour, sexual orientation and ethnicity. These 'involved notions of respectability and appropriate sexual behaviour, "manliness" and a complementary role for women, and ideas of

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racial superiority'. Women became the guardians of morality and tradition in the private sphere. In the last years of the twentieth century by contrast, nationalism takes many different forms, among which its alliance with religious fundamentalism. In various contexts from postcolonial states to within Western liberal democracies, conservative gender ideology is therefore used and 'rooted in an idealised past', reasserting a collective identity in the face of secular modernity and/or westernisation.

In the so-called 'Third World', the rise of fundamentalism, and/or nationalism appropriating religious ideology can be situated in a postcolonial and particular socio-economic context, rallying against racism, (neo)imperialism and Western supremacy. Many women participate in these movements, and recent feminist research is increasingly paying attention to women's contribution and engagement in fundamentalist discourse, and the way strategies of resistance or complicity are employed that may offer means of agency and empowerment in their daily lives (e.g. Ask and Tjomsland 1998; Brink and Mencher 1997; Howland 1999; Gerami 1996; Jansen 1994; Moghadam 1994a). This shift has been greatly influenced by anti-orientalism and postcolonial critique, and signals an attempt on behalf of feminist scholarship in making amends for its earlier limited or even exclusive 'Western' universalistic focus, towards an acknowledgement for the differences *between* women in both local and global contexts. However, according to Haideh Moghissi (1999) for example, in regards to Islamic fundamentalism, in what she identifies as a kind of 'postmodern' or anti-orientalist analysis, this paradoxically balances towards a convergence with fundamentalist conservatism. In order to counter anti-Muslim prejudices and neo-orientalist representations of Muslim women, women's agency and empowerment is attributed to particular groups of women who have for instance, 'taken on the veil'. The consequence is not only that internal diversity is overlooked, but that critical analysis stops short at the representation of 'authentic', 'empowered Muslim women'. The call for tolerance unfortunately ends up in an endorsement of 'the fundamentalists' solutions to crisis of modernity and modernization' (46).

Moghissi (1999: 47) represents the style of thought and cultural climate that converges with Islamic fundamentalist conservatism as 'postmodern relativism', as 'a style benchmarked, by an uncritical pursuit of the culturally exotic and untouched' (47). However, I argue that the term 'cultural relativism' may be more appropriate for the climate leading to the link Nira Yuval-Davis (1998a) and Charles and Hintjens (1998) make between policies of multiculturalism and the rise of many ethnic or religious fundamentalist movements among minorities in the west. According to Yuval-Davis (1998a: 172), multiculturalist policies and 'anti-racism' which developed in response to the failure of liberal approaches that assumed racism would disappear once immigrants acculturated and assimilated, have contributed to the process of identity politics and proliferation of imagined communities. Multiculturalist

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policies would construct 'cultures as static, ahistoric and in their "essence" mutually exclusive from other cultures, especially that of the host society'. Moreover, Yuval-Davis argues, 'culture' in the multiculturalist discourse is often collapsed into 'religion,' which becomes the signifier of cultural difference.

Debate expressing feminist concerns over the way multicultural tolerance appears to reinforce gender inequality in many minority groups has recently been provoked following the publication of Susan Moller Okin's controversial essay 'Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?' (1999). Okin points to the growing tension between feminism and the multiculturalist concern for protecting cultural diversity in terms of group rights for minority cultures. In Okin's view, this often runs counter to liberal norms of individual freedom and gender equality. Okin's view of 'culture', 'religion' and 'tradition' is highly essentialist and de-contextualised though, reifying clear-cut identities and differences with simplistic statements such as 'most cultures having as one of their principal aims the control of women by men' (13). However, Okin does draw attention to the fact that all collectivities are gendered, and particularly to the fact that advocates of group rights pay little or no attention to the private sphere. From critiques of theories of citizenship through to human rights, feminist scholars have repeatedly emphasised that the distinction between public and the private is itself an ideological construction, and that from the perspective of gender, it is precisely in the latter, concerning the regulation of reproduction and women's behaviour, where gender inequalities persevere. As I have repeatedly argued, in identity politics that draw on ethnic, religious or cultural resources, women often come to symbolise the boundaries of the collectivity, whilst they are expected to reproduce it through patriarchal behavioural norms.

The secular democratic model as a product of the Enlightenment project with its separation between the state and religion; the secular public versus a private sphere, where individuals, families and communities are 'free' to practise religion, according to Yuval-Davis (1994: 7-8) has therefore created a paradox in which 'in the name of pluralism' intolerant ideologies have been endorsed. The consequence of multiculturalist policies guided by ideologies of cultural relativism is that 'members of different groupings [are seen] as essentially different from the "norm", as well as internally homogeneous'. (8) Whilst the naturalisation of a Western hegemonic culture continues, minority cultures are reified, remaining oblivious to internal differences and conflicts along lines of gender and class. Certain segments can then claim to be representatives of 'authentic' cultures or communities, whereby for instance, the demands made by minority women are not regarded 'legitimate'. The most conservative constructions of gender are then considered 'authentic', and at worst enforceable in the name of cultural relativism, pluralism and the freedom attributed to the 'private sphere'.

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The fact that in so much of the identity politics of traditionalist, fundamentalist, nationalist movements or 'ethnic projects' gender conservatism is so pronounced, is generally attributed to the 'crisis of modernity', with which feminism is identified as a symbol of wholly Western, secular and liberal culture and society. In many postcolonial states the – selective - rejection of 'westernisation' has led to nationalist and fundamentalist movements beckoning women to return to their 'traditional roles', in order to preserve the 'spiritual essence' of national identity. As I have extensively elaborated, feminist scholarship has had to – and continue – to deal with the way it has projected Western norms on other cultures and groups, beyond ideas of victimhood and false-consciousness. On the other hand, anti-orientalism and postcolonial critique that has enabled a focus on alternative perspectives of gender relations and models of agency, needs to be wary of perpetuating similar essentialisms when it comes to theorising the differences between women.

Uma Narayan (1997c: 397) for example, warns to be attentive to the common rhetoric that Third-World feminist voices would 'be rooted in elitist and "Westernized" views of their cultures'. She argues that 'for many Third World feminists, their feminist consciousness is not a hot-house bloom grown in the arid atmosphere of "foreign" ideas, but has its roots much closer to home'. Elsewhere, Narayan (1998: 93) argues how feminist critiques of gender essentialism through paying attention to the differences among women, must be careful not to revert to cultural essentialism that represent them as if they were 'natural', or distinct entities: 'Instead of seeing the centrality of particular values, traditions, or practices as *given*, we need to trace the historical and political processes by which these values, traditions or practices have *come to be deemed* central constitutive components of a particular culture' (93).

In my analysis of the discourse of strictly Orthodox Jewish women in a diasporic minority community, I have attempted to apply the same kind of approach, and have attested to similar dynamics concerning the way traditionalism is characterised by particular appropriations of religious and gender ideology. I have similarly shown how in the identity politics of this transnational community, feminism is seen as symbolic of secular modernity and liberalism. Again historical contexts are important in accounting for these processes. As Christel Manning (1999: 32) notes - and I have likewise referred to as problematic in the formulation of a Jewish feminism as ethnically defined -, in the North American context, maintaining traditional gender norms has been a way of safeguarding Jewish identity, whilst embracing feminist norms was seen as Americanisation, thus perceived as a threat to the survival of both tradition of/and the collectivity.

At the same time, my research showed that many of my interviewees were somewhat ambivalent on the issue of women's emancipation. The process of the changing status of women cannot *not* have affected traditionalist communities. Feminist language is selectively but definitely being appropriated in normative discourse, for instance, by claiming that women within the

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tradition of the collectivity were already always equal or even superior, allowing to reject feminism as not only alien, but simply irrelevant to native concerns. As Yuval-Davis (1997a: 195) notes, collectivities as a general rule are composed of family units, and this is where the conflict with ideologies and practices of individualism such as in secular and liberal democracies lies. Traditionalist versions of religion furthermore collide with Western and modern notions of religion as a matter for the individual, rather than communal and belonging to the public sphere (Hawley 1999: 6). Therefore they challenge the private/public distinction that is the very foundation of the secular, pluralist and 'non-racist' society. As I have illustrated, the relationship between gender and religious identity in the contemporary practice of merely one religious tradition, is played out in complex ways. This behoves careful and contextualised analysis with attention to the way multiple factors and axes of power and differences intersect in complex ways.

In the case of Judaism for example, as traditionally a communal religion, Yuval-Davis (1992b) draws attention to the fact that in classical Judaism as such, there was no separation between the 'private' and 'public' spheres within the community. Although strictly speaking women were excluded from public forums of religious practice, communal laws embodied in halakhah equally applied in the 'private' spheres of life. The most significant division was that between the communal sphere of the 'other', of which the gentile state was part. Although historically the general rule was to accept the state's authority and laws, in practice there has been strong resistance to the state's involvement in anything pertaining to the relationship between Jews and within the boundaries of the community. After the Enlightenment and the founding of modern states and notions of citizenship, as I have shown, Jewish identity was reconstructed in terms of a voluntary 'religious identity' modelled following Christian norms. Jewish identity has consequently been reformulated in complex ways in various political, national and ethnic projects. For traditionalist Orthodox Jews who continue to abide by the rules of halakhah in the communal sense and circumscribing all aspects of everyday life, the question how to remain 'religious' thus concerns the perpetuation of religious practice, cross-cutting the boundaries between public and private which are defined in accordance with deeply gendered norms.

The fact that general feminist scholarship has so far greatly marginalized feminist studies in religion, as I observed in chapter one, is therefore not that surprising considering its predominantly secular and liberal tenets, and considering the context in which feminism has grown in a climate of declining religion, the latter considered a bulwark of a patriarchal legacy, circumscribing centuries of gender ideology. Whereas a number of Western feminists during the first wave of feminist movement were more positive about religion, this involved appealing to it in order to ground claims of for instance ontological equality between women and men. Radical and cultural feminist versions of alternative religion then again, mostly appear to be founded on ideas of

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essential differences between the sexes, although hierarchies may be inverted and separatism propagated. These kinds of feminist 'scholarship' have similarly been held as suspect, or doubtful as to their validity for claiming a place within the academy. Conversely, postmodern constructionist feminist theories of gender have not taken really influenced the feminist study of religion, where as I have argued, the notion of *essentialism* prevails in the conflation of confessional and 'outsider' boundaries.

If fundamentalist movements can be characterised by their appeal to religious immutable and foundational essences (fundaments), - however these may be defined concerning the tradition in question - from a comparative perspective, they appear to share remarkable similarities in their conservative gender ideologies. For these similarly appeal to dualistic gender essentialisms which are in any case diametrically opposed to contemporary feminist liberal and 'third wave' constructionist perspectives. Although these 'fundaments' may be mere 'myths' (Jansen 1994) from the outsider's point of view, the problem is that myths are the very stuff of which religion is often made of. Attributing a foundational status to these (Pinxten 2000) is nothing new in the case of at least the Mediterranean religious traditions, whether the emphasis lies on doctrine, belief, morality or practice. So the problem that feminist activism and scholarship has with 'religion' I think, is that simply in many cases - especially in the monotheistic Abrahamic traditions - these similarly contain and provide deep-rooted essentialist ideas on the essential differences between women and men. If religious studies has to start taking gender seriously in order to move beyond a 'God's eye view', then feminist scholarship and activism equally must start taking religion seriously, both in view of the apparent dangers, *and* the 'empowering' effects it appears to be having in the identity dynamics for increasing numbers of both women and men.

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