

## Introduction: Linking Gender and Religion

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*"My mother wears a burqa, my father does it too.  
I have to wear a burqa, the burqa it is blue. [ . . . ]  
We all now wear a burqa, you don't know who is who. If you want to meet your sister, it  
can be your uncle too."<sup>1</sup>*

These verses are part of a song entitled "Burka Blue" that was produced in October 2002 during a German music workshop at the "Institute of Learning Music" in Kabul, Afghanistan. The workshop's initiator was the German music label *ata tak*, which released a CD with the title "Burka Blue" in 2004.<sup>2</sup> The song, and especially the corresponding music video on YouTube, became—at least in German-speaking countries—one of the media events of the year 2003 and was transmitted by the German TV Program SAT 1.<sup>3</sup> The video clip features three figures wearing long blue burqas, playing drums and electric and bass guitars and posing on a hill in front of Kabul.

The quoted lyrics provide a good illustration of some of the main topics of this special issue. Playing with the visibility of the burqa as well as its covering and concealing character, they question the gendered stereotypes constructed through this sort

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<sup>1</sup>Lyrics transcribed by the authors from the following music video on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bpH83Vi7b9E> (with German subtitles) (8.12.2011).

<sup>2</sup>See <http://www.atatak.com> (6.12.2011).

<sup>3</sup>See <http://www.atatak.com/tontraeger/burkaband/burkablu.html> (6.12.2011) and [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x\\_Y-sw89qTY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_Y-sw89qTY) (6.12.2011).

of clothing. The covering of the body, usually understood as a typical female feature, is here diverted as a blurring of gender identities. At the same time, the lyrics address ongoing processes of social transformations through implicit references to religion. The group uses the burqa as a metonym for Islam, placing it in opposition to another piece of clothing, blue jeans, which are emblematic for U.S. imperialism, as shown by the following verses:

*“My mother wears blue jeans now and I am so surprised.  
Things are changing faster, I don’t know if it’s right.”*

Even if the song never explicitly mentions Islam, its lyrics and their blasting power, ironically playing with the burqa as blurring gender borders, refer to political issues (the Taliban regime in Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001), questions of gender and power relationships and socio-cultural body training through dance and clothing. Simultaneously, the performance of a specific, stereotyped religious culture and identity subverts and puts into question the usual meanings Western societies associate with them.

The interplay between gender identities, contemporary socio-political changes, and religion as a background constitute the main themes of the quoted lines. Although these interactions are here simplified and used humorously, they echo scholarly addressed questions regarding gender and religion within diversified and transnationalized societies, and they also reflect the weight of Islam in dominant scientific and sociopolitical discourses about religion. These topics are at the core of the reflections presented in this special issue: focusing on contemporary European societies and on the U.S., the articles discuss the important social transformations currently manifested through the changing and challenging relations between religion and gender. They also explore the production of new forms of inclusion and exclusion through the articulation of gendered and religious belongings. As gender and religion constitute central categories to (re)produce social difference, the analysis of their interplay is relevant not only for the social sciences, but also from a political and feminist standpoint.

Our approach is a contribution aiming to help fill a gap whose presence has already been underlined by scholars such as

King and Beattie in their book *Gender, Religion and Diversity* or Woodhead in her article *Women and Religion*. King and Beattie described this problem as a double blindness: “on one hand most contemporary gender studies [ . . . ] remain extraordinarily ‘*religion-blind*’; on the other hand many studies in religion continue to be profoundly ‘*gender-blind*’” (King and Beattie 1f). This introduction, alongside the articles assembled in this special issue, aims to shed light on the neglected topics of the interplay between gender and religion and of feminist religious studies.

As seen in our opening example, religious phenomena and systems of belief have gained increased visibility in the context of the facilitated circulation of people, ideas, and goods across the borders of countries and continents. Hence, religious belongings, identities, relationships and practices are not only bound to a given nation-state or a region, but have become transnational phenomena connecting people in wider communities beyond borders and between continents.<sup>4</sup> Religions become present in different areas through migration and transnationalization, which has resulted in an enhanced diversification of European and U.S. societies. Numerous studies have underlined the growing diversity of religious forms, beliefs and practices in Europe and the U.S., where new religious spiritualities have been linked to the presence of migrants.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, in these societies, established and traditional religions have lost their institutional importance for many people, while religious and spiritual beliefs have become more individualized.<sup>6</sup> Some scholars use the term “post-secularism” to acknowledge that despite the marked decrease in the attendance of institutionalized, Christian churches in many European and North American countries, some forms of belief and religious practice remain prominent, albeit much altered, among the general population.<sup>7</sup> These shifts have been accompanied by the idea that religious phenomena can be problematic—although this debate takes different shapes in U.S. and European contexts.<sup>8</sup> The most prominent example might again be Islam, which appears alternately in dominant discourses

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<sup>4</sup>See for example Hüwelmeier and Krause 2010; Levitt 2007; Plüss 2009.

<sup>5</sup>See Vertovec and Wessendorf 2006.

<sup>6</sup>See for example Berger 1999; Davie 2000.

<sup>7</sup>See Gorski and Ates 2008.

<sup>8</sup>See Foner and Alba 2008.

as a threat for civil and national security through the rhetoric of terrorism,<sup>9</sup> as an obstacle for migrants' integration and as a peril for gender equality through stereotypes about practices such as forced marriages and the subordination of Muslim women.<sup>10</sup> Hence, we observe that religious phenomena are constantly evolving, embedded in the complex and dynamic interplay of social and political forces and resistances. Consequently, they are not neutral, but instead remain closely related to issues of power relations, producing new forms of exclusion and social inequalities through local, national, and transnational forces simultaneously at work. Therefore, religious phenomena are closely related to gender issues and raise questions about the meaning of these social dynamics in terms of gender relations; the gendered effects of general transformations such as individualization, secularization, islamization, and transnationalization; their articulation with mainstream narratives about gender equality; and, finally, their intersection with other social categories based on origin, social class, education, ethnicity, sexual orientations, and so on.

Such are the questions that are—at least partially—discussed in the articles of this special issue. The present introduction is divided into three sections. We first present the general epistemological framework, which has implications on a methodological level, in particular regarding the necessity to clarify the terminology we have chosen, i.e., the use of the terms “religion” and “gender.” Our second step is to provide an overview of the research history and of the possibilities we see in the articulation of the two categories at hand. Finally, we present and discuss how the analyses of the articles are embedded within the framework of these crucial questions and transformations.

### **What Do We Understand by Religion and Gender? Epistemologies and Methodological Endeavors**

Before we can consider the multiple articulations of religion and gender, it is necessary to clarify their respective epistemologies and to present the challenges conveyed by both terms. Neither

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<sup>9</sup>See Eckert 2008; Casanova 2004; Cesari 2010.

<sup>10</sup>See Lutz 1991.

religion nor gender constitutes a given and univocal category, and the wide discussions they have give rise to reveals the impossibility of presenting “a generally acceptable definition of either of them” (King and Beattie 5). As concepts deriving their meanings from the wider frameworks in which the researchers and research participants are embedded, they take different shapes depending on the historical context and on theory, methodology, epistemology, and dominant narratives. If it does not make sense to define gender or religion by trying to single out certain essential characteristics, it is useful to clarify the epistemological evolution of both concepts and their specific challenges.

### *Epistemologies*

“Gender” was imported as a *terminus technicus* from linguistics into psychology in the 1950s by John Money and his team, who were working on intersexuality and needed a term that could give a better account of the blurring of “sexual” identification processes than the (at that time) static concept of “sex.” The term “gender” was adopted by the social sciences in the 1960s and has been used since then in various academic traditions and in different languages as a concept of a scientific meta-language.<sup>11</sup> Based on the famous statement by De Beauvoir in her work *Le deuxième sexe* from 1949 “on ne naît pas femme, on le devient” (De Beauvoir 285f), social scientists have shown in the last fifty years the multiplicity of constructions of femininity and masculinity and the different forms of power asymmetries between and within gendered groups.

Epistemologists usually distinguish different phases in the theorization of gender.<sup>12</sup> In a first step, feminist researchers criticized the “male bias” and androcentrism characterizing most academic work within the social sciences.<sup>13</sup> These political and academic endeavors aimed at giving a voice to women, who were considered a “muted group” (to speak with Ardener) given the widespread androcentric view, and they finally lead to the institutionalization of “women’s studies.” The main achievement of

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<sup>11</sup>See Diamond 2004.

<sup>12</sup>See Davis-Sulikowski et al. 2001.

<sup>13</sup>See Rey 1994; Moore 1988.

this academic movement has been to bring to light the variability of power constellations between men and women as social groups, therefore fighting against the idea of a universal (and thus natural) subordination of women.<sup>14</sup>

The illusionary simplicity of binary thinking and its conceptual limits were then highlighted by the emergence of Black Feminism and GLTB (Gay, Lesbian, Transsexual, Bisexual) Studies. Both movements convincingly showed that gender, as a relational and analytical system,<sup>15</sup> is closely linked to other categories of differentiation such as ethnicity, social class, sexuality and so on. It always operates in interaction and simultaneously with other categories of difference,<sup>16</sup> referring to dynamic social representations and the production of naturalized femininities and masculinities. It is therefore related to identities and subjectivities but also to their embeddings into systems of domination and subordination (Butler 880; Gildemeister 531).<sup>17</sup> Feminist researchers belonging to marginalized social groups have denounced the implicit normative values conveyed by the concept's first uses.<sup>18</sup> Their main criticisms were its class-blindness and its hidden imperialistic white middle-class conception about male–female equality and women's empowerment.<sup>19</sup>

Gender hierarchies are inscribed in the division of labor, in social representations, ascriptions, behavioral expectations and, in general, in the social status attributed to the categories of “men” and “women.” Neither a biological characteristic nor a stable social identity for individuals, gender is “done” (West and Zimmermann 125f) actively re-produced through a vast range of social practices and interactions and, hence, varies according to historical, sociological, and geographical contexts.

If gender is a rather recent category, religion as a collective singular and as a universal concept is an invention of the Enlightenment and the modern era (Schlieter 14; Sharpe 21f). Like gender, “religion” has been developed in various directions

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<sup>14</sup>See for example MacCormack and Strathern 1980; Rosaldo 1974; Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Rubin 1975.

<sup>15</sup>See Parini 2006.

<sup>16</sup>See Crenshaw 1994.

<sup>17</sup>See also Bourdieu 1998; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005.

<sup>18</sup>See Mohanty et al. 1991.

<sup>19</sup>For example Hill Collins 2000; hook 1998.

and with distinct intentions and views; it therefore cannot be reduced to one definition.<sup>20</sup> Woodhead recently proposed in her article *Five Concepts of Religion* a taxonomy of five major concepts of religion in the social sciences, each one embedded in specific theoretical traditions. The first concept that has dominated recent social scientific work interprets religion as a system within culture, whereby the focus—depending on the research question—can lie for example on religion as a system of beliefs, of meaning, of values, of discourses or of memory and tradition. The second main approach to religion in the social sciences is the focus on identity, whereby the basic assumption is that religion is first and foremost a matter of the creation and maintenance of social bonds, of belonging and boundaries. The third concept looks at religion as a social relationship. Here, attention is directed to interconnections and networks as well as to the question of how religion helps people relate to each other. The fourth concept, religion as practice, has long been a central focus point, especially in anthropology. A focus on ritual as well as an examination of “popular” and “everyday” religion are also part of this concept. The last concept is that of religion as power: religion indicates where power lies and allows people to interact with it on various levels. These five major concepts of religion are not understood as being mutually exclusive but are regarded as different views of religion that aim to help scholars to justify and critique their conceptual choices. For a “full and rounded study of religion,” all five concepts are needed (Woodhead 138).

In line with these ideas, we understand religion as the result of socio-cultural interactions intertwined with other aspects of culture such as popular media, normative systems, economics, and political transformations.<sup>21</sup> Religion produces socio-cultural systems through processes of domination, subordination, inclusion, and exclusion, all spiced with an “aura of factuality” (Geertz *Interpretation* 90) and—speaking for western culture—constructs some sort of transcendental relations and perspectives beyond the realities of everyday life.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>See Hinnells 2010.

<sup>21</sup>See Woodhead et al. 2002.

<sup>22</sup>See Luckmann 1976; Stolz 2001.

*The Weight of Common Sense*

One of the main difficulties in using the concepts of gender and religion is the tendency to generalize and homogenize, which conveys only a simplistic idea of the richness of the social phenomena that the two concepts encompass. For instance, everyday speech, policy analysis, media reports and occasionally even academic writing routinely treat religion as reflecting the existence of given, definitive and monolithic groups (Islam is xxx, Muslims think that . . . ). A similar problem can be seen in some uses of the category “gender”, such as when it is oversimplified and understood as a mere reference to an unquestioned “men-women” dichotomy. In such cases, reduction processes link social categories based on both gender and religion with strong normative ideas (i.e., about what a good woman, a good religious practitioner or a good religion is).

Common sense narratives shape “folk sociologies” (Geertz Local Knowledge 73f) that carve up the social world in essentializing and naturalizing ways<sup>23</sup> and constitute vehicles of what can be called a “participants’ primordialism” (Brubaker 34f). As shown by Kromidas in her articles *Elementary Forms of Cosmopolitanism* and *Troubling Tolerance and Essentialism* and by Dafflon-Novelle in her research *Les représentations multidimensionnelles*, social groups develop different kinds of representations about gender or other categorization axes such as ethnicity, race or, consequently, religion. The challenge for social researchers, who take vernacular categories into consideration and consider participants’ understandings as serious, is to avoid uncritically adopting one kind of narrative, usually the one of dominant social group(s), as the sole category of analysis. In doing so, they would fail to give an accurate account of the richness of collective representations and the complexity of social experiences. Uncritically adopting a dominant narrative leads studies to implicitly (re)produce social hierarchies as they legitimize some narratives while silencing others. As empirical data, common sense ideas represent an important part of *what should be analyzed*, reflecting on social uses, which are always “circumstantial, contextualised and historicized” (Lavanchy et al. 13).

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<sup>23</sup>See Guillaumin 1992.

Therefore, they do not belong in a scholar's analytical toolkit, as they neither describe nor give analytical insight, but instead act as blurring smoke screens.<sup>24</sup>

### *Methodological Endeavors*

The proximity and, sometimes, the conflation of *emic* and *etic* perspectives is a recurrent concern of social researchers.<sup>25</sup> The dynamics of social categorizations can be conveyed through Clifford's notion of "articulation" (Clifford 468f), used to show the pointlessness of critical work that pits *etic* deconstructions against *emic* perceptions constructed as certainties, and lead researchers to take into account uncertainties, meaning gaps, and incoherencies. This has some methodological consequences. The first we will discuss affects the scientific enterprises of comparison, generalization, and claims of universal truth.

Gender and religion are both analytical concepts based on a western tradition of cross-cultural and trans-historical comparison. As such, they are embedded in specific systems of domination and connected to different forms of political action, social belongings, and cultural framing. Friedrich Max Müller, often seen as the father of the study of religion, already stressed this point in his 1876 work, when he—with a link to the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe—stated, referring to religion, that "knowing one, is knowing none" (Müller 14). This comparative basis of "religion" has encountered growing criticism since the 1960s. While Wilfred Cantwell Smith even proposed omitting the concept of "religion" from scientific research projects (Smith 34), Jonathan Zittel Smith tried to demonstrate in his book *Imagining Religion* that comparison might rather belong to a magical enterprise than to the realm of scientific knowledge. Twenty years later he called in an article with the title *The "End" of Comparison* for careful reflection about the connections between scientific traditions, the intentions of a specific worldview and concrete research intentions. In a similar vein, Thomas Luckmann argued in *The Invisible Religion* that sociological studies of religion were so closely

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<sup>24</sup>See Affergan 1987; Cuche 2010.

<sup>25</sup>See Dervin et al. 2011.

intertwined with Christian churches as formal institutions that further religious manifestations had been made invisible.

Postcolonial scholars expanded this line of criticism by showing that the concept of religion is based on ethnocentric imperialistic views and that it cannot do justice to non-western ideas of religion, instead forcing them into a western pattern.<sup>26</sup> Partly drawing on the legacy of feminist and postmodern research works, postcolonial studies have shown once more the problems inherent in universalizing the category “religion” as well as the dichotomy “woman–man” by questioning the production of social difference and its embeddings within specific power relations.<sup>27</sup>

This criticism put the objectivity of the social sciences into question and had far-reaching consequences for the study of gender as well as of religion. First, shaking the pedestal of science as the exclusive source of knowledge opened the way for more comprehensible, hermeneutical understandings of religion, religious phenomena, and belief systems as well as gender regimes. Following the epistemological turns triggered by feminist, postmodern, and then postcolonial criticisms provides an escape from the simplistic and reductive opposition of being either “inside” or “outside”: as scholars cannot flee the effects and implications of their social, economic, and gender positioning, they need to make explicit and reflect on their approach to and presuppositions about religion. Identifying the limits of binary thinking (male/woman, science/religion) and trying to go beyond it are efficient ways to avoid the implicit value judgments that still tend to accompany binary pairs (good/bad, universal/partial, evolved/backward . . .).

A second methodological challenge that is of central relevance when studying gender and religion is the insight that science is not value-free, but always contextual, contingent, and linked to questions of power and legitimacy. The necessity of decentering the perspective addresses two main problems. The first of them is the issue of distance and proximity between the researcher and the research subject.<sup>28</sup> The second is related to the ideas of judgment, neutrality, and objectivity, which were

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<sup>26</sup>See Asad 2003.

<sup>27</sup>See Ahmed 2000; Lavanchy 2009.

<sup>28</sup>For example Heller 2010; Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Gunaratnam 2003; Heller 2012.

considered the norm for scientific approaches, especially in the study of religions (Pezzoli-Olgiati 41f). The realm of the irrational, the false, the popular and/or exotic, the “opium of the people,” religion stood in opposition to the positive values embodied by scientific knowledge as objective, absolute, and universal.

This third challenge stems from ethnic, multicultural, and transnational studies dealing with questions of how “differences” are socially (re)produced in the context of diversified modern societies and which role the categories of gender and religion play in these constructions. There is no doubt that, in such contexts, gender and religion represent crucial categories for the construction of social and symbolic boundaries and for the social organization of differences, and thus for exclusion, as has been reported by scholars from different parts of the world. A broad range of cases have described how reified cultural and ethnic differences have been linked to naturalized perceptions of gender relations and have shown how these ideas are mobilized in order to legitimate hierarchical boundaries between ethnic, national, or religious groups, thereby legitimizing migration admission policies differentiated on such grounds as well as specific (non-)integration discourses.<sup>29</sup>

Scholars have recently shown how an implicit and subjacent ideal of *gender equality* plays a central role in these boundary-making processes. Essentialist representations of “culture” have been linked to gender, implying that distinct “national” or “religious” cultures have specific gender relations and organization. This was also linked to “vanguard” and progress narratives (Alcoff 262f), which reflect an implicit hierarchical order where the ones who speak consider themselves as more egalitarian—and therefore more legitimate (Nader 223f). In dominant media and scientific discourses, the idea that “occidental” systems are the more egalitarian ones (Moller Okin 7f) is reflected by stereotypes dictating that the women of the “others” are subordinated, a contemporary reformulation of the myth of “white men saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak 93). Gender, and more specifically the idea of the “subordinated Muslim women,” is used in order to legitimate this boundary, resulting in a culturally reified

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<sup>29</sup>See Brunner et al. 2009; Duemmler et al. 2010; Korteweg and Yudakul 2009; Philips 2007; Shachar 2007; Volpp 2001.

“us” and “them” and in corresponding processes of exclusion.<sup>30</sup> In this sense religion is—again—tightly interwoven with questions of power, as established religions will close their ranks and create boundaries between themselves and others.

The study of religion and gender was challenged in a further way by the diversification of societies. In the due course of multicultural politics and ideologies, religion and gender became a source of identity politics and categories of recognition like ethnicity and culture, and both became a matter of external social categorization as well as of self-identification. On the one hand, religion narratives represent a resource for ethnic and migrant minorities who use them to articulate political claims and recognition. The practice of young Muslim women in Europe wearing the hijab can be analyzed not only as an assertion of Muslim identity when confronted with Islamophobia, but also as a strategy to win recognition for a form of identity which is self-identified and self-defined instead of imposed by dominant groups. Identity politics in the name of a religion and idealized gender relationships always imply the use of “strategic essentialism” (Landry and MacLean 214),<sup>31</sup> as no group articulating explicit identity politics can exist without postulating primordial commonalities.

### **Discussing the Interweaving of Gender and Religion**

There are numerous ways to intertwine gender and religion—or to consider their interplay. A first set of scientific works focuses on questions regarding religious practices and beliefs, often understood in the sense of (historically grown) religious traditions such as Christianity or Islam. Such scholars are mainly interested in “women and religion” or “men and religion” in female or male everyday life.<sup>32</sup> A second set identifies different gendered systems and different constructions of masculinities and femininities. It analyzes the role of religious beliefs as a constitutive or challenging factor for different constructions of gender.<sup>33</sup> A third set addresses gendered uses and subversions of religious categories,

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<sup>30</sup>See Dahinden et al. 2011; Dietze 2009; Lutz 1991.

<sup>31</sup>See also Fraser and Honneth 2003.

<sup>32</sup>See King 1987; Neubauer 2009; Morgan and de Vries 2010; Beyeler, present issue.

<sup>33</sup>See Lanwerd and Moser 2010.

symbols and signs.<sup>34</sup> The fourth set merges works researching the relationships between men and women in the context of religion, often fighting for more equality between the social groups.<sup>35</sup>

These are just four examples of the richness and multiplicity of studying the relationships between gender and religion. These approaches share a common interest for the study of the interaction between gendered and religious experiences. As pointed out by Ursula King, gender and religion are “not simply two analogues or parallels existing independently of each other, but they are mutually embedded within each other” (King and Beattie 8). We therefore argue that various useful possibilities to approach gender and religion, and the complex interactions between them, exist. This, in turn, implies reflection on the chosen terminology, the meanings and values implicitly conveyed by the terms; implicit assumptions must be outlined and made explicit.

Nevertheless, it remains surprising how late gender issues began to be included in religious studies (Warne 251). Woodhead considers in her article “Gender Differences in Religious Practice and Significance” that such gender-blindness is predominantly an attribute of a “dominant theoretical framework,” “whilst small-scale, ethnographic studies have been most likely to recognize the significance of gender” (Woodhead 566). Systematic perspectives on gender and religion still constitute a marginalized field of interest in the study of religion. New overviews of and theoretical approaches to religion(s) provide little reflection about a main agent often presented as a “*vir religiosus*,” even if theoretical approaches to gender and religion have recently experienced an upswing.<sup>36</sup> Such works convincingly combine the analysis of interactions between gender and religion with reflections on the usefulness of the chosen scientific categories.<sup>37</sup>

Looking back on the history of the development of such scientific negotiations between gender and religion, it may appear as striking that the struggle for gender equality has conveyed interdependent relations between women’s claims for equality, religious studies in various disciplines and emic religious world

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<sup>34</sup>Wilcox, this issue.

<sup>35</sup>See Pahnke 1993.

<sup>36</sup>See for example King 1995; King and Beattie 2004; Woodhead 2007; Lanwerd and Moser 2010.

<sup>37</sup>King and Beattie 2004; Woodhead 2007.

views. Woodhead distinguishes in her article “Feminism and the Sociology of Religion” three phases of feminism that had an impact on the development of religious denominations and on gender studies as well as—sometimes with a minor delay—on the analysis of the interplay between gender and religion. First wave feminism in the late nineteenth century in Europe and the U.S. claimed “equality between the sexes and [. . .] subsume[d] their differences under a common ‘humanity’” (Woodhead 67). On the one hand, the debates of this early feminist movement had an effect on religion studies by allowing a reflected approach to the dominant religious Jewish–Christian scholarly tradition. For instance, prominent figures such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony actively contributed to reforming mainstream religious views towards male–female differentiations (Jeffers 61f). On the other hand, first wave feminism also led to a search for renovated forms of religious expression, resulting in religious movements that turned away from traditional institutions and religious hierarchies, as Helena Petrovna Blavatsky’s Theosophy or Spiritualism did. Such events impacted the study of religious beliefs and systems as new objects of investigation generated new scientific questions, and they opened a path to reflection on the commonly accepted, male-dominated scientific approaches. The British classical scholar Jane Ellen Harrison, for example, through the influence of first wave feminism, changed the male and text-centered views on religious systems and co-founded the modern approach to mythology.<sup>38</sup>

Between 1960 and the early 1980s, a second wave of feminism developed “a highly essentialist understanding of men and women” (Woodhead 67) through campaigns for the liberation of women from male oppression. This changing paradigm affected newly constituted religious groups, especially the so-called New Age movements<sup>39</sup> and their constructed, naturalized comprehension of gender. Beliefs such as Goddess-worship, theories of matriarchy and the (re-)construction of pre-Christian forms of religions mingled with renovated normative values towards sexuality, new conceptualizations of gender hierarchies, individuality, and fluid religious belongings (Hanegraaff 213f). Studies of religions and

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<sup>38</sup>See Harrison 1903/1991; Brunotte 2008.

<sup>39</sup>For more details regarding the concept of “New Age” see Boehinger 1994.

beliefs mirrored second wave feminism in analyses focusing on “women” in different religious traditions or even, in a more generalizing way, on “woman” in “world religions,” as shown by Friedrich Heiler’s book *Die Frau in den Religionen der Menschheit*. Thereby, the category of “woman” and, implicitly, the one of “man,” were used as essentialist categories of differences and—without further reflection—often as “externalized objects” and not as “thinking subjects,” as Heller stresses in her article “Gender und Religion” (Heller 759), reflecting the feminist and public discourse of the time.

Third wave feminism was popularized in the academic world through the postmodern constructivist turn of the 1990s. It “reacts against essentialism and seeks instead to explore gender differences which are now understood as complex, multifaceted, fluid, constructed, and only loosely related to the body” (Woodhead 67). This interest for the social constructions of masculinities and femininities, for their meanings in terms of power relationships and in relation to knowledge production, crucially influenced and continues to influence religious studies. Alongside research work labeled as “subaltern studies,”<sup>40</sup> new topics such as the “material religion”<sup>41</sup> arose and the idea of transnationalization emerged, implying a “religion from below” perspective that focused on religious world views in popular media and everyday culture and on marginalized social groups. Such studies interweave gender questions with epistemological issues such as the legitimacy of generalization processes and with sociopolitical and religious challenges embedded in scientific representation. From a methodological perspective, they draw attention to the dynamic and processual character of research encounters,<sup>42</sup> showing that research, from data production and co-construction to the different steps of its analysis, constitutes a reflexive and interactive process shaped by both the researchers’ and the research participants’ personal history, religious world view, gender, social class, and ethnicity, by the concrete context (place and time) and by the characteristics of other people in the setting.

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<sup>40</sup>See Spivak 1988; Abu-Lughod 1991.

<sup>41</sup>Plate 2002; Plate 2009; Pezzoli-Olgiati and Rowland 2011.

<sup>42</sup>See Gunaratnam 2003; Knott 1995.

In sum, we argue that the intersection of religion and gender constitutes a central theoretical and methodological framework to address issues of inclusion and exclusion, production of difference and the complicated power relationships in societies. Religious phenomena are closely related to power relations and systems of dominance—as is also the case for gender regimes. Therefore, the articles in this special issue have not only scientific, but also political relevance.

### **Religion and Gender in Deep, Small-Scale Studies**

The articles in this special issue are embedded in the debates presented above and deal with specific aspects of these possible articulations between religion and gender. The thread that connects them all is the centrality of the following questions: what kinds of social transformations are currently underway for religion and gender relations? How do they produce new forms of exclusion and inclusion?

The first contribution, by Melissa M. Wilcox, highlights how gender and religion are articulated in the context of new trends in religion in the U.S. Using two studies involving lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities, her article depicts current social transformations within the religious realm. It constitutes an intelligent and fine criticism of “gender-blind,” “post-secular” religious studies that do not take into account the ways in which gender, sexual or ethnic identities may impact people’s participation in post-secular forms of religion. Melissa Wilcox illustrates how gender, sexuality and ethnicity intersect to impact patterns of religious practice and belief, showing that scholars cannot fully comprehend post-secular religions and societies without integrating these factors. In her case studies, religious practices, beliefs, and belongings are negotiated and highly influenced by sexual orientation.

The second contribution, written by Sarah Beyeler, focuses on the interplay between religion as a self-identification category and external classification on the one hand and representations of gender relations on the other. In an article based on ethnographic empirical fieldwork among the Ahmadi community in Switzerland, the author studies how a Muslim minority community mobilizes religion and gender to carve out a particular niche in

society. She shows how the moral imperative of gender equality between women and men is used by the majority society to put people categorized as “Muslims” in a subordinated position. However, Ahmadis use similar narratives about equality to assert their own moral superiority over two dominant groups—Swiss secular and Christian society and mainstream Muslims—by emphasizing the special position of women within their community. This case study illustrates how a stigmatized minority group essentializes and naturalizes differences between women and men as a counter-strategy that reinforces and legitimates hierarchical gender arrangements. This article is an impressive illustration of the articulation between religion, gender and systems of dominance in the context of diversified societies.

Monika Salzbrunn’s contribution deals with Islam in France. Her article highlights the use of religion and gender as crucial categories for boundary making and exclusion in media and political debates. The author analyses the effects of exclusion produced by dominant discourses that put into question the legitimacy of a gendered religious group of citizens, Muslim women wearing a burqa, in the French public space. Conservative political forces instrumentalize feminist values in order to keep these particular citizens in a subordinate position. Adopting a diachronic perspective, she highlights the processes of boundary work produced by the semantics these Muslim women give to their clothing and their interpretation of feminist values. As boundary work is always relational, it does not come as a surprise that the political situation and the dominant discourse produced by politicians and the media has an impact on the way people perceive themselves and perform their particular belongings, using some external signs as a counter-performance. This research again points to the ongoing processes of renegotiations in terms of systems of dominance, where Islam and gender are used as crucial makers of the borders between “us” and “them.”

Another aspect of the relation between religion and gender is brought to light by the contribution of Irene Becci and Mallory Schnewly Purdie, who show how institutional arrangements—here prisons—have an impact on religion and gender. Because of its secluded character, the prison world is the object of distorted perceptions and vivid imagery affecting both gender and religion. Based on empirical data collected in two Swiss prisons

(one all-male and one all-female), this article concentrates on two main topics: firstly, the authors describe the ways in which religiosity is expressed and practiced in prison by male and female inmates. Secondly, they comment on the social functions that inmates attribute to religion in prison. The authors demonstrate that men and women understand and practice religion in a similar manner but attribute differentiated functions to it. This allows the authors to argue that the observed differences stem to a large extent from the institution, which is organized according to a gendered logic that promotes a normative, gendered relation to religion.

The final article, by Taylor Christl, Christoph Morgenthaler, and Christoph Käppler, provides interesting insight into the use of quantitative methodology in the exploration of the relationships between gender, religiosity, and body image among adolescents. Working in the field of psychology, the authors have chosen to investigate the positive body image of adolescents, distancing themselves from a “single problem perspective” that has given rise to criticism. More than 660 South-German adolescents belonging to various religious groups were involved in the study, which was based upon the hypothesis that religion influences the ways female and male adolescents feel about their bodies on both a personal and cultural level. This research attempts to better understand these differences by examining this diverse sample of adolescents and measuring their religiosity and body representations. Results suggest that religion is unrelated to positive body image among male and female adolescents and support the critique that gender differences have been exaggerated both in terms of religiosity and body image.

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