Religion continues to be a powerful and empowering force in societies around the world. It helps to shape—and indeed is shaped by—the needs, dreams and ideals of men and women everywhere. Taking into account the countless meaningful roles that spiritual practices, religious symbolism, and syncretism play in the lives of ordinary people draws attention away from a preoccupation with elites and institutions and toward emergent vitality and hope, wherever those can be found. This is the heart and soul of lived religion, as is it conceptualized by recent scholars (e.g., Hall 1997).

As an analytical frame, gender is seldom at the center of conceptualizing religious experience or examining its impact upon believers—even less so, a self-conscious focus on women that begins and ends with feminist epistemologies at the core. While various theoretical models sympathetic to the struggles of women, race, and class have sought—with some success—to restructure academic discourse as it relates to women’s lives and circumstances, few have been able to carve deep inroads into the subspecialty of our discipline that we label sociology of religion.

We are not alone in thinking about these matters. Numerous feminist scholars were part of an early cohort that saw their intellectual and social activist activities in and beyond the academy develop at roughly the same time and hence become almost indistinguishable from each other (see Nason-Clark and Neitz 2000: 393). Interestingly, for many of these women the trajectories along which their lives, their work and their activism evolved were inextricably linked. The issues of silencing, credentialing, and invisibility were central motifs, along with the disruptions, contradictions and celebrations that come along life’s pathway—be they personal or professional. By and large, they received little feminist nurturance as their careers evolved, and the mutual interplay and impact of their biographies and research agendas suggested that
Charting new territory took a personal toll even as it was made possible by the experience (or fear) of marginalization. Both researchers and research participants were changed in the process. But was there an impact on the discipline?

Those researchers more recently introduced into the academy are unlikely to share too many overlapping features of this narrative construction. They are adapting feminist theories and feminist methodologies through a lens that is able to take for granted several features of university life and academic discourse that was unknown a generation before. Without a doubt, our disciplines have changed in terms of the constituency of scholars, the publications, and the questions deemed appropriate for analysis. Several accounts of women’s participation at annual meetings, even thirty years ago, reveal that much has changed. Women have been presenting papers, publishing journal articles and books, serving as reviewers and editors, elected as presidents and officers of professional organizations, and slogging in the academic arena amidst grant-writing, fieldwork, and data analysis. But has this changed the way we see or conceptualize the lives of women, men, and gender?

Not long ago, we wrote a chapter on gender for Helen Rose Ebaugh’s *Handbook of Religion and Social Institutions* (2005). There we argued that evidence of religious beliefs and religious practices seem to be obvious to just about everyone except those whose research and passion is linked to feminism or gender studies. In substantiating this claim, we chose five recent books discussing gender issues or women’s lives from our bookshelves (Crow and Gotell 2000; Kimmel and Aronson 2004; Lips 2000; Spade and Valentine 2004; Wood 2003). This non-random experiment produced troubling results: in not one of these anthologies was there even a chapter devoted specifically to spirituality or to the religious quest. Then we proceeded to turn the tables and have a brief look at recent collections of essays in the sociology of religion (Aldridge 2000; Dawson 2003, Dillon 2003; Hood 1995; Swatos 1998). Here, there was a dim light flickering at the boundaries. While less than 10% of the print space was devoted to the lives of women or used a lens that featured a gender analysis, there was a chapter, or at most two, in each collection.

We acknowledged then, and repeat now, that perhaps this was too cruel or too rudimentary an introduction into the relationship between religion, women, and gender. But its results stand: Spirituality is not on the feminist radar screen, and a feminist or gender lens is not often employed when considering matters religious.