THE CATEGORY OF GENDER IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

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1. Introduction

Gender as a category of analysis has proven to be both a useful and dangerous tool in pointing to the social aspects of women's oppression. In this essay I wish to examine how gender has been delineated by feminists in a variety of fields, and then, more specifically, how it is used in two books, John Stratton Hawley (ed.), *Fundamentalism and Gender* (1994) and Ursula King (ed.), *Religion & Gender* (1995), that incorporate the notion of gender in their titles and as a basis for their studies. By reviewing these texts, my hope is to render a clear analysis of the category of gender as it is used in the study of religion.

The category of gender has become quite popular in the last two decades, and the questions are why is it so popular and how useful is it? It is my assessment that gender appears as a neutral category of analysis and is therefore a means by which to depoliticize feminist analysis, make it more palatable if you will. By depoliticizing feminism it can enter the arena of scientific study since it is uncontaminated with political concerns, as if science itself has no political concerns, an assumption which will be discussed. Further, I would argue that gender as a category of analysis is one developed within a hegemonic discourse and therefore a dangerous category at best. This category was developed in order to explain the naturalness of the subjugation of the female, and hence this master's tool cuts two ways: the ground of hegemonic discourse regarding the naturalness of oppression of the female of the species, but also the ground of feminist discourse of the unnaturalness of this oppression. By using gender rather than sex, sex remains an untheorized category that acts as the bedrock of gender. Gender then becomes the artificial category that overlays the real, sex. Sex remains in nature, natural, and a *sui generis* category that ultimately undercuts any and every feminist argument against the oppression of the female which includes all women: black, brown, red, white, yellow, poor, rich, heterosexual, or lesbian.
2. Gender (de)constructions

How gender functions has been of theoretical concern for feminists in a variety of fields. The theorizing of gender in a variety of pedagogical locations, most significantly women's studies, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, science, and literary criticism, has affected how feminists in Religious Studies have dealt with the category of gender. Because feminism can be found in most if not all fields of study, and feminists read each other's work, how gender as a category of analysis is dealt with demonstrates the insights and interests of these fields. In order to understand how the contributors to both King's and Hawley's text have come to their understanding of gender and gender ideologies it is necessary to map the terrain of feminist analyses of the category of gender.

2.1. Sherry Ortner and Carol MacCormack

Sherry Ortner wrote a pivotal article in 1974, “Is Female to Nature what Male is to Culture?” The thesis of her argument was that in ideological constructs determined by religion, kinship arrangements, and attitudes about social norms, the category of female is metaphorically connected to nature while the category male is connected to culture. Since culture is valued over and above nature as more sophisticated, less dangerous, order as opposed to chaos, then male is valued over and above the female. The basis of her argument is founded upon the notion of binary opposition. The theory of binary opposition was developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (b. 1908) using Ferdinand de Saussure's (1857–1913) structural linguistic theory wherein meaning was found in the differences between signs as opposed to meaning being located in the relationship between the sign and the object of its signification. Black takes its meaning from being not white, white derives its meaning from being not black. Meaning is derived in the dichotomous relationship between signs: “the signifying function of difference” (Masuzawa, 1993: 35). Lévi-Strauss used the theory of binary opposition in order to analyze myths, rituals, and kinship structures; he believed that binary opposition was a universal cognitive function of human beings, much as language is understood to be a universal aspect of being human. Further, binary opposition was a means by which humans understood existence: it allows humans to make their world meaningful. Binary opposition was/is an unconscious representation of the underlying structure of human thought patterns. This is its universal aspect. All humans use it, like language, to communicate their understanding of