GENDER-CRITICAL STUDIES IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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In 1960, Valerie Saiving published an essay entitled “The Human Situation: A Feminine View”.¹ This essay is an examination of religion which places women’s experience at the centre of its analysis, the central premise of feminist scholarship. Although this feminist analysis of religion was published three years before Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique, the publication credited with signalling the beginnings of what is commonly spoken of as the second wave of feminist consciousness, Religious Studies has lagged behind other academic disciplines in incorporating the gender-critical analyses engendered by the feminist movement into its mainstream. Those engaged in gender-critical studies, which until very recently have focussed almost exclusively on women, have been equally reluctant to incorporate religion into their analyses. Methodology in Religious Studies: The Interface with Women’s Studies, Feminism in the Study of Religion, and Women, Gender, Religion explore the intersection of gender-critical studies and the academic study of religion. As their titles suggest, they present three related, yet distinct and often competing perspectives. Randi R. Warne, a Canadian feminist scholar in Religious Studies and a long-time advocate of gender-critical analyses in the academic study of religion, has written extensively on the relationship between gender-critical studies and Religious Studies in


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North America throughout her thirty-year career. Rather than attempting to reinvent the wheel, I rely on her insightful works to provide the framework for this discussion.

In an essay published in 1991, Warne observes that there are some striking parallels in subject matter, methodological questions and relative status in the Academy between Women’s Studies programmes, the locus of gender-critical studies, and Religious Studies programmes which should make them “natural allies in the academy over against the positivistic, rigidly-boundaried approach which has come to characterize many university disciplines” (348). Both fields of study were created to correct an imbalance. Religious Studies departments became necessary when it could no longer be assumed that knowledge of the religious symbols and concepts underpinning Western civilisation was being transmitted via popular culture or through “mainstream” academic disciplines such as History and English. Women’s Studies programmes introduce the voices and perspectives of those long ignored in academic discourse. Methodologically, in both fields of study personal experience plays an important role in the data studied and in their analysis. Also, both religion and gender make claims “to a kind of ‘ultimacy’ in revealing something about ‘essential human nature’” (351). And further, religion and gender are both cultural systems in which we are involved independent of personal choice, researcher and research subject alike. These factors create similar questions (but not necessarily similar solutions) for scholars in both fields of study regarding the relationship between the universal and the particular, whose experiences are to be treated as normative, the place of objectivity and the role of commitment. Within both fields, those questions engender searching internal debates and concomitantly innovative, critical and careful scholarship. Nevertheless, because Women’s Studies and Religious Studies take non-quantifiable personal experience seriously in their analyses, the relevance and credibility of both fields of study are questioned within the Academy.

Despite these similarities, Women’s Studies and Religious Studies were not, and still are not allies within the Academy. Warne identifies several factors contributing to the antipathies between Women’s Studies and Religious Studies (1991: 353-355; see also Warne 1995: 97-99; and Plaskow 1993). From the perspective of Women’s Studies, religions not only replicate patriarchal dominance, but also exacerbate it by “justifying the subordination of women through appeal to claims of ultimacy” (Warne 1991: 354). Religion is also rejected as a subject worthy of scholarly inquiry because many women have had negative personal