Joanna de Groot and Sue Morgan (eds.)


This anthology is a special issue of the journal *Gender and History* and remains, in its essence, still very much a journal publication. What brings these various articles together is how they all relate to the issues of sex, gender, and religion, but not much more. It is a selection of fine and, at times, even excellent texts, but the variety of topics and angles covered is so extensive that the claim that this represents a greater whole appears somewhat optimistic. With their respective backgrounds, the two editors are both well qualified for this task — Sue Morgan as an expert on the intersection of gender, sexuality, and religion in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Great Britain, and Joanna de Groot as having a more comparative background, focusing on the interrelation between gender and religion in modern Islam and Christianity — but this does not change the fact that the contributors at large remain a motley crew. A major challenge when reviewing such a collection thus becomes offering justice to each of the many articles.

The book is divided into four major parts, all with such broad scopes that this further division does not offer much in the way of a more precise focus. The first section, *Crossing Cultures and Transnational Exchanges*, is perhaps the most pointed selection, consisting of five articles on cross-cultural issues that involve sex, gender, and religion, but, again, as is amply demonstrated here, this may refer to almost anything.

Focusing on the twentieth-century history of the Yoruba-Cuban beliefs of Ocha-Ifá, Carolyn E. Watson studies how a religious tradition may evolve through a variety of persecutions aimed at it. In this case, it is about Catholic and communist efforts of oppression based on their own often orientalizing view of Ocha-Ifá, equalizing it with both witchcraft and unbridled sexuality, something which again has contributed to the tradition’s own beliefs and practices around matters of sex and gender.

Clare Midgley’s article about how beliefs about gender roles have crossed from one religion to another, more specifically between nineteenth-century Unitarianism and Brahmoism, is an excellent study of how an interreligious angle may be vital to understanding the development of various aspects within a particular faith community.

How religion and gender are portrayed in the biographies of exemplary Buddhist Chinese women is the topic of Yuet Keung Lo’s fine article. To what degree these presentations are controlled and how the various ideals are
constructed depending on various Buddhist traditions are among the topics discussed.

Kathleen McIntyre offers a thorough presentation and analysis of an early twentieth-century struggle in southern Mexico on national identity, religion, and gender, where Baptist Protestantism, Catholicism, and Zapotec culture all played central parts.

In pointing to nineteenth-century Christian worries about gender roles within Hinduism in British India, Daniel J. R. Grey presents a poignant analysis of how actual and perceived aspects of a different religion could trigger a variety of responses from colonial authorities.

The book’s second part, Religion, Embodiment, and Subjectivity, primarily focuses on the body but at the same time includes a much wider scope.

In their contribution on ancient Near Eastern ideas on purity and impurity, Érica Couto-Ferreira and Agnès Garcia-Ventura interweave recent discussions within Assyriological studies and gender studies in a way that proves fruitful to both fields.

Anne E. Bailey presents various aspects of the history of lamentation up to twelfth-century hagiographies, drawing on a vast amount of different sources while particularly emphasizing how gender and religion held important roles in this development.

How architecture is used in order to uphold the sanctity of medieval English anchoresses living permanently in minute cells attached to various churches is the subject of Michelle M. Sauer’s original analysis. She points out how a number of questions had to be taken into consideration: for instance, what was to be seen and not to be seen and by whom, how should the limited contact with the outer world be managed, and how the danger represented by the female body was controlled.

Maya Corry discusses the allure and danger of male beauty in the paintings of Renaissance Milan. She refers to aspects of desire and spirituality, Christian and Neoplatonic ideals, gaze and sexuality, in a way that offers new perspectives on these often well-known depictions.

In her study of how gender, religion, and deafness could intersect in the nineteenth-century United Kingdom, Esme Cleall offers a most pointed presentation of how identities often considered as both natural and basically inflexible really may be in a state of perpetual flux, depending on various religious and social perspectives. Similarly to how gender studies have benefitted from being challenged by the studies of sexuality and gender identity, this article is a good example of how the upcoming field of (dis)ability studies really is of similar value.