

Foreword

More Notable Than Thou

Gender bias in the history of ideas is notorious. In religious terms, it can also be called heretical, blasphemous, and evil. The challenge to represent women's lives, voices, and accomplishments in the broad and deep reaches of religion is even more difficult than in other fields. While history has its male actors and music its male composers, religions have their male gods who reign supreme even over male practitioners. These gods eclipse and erase goddesses, women scholars and ministers, and women's ways of shaping spiritual consciousness. Women face formidable obstacles in religion, but women's struggles are their success.

It is no wonder Wikipedia is so thin on entries about women in religion. With the publication of this volume edited by Colleen Hartung, and subsequent volumes that will add scores more such articles, that problem will be solved. I predict that, in time, the actual numbers of women religious agents, if documented fairly, will far surpass those of men. After all, religion has long been seen as part of the soft, spiritual, domestic world associated with women, versus the tough, intellectual, global dimensions that are identified as male. But this will happen only if methodological changes are made in the whole approach to notability—if power dynamics are analyzed and transformed and entries admitted accordingly.

At the heart of the problem is who holds the power to decide, as feminist philosopher Mary Daly and other twentieth-century feminist theologians pointed out. Starting with God—who is Father, Lord, Ruler, King—the divine is male and therefore, Mary Daly reasoned, the male is God. That prescient insight remains at the heart of many religions’ skewed biases against women. Even those traditions with female deities often have male leaders, mirroring the cultural norms.

The logic of the problem is simple and thoroughgoing: from being to doing to documenting to enshrining in the Wikipedia canon, maleness holds sway. Thus, if the divine is male and humans are made in the divine image, then only males can be fully actualized humans. Only males, then, can do or act religiously, whether in shaping ideas or celebrating sacred rites. What “counts” as religion, and therefore gets taken as “real” in each tradition, is what males do. So when it comes to documenting religion for Wikipedia or other global platforms, it is easy to determine whom and what to include and exclude, especially since the very people making the decisions are of the empowered class—namely, males.

The logic of the solutions is a bit more complicated. Moves away from gender binaries help a bit, but there is simply no way forward in religion without a wholesale revamping of the lenses of analysis and the rules of involvement.

This work is well underway thanks to countless collaborative efforts by women and some enlightened men. The *Woman’s Bible* (1895/1898) was a bold early effort by suffrage movement members to excavate the very texts that undergirded their oppression. By the mid-twentieth century—when women in significant numbers began to study religion—conferences, workshops, courses, and caucuses developed, which incubated the nascent feministization of the field in virtually all traditions, albeit unevenly. A burgeoning body of literature developed, and the world would never be the same again.

Nothing was untouched, and one could say nothing was sacred, in that every dimension of religion—scriptures, teachings, doctrines, polity, pastoral ministry, ethics, rituals, education of children, and more—was scrutinized and challenged. When the perspectives of those who were marginalized on the basis of sex, race, nationality, sexual orientation, disability, gender identity, and more were brought to bear, religion became a whole new field of inquiry.

The miracle is that there are *any* entries about women in religion on Wikipedia! Deeply entrenched biases die hard, and virulent backlash against women’s gains are reasons why progress has been slow. But the most important reason is that savvy patriarchal gatekeepers understand that half-truths are being made whole and histories rewritten by projects like this book and the many that preceded it.

For example, it is stunning to imagine the history of the United Church of Christ without the central contribution of Dr. Yvonne V. Delk, who directed the Office for Church in Society. Likewise, Shundo Ayama Roshi broke new ground in

Zen Buddhism as the highest-ranked nun. But recognizing these women in equal measure with men would upset patriarchy's apple cart. Yes, African American women played a shaping role in the UCC's justice work even when they themselves were still not treated justly. And yes, Zen Buddhist nuns in Japan are intellectual powerhouses and influential practitioners. Those insights do not only belong in Wikipedia entries; they necessitate a rewriting of basic histories of male-centric religions. As I have long contended, the underlying issue is that "adding women and stirring" is never enough. New, inclusive histories are required and their existence will be proof that power is being shared.

Social change is an important goal of activist scholarship. What will it take to value solid teaching as much as serious scholarship, both of which women do? When will the arts—including music, dance, painting, and sculpture—achieve the same status as religious doctrine and dogma when it comes to religious expression? How can the myriad forms of leadership that women exercise gain recognition? It is not just the work women do but the many ways women do it that remain invisible unless and until their stories are granted status. This is happening gradually, against strong odds, but with recognizable success in essays like the ones in this volume.

One wonders why Wikipedia, a fairly new and not always highly regarded source of information, is still so behind the curve. One reason is that new sources tend to imitate old ones. Moreover, less prestigious platforms tend to try to prove their bona fides by an exaggerated, and in this case outmoded and outdated, attempt at rigor. The result of aping patriarchy is patriarchy. But looking more broadly at the many religious players in their unique roles, and looking more deeply around the edges to see who has been left out or misunderstood, will result in a far richer and more useful—hopefully more well-respected—font of global knowledge. Such work is in everyone's best interest.

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