

Is Feminism Appropriate in Religious Studies?

Over the last few decades, the field of religious studies has been called to reflect upon a number of new perspectives, approaches and agendas put forth by both its own scholars and those of other fields. One of the perspectives put forward is from feminist scholars who argue that religious studies, as well as the religions which they study, needs to reconsider the place of women within their consecutive spheres. Furthermore, they argue that in order for women to be given a voice or to emerge as active participants, both religious studies and religion itself, must undergo fundamental revolutions in theory and belief. For those religious studies scholars who choose to take such feminist critiques seriously, the perspectives that these critiques provide may prove useful in gaining a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of religion. However, there is an inherent danger for the religious studies scholar who chooses to embrace the approach religion from a methodology based upon feminism due to its seemingly inherent activism which focuses on perpetuating a change in, or revolution of, not just the field of religious studies, but that of its subject matter. In other words, the feminist critique is often applied to the religion itself and emphasizes those practices that are deemed to be inappropriate in hopes of changing the religious tradition. Hence, this presents a dilemma for the religious studies scholar. Is the feminist approach, with its inherent activism, compatible with the goal of religious studies? Is it appropriate for the religious studies scholar to also be a feminist? The purpose of this paper is to explore these questions and to show that the activism inherent within feminist, while beneficial in questioning religious studies scholarship and its biases, makes it incompatible with religious studies when addressing religion. This paper will be broken up into two parts, each with subject headings for clarity. The first will set forth the working definitions that will be used for this exploration and the second will provide a discussion of the relationship that religious studies has with feminism through a comparison with theology and activism.

Working Definitions

The purpose of the first section of this paper is to present working definitions or concepts that will be used throughout the paper. It is hoped that presenting this section will allow the reader to see both my own understanding and biases when it comes to specific terminology and concepts and how I may make use them later in the paper. However, they are not full fledged defenses of the definitions. Where appropriate, I will discuss either how I came to hold such assumptions or offer some support for my use of them. It needs to be reiterated to the reader that these definitions and concepts are to be assumed correct for this paper and are foundational in the exploration given later.

Working Definition of Religious Studies

The first area that needs to be addressed is one concerning the goal, or purpose, of the field of religious studies. When looking into the field itself, there might at first appear to be a myriad of interpretations as to what the goal of religious studies is. One interpretation that might be encountered is a traditional approach that, contrary to the theological approach, seeks to look at religion objectively by bracketing the experience of the researcher from that of the subject researched.¹ Another interpretation called radical empiricism seeks to provide information by

¹ No reference is given to this approach due to its commonality within the field of religious studies.

seeking out lived experience and stressing the interaction between scholar and religious practitioner (Jackson 3). Performance theory is another interpretation which seeks to put an emphasis on the performance and ritual within religious activity.² Each of these approaches, along with many others used within the field, present numerous interpretations of religion and offer a variety of different sorts of information.

Oftentimes, I think that when a scholar is asked to discuss the goal of religious studies, or give a definition of it, they present their methodological approach as the purpose itself. This mistake often confuses the issue so much that the goal of religious studies itself is never concretely determined. In other words, methodologies are simply a means to an end and should not be considered ends in themselves.

In order to avoid this confusion it might prove helpful to simply propose a definition of religious studies which points to my perspective on the goal of religious studies. *The purpose of religious studies is to provide a holistic description³ of a belief system (religion) that allows for a better comprehension of its beliefs and practices without relying upon truth claims.* This purpose statement, which will be the working definition of religious studies, is not necessarily unique within the field. For instance, in “Feminism and Religion: An Introduction,” Rita M. Gross offers the following statement:

What is the academic study of religion? At the most basic level it is a descriptive discipline that gathers and disseminates accurate information about a variety of religious beliefs and practices people have entertained and engaged in throughout time and space (8).

It should be noted that I have included within the latter part of my definition a short statement upon about truth claims. This part of the concept is very important and speaks to the way in which the information gained through research, regardless of the nature of the approach, is to be considered by the religious studies scholar him or herself. Simply put, the information is not supposed to be presented as affirming or denying any of the truth claims held by the researcher. It is also important for the reader to realize that this does not necessarily mean that the researcher, or his conclusions, are unbiased, disembodied or in some other way detached from his perspective. Furthermore, the sources themselves (i. e. religion) from which the information is drawn should never be presented as ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’ Statements such as these are beyond the scope of religious studies because they inherently rely upon truth claims. This stance is reflected by Gross when she states, “Scholars may debate about alternative hypotheses about information being studied, but debating truth or falsity of the religious ideas is irrelevant to the study of religion as a descriptive discipline” (8). Furthermore, this emphasis on not using truth claims is supported by Robert A. Orsi in “Snakes Alive: Resituating the moral in the Study of Religion”:

Religious studies is not a moralizing discipline; it exists in the suspension of the ethical, and it steadfastly either refuses to deny or redeem the other. It is a moral discipline,

² Performance theory refers to a number of different approaches which are viewed in contrast to the more traditional ‘objective’ approach. For a thorough discussion of performance and how it has been looked at in religious studies, see Bell, Catherine. “Performance” *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* Ed. Mark C. Taylor. Chicago; The University of Chicago Press, 1998.

³ It should be made clear from the discussion that the use of the term ‘descriptive’ here does not refer to a religious approach that emphasizes an objective ‘description’ of a religion. Rather, it is used to refer simply to a presentation or analysis given by a scholar. The type of information given will depend upon the approach the scholar takes.

however, in its commitment to examine a variety of human experience and to making contact across boundaries – cultural, psychological, spiritual, existential (115).

Therefore, this will be the working definition of religious studies that will be used when exploring the religious studies scholar's relationship to the theologian and the feminist.

Working Definition of Theology

The theological approach to religions is sometimes described as the flipside of religious studies. This points toward a working definition of theology. *The purpose of theological approach is both to offer a description of a belief system and also to judge how it should, or ought to, be according to specific truth claims.* This is supported by Tariq Ansaar Aquil, Sr. in "How Religious Scholars and Religious Ecclesiastical Leaders are Related in Their Respective Traditions" when he states, "The ecclesiastical leader's [theologian's] search has oftentimes been motivated by desire to validate the foundational principles upon which the belief system is predicated in order to substantiate the decision to surrender to faith" (30). Therefore, theological scholarship uses truth claims to analyze and describe a religion.

It should be noted that the theological approach does not limit the theologians to looking at just the tradition that he or she adheres to. As such, it may often happen that the beliefs of one religion are judged according to the truth claims of another. This may result in some interesting, if skewed, descriptions of a religion. Furthermore, these descriptions are often used to promote either change within a religious tradition viewed or a conversion away from the tradition on the part of its practitioners. This activism is important to keep in mind when the relationship between theology and feminism is explored.

Working Definition of Activism

While the definition of activism may already be apparent to the reader, I have chosen to include it here for two reasons. The first is to make sure that we are using the same definition. The second is to allow for a quick discussion of why the audience of the activist is so important because this will be built upon later in the paper as it is fundamental in analyzing the appropriateness of certain forms of conduct on the part of the religious studies scholar. For the purposes of this paper, *activism will be defined as the pursuit of change within an organization, society, culture, etc. which is built upon a specific agenda.*

A specific type of activity is based upon both the agenda used and the audience it addresses. There are many different agendas that an activist can entertain, many of which address such as academic, social or religious spheres. The important thing here is that many times the audience plays as large a role in defining the type of activism as the agenda does. For instance, assuming that an activist has an agenda which advocates bikes safety, if they do so in a court of law or other political institution then their activism should be considered it political activism.

It should also be noted that not all activist agendas are appropriate or logical given a specific audience. As such, the activist audience may be used to judge whether or not a specific agenda is appropriate in a specific context. For instance, it would be inappropriate, even irrational, for an anti-logging activist to try and convince a religious studies scholar to stop logging.

Working definition of Feminism(s)

This section proves to be perhaps the most difficult to discuss if the hope is to try and define feminism. However, because of the high importance of the term to this paper and its impact upon the field of religious studies, it must be defined. Much like the field of religious studies, there are a myriad of definitions put forth as to what feminism is and what it entails. If one looks out into all the definitions given to feminism, a myriad of different versions are found. For instance, Gross offers, “The most basic definition of feminism is the conviction that women really do inhabit the human real and are not ‘other,’ not a separate species” (16). She uses this further to develop different, although connected, forms of feminism: feminism and women’s studies (17). In “Having Your Cake and Eating It Too: Feminism and Religion,” Katherine K. Young gives a critique of Rita Gross’s discusses on feminism. She states that Gross defines it as something that “... attacks religions as patriarchal and often, after deconstructing them, tries to reconstruct them in what are considered more suitable forms...” (169). Women studies on the other hand “... not only documents the absence or marginalization of women in religion but also presents information about them, expressed whenever possible in their own ‘voices’” (169). Young then argues that in reality these two different definitions are in actually combined into a feminist approach which both calls attention to women and advocates for them (169). Statements made by Rejeswari Sunder Rajan in *Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Post Colonialism*, suggest a similar take on feminisms advocacy of and for when. She states, ““One of the most insistent beliefs that informs this project [she is speaking of reviewing *Women Writing in India*] is the declaration that the recovery of women’s writing, feminist literary criticism, and writing by women itself, are political rather than aesthetic activities...”” (2). This may even be the case when feminist scholars address the information put out be religious studies. Ursula King, in her article “Is there a Future for Religious Studies as We Know It? Some Postmodern, Feminist and Spiritual Challenges,” describes the feminist critique of religious studies as “... the radical questioning of the andocentric framework of the past scholarship on religion by critical feminism and gender studies...” (365). As such, it is rather difficult to see how advocacy does not play an active, essential role in feminism.

Based on the previous discussion I believe that the following working definition of feminism is supported. *The goal of feminism is to both draw attention to the place, responsibility, standpoint and perspective of women and to call into question how these things and women themselves have been written about understood and perceived.*⁴

With this working definition in mind, it appears that feminism is essentially a form of activism because it seems to fit the definition presented above. Therefore, it might prove beneficial to talk here about different forms of feminism as defined by the audiences to whom they speak. These types of feminism activism will be used later within the paper in exploring what may or may not be appropriate for religious scholars to do. It will also hopefully show that, like activism, there are different forms of feminism.

Scholastic feminism: This form of feminism argues for the inclusion of the female standpoint within the Academy and argues that sex and gender need to be taken into account when doing information gathering and developing methodologies. It should be noted that the

⁴ A caveat should be given here. There are some scholars who call themselves feminists but seem to focus more on gender issues rather than just women themselves. At this point, due to the muddled descriptions of feminism and the multitude of agendas put forth by feminist scholars, I have chosen not to deal with this specifically within my paper. However, I do think that the conclusion drawn of feminisms appropriateness to religious studies would mirror gender studies if the same inherent activism exists within that form of scholarship.

scholastic feminist is using the agenda of feminism when gathering information and critiquing methodologies. That is, their theories strive to bring attention to and advocate for women.

*Social feminism:*⁵ This form of feminism argues that the female gender has been objectified and discriminated against within a society or culture. The purpose here is to reincorporate, reintroduce and focus upon the female perspective in the hope that it will be given equal standing or consideration within society, regardless of current social or religious norms.

Religious feminism: This argues that the female gender has been subject to discrimination and alienation within a patriarchal religious tradition and hopes to accomplish change within said institution or religion in general so that women can be given a voice or take part with the religious sphere.

Exploration of Appropriateness

With the above assumptions in mind, the exploration itself may begin in earnest. The first part of this section will look at and compare religious studies and theology. The second section will look at the relationship between feminism and theology. The third section will look at whether or not, given the previous two discussion, religious studies and feminist are compatible. The fourth section will be a discussion further emphasizing why religious studies and activism are incompatible given the purpose of religious studies. This section will also close the paper and hopefully, if not convince the reader of my thesis, at least show that the connection between feminism and religious studies scholarship needs to be questioned more thoroughly.

Academic and Theological Religious Studies

It should be clear from the working definitions of religious studies and theology above that they have much in common. Therefore, it might be argued that each seeks to provide a description of belief systems that can complement and inform each other. In my experience, this seems to be the case. Religious studies scholars often can, or at least should, talk to the participants of the religions that they study and more often than not the more authoritative ones are often theologians. Theologians themselves, as the comment from Aquila earlier presented suggests, may use information provided by religious studies to help affirm their belief. As such, these two different approaches to religion seem to complement each other.

However, there is a fundamental difference in the way that the religious studies scholar and the theologian look at, address and think about religion. As Aquila states, "Deeper insight reveals that the though twins [religious studies and theology] each has distinct personality traits (30.) The difference in approach to religion often results in religious studies being understood as describing the 'is' of a religion, while theology is often thought of dealing with the 'ought.'⁶ In other words, the religious studies scholar presents descriptions as perspectives characterized by what is happening within a belief system given the information gathered by the scholar and

⁵ Due to the limitations of this paper, social feminism will not be looked at in depth. However, the reader may want to ponder the connection between religion and society. Whether religion is seen as giving rise to social norms or culture is seen as a sphere separate from religion, the advocacy inherent within feminism presents interesting problems when the religious studies scholar turns to addressing social issues of a group. Furthermore, do the same issues we find here apply the scholar's own society?

⁶ As mentioned, this is a very common description of the difference between describing a religion and teaching it. For those that are interested, Katherine K. Young uses this to a very interesting effect when critiquing Rita M. Gross's article on page 170 of the work cited.

according to the methodology they embrace. Such a description is not based upon the truth claims of the scholar. As such, morality based judgments are put aside in an attempt to present a description that will meet the ultimate goal of religious studies. Therefore, there is no need for the religious studies scholar to ever advocate a change in the stance of the religious practitioner, at least not one based upon truth claims or moral imperatives. On the other hand, the theologian, while also presenting a belief system as description, does so according to a moral standard or foundational truth claim against which the description is judged. Hence, the theologian seeks to inform, uphold or deny a specific belief system, and its perspective or its truth claims. Such a stance involves both moral and ethical judgments and, therefore, such a standpoint may, and often does result in advocacy for adhering to a specific set of truth claims (i. e. those of the theologian).

Therefore, when asking the question of whether or not religious studies is compatible with theology, it appears that it is not. The pursuit of both groups may complement and, at times, inform one another but it seems impossible for their agendas to coincide. One seeks to simply describe while the other wishes to inform and possibly change. This shouldn't come as any surprise to the reader who is informed of the distinction between the religious studies approach and that of the theologian but it should be kept in mind for later discussions.

Feminism and Theology

Turning now to look at the compatibility between feminism, in this case religious feminism, and theology, it appears that the two actually have much in common. Both seek to address belief systems according to specific agendas and often do so using moral or ethical claims. Interestingly, Young, given her critique of Gross's work, argues that "their role [feminists] is *functionally equivalent*⁷ to religious founders" (181). As such, it seems that there is, at least on the surface, no inherent incompatibilities between the approaches of the two groups.

However, like the interfaith struggle between two theologians, theologians and religious feminists often conflict over the agenda which they hold. These conflicts often give rise to new interpretations of a religious belief or the creation of a new belief system. Two examples can be offered for this.

One instance of this is presented in Plaskow's *Standing Again at Sinai* where she, a self-described feminist theologian, argues that for Judaism to truly be representative of Jewish life it must allow for religious practices that affirm both the male and female. Her argument is based upon theological grounds and addresses the religion itself. In doing so, she hopes to bring about change from within (ix-xxi). She may meet resistance from both other feminists that believe she should abandon Judaism because it is patriarchal and fellow Jews who think her reforms may create a new religion that isn't inherently Jewish.⁸

Another instance of how feminist may argue for a change in religion or its practice, and in some ways mirrors the conversional efforts of a theologian, is found within the Goddess movement. In Cynthia Eller's book, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America*, she provides access to religious practitioners that have decided to do away with religious practices that they perceive as fundamentally patriarchal, such as those

⁷ The italics have been put in place to call attention to the term 'functionally equivalent' to point out that Gross does in fact not view them as identical

⁸ This paraphrase is not cited specifically because she returns to this discussion throughout her book. There seems to be an underlying fear of criticism from both her fellow feminists and her fellow Jews which permeates her work.

found within the Judeo-Christian traditions and have turned to creating their own. She offers the major characteristic of Goddess worship as “valuing women’s empowerment, practicing ritual and/or magic, revering nature, using the feminine or gender as a primary mode of religious analysis, and espousing the revisionist version of Western history favored by the movement” (6).

There seems to be no inherent incompatibility between the methods of the religious feminist and the theologian because they both base their activism upon truth claims. However, in reality, when both feminist and theological agendas are advanced, conflicts may result depending upon the truth claims put forth by both parties and even those of their audience.

Feminism and Religious Studies

At this point, it should be clear that feminism in general has much more in common with the theological approach than it does with religious studies scholarship. If we limit the sphere of discussion for a moment simply to that of religion and look again at how both religious studies and religious feminism interact with it according to their own purposes, it appears that they are incompatible. A simple thought experiment may be used to show why. Assume there is a religious ritual called X.⁹ When approaching X, the religious studies scholar may look at it from a variety of methodologies. For instance, from a phenomenological perspective, the religious studies scholar may talk about the material components used in X and when they may or may not be implemented. If the scholar chooses radical empiricism as his or her approach, then they may discuss or focus on their own interaction with religious practitioners as they perform X. From a performance standpoint, the scholar may try and see what is going on in the behavior of those participating in X and look at how it compares to other religious rituals. Regardless of the approach, the religious studies scholar never judges whether or not X should, or ought to be done. When turning to the religious feminist, he or she will approach X with the specific agenda of feminism and will judge it accordingly. As such, while the religious feminist may understand the religious significance of X, he or she will seek ultimately to affirm or deride it. From this example, it becomes clear that the goals of the religious studies scholar and the feminist activist seem inherently incompatible. This analysis is supported by Young when she argues that Gross’s purpose of using ‘tolerance’ as a methodology when dealing with religion:

...does not arise from the ethical position ... Nor does it arise from scholarly need to understand religions on their own terms. It arises from the political urge to destabilize religious worldviews – beginning with the western ones of her students [their X] – by showing how ignorant and biased they really are for holding ‘monolithic or universalistic presuppositions about the world’ (170).

However, does the above discussion actually show that feminism is inherently incompatible with religious studies? Given the fact that there are different forms of feminism, is there one that is more appropriate? If the audience is changed, that is, if we move the focus of discussion away from the religion itself and instead toward the field of religious studies, something remarkable happens. We move away from religious feminism and enter into scholastic feminism. Here exists a better chance that the work of the religious studies scholar and

⁹ X, here can equal any number of rituals. For instance, substitute it for female circumcision, the use of the veil in Islam, or Sati in Hinduism. I used this format of argumentation to show the almost unlimited number of rituals that could be plugged into this schematic.

that of the feminist might be found to complement each other and possibly even be compatible. From the critique of religious studies scholarship offered by the scholastic feminist, it is becomes clear that there have been some descriptions of religion that have not taken into account the female perspective. An example of the scholastic feminist critique is offered by King. King states eloquently:

The traditional methodological perspectives of male religion scholars are rooted in largely unexamined andocentric assumptions that can cause serious deficiencies at the level of data gathering, model building, and theorizing in the study of religion, in spite of frequently affirming claims of their “value neutrality” and “objectivity.” Feminist research and woman’s scholarship in religious studies challenge traditional methods and boundaries of the discipline and thereby contribute to their transformation (373).

Therefore, it appears that the feminist scholar may be working, at least partly, toward the same goal as the religious studies scholar. If the result of the scholastic feminism critique causes the field of religious studies to reflect upon their approaches and whether or they add to the comprehension of a belief system, then it is beneficial to the religious studies scholarship.

The feminist scholar’s critique shows that feminism, like theology, may offer useful information which can inform the methodology which a religious studies scholar chooses to embrace. However, while there is not any danger in trying to answer the critique offered by scholastic feminism, it is important that the religious studies scholar does not embrace feminism itself. It must be remembered that feminism is inherently activist and therefore, like theology, is incompatible because both have very different goals.

One danger in embracing feminism is that the religious studies scholar may assume that, due to its activist agenda, it speaks to or meets the goal of religious studies more than any other approach or perspective.¹⁰ If the religious studies scholar does assume or argue that the feminist approach should be used to the exclusion of other approaches, then it becomes clear that the scholar believes that this approach has revealed the ‘essential’ components of a religion, in the case of the feminism, the female perspective, and in doing so has done a disservice to the field itself.¹¹

One way of seeing how such an emphasis hinders the field may best be offered in a thought experiment. Assume, for the sake of argument, that there is a professor teaching a religious studies class. The professor has chosen to take an approach informed by the scholastic feminism and has chosen to teach the class using only information gleaned by that approach. While the class will no doubt gain some insightful knowledge into the religious tradition, this knowledge is only partial because no single approach can ever truly meet the goal of religious studies.

¹⁰ Claims that the feminist approach offers a better or more informed view of religious traditions than the ‘patriarchal’ approaches which emphasized objectivity, was put forward many times in Lynn Ross-Bryant’s fall 2005 course titled “Religion and Feminism” (although not necessarily by Ross-Bryant herself.) My concern here is that all past information offered by previous scholarship will be jettisoned because it did not use a feminist methodology. I believe such a stance is detrimental to religious studies and that’s why it appears in the paper.

¹¹ It should be noted that this is a danger that is actually always present within scholarship. However, due to the essential activism within feminism it appears to be a common problem. This statement also includes the assumption that there is no essential component to religion.

This conclusion is directly drawn from the definition of religion offered previously, which states that religious studies strives to provide a 'holistic description' of a belief system. It is difficult to see how one set of information or one singular approach alone could ever meet this goal. If on the other hand this same professor does allow the class access to both the feminist approach and that of several others used by other scholars, the class will get a better, more well-rounded description that more than likely goes further toward reaching the goal of religious studies.

If it is unclear why the scholastic feminism is incompatible with religious studies then simply returning to the classroom might prove beneficial. From my experience, the students in religious studies classes are often asked not only to bracket their own truth claims for the purposes of the class, but also are required to look at different perspectives and see what information may be gathered from each. Those students that do not either allow themselves to bracket their beliefs, find themselves unable to listen to other approaches, or both, do not do very well in religious studies classes. I believe it is because they are unable to embrace the goal of religious studies. Given this result, what are we to think of religious studies scholars that cannot bracket their own truth claims, or are unable to consider approaches to religion different than their own, or both?

Religious Studies and Activism

One criticism that might arise begins by questioning my presented goal of religious studies. It could be argued that by not allowing the religious studies scholar to do anything more than present a description of a religion, they are rendered useless when it comes to changing the world. In other words, religious studies scholars should offer the world something rather than just sitting up in their ivory towers talking amongst themselves.

While I understand this concern, I find myself wondering if such a criticism says more about the activist agenda that such a person may have and if the place for them is really within the field of religious studies. However, rather than argue over my assumption of the goal of religious studies, mainly because I do think it is valid, perhaps the better course is to show that religious studies, as I have defined it, does allow for scholars to effect the world outside of academia. Gross points to a way in which religious studies scholarship affects those that interact with it when she states:

The academic study of religion is radically destabilizing because accurate information about and empathy for the other is radically destabilizing. Once one really understands the point of view of 'the other' or foreign, claims that one's belief is that only truth are no longer compelling. This is the most significant point of contact between the academic study of religion and the way in which religion is sometimes practices as a personal faith perspective (13).

This shows an inherent impact that may occur due to a widening of a knowledge base. Therefore, while the impact of religious studies scholarship may not be far reaching in the sense that it doesn't impact a great deal of people all at once, it does have an impact regardless and, therefore, just by being available it allows people, those that are willing, to see a different perspective.

However, it should be pointed out that this knowledge, or rather the ability to provide knowledge, should be a passive one on the part of the religious studies scholar. By this, I simply

mean that it is one thing to speak to students or fellow scholars within the halls of academia and challenge their perspectives, approaches and conclusions. It is something completely different if the religious studies scholar goes out of his or her way to destroy the truth claims, or at least to show their deficiency, held by religious studies scholars or to hold up their knowledge as a truth claim in itself. If a scholar does so, then the question must be asked about this activist activity and what agenda they may hold.

Having made this statement, it should also be pointed out that both Rita M. Gross and Ursula King are guilty of intentionally doing so. Gross's position should already be clear from the discussion above dealing with the connection between feminism and religious studies scholarship. However, to reiterate, she intentionally goes after the truth claims of her students in hopes of changing them simply because she believes that they are false. It is interesting that she feels that religious diversity is beneficial but only when it meets the criteria set by her as acceptable (Gross 13). For instance, at one moment she states 'living with religious diversity and regarding it as an interesting resource rather than undesirable deviation from the truth, are the values that dominate the academic study of religion' (13). She then goes on to say, "One *should* feel that sexist, racist, ethnocentric, and religious chauvinisms, if present, are being threatened by the academic study of religion" (13). It appears that she is not really looking at religion with the goal of describing it but rather judging it according to a specific set of truth claims that see sexist, racist, ethnocentrism, and religious chauvinism as bad. Her agenda appears to be one which hopes to due away with these things while hiding behind the guise of doing religious studies.¹²

Ursula King does something similar to Gross but in an opposite application. She hopes that the knowledge gained by religious studies can be used to help people find their place within the spirituality of a more globalize world. She does not denigrate the religious worldview of the people that she studies but rather hopes the information gleaned from studying will be used to create new world views. As such, King is presenting her data, although not specifically any one part of it, as contributing to a new religious paradigm. She believes that this is the tract that religious studies must move into in order to be a viable part of society. She states:

Also important is a different purpose for religious studies... Besides its contribution to the ongoing growth in knowledge, religious studies also possesses tremendous resources for helping people to develop an integral, holistic way of life for an ecological age. Studying religions can become a means for feeding the zest of life and for enabling humans to live better fuller lives (384-385).

It should be clear that she is offering the 'truth' found in the study of religions and as such it must be questioned as to whether or not it is really appropriate for a religious studies scholarship.

In the end, it should become clear that there is a fine line to be walked if one wishes to provide new perspectives and fuller understandings of religion to a world which may benefit from it without crossing that line into activism. From the two examples provided, it should be clear that either arguing against a religious standpoint or presenting a religious standpoint as correct or more fulfilling is not the goal of religious studies but rather better left in the hands of the feminist activists and theologians.

¹² It should be noted that this is my own reading of Gross. Katherine K. Young argues along the same lines, although she argues a somewhat different case in "Having Your Cake and Eating it Too: Feminism and Religion"

Feminist Activism is incompatible with the academic study of religion because it, much like theology, presupposes specific truth claims when it addresses a religious belief system. As such, it seeks to change a religious belief system rather than give insights or access to a more comprehensive understanding of a belief system. However, when the feminist critique of the field of religious studies is offered it can point scholars to new approaches toward religion and allow for the goal of religious studies to become all the more attainable.

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