WHAT WE KNEW, WHAT WE KNOW, 
AND WHAT WE WILL KNOW ABOUT 
RELIGION AND SEXUALITY

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ABSTRACT
Twenty years ago, certain assumptions were current about religion and sexuality. Among them was the idea that most Christian and Jewish denominations are sex-negative, misogynist, and discriminating against women and same-sex loving people. It was also taken for granted that gender binaries were real: men/women; heterosexual/homosexual. Today, different assumptions apply. Some religious groups are actually sex-positive and welcoming of all persons. Gender binaries have been replaced by the idea that both gender identity and sexual orientation are diverse and fluid. Implications of these assumptions are reflected in many religious groups both in theology and polity. What the future will bring is unclear. In this text the author will hazard a few guesses in light of trends in religion today including increased secularization, continued recalcitrance on the part of some denominations, and changes in religious practices.

Keywords: religion and sexuality; gender identity; sexual orientation.

O QUE SABÍAMOS, O QUE SABEMOS E QUE SABEREMOS SOBRE RELIGIÃO E SEXUALIDADE

RESUMO
Há vinte anos, certos pressupostos eram correntes sobre religião e sexualidade. Entre eles estava a ideia de que a maioria das denominações cristãs e judaicas era negativa em relação ao sexo, misógina e discriminadora das mulheres e de pessoas do mesmo sexo que se

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amavam. Geralmente era também aceito que os binários de gênero eram reais: homens/mulheres; heterossexuais/homossexuais. Hoje se adotam pressupostos diferentes. Alguns grupos religiosos são realmente positivos em relação a sexo e receptivos a todas as pessoas. Os binários de gênero foram substituídos pela ideia de que tanto a identidade de gênero como a orientação sexual são diversas e fluidas. Implicações dessas suposições se refletem em muitos grupos religiosos, tanto teológica como politicamente. O que o futuro irá trazer não está claro. Neste texto, a autora vai arriscar alguns palpites à luz das tendências na religião hoje, incluindo a crescente secularização, a contínua resistência por parte de algumas denominações e mudanças em práticas religiosas.

**Palavras-chave:** religião e sexualidade; identidade de gênero; orientação sexual.

**LO QUE SABÍAMOS, LO QUE SABEMOS Y LO QUE SABREMOS SOBRE RELIGIÓN Y SEXUALIDAD**

**RESUMEN**
Hace veinte años, ciertas suposiciones eran comunes acerca de la religión y la sexualidad. Entre ellos estaba la idea de que la mayoría de las denominaciones cristianas y judías era negativa en cuanto al sexo, misógina y discriminatoria contra las mujeres y las personas del mismo sexo que se amaban. Generalmente era también entendido que los binarios de género eran reales: hombres/mujeres; heterosexuales/homosexuales. Hoy día, se aplican diferentes supuestos. Algunos grupos religiosos son de hecho positivos frente al sexo y acogedores de todas las personas. Los binarios de género han sido sustituidos por la idea de que tanto la identidad de género como la orientación sexual son diversas y fluidas. Las implicaciones de estos supuestos se reflejan en muchos grupos religiosos, tanto en la teología y la política. Lo que el futuro habrá de traer es incierto. En este texto la autora arriesgará algunas conjeturas a la luz de las tendencias en la religión hoy, incluyendo el aumento de la secularización, la continua obstinación por parte de algunas denominaciones, y los cambios en las prácticas religiosas.

**Palabras clave:** religión y sexualidad; identidad de gênero; orientación sexual.
INTRODUCTION:

MANDRAGORA is an important resource on the theological scene. I have written for it on occasion, and always read it with great interest. Themes and content change, but the fundamental quality of analysis and the basic commitment to the well being of all persons remain the same. I offer congratulations and gratitude to the staff as I look back and ahead on matters of sexuality. How wonderful to continue working together. This is what makes feminist work in religion so engaging.

Twenty years ago, certain assumptions were current about religion and sexuality. It was taken for granted that gender binaries were real: boys/girls; men/women; heterosexual/homosexual. Most Christian and Jewish denominations were sex-negative, misogynist, and discriminating against women and same-sex loving people. Religion was not particularly useful when thinking about social change since it was seen as reinforcing the status quo.

Today, different assumptions apply. Gender binaries have been replaced by the idea that both sexual orientation and gender identity are diverse and fluid. There are many options in both categories. Some religious groups, and some local houses of worship are actually sex-positive and welcoming of all persons. Implications of these changing assumptions are reflected in many religious groups both theologically and in terms of polity.

In the 1990s when MANDRAGORA began, it was risky to write about feminist issues in religion. Authors might suffer negative consequences when looking for graduate programs or jobs. Writers from outside of Latin America risked being labeled as colonialists trying to foist ideas on people who did not want them. I observe twenty years later that publishing in MANDRAGORA is a plus for writers, especially graduate students, because the journal has earned a reputation for excellent content and critical scholarship. Moreover, as a North American, I have always felt welcome in the global conversation that the journal hosts. Now the new “givens” in the field of religion and sexuality change the conversation in important ways. I offer a summary of some of them with a guess at what might be ahead of us.
CHANGES IN THINKING ABOUT GENDER

More than simply being concerned with gender, feminism in the 21st century is focused on eliminating the wide range of oppressions that guarantee that some people will always be advantaged and others will be disadvantaged. This is certainly true with those who are female-identified, especially women and dependent children. But now it is also complicated by the changing understandings of gender that make the old categories like male-female harder to defend, and by an emerging variety and fluidity of sexual orientation that gives rise to the new complexity in human experience.

When work on gender oppression began in the 1960s, it was resultant of the emerging women’s movements for justice around the world. It was also linked to liberation struggles including those dealing with economic injustice, racism, colonialism, and the like. U.S.-based scholars including Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Letty Russell, to name only a few of the many whose early work has ground a remarkable field of study, made certain assumptions about sexuality, gender, and religion that are not necessarily the case today. As scholars and activists from around the world now form a glorious chorus of feminist workers in religion, the categories in which they work are as diverse as they are.

This does not mean that the early work was without merit. To the contrary, it was luminous in its brilliant naming of the fundamental questions that still guide the field. It is because of the success of pioneers that new colleagues around the world are taking up whole new constellations of issues in the 21st century, some of which could not have been imagined fifty years ago.

The blatant sexism found in patriarchal, or what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has named “kyriarchal,” societies prompted the early feminist work in religion. It was impossible to understand societies—whether


secular or religious, indigenous, or newly arrived—without taking into account the many ways in which so-called gender differences amounted to gender discrimination.

As women from the Christian tradition began to understand the relationship between language and imagery, between religious teaching and social structures, it quickly became obvious that the maleness of the Divine and the hegemony of men in the culture were related. Mary Daly captured this insight memorably when she wrote, “If God is male, than the male is God.” Without reducing fifty years of work into a single, albeit signal phrase, it is impossible to overstate the breadth and depth of this insight. Twenty years ago when MANDRAGORA entered the conversation the concept was still not anchored in society nor accepted by most people. It still is not today.

Gender disparity was seen in many forms. The exclusion of women from ordained ministry, still the case in the Roman Catholic Church worldwide, is but one example. Women were prohibited from serving on juries, voting in national elections, acquiring credit in their own names etc. all because of misunderstandings of gender differences that religions emphasized. Current restrictions on women’s access to certain forms of education, employment, and decision-making about reproductive health form another cluster of gender-based issues. They are all the consequences of a two-gendered worldview with one gender, namely males, in charge, and one gender, namely females, in a permanent subordinate position. The “lordship” of the savior further reinscribes this idea in Christianity, reinforcing gender roles and gendered power.

The role of religion understood generically has been to baptize and confirm a two-gender worldview and assure that it would endure. Happily, feminists in many fields, including religion, are systematically dismantling the apparatus of such discrimination. No longer can people be lied to about the intentions of the Divine to make men powerful and women submissive.

No longer can jobs and social roles be confined to one gender or the other based on divine will. While there is always more work to do, it is far less common today than it was twenty years ago to find wholesale limits put on women. However, it is very common to find women and

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3 Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father, p. 19.
dependent children being abused, trafficked, and/or punished simply because of their gender. Every war-torn region of the world exhibits this phenomenon. So much of the religious symbolism and imagery that undergird social structures remain to be dismantled.

Fifty years of feminist work in religion has resulted in some new possibilities that have only intensified in the last two decades. For example, basic ideas such as the gender of the Divine have changed. It is no longer acceptable in progressive circles to use gender-exclusive, power language such as “Father,” “Lord,” “Ruler,” “King,” though it is still done routinely in many places of worship. Theologians have done tremendous work dealing with classist, colonialist, racist, sexist religion. But, sadly, in very few places is there the theo-political will to make such changes operative in daily life. How few churches, for example, use words like “Mother,” “Goddess,” “Friend,” “Ground of Possibility,” and myriad other inclusive and expansive appellations for the Divine in worship, study, and preaching. Old habits die hard and old power structures even harder.

Similarly, women are now part of many religions’ administrative and ministerial bodies. The decision to allow women bishops in the Church of England, for example, is a long overdue step forward. But even decades after the ordination of women priests in some settings, there are feminist questions about whether ordaining women makes any real difference or whether it simply shifts the burden of ministry to women in what has become a stereotypic female job in kyriarchy.

Of course at the level of gender justice there is no question that it is better if anyone is to be ordained to ordain women. But as theology graduate student Jacqueline Small asserts: “A Church that gives women more power gets points for liberality, but it seldom has to address deeper issues of patriarchy, like male language for God, permissive attitudes toward gendered violence, and expectations that women must prevent men from lusting. Nor does such a Church necessarily affirm LGBT lives, or welcome non-white people.”\footnote{http://religiondispatches.org/female-bishops-in-church-of-england-is-a-good-step-but-its-just-a-step/ Jacqueline Small, July 18, 2014.} This is a 21st century view of what difference gender makes, which is shared by some of the women
who were ordained forty years ago. Gender justice without connection to the larger web of oppression is partial at best.

Moreover, there is a real question now as to what constitutes gender. As transgender persons become increasingly vocal and active, the larger society is forced to deal with the fact that we do not know as much about gender as we might have thought. In the early work of feminist theologies, it was assumed that genitalia determined gender such that a person with a penis was a man and a person with a vagina was a woman. Decades later, the sciences—both social and physical—make such distinctions more complicated.

The work of Christine Gudorf opened this discussion in the academic study of religion:

“Late modernity has been witnessing the erosion of the dimorphic sexual paradigm that, in both strong and weak forms, has characterized human history as we know it. Recent discoveries in biology and the social sciences have combined with altered patterns in human sexual behavior to raise critical new questions about the inherited paradigm. Religions of the West whose sacred texts, mythologies, and codes of behavior assume that maleness and femaleness are exclusive and complementary types of sexuality—each of which determines sexual identity, reproductive role, social role, and the sex of one’s partner—increasingly must grapple with both theoretical evidence for and experiential evidence of polymorphous human sexuality. Inherited categories of dimorphic sexuality not only are challenged but become less and less intelligible.”

She gives many examples from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam:

“Sexual dimorphism is not merely understood as part of original creation as depicted in sacred texts. Throughout all three sets of sacred texts, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, males and females are distinguished from each other again and again in terms of social function, worth, and relation to each other and to God, that is, in terms of religious norms. All three sets of texts dictate different sets of religious and moral, social and domestic norms for those dimorphically divided into men and women.”


6 Gudorf, P. 868.
Whether this is played out in Judaism in terms of how early accounts of Genesis were read, or in Christianity with regard to ministry being reserved to men, or in Islam where women were in some instances elevated in status, the same dynamic of male over against female held. The differences were seen as complementary even though the results made clear that difference really meant discrimination.

Gudorf goes on to explore the biological basis of the two-gender approach and found that it was as dubious as the theological one:

“In fact, biologists today tell us that there are six different biological factors that together make up one’s sex, each of which has a spectrum with poles at either end. For many people these six different factors do not line up in any consistent “male” or “female” pattern. The six biological factors are chromosomal sex, hormonal sex, sex of the external genitalia, sex of the internal reproductive organs, gonadal sex, and sex of the brain (Crooks and Baur: 43-48). These are obviously interrelated, though not always in the same way in all persons.”

All of this amounts to less certainty about what a woman is, what a man is, and more intensity around the question of why we need to know. Terminology is important. While we previously operated out of the notion that sex was given and gender constructed, that is, one was born female and made into a woman according to social norms, we have learned that both sex and gender are constructed. Of course there are certain biological givens, but how those are “read” as in the case of intersex people for whom doctors routinely make decisions at birth, are matters of culture.

What Gudorf wrote of in terms of sexuality, we now refer to as “gender identity,”the ways people want to be referred to in everyday life. For example, a young woman friend of mine named Maria now wants to be called simply “M” without reference to gender. M wants to be referred to by the plural non-specific pronouns “they” and “their” instead of “he” or “she” as is customary usage in English to denote gender. While this is awkward because English (and Spanish) make gender explicit in pronouns, I am learning to do it because it is “their” way of wishing to be named.

7 Gudorf, p. 875.
CHANGES IN THINKING ABOUT SEXUALITY

Similar major changes have taken place in understandings of sexuality in recent years of feminist work in religion. In the earliest work, for example the signal essay by Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View”, there is no reference to what we now call sexual orientation. It is assumed that all women are heterosexual, married, with children. Now we know that that is not true, that variety not sameness is the norm.

Just as gender varies far more than we thought, so, too, does sexual orientation. Rather than being fixed and rigid—once heterosexual, always heterosexual—we now know that sexual orientation can be fluid over a lifetime. Moreover, the continuum of sexual attraction is far broader than imagined by those who did early feminist work in religion.

So whether one is lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, or some other category yet to be named is taken as a given, understood on the same ethical plain, and yet given specific attention because of the different ways in which societies treat different people. For example, lesbian women in many parts of the world can lose custody of their children. Bisexual women are virtually ignored as such. Heterosexual women are expected to behave in certain male-pleasing ways. All of these situations need to be changed, hence attention to sexual orientation has become an important dimension of feminist work in religion.

Theologians and activists including Carter Heyward, Judith Plaskow, Mary E. Hunt, Marcella Althaus-Reid, and writer Kittredge Cherry have brought insight to what are now referred to as “queer” issues in religion. While these matters are very culturally specific, they are also more broadly experienced than previously thought. Far from being a

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“northern or western import” as queer issues were dismissively referred to in some circles, the presence of importance of various sexual identities in virtually all cultures is something that has enriched and expanded feminist work in religion.

Queer work in religion is a whole new sub-specialty. While it refers in the first instance to the ways in which the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer people inform religion, “queer” has a broader meaning as well. “Queer” has come to encompass all who transgress social norms of sexuality, whether in dress, object of desire, sexual practice, etc. This has resulted in a certain dissipating of the focal concept, i.e., if everyone is queer how is anyone queer? But many young people especially prefer to call themselves “gender queer” than to worry about such technicalities. The attempt is to leave aside the mores of the past, embrace new practices, identities, and values, and include, include, include. I think it is a worthy project to pursue though it is not clear where it will end.

**CHANGES IN RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING**

These changing understandings of gender identity and sexual orientation mean that feminist work in religion must reflect new data. Of course they also reflect far more sensitive and differentiated views of economic disparity, racism, colonialism, ableism, and the like, all of which are taken together to dismantle *kyriarchal* structures. But the specific changes that these two concepts invite challenge some older assumptions.

First, what constitutes a woman has expanded to include trans women, i.e., those who were considered male but have taken steps to change their gender identity in the world either by cross dressing, taking female hormones, having surgery, or any one of a number of means to present as female. Since trans women share in the oppression of all women, albeit in some instances with the residual privilege of male upbringing (for example, previous access to education, income, etc.), their experiences now add to the panoply. Their inclusion in women’s communities, though disputed in some instances, is an important signal of justice seeking.
Second, since women come in a wide range of sexual orientations, feminist work in religion reflects that variety. Ethical issues of reproductive justice, including contraception and abortion, are treated alongside equal rights for lesbian/bi/queer women, and along with legal, economical access to hormones and/or surgery for trans women. These may seem exotic in the face of other ethical agenda items including war, economic injustice, ecological disaster, and the like. But ignoring or trivializing the range of women’s issues contributes to the erasure of women and the oppression of sexual minorities.

Third, these wonderful new insights into human experience are resulting in exciting new feminist work in religion. One example is Virginia Ramey Mollenkott’s book *Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach* in which she makes clear the changes that a trans lens brings to the field. Virginia comes from an evangelical background and is now in her 80s so she brings considerable credibility and experience to the issues. For instance, she suggests that maybe the text of Galatians 3:28 is to be taken literally such that “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female...” Imagine how the world would be different!

Other scholars of queer theology, including male feminists like Patrick Cheng, are asking similar questions. It is safe to say that all subsequent feminist liberation work in religion will reflect these insights.

Fourth, the hard work of religious activists has changed many religious traditions. Judaism and Christianity in many countries have found change inescapable as LGBTIQ people have used their own sacred texts and teachings to insist on inclusion. “Love God and love your neighbor” does not leave a lot of room for discrimination. Feminists have insisted that ministries and leadership jobs be opened to women. And so they are, almost to the point that we can see ministry as a predominantly female profession in the future.

While some denominations remain recalcitrant in these matters, Roman Catholicism being the primary example, others have realized in the face of increasing secularization and decreased interest in religion

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on the part of many people that they have to become more welco-
ming or lose members. Many denominations that have opened their
doors, eased up on their old moralism, and, above all, listened to the
experiences of good people, have found that their congregations are
growing, their status in the community is on the rise. Ironically, new
understandings of sexuality and religion may give religion a better public
profile in the future.

WHAT IS NEXT?
Feminist study in religion is a dynamic and expanding field. The
changes in understanding of gender identity and sexual orientation are
only the beginning of new insights for which the experiences of many
people in many parts of the world are necessary. Two factors remain
the same as in the founding work. First, the connection to movements
of liberation is solid. Feminist religious activists are essential to the
analytic work. Second, the links and connections between/among va-
rious forms of oppression remain important to understand and provide
cues about how to eradicate them. This is the work of social change
to which feminist liberation theologians are committed without reser-
vation and with joy.

So what might we reasonably expect to come next? I have no
crystal ball, but I see three likely next steps. The first is a deeper ap-
preciation of diversity within certain categories. For example, even for
those who have not moved beyond the gender binaries, there is a great
deal of variety within what we think of as a man or woman, a boy or
girl. Religion helps here. If all persons are created equal, have the same
source and end of their existence, then their infinite variety is important
to embrace. Rather than trying to cluster people by socially constructed
categories of gender—just how much testosterone must a person have
to be called male, as Olympic officials worry—it makes so much more
sense to see the individuality as a gift to the world. Categories come
and go, but persons, precious and beloved persons, have only one life
each to enjoy. It is a human right to do so.

A second likely move is to gradually deemphasize sexual orienta-
tion and focus instead on the quality of human love. So many people
report changing their sexual orientation over a lifetime—a heterosexual woman who falls in love with a woman, a gay man who finds his female coworker very attractive, a bisexual woman who discovers she wants her male friend to be her lover—that once again the categories are less helpful than the individual experiences. Of course it is hard to live in a world without labels. If I want a can of soup at the grocery store it is helpful to know if it is tomato or mushroom! But undue scrutiny to the “object” of one’s love can obscure what is really important, namely, the quality of that love as shown in the commitment, faithfulness, and care of the lovers.

A third very feasible change that may come is more interreligious discussion of religion and sexuality. There are very few instances of people from different faith groups discussing these matters with colleagues across traditions. Certain exceptions prove the rule, such as the marvelous project on “good sex” that a group of feminists around the world (myself included) carried out. But it is hard to find many such examples where religious people who help shape their own tradition’s thinking also talk with their neighbors.

Now I think we have to admit that none of us are experts, that all of our traditions have shaped even their most progressive thinking about sexuality based on outmoded ways of thinking. For example, feminists shaped our agendas based on what we thought we knew about women. Trans women have shown us that we don’t know all that we thought we knew. So pooled resources for understanding how gender identity and sexual orientation work in the contemporary world works will benefit everyone.

I wish MANDRAGORA many blessings on its next twenty years of publication. I hope to contribute to it again and again. More important, I hope to read and learn and grow because of it as new data inform our efforts to make feminist religiously informed justice.

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