Roundtable On Feminist Ideology And Religious Diversity, Part 5: Feminist Theology, Religiously Diverse Neighborhood Or Christian Ghetto?

R. M. Gross
C. P. Christ
G. G. Burford
A. Wadud
Yvonne Patricia Chireau
Swarthmore College, ychirea1@swarthmore.edu

See next page for additional authors

Follow this and additional works at: https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion

Part of the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.
Authors

This article is available at Works: https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion/9
At recent gatherings of feminist theologians, I have become increasingly frustrated and alienated when repeatedly the topic of diversity has been limited to diversity within Christianity. When I have pointed out that some of us are not Christians and that religious diversity, not just intra-Christian diversity, needs to be on the agenda, my comments have been repeatedly ignored. As soon as I would finish speaking, people would return to the topic of intra-Christian diversity and complain that not enough non-white Christian feminist theologians were in the group. I was one of the few non-Christians in these groups, but the kind of diversity represented by us non-Christians was treated as if it were unimportant or irrelevant. If feminist theologians are genuinely concerned about diversity, such reactions are completely unwarranted. After all, whatever complaints some had about a lack of intra-Christian diversity, the diversity of forms of Christianity in the room was significantly greater than the broader diversity of religions represented in the room.

Feminist theology, it seems to me, should be an enterprise that looks like the world we live in. One of the great discoveries of the past century and a half has been that of religious pluralism and of the fact that non-Christian religions cannot simply be labeled "errors," but are just as sophisticated and cogent as Christianity. No reputable theology that ignores religious diversity and continues the tradition of Christian hegemony is possible in this religiously diverse world. Yet as the world becomes more aware of and sensitive to diversity of all kinds, the feminist theology movement, like much mainstream (or malestream, as some feminists would say) theological writing and education, is oblivious to the reality of religious diversity and acts as if all theology were Christian theology.

Non-Christians are often deeply offended by Christians' frequent unwillingness to extend themselves to understand and appreciate non-Christian
religions, as well as by an assumption of Christian superiority and hegemony long after it has been deemed inappropriate or unwarranted by the facts of religious diversity. Furthermore, in the Western Hemisphere and Europe, non-Christians are religious minorities. In these geographic areas, whatever other discrimination Christian feminists may face because of race, class, or culture, they do not experience being a religious minority. Therefore, they often seem unaware of the pervasive cultural assumption that Christianity is the normal and normative religious affiliation. They live in a culture that takes for granted a Christian calendar and schedules holidays in accordance with that calendar.

Recently, I was called for jury duty on the most important holiday of the Tibetan Buddhist calendar. When such incidents reflecting a lack of awareness happen to me, I often reply that I cannot meet the request because of a religious holiday, but I would be happy to come in on Christmas Day instead to do what is requested. Christian feminists live in a culture that assumes all religious people have more or less the same world-view as those of the majority religion, a culture that conducts its public affairs—how it swears oaths in court, how it labels its money, what it says in its political pledge of allegiance—as if that Christian world-view were self-evident and had no alternatives. Because Christianity is the majority religion in most countries in which religious feminism flourishes, Christian feminists, like the culture in general and like mainstream theologians, simply do not recognize what it is like to be a religious minority and do not construct feminist theology that is mindful of religious diversity.

Why feminist theology should want to imitate mainstream theology in this unfortunate habit is incomprehensible to me. One might assume that feminist theology would do better on this score. Feminist movements in religion began, after all, precisely because the diversity represented by women's voices had been submerged in mainstream theology. Moreover, the struggle over diversity has been one of the most painful and divisive experiences within the feminist theology movement. There has been a call for, and a great deal of effort expended in, bringing ever more voices into the conversation, with some success at the intra-Christian level. It is ironic, unfortunate, and sad that a movement so dedicated to bringing as many voices as possible into the conversation would ignore religious diversity.

The effort to include every stripe, color, and variety of Christianity seems to me, an outsider to Christianity with a different perspective on intra-Christian diversity, actually to yield little diversity. These versions of Christianity all read in a relatively similar fashion to me, no matter what their ethnic or cultural source. Certainly they are much more similar to one another than to any of the largely unrepresented non-Christian religions. So if we are serious about diversity, we should want to hear voices that say something quite different from what we are used to hearing. Buddhists, Muslims, neopagans, Native Americans, and Hindus, for example, have quite different things to say about almost every topic
of theological interest than Christians usually do. Encountering and working within a context of such genuine plurality, with its radically diverse religious alternatives, would challenge our thinking and would make our discourse as feminist theologians so much more interesting.

But if non-Christians are routinely ignored and discounted, as happened in the forums in which I recently participated, it is little wonder that fewer and fewer non-Christians identify with the feminist theology movement or contribute to it. This is especially relevant because other academic forums that are not hostile to feminism and women's issues are much more concerned with religious diversity than are the feminist theology movement in general and the Women and Religion section of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) specifically.

For example, the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies invites many types of comparative Buddhist-Christian studies and dialogue; religious diversity is always taken into account, but this does not mean that Christianity is ignored or that intra-Christian variety is overlooked. The society has written the principles of gender balance and inter-religious balance into its bylaws; a great deal of attention is paid to selecting women officers regularly and to booking women speakers at all conferences. However, as a long-term member of the society and of its nominating committee, I sadly report that of the four possible combinations of gender and religious identity relevant to this society, Christian women are by far the most rare. They do not participate actively or in large numbers in the society and recruiting them as officers has proven to be very difficult, which is not at all the case for Buddhist women. Christian feminists (and most women who are theologically liberal enough to be interested in inter-religious exchange are feminists), it seems, are not interested in and do not care to engage with the topic of religious diversity.

The example of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies demonstrates that one does not have to choose between feminist awareness and sensitivity to the existence of religious diversity or the needs of non-Christian members of the academy. In this particular case, the male Christians who participate in the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies are considerably more advanced on the issue of taking religious pluralism seriously than are most Christian feminist theologians. I do not have to sacrifice my feminist consciousness to participate in this academic forum, and it takes my concerns as a non-Christian seriously. Therefore, I find it considerably more attractive than the many feminist theology forums that limit their concern to intra-Christian diversity.

It should be pointed out that in its early years, the feminist theology movement was not so limited. Christians and non-Christians worked together in the early years of the AAR Women and Religion section and the feminist theology movement to present a strong feminist presence in theology and in the academic study of religion. Non-Christians such as Judith Plaskow, Carol Christ, Christine Downing, Naomi Goldenberg, and myself were instrumental in the early
development of the feminist theology movement, and we were as visible, as
central, and as valued as Christian feminists were. But over the years, that has
changed considerably.

Especially problematic in regard to the development of feminist theology
since its early days is the employment situation of non-Christian feminists. Very
few of us hold academic jobs commensurate with our contributions to the fields
of religious studies and feminist theology, and very few of us teach graduate stu-
dents, a fact that probably reflects the cultural assumption that Christianity is
the normative religion. Christian feminists have been more appropriately em-
ployed much more frequently. Many hold influential positions in graduate
schools of religion, seminaries, and theological schools, whereas non-Christian
feminist theologians almost never hold equally influential positions. This is un-
fortunate both for individual non-Christian feminists and, even more so, for the
future of women’s studies in religion and feminist theology. Those with positions
in graduate schools of religion, seminaries, and schools of theology have a much
more direct impact on the future of a discipline than those who are limited to
undergraduate teaching. If the major teaching responsibilities of those who
teach only undergraduates are large service courses at the introductory level,
their lack of influence on the next generation of scholars is intensified. In addi-
tion, not only do those of us in such positions have less time and fewer resources
for research and publication, but in some cases we are almost punished for our
scholarly achievements by colleagues, departments, and colleges that do not
value scholarly leadership and excellence or are jealous of our successes as pub-
lished scholars. These employment situations diminish even further the pres-
ence and influence of non-Christian feminist theology in our discipline.

Altogether, these conditions create a depressing situation for the non-
Christian feminist who cares about theology and theological education. They
also create a situation that is not healthy for feminist theology. If feminist the-
ology is limited to an intra-Christian context, it will be a more isolated and less
relevant movement than it will be if religious diversity is taken more seriously
and if non-Christian feminist theologies of all varieties flourish.

If this situation is to be remedied, what actions need to be taken? Three
high priorities come to mind. First, and perhaps foremost, we religious femi-
nists need to return to our original inspiration—the desire to overcome the mo-
nopoly of one voice on the process of creating theology and to open the forum
to a diversity of voices. Throughout the development of religious feminism, we
have heard from an ever-widening circle of diverse voices, as people who felt ex-
cluded expressed their frustration and added their contributions. But, as I have
argued in other contexts, we have stopped too soon.¹ Genuine diversity, for
those of us involved in religion, must include religious diversity. And religious

¹ See Rita M. Gross, *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996),
56–64, 224–27.
diversity and Christian diversity are two different things. Religious diversity is not achieved merely by including Asian, African, Latin American, African American, and lesbian Christian perspectives in the discussion, even though such efforts have made feminist theology somewhat more diverse than it was when many of its spokespeople were white, middle-class, heterosexual North American Christians. Religious diversity will be achieved only when Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, pagan, Confucian, Taoist, and indigenous feminists routinely participate in feminist theology discussions and are taken seriously by Christians as theological partners.

The second priority is a problem that pertains not to Christian feminists alone but to Christian theology in general. It is so easy for Christian feminists to ignore religious diversity probably because so many Christians do not take non-Christian religions seriously and do not regard their practitioners as equal partners in religious life and in the quest for meaningful answers to life’s dilemmas. Behind this lack of consciousness regarding the significance and value of non-Christian perspectives lies the specter of a long history of exclusive Christian truth claims and tremendous suffering wrought upon the world by such claims. Though probably few Christian feminist theologians would agree with these truth claims, the history and pervasiveness of such claims require proaction rather than passive reaction on the part of Christian feminists. A passive stance vis-à-vis these claims has resulted in the current lack of religious diversity in the feminist theology movement.

Religion may be the only arena in which exclusive truth claims about the superiority of one’s own group over all other kinds of human beings are still routinely circulated and acted upon, even by people who would not support racial, gender, or class prejudice, or homophobia. In fact, the way in which exclusive truth claims in religion function as the religious equivalent of biased statements regarding race, gender, class, sexual orientation, or culture has not been noted, discussed, or condemned by many theologians. One might hope and expect that feminist theology, with its sensitivity to diversity and to the pain of exclusion, would be among the leading movements to condemn exclusive truth claims in religion and to manifest a different, religiously diverse stance. Unfortunately, however, my male colleagues in Christian theology who are involved in inter-religious dialogue are considerably more attuned to the problems of exclusive religious truth claims and to the need for serious interaction with non-Christian religions. When I move from a multifaith gathering to a feminist gathering, I find considerably less awareness of the importance of religious diversity and of the need for such serious interaction.

Finally, if non-Christian feminist theologians were more appropriately employed, in positions in which they could do more research and writing and from which they could directly influence future generations of theologians through their presence and their teaching, the marginalization of non-Christian feminist theologians would be significantly lessened. Like the second priority, this
project does not pertain to feminist theology alone but intersects with another major project. Seminaries and schools of theology, as part of their program of training students to be more sensitive to religious diversity and to develop a more adequate ethical response to that diversity than exclusive truth claims, need to stop ‘othering’ non-Christian religions. The most effective way to do this would be to require training in major world religions as part of the curriculum in such schools and to have this teaching presented authentically, by academically trained spokespersons from those religions. Therefore, I suggest that efforts to create appropriate positions for non-Christian feminist theologians should be a high priority for Christian feminists who are now employed by major graduate schools of religion, seminaries, and schools of theology. Adopting this priority not only would address the lack of religious diversity in feminist theology circles but also would help mainstream Christianity negotiate more suitable ways of thinking about religious diversity and would educate the next generation of parish ministers and theologians to broadcast another message to their congregations and students about difference and those who are different.

Rita M. Gross

---

2 Gross, “The Virtues and Joys of the Comparative Mirror,” Boston University School of Theology Focus (fall 1999): 9–16. This paper was originally delivered as the Lowell Lecture at the Boston University School of Theology on March 23, 1999.
I vividly remember the days when the women and religion section was a place where feminists in religion engaged in dialogue across religious boundaries. I believed that we were working together to transform and recreate religious traditions.¹

Just as clearly etched in my mind is an afternoon when the women walked out of the Women and Religion section. I was sitting in the back of the room. I couldn't believe my eyes! Christian feminists must have presented in the first part of the afternoon, and some of the rest of us—perhaps Susan Setta, Rita Gross, Judith Plaskow, Emily Culpepper, Karen Brown, Naomi Goldenberg, or myself—must have been scheduled for the second session. At the interval, half of the room, led by two senior Christian feminists, left. I approached one of the women who led the exodus in the evening, asking her what had happened. "The big boys were discussing liberation theology," she responded unhesitatingly, "and I told my students they needed to be up on that if they wanted to get jobs." "And what we're doing isn't of interest to them?" I must have replied. "It won't help them get jobs," she answered.

I felt something breaking inside of me. Our community of creativity and discourse had been ruptured. One could argue that the shattering of early idealistic dreams was inevitable as the study of women and religion developed. But I cannot help thinking that the break that occurred had an economic cause rooted in powerful religious interests.

About that time I was asked to teach a course on feminist theology at a Christian seminary in northern California. The majority of the course was devoted to Christian feminists, and I presented their work sympathetically, while making it clear that for me, their work did not go far enough if it left the core symbolisms of the Bible and liturgy in place. I was not asked to teach the class again, but as I had a full teaching load at another university (and the adjunct salary I had received barely paid for my gas), I did not think much about it. Later, a friend who had graduated from the seminary in question asked the dean of the seminary (herself a feminist) why I had not been rehired. My friend was told that a student had complained that because I was not a Christian she had begun to question her own faith (make a note of this). My friend responded that if I knew the subject matter and taught it fairly, my theological stance should not matter. She argued further (forgive my immodesty here) that it didn't make sense to deprive students of contact with one of the leading feminist thinkers in

¹ Judith Plaskow and I edited Womanspirit Rising (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979, 1989) and Weaving the Visions (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1989) in the conviction that feminists who radically challenge religious traditions have a great deal in common.
religion. Eventually, I was asked to teach again, but only if my friend agreed to co-teach in order to represent the Christian position.

A few years ago, I was surprised at the outrage Christian feminists expressed when they were chastised and punished (in some cases) for invoking the feminine divine at the Re-Imagining conference. Where were these same women, I wondered, when Rita Gross and Emily Culpepper and Naomi Goldenberg and I were passed over for jobs, overlooked when conferences were planned, and excluded in a variety of other ways from the feminist theological dialogue because of our work on the Goddess? And why did they act as if it had just occurred to them that invoking the divine power as female and sexual might evoke repercussions?

Rita Gross states that Christian feminist theologians have excluded non-Christians from the feminist theological dialogue. This certainly is true. But the problem is in the first instance structural. Christian feminists did not create the system. They have simply found a way to work within it.

Most departments of religion are hostile to or ambivalent about constructive theological work, because it does not seem to be sufficiently 'objective.' When those with Christian or Jewish commitments sympathetic present 'classic' texts or the works of 'great men,' they can claim to be teaching 'objectively.' But when feminists challenge the assumptions and conclusions of traditional authorities or (worse!) insist on teaching alternative texts, they are accused of partisanship. Before I came up for tenure at Columbia University, I was advised that as my work had come to focus on women writers, it no longer 'fit in' with the priorities of the department. About that time, I noticed that job descriptions began to change. Positions that once might have been described as "contemporary religious thought" began to mention specific male thinkers. This excluded those whose focus was feminist theology. (A question not asked in Rita Gross's essay is why so many of the younger feminists in religion are uninterested in or hostile to feminist theology. The reason for this must also, at least in part, be ideological and economic. Women who want to be hired in religion departments must distinguish themselves from a generation of scholars perceived as not sufficiently objective.)

Seminaries are not adverse to theology. Several of the liberal seminaries have even (after years of feminist struggle) welcomed feminist theology. But they require theologians to be Christian. I am quite certain that feminist theologians who teach in seminaries are regularly challenged about their commitment to Christianity. (This is probably why so many have written Christologies.) Such scrutiny no doubt affects their self-understanding and their reaction to the work of others in both conscious and unconscious ways. Denouncing non-Christian feminists is one way to 'prove' one's own theological purity. Ignoring their work in one's writing and teaching is another. Inviting non-Christian feminists to speak at conferences or to deliver lectures in one's academic setting
might give rise to questions about one's own work. It may seem easier not to take the risk.

Rita Gross mentions that she feels more welcome in Buddhist-Christian dialogue groups than she does in the feminist theological community. I suggest that one of the reasons for this is that the boundaries between Buddhists and Christians are less permeable than those between Christian and non-Christian feminists in religion. After all, most of us were once practicing Christians or Jews. It may be precisely because we have so much in common that Christian feminists avoid this dialogue.

Issues that might fruitfully be discussed across religious 'boundaries' include: self (relation, community, autonomy), embodiment (including sexuality), death (and life after death), suffering, nature and the environment, prayer/meditation, social ethics, method, symbols, rituals, conceptions of divine power, etc. In the past, the AAR Women and Religion section has sponsored successful panels on "Initiation," "Suffering," and "Religion and Nuclear War" that featured participants from different traditions.

I worked closely on a project with a Christian feminist for several years. This woman confided that if she continued to work with me, she might find herself leaving the church (here we go again!). It was understood that her job and her standing in the field depended upon this not happening. Not long after that, she attacked my work in print. At a recent gathering that included feminist theologians of different colors and religious convictions, a woman of color asked, "Why are we so afraid of discussing the Goddess?" I was excited that a Christian feminist finally raised the question. It was not addressed. (Why?)

I submit that the Goddess is threatening to Christian feminist theologians because the images of the Goddess and the embodied earth-based spirituality they reflect are powerful and attractive. The women at the Re-Imagining conference discovered this when they invoked Sophia using images that sounded suspiciously like they had been learned in the Goddess movement. And just as they discovered the power of the Goddess, a line was drawn in the sand. They were told in no uncertain terms that funding and positions would be withdrawn from those who crossed this boundary.

It is sometimes said that the dialogue about the Goddess is primarily a white women's issue. While white women in the Goddess movement may be as likely to be as racist and as capable of fighting racism as any other white women, it simply is not true that non-white women have no interest in the Goddess, female symbolism for divine power, or earth-based spirituality. The Goddess circle Rising Moon that was my spiritual home in the 1980s was co-founded and co-led by a Hispanic woman, Carmen Torres. Alice Walker identifies herself as a womanist pagan. Audre Lorde and Ntozake Shange invoke African Goddesses in their poetry. Luisah Teish and Arisaka Razak are important voices in the Goddess movement. Many Asian women identify with Kuan Yin and other
Goddesses of their ancestral traditions. If Goddess feminists of color are absent from the feminist theological dialogue in the academy, the reason may have more to do with lack of opportunities to study Goddess traditions from a feminist perspective (and the need to identify as Christian to keep one's job) than lack of interest.

I wonder how different our work and our dialogue might be if all of us were not constrained and seduced by the economic powers of the church and the academy?

When I was teaching, students who wanted to pursue graduate studies in women and religion focusing on contemporary or historical aspects of Goddess religions regularly approached me. They asked where they could study. My answer was “Nowhere, unless you are prepared to carve out your own niche in a program that will be either indifferent or hostile to the questions you wish to address.” The numbers of women and men interested in studying Goddess religions, ancient and modern, have surely increased. A friend of mine, who teaches at a large state university in the (U.S.) south, told me that a large proportion of his undergraduate religion students identifies as Wiccan. Yet, to my knowledge, only the California Institute of Integral Studies offers the possibility of integrated and feminist critical study of Goddess religions on the M.A. and Ph.D. level; this program is struggling and poorly funded.

There is currently a debate raging in the fields of archaeology, classics, and to some extent, religious studies about the understanding of history proposed in the Goddess movement. Much of this debate focuses on the work of Marija Gimbutas. However, the work of Marija Gimbutas is not the main issue. If her work had not been taken up by a host of writers and (mostly) self-trained scholars, and if these writers had not influenced several generations of students, Gimbutas’s work could be ignored. The debate is really about the claim of the Goddess movement that (at least some of the) cultures that worshipped the Goddess lived in greater equality and peace than our own, and the converse claim that the rebirth of the Goddess (in a feminist context) is healing for women and might promote peace and equality.

Observers of this debate will note that the materialist bias of contemporary archaeologists makes them suspicious of (if not hostile to) all attempts to reach conclusions about the religious worldviews of non-literate societies; and that the field of religion provides few opportunities to study prehistoric religion. Thus, one might ask whether the academic participants in this debate have access to the proper methodological tools to resolve it, and lament a situation in which those interested in the history of the Goddess have for the most part been unable to find a context in which to be trained to evaluate sources.

I wonder what the women who have gained some power within the current academic structures can and will do to challenge this particular status quo? If the proposal submitted to the program committee of the American Academy of
Religion in 1997 by Miranda Shaw (Buddhist Studies) and Constantina Rhodes Bailly (Hinduism) for a working group on Goddess Studies is any indication, the outlook does not seem hopeful.

This group would have provided a place where scholars of Goddess religion in "area studies" (non-western or non-literary traditions) and Goddess theologians could discuss and debate common themes in their work—and possibly also to consider the questions about history raised in the debate about Gimbutas. Over one hundred signatures indicating interest were collected for this proposal. The steering committee was to have included Rita Gross (Buddhist Studies and Buddhist Theology), Christine Downing (Archetypal Psychology and Greek Goddesses), María Pilar Aquino (Liberation Christianity), Sylvia Marcos (Latin American Indigenous Traditions), and myself (Goddess Thealogy and Western Goddesses). The variety of religious commitments, ethnicities, areas of study, and methodologies represented in the proposed leadership of this group suggests that it would have encouraged exactly the kind of dialogue among feminists in religion that has been missing in recent years. Though there were a number of feminists on the program committee, the proposal was rejected, on the grounds that such questions were being and could be addressed in other program units. (That these issues are not being pursued anywhere can be proven by even a brief perusal of the 1999 AAR program and the 2000 call for papers.) One of the proposers told me she felt like she had been slapped in the face. "Where the Goddess is involved," she said, "it seems like we are back in the days when they told us that we didn't need a women and religion section. The only difference is that our proposal is being rejected by feminists too!"

None of the women on the committee contacted the women who made the proposal to suggest how it might have been strengthened for resubmission. I was on the program committee in the 1980s when a number of new proposals for feminist studies were submitted. I fought long and hard for each one of them. When some of them were rejected, I communicated with the women who had proposed them about the reasoning of members of the committee and how to address it. Why the feminists on the program committee did not take a similar interest in the fate of the Goddess Studies proposal mystifies me.

When I wrote my thealogy, Rebirth of the Goddess (New York: Routledge, 1998), it never crossed my mind not to quote Christian and Jewish feminists alongside Goddess feminists. On the question of monotheism and polytheism, for example, I learned as much from Jewish liturgist Marcia Falk as I did from Goddess theologian Starhawk and archetypal psychologist Christine Downing. All of us were reacting against the exclusive monotheism of Biblical traditions, and our proposals for the future had more in common than would be indicated by our religious affiliations. My editor questioned the number of quotations in my final manuscript, suggesting that I might put more of my ideas into my own
words. My response was that I perceived my book to have emerged out of a dialogue with other women, and I wanted my text to reflect that fact. While our religious commitments differ, feminists in religion, I believe, have a great deal to say to one another. *I ask my sisters again, why did you walk out of the room we once shared, and close the door behind you?*

---

**Grace G. Burford**

**Issues of Inclusion and Exclusion in Feminist Theology**

Every day, people I interact with make assumptions about me. That I am a white, middle-aged woman seems obvious from my appearance, and is in fact true. When they assume that I am married (or at least in a primary relationship), heterosexual (my assumed primary relationship is with a man), a mother (I have had sex with that assumed man, with whom I have an assumed relationship, and I have had the experience of bearing at least one child), and a Christian (at the very least, I must believe in God), they usually have not even considered that I might be single (and unattached), homosexual, childless, and Buddhist (nontheist). Considering where I live (a small town in Arizona), I am lucky if they do not also assume I vote Republican, carry a gun, and want to be referred to as a “girl.”

Given the many ways I am not like most of the people I meet, their false assumptions usually fail to surprise me. I have come to expect that the soprano who sits next to me every week in chorus rehearsals will make many, if not all, of those false assumptions. Despite the fact that I have subtly and even directly informed her of her errors, she will likely fall back into applying to my life categories that fit hers. I am a rare glitch in her world-view, and she has no compelling reason to let this oddball alter her understanding of people in general. On the other hand, I expect some people who are in the habit of making these assumptions to change, because I know they claim to value open-mindedness and to honor diversity. At Prescott College, I am the only out gay person on the faculty, though perhaps not the only Buddhist. I expect more, in terms of acceptance of difference, from my colleagues at the college than I do of the local population in general, not because I think my colleagues are smarter or more worldly, but because they have aligned themselves with an institution that publicly values diversity. When I have encountered habits of exclusion in this group, I have pointed them out, and left it at that. Even when the will to be inclusive is there, habits can prove difficult to break. I remain dedicated to this role in my community for two reasons: first, I feel heard—we are making progress here; second, it is important for Prescott College students to see that not all activism
is environmental and that one person can make a difference without necessarily skipping classes.

Last week I attended the monthly activity of the Gay Lesbian Yavapai Alliance, a group I helped form about two years ago because then, as now, there was no other local forum in which non-heterosexual people could gather for social interaction. At this month’s event we watched a video designed to help counselors understand their clients’ gay and lesbian relationships. A local gay counselor-in-training led the post-video discussion, and consistently assumed we were all in primary relationships. In another context, I might have let this inaccuracy go, as I do not enjoy pointing out my singleness to people I do not know well. But in that group, comprising members who routinely experience exclusion, I felt it was incumbent upon me to reflect my own feeling of being excluded from that discussion. When I pointed out to the facilitator that not all of us are in primary relationships, he stumbled a bit, thinking maybe he had just used the wrong word for my (assumed) primary relationship, and resisting my claim that I just am not in one. As so many awkward situations do, this one got defused by a quick turn (on my part) to humor. Shortly afterwards, everyone decided it was time to go.

In “Feminist Theology: Religiously Diverse Neighborhood or Christian Ghetto?” Rita Gross points out that she has felt excluded from the activities of a group that she helped form, and that her concerns go unheard in gatherings of people who profess to share her values. Although I cannot claim to have been active in feminist theology during those crucial formative years, I have participated for many years in some of the same groups and gatherings Rita mentions. Like Rita, I have drifted away from feminist theology activities because I find little of interest to me going on there, despite the fact that I consider my work to fall, in some sense, under this rubric. I can confirm Rita’s experience of passive exclusion from these groups, manifested as their offering little of interest to feminist scholars involved in non-western, and especially non-Christian, religions. I can also witness to her attempts to call attention to this phenomenon, and the deafening silence those attempts have engendered.

Although I would not limit it to the realm of exclusive truth claims, I agree with Rita’s explanation that feminist theology’s “passive stance” on issues that would expand its borders beyond western religions “has resulted in the current lack of religious diversity in the feminist theology movement.” Like Rita, I have also experienced the active inclusion that characterizes the workings of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, and that belies the need to succumb to the comfort of the familiar. Diversity challenges that comfort, and requires energy and effort. Discussion within a diverse group does not allow one always to discuss what one already knows, which is why it is both so challenging and so enriching. I get the sense from the feminist theology circles that their interest truly lies in doing western, especially Christian, theology—at least for now. Including a variety of views within those areas seems to be difficult enough,
and perhaps even sufficiently enriching. I read the silence that follows Rita's challenges to push those boundaries as a kind of bafflement, a sense of “Aren't we doing enough already?” Rita's answer, as we know, is a resounding “No!” The feminist theology groups proceed, as we all do, prioritizing their next tasks according to a value system that the resulting activities reflect. The values reflected in the current activities of these groups include diversity, but no group can achieve wide-ranging diversity all at once. These groups have chosen to appeal first to various types of Christians, then to other monotheists. Eventually, they might arrive of their own accord at the task of including feminists who work in non-western traditions. Maybe we should just be patient, and wait our turn. Or maybe—and here I am sure Rita will be relieved to read that I am not really counseling patient waiting—this effort to include such a wide-ranging diversity of Christian and western theological views will prove to be not a path to ever-greater inclusion, but a cul-de-sac of exclusively Christian interests. If these circles do not strive now to return to their roots, as Rita has suggested, and manifest a wider sense of diversity, they could end up with no expertise or impetus to go any further.

Unlike Rita, until I received her essay and the invitation to respond to it, I had given up on participating in the activities of the feminist theology circles. Feminist theologians’ near-exclusive fascination with western religious traditions—like my singing friend’s refusal to acknowledge the differences between my world and hers—surprised me at first, but has now become part of my understanding of their identity, and I expect no more of them. My fruitful conversations take place now in groups formed around Buddhist studies, lesbian issues, experiential education, religion and science, inter-religious dialogue, and deep ecology. But Rita is more invested than I am in the feminist theology groups. She continues to rise to the occasion, striving to hold feminist theologians to their professed ideals of religious diversity. She feels as compelled to speak out about this situation as I do to address issues of exclusion in the Prescott College community and the Gay Lesbian Yavapai Alliance. I find myself inspired by Rita’s challenge, and wonder what kinds of conversations we could have within the context of wide-ranging feminist theology, should her calls for religious diversity be heard and responded to positively this time. I can begin to explore those possibilities by reflecting here on the three priorities for action with which Rita concludes her essay.

First, Rita urges religious feminists to return to their original desire to open theology to a diversity of voices. Early in her essay, she says that “[f]eminist theology . . . should be an enterprise that looks like the world we live in.” In contrast, she says, “the feminist theology movement . . . acts as if all theology were Christian theology.” So much depends on the meanings of these terms: feminist, theology, the world we live in. For me, one of the defining characteristics, and greatest contributions, of feminism is its critique of assumed objectivity. We
may strive to extend ourselves beyond the limits of our particular perspectives, but we always have particular perspectives, which we must acknowledge. In this sense, the term ‘theology’ can be problematic. Do its etymological roots (Gk. theos, “god” + logos, “discourse”) necessarily limit its practice to discourse within the monotheisms, or theisms, of the world’s religions (thus excluding Buddhism and several other religious traditions)? The activity of creatively and thoughtfully expanding the understanding of a religion from within (i.e. from a faith-based perspective) has by no means been limited historically to Christianity, or to the monotheisms, or even to the theistic religions. But can we legitimately call this type of activity theology when it involves no theism? Some might say that theology, if not all Christian, is by definition all monotheistic, or at most theistic, which would exclude a great deal of what Rita—and many others who work in Buddhism or Taoism or Confucianism or many indigenous religions—do. That definition would also limit feminist theology’s religious diversity, in the very way Rita critiques in her essay.

Although she does not make a case for it here, clearly Rita is using the term ‘theology’ in a more inclusive sense than its root theos would indicate. If we are to carry out the kind of all-inclusive conversation about religions Rita calls us to engage in, we must either go along with this expansion of the term, or find another term to use that would include (theistic) theology and creative, systematic thought within non-theistic religions. Personally, I have as much difficulty with the term ‘theology’ as I do with ‘God,’ for both feminist and Buddhist reasons, so I would prefer the latter option: to find a more inclusive term. We need a way to refer to this activity that falls somewhere between the supposedly objective ‘academic study of religions’ and the theistically loaded ‘theology.’ The exclusion within feminist theology Rita calls attention to in her essay unfolds all the more easily when this enterprise goes by an inherently exclusive label.

As for the phrase “the world we live in,” the problem Rita identifies emerges out of differing perceptions of that world. Those of us who study the world’s religions across the planet live in a very different world from the young grocery store checker in rural Virginia who remarked, after I told her I taught about the world’s religions at a nearby university, “I didn’t know there was more than one religion!” For those scholars whose work focuses on the dominant religion of our culture, it must be all too easy to slip into seeing the whole world as a reflection of their piece of it. I am reminded of a scene in the movie “Contact,” in which a member of a supposedly international consortium, in charge of choosing who would represent the human species by taking a trip in a machine designed by aliens, confronts the character played by Jodie Foster. He clarifies his first question: “Do you consider yourself a spiritual person?” with “Do you believe in God?”—as if the two were equivalent. When she challenges the relevance of his question, he replies that “95% of the world’s population believes in a supreme being of one form or another.” That statistic, which exaggerates
the theism of human beings by at least 30%, is cited two more times and used effectively by her opponents to eliminate the Jodie Foster character's chances at the space sojourner's position. Had I not responded to that false statistic by saying out loud in the movie theater, "That's not true," even the two Prescott College colleagues I was with (whom I think should know better) would have missed the error. Rita expects feminist theologians to transcend that kind of theistic parochialism. She challenges our colleagues in feminist theology to expand the world they live in to include non-Christian, non-western religions, based on knowledge of the world's diverse religious landscape and the avowedly feminist ideal of diversity and inclusion. Indeed, it would seem that feminist theologians must either rise to this challenge, or limit the extent of their claims of feminist inclusivity.

Rita's second priority calls feminist theologians to renounce Christianity's exclusive truth claims. Undoubtedly, most of us would acknowledge the downside of such claims, when they have been joined historically with political power. But I am not so sure we can assume that Christian theologians, even feminist Christian theologians, will be so willing to abandon exclusive truth claims. The complex question of whether one must reject one's claims to religious truth in order to engage fruitfully with someone who holds different religious truth claims lies at the heart of inter-religious dialogue, and the tension of this unresolved question often lends such dialogue real vivacity. Certainly we must respect each other's right to maintain our individual religious views, but at what point does that put the brakes on dialogue? When does it become a refusal to take the practitioners of another religion, in Rita's words, "as equal partners in religious life and in the quest for meaningful answers to life's dilemmas"? I feel a definite disrespect of my own religious quest in a Christian friend's relentless efforts to make me see things the way she does. I recognize her religious life as legitimate, but her constant proselytizing of me indicates her refusal to grant me the same respect.

Although feminist theologians' passive exclusion of non-western religions does not actively push western religions on feminists who work in non-western traditions, it effectively amounts to the same thing. If we want to participate in this conversation, we must be willing to do so in almost exclusively (mono-)theistic terms. Why? Because the overwhelming majority of participants in this conversation think in those terms. If feminists were willing to accept this line of reasoning, feminism would still be unself-consciously white and middle-class. An openness to dialogue does not require rejection of one's distinctive religious truth claims. It does demand acknowledgment of other religions as legitimate paths. The great productivity of inter-religious dialogue demonstrates that we can share our different religious world-views and experiences with great delight and to our significant mutual benefit, without rejecting our distinctive truth claims. For me, exclusive truth claims are not about personal or group superiority, but about understanding the nature of reality and living within and valuing that distinctive understanding of the world—and considering that mode of
behaving and understanding to be the best, if not the only, way to human religious transformation and fulfillment. I may see my Christian counterparts as genuine religious seekers and still wonder at their choice of a religious path I have rejected because it would never work for me. This perspective does not preclude genuine dialogue between us. Indeed, if we did not approach such dialogue from differing world-views, what would we have to discuss?

Rita's third call for action—for more appropriate employment of non-Christian feminist theologians—raises two issues for me. One concerns the role of undergraduate versus graduate teaching positions in the academic study of religions; the other involves theological versus secular institutions of higher education in religious studies. Rita states that "[t]hose with positions in graduate schools of religion, seminaries, and schools of theology have a much more direct impact on the future of a discipline than those who are limited to undergraduate teaching," and she calls for non-Christian theologians to be employed more often "in positions in which they could do more research and writing and from which they could directly influence future generations of theologians through their presence and their teaching." I recognize that some non-Christian feminist theologians have been frustrated in their attempts to move into these areas of our field that probably do have more influence on the discipline than does undergraduate teaching. But I feel compelled to respond to these statements from the perspective of another feminist involved in non-western religious study and thought. My vocation lies in undergraduate teaching. Although I recognize that the academic discipline must exist in order for me to carry out this mission—and I do have an interest in research and writing that must take a back seat to my heavy teaching responsibilities—I see the role of undergraduate teachers, especially for those of us who approach this topic from non-western perspectives, as crucial to the expansion of religious diversity both in our discipline and in the world. I am happy to have the kind of impact I do on my students every year, even at the expense of influencing the discipline. That said, I wholly endorse the inclusion of non-Christian, non-western feminist theologians in positions in graduate schools of religion, seminaries, and schools of theology.

I question, however, the appropriateness of Rita's suggestion that seminaries and schools of theology "need to stop 'othering' non-Christian religions." This ties in with the notion that Christians need to abandon their exclusive truth claims. How can Christians stop 'othering' non-Christian religions without ceasing to be Christians? If Christians do not recognize the other-ness of religions that are not Christian, how can we ever expect them to acknowledge, for instance, that there are non-theistic religious ways of looking at the world and pursuing the religious life? I find nothing more irritating than that claim of false inclusivity (whether it comes from Hinduism or modern Christian theology) that labels every relationship with the sacred 'belief in God,' regardless of how the particular individual describes that experience.

On the other hand, I certainly endorse Rita's suggestion that the training in major world religions, no matter where it takes place, should be "presented
authentically, by academically trained spokespersons from those religions.” But I doubt this can be done in the faith-based settings of seminaries and schools of theology that exist for the purpose of training religious professionals within single religious traditions. I would expect them to teach, and their students to learn, consistently from that perspective. Granted, my understanding of this situation is colored significantly by my years of teaching in the Department of Theology at Georgetown University, which is not even a seminary or school of theology, but which is a Jesuit institution and does have a distinctively theological bent. My experience there lowered my expectations regarding the ability of schools that are run by specific religious groups to present religions other than their own as ‘genuine faith options’ (something I was criticized for doing at Georgetown). The only injustice I see in this limitation is a certain degree of false advertising; had Georgetown been a seminary or school of theology, I would not have been so surprised and offended by the level of faith-based exclusivity I encountered there. Even if the religions other than Christianity are taught genuinely and well, they will still be other than Christianity. Still, it would be a significant improvement to reach the goal of seeing them taught genuinely and well, and no one could do this better than feminist scholars who work within non-western religious traditions.

I see difficulty in calling our not-necessarily-theistic feminist enterprise ‘theology,’ and I suspect it is impractical, if not unreasonable, to expect faith-based educational institutions to be as inclusive of religious diversity as their secular counterparts. But if the commitment of feminist theologians to diversity is genuine, it is legitimate to hold them to a higher standard of inclusion of religious diversity than has been achieved so far. I hope Rita’s challenge, and this roundtable discussion, will lead to further conversations along these lines within feminist circles, and I thank Rita and the JFSR for engaging us in this fruitful topic.

Amina Wadud

As I enter this roundtable discussion, I recognize that I share in Rita Gross’s concerns over ‘diversity’ in the context of feminist theology in the secular and quasi-secular U.S. academic settings, and wish that it were more inclusive of non-Christian diversity. However, I am overwhelmingly concerned about the rhetoric of discourse, and the problems that arise in naming an issue. In this case, I am especially interested in how the author uses diversity to disallow concerns of race to be included. As such, she has made the term part of the politics of exclusivity. So my most important objective—to posit some constructive ideas about Islam in the academic context of women and religion—is overridden in response to the particular way the author discusses diversity.
Contesting the Terminology of Discourse: ‘Diversity’ Is Just Another Word for ‘Other’

Rita Gross complains that as soon as she would finish speaking (“some of us [my emphasis] are not Christians and ... religious diversity, not just intra-Christian diversity, needs to be on the agenda”), her “comments have been repeatedly ignored. . . . people would return to the topic of intra-Christian diversity and complain that not enough non-white Christian feminist theologians were in the group.” This phrase highlights most overwhelmingly that this articulation is about white people: women and men who presume that the privileges granted them on the basis of white superiority should remain theirs, no matter what aspect of the world’s underprivileged masses they may also claim as their own perspective.

My suspicions were up as soon as I read the title of this roundtable discussion. In our current social-cultural contexts, the word ‘ghetto’ is mostly applied to non-white communities. So why must Professor Gross toss the word around here to indicate that Christianity forms its own ghetto, except to be intentionally divisive? Her dismay that the Women and Religion section of the American Academy of Religion is predominated by intra-Christian concerns of diversity is lost to me by her particular language choices. My agreement that ‘religion’ in the context of U.S. academia is too often taken to mean Christianity, with its own oppressive and domineering paradigmatic tendencies, is sideswiped by the need to determine how I can enter this discussion if at all.

Like the author, I am post-Christian. However, my conversion to a non-western mainstream religion was wholly inspired by my upbringing in the Black Christian church. My father, a Methodist minister, was my first spiritual mentor and I am an extension of what he taught me: about integrity and moral commitment to end all forms of discrimination as motivated by a Force greater than but integral to our own selves. However, this personal lead-in to the conversation initiated here by Rita Gross to address the dilemma of multiple displacements is itself displaced. I am forced to make a choice.

Can I side with Professor Gross on the basis of my concerns over the near monopoly of Christianity in U.S. academia and in the Women and Religion section of the AAR? Or must I defend my concerns over continued racial stratification even amongst feminists? Unfortunately, her intentional reduction of a complex problem to one which pretends that concerns of non-white women could be ignored is unforgivable. After that, nothing this woman says endears me to her. Even I, a convert to Islam and a major player in both scholastic and activist women’s human rights movements globally, must fight to establish the right to speak as an African-American, non-Christian in many of the same settings she indicates lack multiplicity. However, the matter is not so simple as to permit racial slurs, subtle or otherwise. I find myself more forgiving of sexism among my brothers and xenophobia among American citizens than I find myself
forgiving of racism among people of non-African origins; and for me this includes as many Asians and Europeans as it does Euro-Americans, whether from Watts or Wisconsin.

So my priority here in the complexity of issues about diversity is to intentionally choose sides against Prof. Gross, for the sake of never forgetting how endemic racism is in these contexts. For anyone to espouse an enlightened expression about the use of the term diversity, she must first accept the necessity to annihilate all forms of white supremacy. I will not accept to coordinate my efforts with any white feminist—for whatever reasons of her own personal experiences of marginalization—who chooses to ignore this reality of race. In her effort to privilege her particular aspect of diversity, Rita Gross has misappropriated the issue and must amend the offense she has demonstrated against others.

Rita Gross comes into ongoing dialogues about ‘difference,’ ‘diversity’ or whatever master trope is used to label the ‘other.’ In all the centuries of non-white peoples, women and men, the nagging cry of racial injustice continues to go unheeded, but now it is redistributed through careful (or is it careless?) language acts. ‘Diversity’ is the key term of the past decade and one that allows whites to be members of the disenfranchised. That Rita Gross is grossly insensitive to this does nothing to rally support towards her goal of exorcising the hegemony of Christian privilege from that which the academy calls ‘religious diversity.’ While juxtaposed to non-white Christians voicing their concerns about their peculiar exclusions and omissions, a Pandora’s box of who is the most oppressed is inadvertently opened. To ignore this through her barrage of negative language tools only further isolates the importance of her issue behind what could be perceived by non-white women of Christian background as insensitive and ill-placed. It further alienates her from others who might support the claim she makes.

I was so infuriated by her statement that I could not focus on my struggles within academia to make a space for meaningful discourse on Islam and gender. For while this concern is uppermost in my mind, it fell upon the slippery slope of the ways that white Americans assume the complete freedom to make any number of choices, and then assume they should be affirmed in those choices by all manners institutional and structural.

Of course I would like to engage in a roundtable over issues of interreligious diversity because I am not only Muslim, I am also engaged in alternative pro-faith and pro-feminist Islamic scholarship while here in western academia. Of course, I would love the company of religiously grounded women academics—feminist or otherwise. I would love the company of non-religious feminist academics—women or otherwise. However, like my sex, I have worn my black skin since birth. When I am marginalized for the most important decision of my life—surrender to the embrace of Islam—I do not feel the alienation as deeply as I do with the continual inability of ‘progressive’ women and men of all races, classes and genders to deconstruct their own positions of privilege.
So I cannot dismiss the significant concerns of my non-white sisters who are Christian.

Unfortunately, that white female privilege comes out again: "in the early years of the AAR Women and Religion section," Rita Gross and a handful of other white non-Christians "worked together." While they were working together, did any of them recognize, articulate or even challenge their own white privilege until Mujerista and Womanist Christian women articulated their isolation from the group? "I was one of the few non-Christians in these groups." Perhaps that is because most non-Christians accept the collegiality of their own peoples and cultures without aspiring to integrate the white mainstream as a way to affirm their own specificity, be it religious, ethnic, cultural or linguistic. The global technique of diversity is not the melting pot paradigm, where we 'all get along' by sharing in the master trope. Rather, we get along by respecting our differences and sustaining those differences as healthy expressions of our unique contributions to this amalgam called humanity.

See how quickly Rita Gross re-inscribes the master trope of privilege by citing the example of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies where "the male Christians [monolith?] . . . are considerably more advanced on the issue of taking religious pluralism seriously than are most Christian feminist theologians." This typecasting is detrimental to effectively meeting the goal she claims to seek. The Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies probably recognizes first and foremost their own intra-Buddhist identity, which is not anti-Christian. To indicate their perspective on dialogue, they openly declare it—by naming it. The name is explicit to both self-affirmation and a relationship to other affirmation. In this case, the other is the dominant western academic religious paradigm: Christianity. Do the Buddhists have a similar society for Buddhism and other world religions? (Probably not in this country.) Those who participate have something explicit in mind regarding their interest in the major discourse from their own perspective as Buddhists. Meanwhile, the 'Christians' who participate must accept the focus as so named. This is not a dialectic of intra-Christian concerns, which include race and gender. This is a multi-religious, or more accurately, bi-religious society.

But then Rita Gross uses the very word diversity in inconsistent ways throughout her short piece. It is interchangeably used for intra-Christian diversity, intra-religious diversity, as perhaps for all human diversities. This further exacerbates the problem rather than cogently resolving it. It would have been helpful in reading the article if the repetition of the word diversity had been preceded by an adjective, which specified the particulars in question. Or better still, in line with my concerns over 'naming,' we need new words here. I like 'pluralist religious discourse' for intra-religious diversity and will leave the Christian women to determine what is best for their intra-Christian diversity concerns.

In other words, diversity has always been about whatever aspect of diversity is reflected by the ones who strive to be equal participants. Diversity is never
all things at once, because the term, as so coined, is meant to allow for every distinctive concern to be addressed in the ways in which the participants are alerted to it. Why did lesbian women's religious studies establish their own subgroup? What does a lesbian Hindu or Jew do when she wants to give her energies to religious discourse? Does she choose this lesbian group, with its Christian/post-Christian centered component? Or does she choose a Hindu or Jewish group, with no consideration of sexual orientation? While there is room for entry into either, the choice will have consequences on the manner in which particular concerns will be addressed.

As to the employment situation of non-Christian feminists: Well, since the publication of *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave* almost twenty years ago,\(^1\) has there been much progress, even among white feminists, to correct this tendency? Moreover, when non-Christians do rule the day, it is usually by being white and therefore privileged in the institutions of American academia by their potential to camouflage their faith choice since they look like the master.

My choice is always to center my academic placement on the basis of my expertise in Islam. Whether I get mainstream feminist corroboration is tangential. Therefore, when I want to seriously challenge patriarchy from within my own faith tradition, I do not go to the Women and Religion section of the AAR. They accept anything I say in a tokenistic fashion. They do not know enough to challenge it, and even if they do, I can always cry cultural relativism to get them to shut up. So when I am genuinely concerned to receive full academic criticisms about my pro-Islam, pro-feminist articulations, I take my feminism to the Muslims and the Islam section. To worry about the Women and Religion section would be to accept their assumptions: that what works for them must also work for Islam. This is clearly not the case.

One last anecdote about Gross's response to being called for jury duty on the most important holiday of the Tibetan Buddhist calendar: "I cannot meet the request because of a religious holiday, but I would be happy to come in on Christmas Day instead." Is it necessary to bring down another's holiday in order to validate your own? My response to jury duty requests has always been to say, "I cannot come. It's against my religion." That this is a bold-faced lie is amusing to me. I am not obligated by my religion to be exempted; I just don't want to go. I play my own subversive games by using the ignorance of most Americans—even officials—about any religion other than the mainstream. If I am not Christian, I can make *any* claim that I want about religious observance. Not only are

---

\(^1\) Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982).
they ignorant about the facts, they do not even care to know how ignorant they are. So I utilize their presumptions to my advantage.

Is a Womanist of Any Other Color or Religion Still a Womanist?

Now I address a long-standing concern with my own sisters of color within the academy who are Christians. Why has the term ‘Womanist’ been usurped by Black Christian feminists and made to refer exclusively to their Christian experiences? To be Womanist is tantamount to being Black Christian. A purview of any literature on the topic will bear this out. Never mind that the person who coined the phrase is post-Christian herself.

At one Womanist section of the AAR matters disintegrated to such a level that one member unashamedly proclaimed, “All right now, we gonna get some ‘church’ going here!” Not only is there no space for Womanist Muslim women, but also the specifics of race and gender as addressed within Christianity are assumed to be generic racial-gender concerns for all religions. This is even more the case with Islam, which had a 1000 year presence in Africa prior to the transatlantic slave trade.

Islam’s presence in Africa had a direct bearing on the slave trade and some estimate that as many as one-third of the Africans brought to the Americas were Muslim, many of whom were literate or from prominent positions in their own cultures. Both their levels of education and their sophisticated global relationship to the second largest religion in the world were obscured by white Christians, who claimed a part of their mission to civilize the Africans was to bring them into monotheism.

When whites obscure Islam, it is part of the overall tendency to justify this horrific institution with its particular racial component in the Americas. When Blacks obscure it, the agenda is subtler and more complex. Only with the growth of Islam did the possibility of Black religion other than Christianity finally become a reality in America. Starting in the early part of the 20th century, Islam paved the way for Blacks in a number of non-western religious traditions—including some African traditional religions. I do acknowledge that the Islam which dominated in this period lacked certain fundamentals of dogma and creed of global Islam. However, American history has shown that even this alternative expression led to the most substantial number of converts to Islam from the African-American community.

The overwhelming majority of religious Black folk in America are Christian. While the percentage of Muslims among African-Americans is unknown, they form the largest single ethnic group of Muslims in America, some 44%. Yet in their discussions on the ‘black religious experience,’ Christian scholars and theologians continually ignore the history of Islam, its global character and its
success in establishing the first alternative spiritual tradition among African-Americans. When Black Christian feminists usurp the term 'Womanist,' we see only the tip of the iceberg.

Islam and Women in the U. S. Academy

My frustrations over appropriately integrating Islam into western academic discourses, feminist and otherwise, are indeed very great. Hence, I honestly despair that even engaging in this roundtable will be very productive. Yet, my primary objective would be to at least begin the consideration of the problem of Islamic studies in U.S. academia. First of all, the problem is not simply one of pluralism in women's studies and religion—although one might hope that would be one constructive avenue. The problem is the treatment of Islam in America and in academia.

Islam is the religion of approximately one-fourth of the world's population. When 'Islam-as-terrorists-who-suppress-their-women' is such a frequent image in our nightly news, entertainment networks, and popular cinema, the level of public ignorance is only slightly more amazing to me than the level of academic prejudice. In December, during the month of fasting, I attended an *iftar* (fast-breaking) dinner at the State Department. During her few comments, Madeline Albright said, “One-fourth of the world's population cannot be reduced to a stereotype.” While I was impressed with this remark, I could still say, “You wanna bet?!” It is the task of the State Department to be informed about such things. At the same time, they not only play no role in eradicating the widespread ignorance and prejudice against Islam in the mainstream American psyche, they also play on that ignorance and prejudice. While we sat and ate the State Department issued an alert regarding possible Muslim terrorists taking advantage of the potential Y2K crisis to launch attacks in America. American Muslims were subject to additional harassment and searches in the next few weeks.

One would hope that a modicum of wisdom would be demonstrated in U.S. academia. However, we are witnessing a particular brand of neo-Orientalism. Except in Islamic studies, the largest percentage of university professors teaching about a particular religion are members of that religion. For Islamic studies, the issue of 'objectivity' regarding the academic approach to religious studies is questioned. Meanwhile in the past two decades, personal narratives have become central to the study and understanding of religious experience—except with regard to Islam, when having a vested interest, or looking the part, discredits the scholar.

Meanwhile, as a self-proclaimed way of life, the very nature of Islam affects many everyday aspects of a Muslim's life. The five times daily prayers require a ritually pure space for observance. When conferences are held in the Muslim world, the place for observance is available. I have never been to an American
Academy of Religion meeting where a prayer or meditation room was made available. Muslims must either return to their own rooms or postpone the prayer because the logistics of the sessions are unaccommodating.

Muslim dietary restrictions, like Kosher and vegetarian diets, are overlooked within the collective meal settings. The restrictions on alcohol affect not only formal cocktail parties, but also wine sauces in main dishes. Certainly we have grown accustomed to integrating our dietary concerns within the mainstream insensitive public; however, these extraordinary measures are contrasted to my experience living abroad, especially in Southeast Asia, where pluralism of cultures, languages and religions is part of everyday life. Each aspect of diversity is celebrated at the level of public consciousness. Several major religious holidays are observed at the national level in Malaysia. With the few national holidays, it amounted to 13 legal holidays per year. Chinese, Indians and Malays celebrated Wisak’s day, Thaisput, Islamic ‘Ids, Chinese New Year and Christmas as distinctive to their religious consciousness. Meanwhile, these holidays were structured as opportunities for neighbors and colleagues of other religions to come celebrate through open house ceremonies.

Because I have experienced this dynamic form of pluralism, I think it can happen in America. Yet, the history of pluralism in America is one in which the dominant perspective tolerates minority perspectives until such time as they can be integrated into the mainstream melting pot of thought and praxis. There are certain conditions that have made it hard to realize truly dynamic pluralism in the U.S. One such condition led to and leads from colonialism in the western world, and that is the presumption of equating the absolute or universal way of doing with the dominant way.

I have not neglected to mention that I am African-American. I should also point out that as a matter of personal choice, I wear a traditional Islamic head cover. Now these two factors adversely affect my credibility as a female university professor. Every semester, I teach a basic introductory level course on Islam. Throughout the entire semester, I am aware that my most ardent efforts to introduce Islam on the basis of the integrity of its own worldview and historical complexity must be presented against the grain of powerful media imaging. These are undergraduates. What is more overwhelming to me, is that I face patronizing condescension from educated feminist theologians, religious studies scholars, and educators. The overwhelming presumption is that any woman so covered is subservient and incapable of making autonomous decisions, let alone articulating a challenge against the hegemony of male privilege in her own social-cultural religious context, or of Christian privilege in academia.

So, over the years, I’m afraid, I have overcompensated for this against my own feelings of inadequacy and postulated a very adversarial attitude in facing this formidable opposition and prejudice. While I have noticed my own negative reaction has been on the increase in recent years, I have lost sight of what my own goals and perspectives are in this minefield. As such explosions continue to
go on all around me, I scarcely recall my primary motivation. So, I shall return to that motivation in this response paper before offering some advice to other Muslim women in the academy.

As the daughter of an African-American country minister, I grew up in the shade of my father’s ultimate dream. His dream was to build God’s kingdom on earth. The bricks and mortar of this dream seemed less significant to him or to me, as a child, than the very idea of coming into a reality which grew from the heart. But my father was an African-American male with many children and few resources. While continuing to face poverty and discrimination, he endeavored to sustain his dignity as one of God’s creatures.

I am already older than my father, so I can imagine how the years wore him down. His untimely death yielded no manifestation of that dream in the real context of our lives. I carried the seed of my father’s dream into my own spiritual quest. Is it possible to live in the world and not succumb to the limitations of the world? In particular, is it possible to have a sustained relationship with what one considers of Ultimate value and concern and not see the truth, essence, beauty and harmony of the Ultimate manifest in the world because of the short-sightedness of the earth’s creatures? The contradiction between racism, sexism, class elitism and other forms of false superiority eventually led me to seek out a more dynamic articulation of the relationship between human beings and the Ultimate.

In Islam, I found an articulation that explicitly coordinates right praxis with right ideas. It is not enough to say that you believe. Belief must be demonstrated in actions. Actions must reflect the nature of one’s internal ethical motivations. God is not so separate from the world or more precisely from humankind—the free willed moral agent—that it is permissible to tolerate man’s inhumanity to man. The goal of Islam is to establish a just social order. Hence, the relationship between God and each human being is a trust (mithaq). Humans are to act as trustees or moral agents of God on the earth. That agency includes our treatment of all of the earth’s resources as well as our treatment of each other. The principle of harmony that must be achieved is prefaced upon a concept known as tawhid. Tawhid is a dynamic term, which is used to express the unicity of God. God is not only one, but also the essence of all things which brings all opposites into harmony. Sustaining that balance is tawhid itself. Under the rubric of tawhid, all things are in an I-Thou relationship. I have used this dynamism in Islam as the basis for my position against all forms of discrimination. I cannot fulfill my purpose in this creation except to implement in every way, at every level as well as on every occasion, the dynamics of tawhid.

I cannot hope to achieve the peace and harmony of my own personal spiritual quest without the outward manifestation of the essence of my responsibility as a moral agent in a relationship of trust with that which is Ultimate, except to establish what is just and forbid what is unjust. As a motivating factor in both my personal and professional life, the Islamic worldview does not lead me to ignore
the perspectives of others nor to assume that mine are isolated from all of humankind or from the creation as a whole. Yet, in the dominant western paradigms governing the treatment of Islam in academia, this perspective does not exist.

What is more, the chance for Islam to articulate its own identity is contrasted with the tokenistic or patronizing opportunities presented formally in the academy for Islamic voices to be heard. Nowhere is this more prevalent than in the area of Islam and women. When I first came onto the academic scene some 25 years ago as an undergraduate, there were few books in English on the topic of Muslim women. After I began to study Arabic and immersed myself in the language and culture of Islamic history, I learned that there were few books on this topic in that language as well. In fact, more than 95% of the books available about Muslim women were written by others than Muslim women. Either Muslim men would tell us how to be women, or non-Muslim women would tell us how to be Muslim.

In the time since my first study of Islam and women, the situation has mushroomed. But like the atomic explosion that prefaced my mushroom image, it is hard to see how far or how long the effects of this new proliferation will reach. For one thing, this proliferation is headed by the sociological and historical case study method. The value of this method, to present specific information about specific situations, is exacerbated by the tendency of both authors and readers to presume that these particulars reflect the whole. As such, particulars are presented and taken as universal. Meanwhile, there is no essential Muslim woman, Islamic cultural or historical circumstance. The wide range of diversity is scarcely breached by this method. The tendency for any one portrayal of any one circumstance of Muslim women to be perceived as generic to all circumstances damages the understanding of multiplicity in issues, problems, perspectives and solutions needed to address the reality of gender disparity in the context of Muslims.

There has been very little by way of gender theory proposed. There have been even fewer efforts to deconstruct gender hegemony of Islamic orthodoxy and orthopraxis, which is based on the results of such a theory vis-à-vis Islam's own ideological development historically. The paradigmatic core of what is taken as fundamental to Islam lacks a rigorous gender-explicit analysis and critique. Rather than to enter into the master tool of Islam's own patriarchal intellectual development, Muslim feminists and others tend to sidestep this task. Instead they offer second-hand versions of western Jewish and Christian feminist critique, as if these could adequately fulfill the task of building an authentic Islamic gender-inclusive reconstruction.

The basis for that reconstruction can only be the Qur'an as the preserved words of revelation from God. Although every aspect of Islam's intellectual development, from the formulation and implementation of Islamic jurisprudence and law down to the modern social sciences, will need such a reconstruction, it
cannot be effectively completed until the very basis and apex of Islam is confronted with its own limitations and integrity. This means not only proficiency in the classical Arabic of revelation, but also the prerequisite skills of Qur'anic exegesis. It was the Qur'an that began the movement that has become known in history as Islam and it is the Qur'an that can and has inspired a radical reformation in the thought and praxis of Muslim people for fourteen centuries. It is the Qur'an that yields the most liberatory perspective on the intimate relationship between each human agent and the Ultimate source of all that is real.

For while each cultural and historical expression of Islam adds to the wealth of lived Islam, to reduce Islam to any particular culture, historical context, gender, race, ethnicity or class is to deny it the potential of its own universal manifestation. Indeed, it is against this very tendency that we claim the right of gender inclusivity against the patriarchal history of Islam's theological self-articulation.

Some Advice to Muslim Women in the Academy

As an academic in a U.S. university, I have seen the potential for the hostility to difference at every turn. Thus the task of moving towards a liberating experience and articulation of Islam seems even more distant. So for my sisters in the academy I will offer these final words, hopefully by way of inspiration:

1) The best thing that you can offer is always the truth. As the Qur'an has articulated, “Let there be no compulsion. Surely truth stands out clearly from falsehood.”

2) The Prophet has said, “One of you does not believe until she/he wants for her fellow believer what he wants for himself.” Never waiver from the goal of reflecting an integral relationship between Self and Other.

3) Whatever you do, in the academy and in the community, there is One Judge and He/She/It does not have tenure, but can be important to achieving yours, provided you do not give up your principles to be accepted by those who do not share those principles.

Yvonne Chireau

I am pleased to take part in this roundtable discussion on what I believe to be a long overdue topic of debate, the question of religious diversity among feminist scholars of religion. Rita Gross's essay raises a number of vital issues that might be confronted as a prologue to addressing the very real issue of inter-religious pluralism in the theological study of religion.
As a scholar of religion who is trained as a historian, I am not as familiar with some of the most recent internal discussions that have occupied academics in the field of theology as are others who are more active voices in this discipline. Nevertheless, I have contributed to and been involved in conversations with theologians, most notably, those participants in the American Academy of Religion’s Womanist Studies group, a movement of African American scholars who are positioned both within academic institutions and outside of the academy, as religious practitioners, independent writers, and artists. I bring my experiences with womanist scholars to bear on this roundtable discussion, because of the relevance of their work to the task of developing and defining feminist theological scholarship.

In her article, Professor Gross takes offense at what she perceives as the lack of true religious diversity that is reflected in the work of feminist theologians. Religious pluralism, she insists, is a historical fact, and non-Christian religions have been marginalized or ignored in recent theological writing and education, particularly that which purports to employ feminist perspectives. Feminist theology, she maintains, is guilty of perpetuating a kind of “Christian hegemony” in an increasingly culturally diverse and religiously pluralistic world. In this, she argues that many feminist theologians have imitated mainstream theologians in their narrow approach to inter-religious concerns.

In essence, it seems to me that Professor Gross is articulating two distinct but related criticisms: first, her strong belief that feminist theology has become dangerously non-pluralistic in its current expressions; and second, her concern that feminist theology is implicitly identified with Christian theology, and is thus potentially exclusivistic in its orientation and presuppositions.

Let me comment on the first criticism, for it is here that my experience has some significance. My own work in African American religious history has been enriched by feminist ideas as well as by the multidimensional perspective that is embodied by womanist analysis, which utilizes some of the theoretical insights of white feminist scholarship while remaining grounded in sources drawn from the realities of black history and culture. While yet evolving, womanist thought posits alternative models of interpretation that are inclusive of theology, biblical studies, ethics and other areas of religious studies.

It is clear that womanist theology, like feminist theology, is an emerging field. In a conference paper some years ago I challenged womanists to take seriously the fact of religious pluralism as it exists in black America. Womanist analysis, I argued, whether theological, sociological or historical, should not center solely upon the study of Christianity, for to do so would deny the variety that has distinguished black religion from its beginnings. This variety was seen in the earliest populations of enslaved black people in America, some of whom were, indeed, African Christians, but also practitioners of Islam and myriad indigenous African religions. While transforming over time and place, the inherent pluralism of African American spiritual life has continued into the twenty-
first century, with blacks in the United States currently occupying a spectrum of religious positions and affiliations, as members of New World African religions, diverse permutations of Islam, humanism, occultism, Judaism, various sectarian Christian denominations, and other global traditions. Significantly, women play fundamental roles in many of these traditions. The lack of scholarly attention given to this situation is unfortunate, given the strong evidence of thriving spiritual pluralism in African American communities, as well as the centrality of women, both in the past and in the present.

Professor Gross states that she believes feminist theology should be “an enterprise that looks like the world we live in.” I firmly agree with this. I admit that I do share Professor Gross’s concern that Christian feminists, including womanists, tend to ignore or overlook religious diversity, even when it is in their midst. Gross claims that this ignorance reflects a “lack of consciousness of the significance and value of non-Christian perspectives.” Perhaps this is true. I too have found a disturbing reluctance on the part of African American feminist and womanist theologians to engage questions of religious diversity in their research, even as the study of Christianity is privileged. There are only a few womanist or womanist-associated scholars in the field of African American religious studies that I know of who have extended womanist interpretations into new, non-Christian subject material. Some of the names that come to mind are Tracey Hucks, Debra Washington Mubashshir, S’tembile West, Anthony Pinn, and Dianne Stewart, younger scholars whose work has greatly enhanced our understanding of spiritual variety in African American religions. One would hope that feminist and womanist theologians would make use of these scholars’ works for the comparative investigation of Christian and non-Christian traditions in black America.

It is unfortunate that religious pluralism is a low item on the agenda of research priorities for white feminists as well as womanist academics. In the study of African American religion I have found this lapse to be particularly acute. While monographs, articles, and books on “African American Christianity” and “the Black Church in America” abound, other areas have gone unattended. On the other hand, one might argue that there is little incentive for individuals to engage religious pluralism in their research because of the lack of support given to scholars whose work concentrates on non-Christian traditions. This is dramatically illustrated in the funding priorities of several of the largest fellowship sponsors in American religion, whose granting choices nearly always sustain some aspect of the study of Christianity or the Christian churches. It is ironic that while undergraduate interest in non-Christian religions is perhaps at its highest—as reflected by the surging enrollments in university and college courses in Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and indigenous religions worldwide—those who are best able to provide the financial resources for examining these important trends, and to support new scholarship and innovative curricula, are inhibited. Institutional endowment of religious studies research seems to be
characterized by an extraordinarily restricted definition of ‘religion’—that is, as equal or relating to Christianity.

Professor Gross also notes that feminist theology should be “among the leading movements to condemn exclusive truth claims in religion and to manifest a different, religiously diverse stance.” However, it is not at all clear to me why this should necessarily be the case if theology is the discipline by which many feminist scholars have pursued their investigation of religion. Historically, the field of scholastic theology (wherein the roots of feminist theology as an academic discipline lie) has not been concerned either with non-western or non-Christian religions, emerging from an intellectual heritage that was less comparative than it was dogmatic, exclusivist, and polemical. Theological studies itself was originally a Greco-Christian undertaking, embedded in the intellectual heritage of the Church. Arguably, theology first developed as a critical justification of the Christian faith, and, in this, it was wedded to a confessional and apologetic project that was bible-centered in its focus. To be sure, in the early twentieth century, Protestant theology broke with the rationalist and philosophical orientation of older methods, eschewing ‘scientific’ hermeneutics in favor of a neo-orthodox, dialectical perspective that denied the relevance of theology to non-Christian faiths while espousing parochial claims of ‘truth.’ Today, those few scholars of religion who remain committed to writing theology outside of the Christian context have found themselves in the areas of ‘global’ or ‘world’ theology, currently minor disciplines in the field of comparative-historical religious studies.

I suspect that, in part, Professor Gross’s problems with feminist theology are methodological. Feminist theologians, their students, and their schools and seminaries, she states, need to be “more sensitive to religious diversity and . . . need to stop ‘othering’ non-Christian religions.” Comparative-historical approaches to religion might be more appropriate to the kind of intellectual engagement and activist bridge-building that Gross envisions as the critical purpose of feminist theologizing. Global theology, with its implicit rejection of cultural parochialism and its emphasis upon dialogue and comparative analysis, may provide a better academic model for feminists, as it assumes that religious pluralism is at the heart of any hermeneutical and theological endeavor.

Ultimately, this conversation leads us to the perennial question of whether feminist claims, as they are conceived by feminist theologians, are truly universal, and whether the concerns of western, white, and Christian theologians truly relate to those of non-western, non-white, and non-Christian religious thinkers whose traditions have developed within different historical contexts and whose normative theological elements contrast sharply with those of Christianity. I hope that it is only a matter of time until comparative approaches will receive the attention they deserve from feminist and womanist theologians, and will yield a rethinking of attitudes and a reformulation of perspectives toward diverse non-Christian faiths.
The invitation to participate in this roundtable discussion could not have come at a better time. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Emilie M. Townes's letter asking me to respond to Rita Gross's "Feminist Theology: Religiously Diverse Neighborhood or Christian Ghetto?" arrived in my mailbox exactly halfway through my fellowship year as a Research Associate in the Women's Studies in Religion Program of the Harvard Divinity School. I had just begun to acknowledge (at least to myself) that what should have been the most productive year of my professional life, spent in the most stimulating and conducive of all environments for a feminist scholar of religion, was slowly going bust. The easy flow of ideas and writing that had been my lucky fate through years living and working in Israel, and through a stint of fieldwork among the priestesses of Okinawa, had simply dried up.

The project that I had taken on myself was entitled "Ethnography in the Service of Theology: Another Step in the Process of Creating Jewish Feminist Theology." The premise of the project was that I would lend anthropological experience and know-how to the Jewish feminist theological enterprise through teasing out the beliefs expressed in the lives and rituals of Jewish women around the world and throughout the ages—women who (presumably) are or were strongly rooted both in 'authentic' Jewish cultures and in the gynocentric 'women's worlds' often found in gender-segregated societies. The idea was to make these beliefs accessible to contemporary (a euphemism for English-speaking) women. This project, while rooted in ethnography, was envisioned as moving beyond the discipline of anthropology and laying the groundwork for Jewish feminist theology that draws in a substantive way upon traditional women's struggles, suffering, insights, and triumphs. Methodologically, the kinds of materials that I planned to 'collect' included women's rituals, life stories, 'folk' stories, lullabies, proverbs, and jokes. All of these, I was convinced, could be 'read' for the theological stances or insights expressed, or hidden, within. I intended to closely read and carefully interpret this material in order to trace the theological issues at stake. In the final stage of the project I planned to 'translate' the lives and experiences of traditional Jewish women into theological forms accessible to a larger (read: American) audience. I saw this project as a crucial corrective to the school of Jewish feminist theology that had chosen...

I would like to thank Amy Hollywood and Judith Plaskow for reading and commenting on this essay.


male-oriented and male-created Jewish sacred texts as their primary conversational partners, a choice that I still believe is less than likely to lead to truly liberating spiritual visions.

In my proposal to the Women's Studies in Religion Program I had mourned the paucity of Jewish feminist theologians, noting that the door that had been so articulately opened by Judith Plaskow's *Standing Again at Sinai*\(^3\) had done no more than remain ajar; few had walked through and the hinges were in danger of becoming rusty. In that proposal I wondered why Christian feminists seemed to have done theology 'better' than Jewish feminists; why so few Jewish feminists even seemed interested in the theological conversations that had taken Christian feminists so far in their thinking about ethics, transcendence, suffering, and God. This was a project I had dreamed of for years, one that would allow me to 'come out' as a theologian and stop hiding behind the oh-so-neutral scientific objectivity of the anthropologist.

September 1999. I arrived at Harvard, and right away found that I felt squeamish saying the title of my project out loud: *Ethnography in the Service of Theology*? It felt like an oxymoron. How can one person simultaneously—in the very same project—take the stance of a cultural relativist and of a seeker after cosmic truths? October, November, December. My four comrades in the Women's Studies in Religion Program [WSRP] were exuberantly producing chapters, book outlines and essays to share with one another at our bi-weekly meetings. But all that I was coming up with were increasingly elaborate analyses of the methodological problems of my own project. With a naivete born of self-deception rather than of inexperience (after all, I had been working in the field of Jewish women's studies for two decades), I was surprised at how little material I could find documenting women's stories, songs, rituals and jokes.

January, February. The other WSRP Research Associates made dignified and articulate presentations to the WSRP Advisory Board, showing the progress they had made on their various projects. Yet all that I could come up with was a passionate speech laying out the ethical problems inherent in my own project: How could I 'borrow' the wisdom acquired by Jewish women through lives of hardship and suffering, in order to enhance the intellectual and spiritual lives of privileged American women?\(^2\)

As I was concluding my ardent yet hardly rewarding or insightful self-critique, one member of the WSRP Advisory Board, a well-respected feminist scholar, asked me to explain my use of the word 'theology,' not at all an unreasonable request, considering that it appeared in the title of my project. I began to stammer: "You are quite right," I told her, "theology is an imposed category in my project. Not only have I been trying to read something systematic into

women's beliefs and practices that—and this is their strength—are diffuse, changeable, and flexible. But [and here my voice switched from audible to internal] I had been doing this as a Jewish feminist in an essentially Christian institution, when, as we are all quite accustomed to saying, theology as an intellectual enterprise is really much more of a Christian thing than a Jewish thing.”

I remembered a lecture that I myself have given to numerous interfaith groups, a paper in which I explain that while Jewish, Christian and Muslim feminists have a great deal in common and read much of the same literature, each group seems to do different things best. Muslim feminists often excel at their committed and sophisticated understanding of the convergence of political power and religion, and at the application of post-colonial theory to questions of religion and gender. Christian feminists have indeed excelled at theology—some of the best among them becoming post-Christian theologians. And Jewish feminists have excelled at ritual—creating vibrant, meaningful and beautiful new rituals that have spread like wildfire throughout the Jewish community.4

What was wrong with my WSRP project, I have come to realize, is what is wrong with a great deal of feminist theological discourse. The problem was that I was letting very particular western Christian paradigms structure my project. In fact, what Jews do best, and what Jewish feminists do double best, is ritual. In my project I had undermined the women whose lives have been my own inspiration, by saying that I was going to look for the 'theological voice' in their rituals, a venture that in fact colluded in a paradigm that assumes that ritual 'stands for' something 'better,' that ritual is (at best) an outward manifestation of more exalted or deeper theological truths. The very construction that made my project sound so Feministly Correct—attention to the practices of non-western women—in fact served to belittle those practices, seeing them as worthy of study only in so far as these practices contained something theologically 'of value' to my colleagues and my educated reading audience. Liberating the theological voice in women's rituals seemed like a great idea. But in fact it was operating within a paradigm foreign to the experiences of Jewish women.

For Jews, for Jewish women and for Jewish feminists, ritual is important in and of itself; ritual is understood to 'do' something rather than to 'stand for'

4 See, for example, Debra Orenstein, ed., Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994). Catholic feminists have also produced a powerful and creative corpus of women-oriented rituals. See, for example, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985); Arlene Swidler, ed., Sistercelebrations: Nine Worship Experiences (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974); also see the newsletter WATERwheel (Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual). Ritual as an effective tool of cosmic and social change has also been a key focus of the Feminist Spirituality movement. See, for example, Starhawk's Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority, and Mystery (New York: Harper and Row, 1987). My sense is that there has been little conversation among these three sets of ritual activists.
something. While Christian feminists have produced top-notch theological elaboration, Jewish feminists have engaged in ritual elaboration—a genre that feels authentic to those whose lives have been formed within Jewish culture. But Jewish women’s ritual elaboration has rarely entered feminist theological conversations. I can say with some assurance that my own work on ritual (primarily among Kurdish, Yemenite and Moroccan Jewish women), while respected by many feminists, Jewish and Christian, also has been dismissed by some Christian feminists for being ‘too descriptive,’ for its absence of theology. Jewish feminists have indeed not put much effort into theological thinking; that is why, I would expect, they have not had much to contribute to conversations with Christian feminist theologians. The silencing that Rita Gross notes, then, is not so much a matter of privileging Christian truth claims as a matter of privileging certain religious genres and barely recognizing others. The issue, as I see it, is that of honoring a certain kind of conversation, the vocabulary and syntax of which are tied to certain elite, western, Christian discursive frames.

As I said, Rita Gross’s essay was handed to me for comment at just the right time. It has helped me see that the ‘problem’ is not that non-Christian theologians have been ignored in the feminist theological conversation. Rather, the problem is that the rules of the feminist theological discursive game have been set in such a way that the spiritual and moral genre at which traditional Jewish women and many contemporary Jewish feminists have excelled—ritual—has been relegated, for the most part, to the minor leagues. Jewish women’s experiences have not significantly shaped, for feminist theologians, what is meant by ‘religion’ and which parts of that thing called ‘religion’ are ‘worth’ talking about. Feminist scholars easily recognize the androcentrism inherent in the definitions of religion that have been taught and re-taught in the academy; my sense is that we have been less cognizant of the ethnocentrism inherent in those definitions.

I doubt that there is any sort of malicious intent involved. Both secular feminism and the scientific academic disciplines that we teach in universities developed in societies in which Protestant Christianity (and very particular denominational notions of Protestant Christianity at that), in one form or another, was normative. It should not be surprising that there tends to be an easy discursive fit between Christianity and feminist theology (as feminism has generally come to be defined by American and Western European white Christian

5 The language that has become popular among anthropologists—ritual drama, ritual performance—draws attention to the symbolic rather than the active function of ritual, and as such is highly ethnocentric. As Edith Turner, among others, has argued, in many cultures many individuals engage in ritual because ritual does something, accomplishes something, effects some sort of real and actual change in the world and in the self. See Edith Turner et al., *Experiencing Ritual: A New Interpretation of African Healing* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992). This view of ritual is consistent with one of the key Jewish ways of understanding ritual, well expressed in the kabbalistic notion that correct ritual action in this world creates order or disorder in the cosmos.
women). The problem is that this easy fit results in the marginalization of non-Christian feminists and scholars of religion. In other words, the issue is not one of bad intention on the part of Christian feminist theologians—I truly believe that the good intentions are there—but rather an issue of conceptualizing such major cognitive and social categories as feminism and religion in particular ways that have exclusionary consequences. Even Christian feminists who do not support an exclusive truth claim for Christianity still have trouble recognizing the ‘truths’ of other religious traditions, not because those ‘truths’ are felt to be morally deficient, but because they are unnoticed. This assessment is not meant to be overtly judgmental; it is simply an observation (as culturally colored as any other). Still, it leads me to ask whether Christian feminists are willing to step down off of a discursive stage that has been beneficial to them in many ways, and acknowledge that this stage has been of dubious benefit to their non-Christian friends and colleagues.

As for me, with some trepidation I officially announce that I have abandoned my theological project. Instead, I have turned my attention back to what Jewish women do best, to the arena in which Jewish feminists have voted with their feet. I have used the second half of my goddess-gift of a year at the WSRP to embark upon a study of the profoundly powerful healing rituals and songs developed over the past decade by American Jewish feminists. And I eagerly await the cosmic, the conceptual, the cultural, and the personal healing that these songs and rituals will most certainly bring about.

Judith Simmer-Brown

Rita Gross has boldly identified an area of concern in feminist discourse in religion, one for which I can only echo my assent. As another non-Christian feminist, a Buddhist who is deeply engaged in inter-religious dialogue, I cannot agree more about the need for dialogue between Christian and non-Christian feminists. Such a dialogue has the potential to liberate each of us beyond the confines of our own traditions or approaches.

Certainly, part of our common human endeavor dictates that our most intense conversations are those which arise from an atmosphere of familiarity, even intimacy. It is a truism in inter-religious dialogue that the most engaging conversations are those within a single tradition rather than between traditions. In the many dialogue conferences in which I have been involved, there have been polite public conversations between Christians and Buddhists, Native Americans and Jews. But between sessions, in responses, and discussion, the ‘real’ conversation takes place between those whose traditions are intertwined: Calvinists jab at Lutherans; Tibetan Buddhists make Zen jokes; Orthodox Jews
kibitz with their Reform sisters. It is nothing if not predictable that Christian feminists (and Buddhist feminists, for that matter) engage frequently and most comfortably with each other.

On the other hand, Rita has identified the missed opportunity in such a habit. Taking Christianity (or any tradition, for that matter) to be normative trades a problematic sexism for problematic religious exclusivism. The perils of such a response are several. Since feminism has thrived in Christian societies, feminist sensibility is one of the potential gifts from the Christian world to the non-Christian world. But, as Rita notes, “fewer and fewer non-Christians identify with the feminist theology movement” because of its insularity. In addition, the disinterest in non-Christian religious life has racial overtones as well, since the western Christian world has been predominantly white, and non-Christian religions are dominated by people of color. Repeating bias, albeit in forms different from sexism, in areas of exclusivism and racism suggests feminist theology may be mired in early, parochial stages of development.

As we face a new millennium, a major challenge to identity and community is that of religious pluralism. We have only begun to digest the power of plurality in American life, and we might humbly predict that embracing pluralism is the major challenge for all religious communities. In our feminisms, we are familiar with the dehumanizing impact of being ‘othered’ because of our sex; as Rita pointed out, othering the ‘barbarian’ similarly dehumanizes those of religious traditions different from our own.

New issues arise as we encounter the non-Christian in our feminist midst. Perhaps we are particularly confused when the non-Christian appears so much like ourselves—white, educated, with western sensibilities and feminist orientation. Carol Christ and Christine Downing are focused on non-Christian goddess traditions; Judith Plaskow has crafted a feminist spirituality based on Jewish culture; and Rita and I are converts to Buddhism. Each of us has practiced our non-Christian traditions for decades if not our whole lives, and while we have uncanny similarities with our Christian feminist theologian sisters, we don’t quite fit the mold. Perhaps we are not ‘other’ enough to be exotic; but we are also not the ‘same’ in our religious heritages. But non-Christian feminists such as ourselves might be able to point out avenues of communication, the benefits of dialogue, and provide the necessary bridges to begin genuine conversations with non-Christians.

Perhaps we need to identify more positively how inter-religious dialogue would benefit feminist discourse. First and foremost, any single tradition’s understanding of identity and gender must by its very nature be limited. In Tibetan Buddhism, for example, identity is said to span more than a single life and one’s gender will most certainly change from lifetime to lifetime. Anne Klein has shown how a sense of individual identity is a contemporary western phenomenon, and has demonstrated how inquiry into identity, whether female or male, is foundational in Buddhist spirituality. She provocatively shows how these
questions from medieval Tibet parallel those asked by continental feminists.¹ Other gender studies that have focused on non-Christian religions have been able to identify more clearly the cultural constructions of gender, such as in the work of Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell, and Paula Richman. They have shown that various feminine symbols of the divine have no universal pattern of meaning or practice in the Christian middle ages, Taiwanese folk religion, and Tamil Buddhism.² If feminist theology were to engage in serious dialogue with traditions in which these fundamental presuppositions are strikingly different, there is potential for fresh construction of the questions and dilemmas around which feminist theological discourse revolves.

Of course, inter-religious dialogue requires certain additional skills for the theologian, whether feminist or not.³ The first requirement is openness and curiosity, a willingness to engage with another tradition and to be transformed by that engagement.⁴ This is probably the most difficult requirement of all. Rita speaks of this in terms of returning to our original inspiration to engage in the diversity of voices. But especially important is openness to being transformed by the conversation, and trust that encounter with the ‘othered’ will transform us in unanticipated ways. Certainly, we have asked this much of our non-feminist sisters and of men. Perhaps we can ask this of ourselves.

In order to be open in this way, several factors are important, which Rita covers in her practical suggestions. We must be minimally educated about the other’s tradition—Rita speaks of the importance of courses in major world religions taught by “academically trained spokespersons” as part of Christian seminary education. In addition, we must dialogue as equals, which requires an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust. Rita suggests that we must stop “othering” each other if we are to significantly dialogue. Further, we must be willing to be self-critical of ourselves and our own traditions or ideologies, in order to open an atmosphere of mutual inquiry. Lastly, we must attempt to “experience the [dialogue] partner’s religion [or ideology] ‘from within,’” as Leonard Swidler has described it.⁵ This entails a kind of mutual conversion. I agree with Rita that such an enquiry would lend maturity and breadth to feminist theological discourse.

¹ Anne C. Klein, Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, Feminists, and the Art of the Self (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
⁴ One of the most powerful expressions of this view can be found in John B. Cobb, Jr., Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).
⁵ Swidler, 3.
As a veteran of feminist theology, Rita has proven herself yet again a courageous pioneer in precipitating this conversation. She is by no means a newcomer to this particular issue. Twenty years ago, Rita and Nancy Auer Falk published *Unspoken Worlds*, which investigated the significance of women's lives in non-western cultures, probing the contours of the 'other' of Christian feminism. In her *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, she traced feminist themes in Buddhism's Indian foundations and its development in Tibet. In *Feminism and Religion*, she devoted equal time to examples taken from non-Christian traditions, observing that "the single greatest weakness of feminist thinking about religion at the beginning of its third decade is that so much of it is primarily Western, and even primarily Christian." Her work in this area has proven the value of feminism's conversation with religious diversity. It is now time for her comments to be taken to heart, and I welcome this roundtable in which we may all seriously respond to her challenge.

---

*C. S'thembile West*

Even though I was raised Catholic, attending parochial schools from first through twelfth grades, the so-called "holy rollers" who jumped, shouted and stomped in the storefront church across the street were just as much a part of my community as the clean-shaven, bow-tied men and veiled women of the Nation of Islam. Each had their place in the matrix of Harlem life. Moreover, from each constituency I learned, and later understood, that life lessons and the learnings engendered by them represent shared, experiential legacies: personal, communal, intellectual, spiritual, religious. The religious plurality represented by Annie B, Miss Charity, Miss Bessie, Aunt Gussie, Aunt Ellen, blood relatives; as much as Adam Clayton Powell, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Mrs. Northcroft and Mrs. Stills, activist models; as much as artists Thelma Hill, Dianne McIntyre, Reggie Workman, Akbar Ali, Joan Myers Brown and other African Americans, shaped the core of my beliefs. Their religious grounding included Buddhist, Baptist, African, Muslim and Catholic beliefs.

These diverse beliefs need not exist in conflict. A multiplicity of beliefs necessarily undergirds African American survival in the New World. Moreover, the spirituality of African people, rooted in the Christian principles embedded in

---

the Ancient Egyptian Mysteries System, espouses the embodiment of moral agency through lived-experience. Within a worldview that promotes holistic, communal responses to life conditions, and faced with challenges of institutional oppression, it is not surprising that the practice of religion among African Americans would take on dimensions to service their specific needs without strict regard for denominational norms.

The pragmatism of African American religiosity resonates like gospel chords reverberating with ancestral memory and experiential wisdom. Handed down through a culture, ontologically designed to function in the service of everyday life, a mix of diverse beliefs appropriately addresses social justice concerns and goals.

The legacy of which I speak services community needs without privileging Christianity. However, I firmly believe that dialogue across religious divides is possible. Hence, the paper “Feminist Theology: Religiously Diverse Neighborhood or Christian Ghetto?” touched me personally and professionally. Rita M. Gross rightfully confronts the privileged status given to Christianity in feminist dialogues about religion. Like Gross, I have felt somewhat isolated and marginalized in discussions of religion because I do not feel aligned with any particular sect, but find useful life tools within an eclectic body of worship practices.

However, feminist theologies emerged out of the need to address the particular circumstances of women's lives. As such, its shape and contours addressed the specificity of women's experiences. Albeit initially servicing middle-class, white women, feminist scholarship has grown, not without hard-won fights by feminists like Beverly Harrison, Judith Plaskow, Sharon Welch, Carolyn Robb, Mary Daly and bell hooks, as well as womanists Katie Cannon, Delores Williams, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Renita Weems, Emilie Townes, Diana Hayes, and others. As such, feminist/womanist theologies, 'God-talk' as it relates to the issues of women, is an enterprise that must embrace eclectic and sometimes conflicting priorities among diverse practitioners. If feminist/womanist theologies are to continue as the representative voices of women who can or cannot speak for themselves, then the full spectrum of women's lives, as represented by religious diversity, as well as race, class, color, gender and sexual preference, must be reflected in the dialogues.

Gross's article challenges feminists to include rather than exclude, in a proactive stance to open new windows onto women's concerns. Gross calls for an extension of boundaries in the academic discussion of religion beyond a purely Christian context. As such, I believe that Gross seeks to sustain the spirit and tone which grounded feminist theology, not only as an academic exercise, but as a movement broadly aligned with social justice. When Gross confirms the importance of diverse, inter-religious discourse, she appropriately challenges the fact that Jewish and Christian ethics undergird the discourse of religion in the academy. Gross's paper illuminates a major hurdle for womanists and feminists in the twenty-first century, if they are to keep in step, not only with the impact of the browning of America [U.S.], but also the spread of Islamic praxis.
I extend Gross's argument to acknowledge the specificity of cultural, political and historical markers, which give context to religious, lifestyle praxis among the world's citizens. I believe that scholars of religion are continuously challenged to look beyond theoretical frameworks, prized within academic enclaves, to meet the demands of lived experience. To achieve this goal, we must 'walk the talk' as contextualized in African American culture. And, if we find that our 'talk' is not compatible with our 'walk' (read: actions), then we must discard pat formulas and go back to our sources: the community.

I agree, as Gross maintains, that "the kind of diversity represented by us non-Christians was treated as if it were unimportant or irrelevant. If feminist theologians are genuinely concerned about diversity, such reactions are completely unwarranted." Dialogue that includes a range of religious voices is an imperative for the new millennium. If feminist theologies truly seek to be representative, then the histories of diverse religious practitioners, which have contributed to the social landscape, must be acknowledged. I believe that inclusiveness enhances peaceful coexistence. Hence, my response to Gross's paper explores its implications for cross-cultural understandings and inclusion, to enhance relationships based on mutual respect and regard for different religious priorities, particularly among feminist scholars, and how we might contribute to improving social conditions. Don't we all have a stake in the improvement of shared social conditions?

If a feminist agenda inscribes neutralizing tensions that promote segmentation, hierarchic social structures and exclusion, then a politic of inclusion begins at the dialogical level. If feminists are to assume viable positions in the forefront of movements for social equality and justice, then recognition of religious diversity with its attendant priorities is necessary in the evolution of feminist theologies. Lastly, if feminist theology seeks to galvanize support and maintain links with those for whom social justice and equality are synonymous with survival, then feminist theologies can ill afford to isolate groups with shared interests based on religious differences.

In light of this, I suggest that we explore three areas of focus for feminist theologies: the significance of non-hegemonic language in theological discourse, cultural specificity with regard to the practice of religion by particular groups, and lastly, interrogation of religious plurality as it relates to the politics of maintaining or dismantling historically institutionalized notions of superiority and inferiority.

First, by privileging Christianity without noting the social and political conditions that fed its development in the Americas, it becomes tangential to discussions of morality and ethics in the context of diversity. Moreover, when the term 'non-Christian' is designated as the descriptor for diverse groups, assumptions of Christian superiority are repeatedly confirmed. The term 'non-Christian' implies Christian universality. Therefore, in order to create an atmosphere to support diverse priorities, opinions, and worldviews, we must craft a language of equality. That language must include without division, embrace
without condemnation, and build bridges that value difference and thereby encourage dialogue.

One bridge-building technique was illuminated during the question period after the lecture given by systematic theologian Delores Williams this past April at Haverford College in Haverford, Pennsylvania. A feminist scholar asked how one might reconcile the idea of Christ as a surrogate and its exegesis for Black women. In response, Dr. Williams referred to the legacy of forced surrogacy among Black women during enslavement. Williams suggested that the moral agency of Black women's experience informs such that when a concept does not function in the service of everyday life, then “you just leave it alone.” When an idea has no point of reference, or cultural specificity for everyday life, Black women historically do not force that concept into the matrix of beliefs. You simply, as Williams proclaimed, “leave it alone.”

This example of moral agency, as it emerges from the lived-experience of African American women, can serve as a model for developing inter-religious communication. There is no need to force Christian beliefs into a worldview or onto a landscape whose context mandates different priorities. “Leaving it alone” suggests letting go the need, and the power dynamic embedded therein, to force diverse groups to accept Christian theological assumptions and, thereby, provides a space for the specific priorities of diverse religious groups. “Leaving it alone” suggests that no one value, or system of values, need be given priority over another.

A look at the heterodox beliefs of Black women who espoused the teachings of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam [NOI], un-masks a curious pattern of religiosity within urban African American communities during the sixties. Interestingly, participation in multiple, religious rituals simultaneously was and is not unusual among Black U.S.ers. Interviews with Black Muslim women in Newark, New Jersey revealed that while NOI ideology indicted the Bible and Christianity because its distortion helped to sustain Black enslavement (Blacks as the cursed sons of Ham were condemned to servitude), some of the women continued to celebrate Christian traditions like Bible reading and recitation, as well as Christmas. The socio-political thrust of the NOI was viewed simply as one of many strategies to enhance the conditions of Black people’s daily lives.

A pattern of multiple religious praxis is also evident in the activities of a biracial NOI informant to whom I spoke in the Baltimore region. Of Choc-

1 Delores S. Williams, lecture, April 13, 2000, Haverford College, Haverford, Pennsylvania.
3 Because the term ‘American,’ accepted as a referent for people who live in the United States, has elitist and hegemonic overtones, the term ‘U.S.ers’ represents an attempt to craft a language of equality in academic discourse as it distinguishes between nations and peoples of the Americas.
taw and African American descent, this woman practices traditional Islam, adheres to the seven pillars of Islam, and engages in the rituals of Indigenous American culture: prayer, chant, sage burning, and sweat lodges. With regard to her religious life and cultural orientation, while she was a member of the NOI, she emphasized: “I’m a Choctaw woman. We are matriarchal. Our society is matriarchally run. I can’t be different than my blood.” The point here is to demonstrate how cultural specificity and lived-experience impacts on religious praxis.

These two examples illustrate that tensions created by relegating one spiritual system to a higher status than another, as Gross discusses, need not mar the landscape of religious diversity. No hierarchic relationships are necessary to promote action that speaks to everyday life conditions. In fact, African American strategies for coping with oppression in its many eclectic forms opens a window onto new understandings and options for how one might negotiate the terrain of diverse religious ideologies.

Germane to dismantling notions of a “Christian Ghetto,” as implied by the challenges presented in Gross’s essay, is the context and intertextuality created by ongoing relationships between religious praxis, social conditions and political power. The social conditions that shape specific religious ideologies, as groups attempt to creatively respond to life dilemmas, must dominate the foreground in feminist theological discourse.

In a discussion of factors that undergird the shaping of African American religiosity, religious studies scholar and historian C. Eric Lincoln notes:

Every religion aims first at spiritual [and sometimes practical] satisfaction of its own clientele, its own true believers. If it is successful, others outside its communion may be moved to seek or to accept admission. This is the primary way in which religions grow. But religions also grow by making themselves exclusive, by publicly rejecting specified publics in order to attract others considered more acceptable to the in-group. And finally, religions often seek to protect their own at the expense of others, particularly in the pursuit of scarce values, whether spiritual or mundane. Remarkably few religious practitioners, lay or professional, are able to recognize the inconsistencies, however bizarre, which often separate their commitments to righteousness from the pragmatics of secular advantage.

It seems to me that Christian ghettoization clearly demonstrates the dilemma to which Lincoln refers. Herein lies the challenge of feminist theologies: to move beyond comfort zones to embrace true religious diversity. Then religious plurality will thrive in the U.S.

---

4 Personal interview conducted by author, June 4, 1992.
5 C. Eric Lincoln, Race, Religion, and the Continuing American Dilemma, 2d ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999), 139.
In “Feminist Theology: Religiously Diverse Neighborhood or Christian Ghetto,” Rita Gross makes an important point: feminist theology is done almost exclusively by Christian women. By calling for greater inter-religious exchange, she hopes to enlarge and enrich the field. I applaud her insights and suggestions. However, even if Gross realizes her objective and feminist theology becomes a more religiously diverse arena, scholars like me will still be left out of the conversation. Because Gross is chiefly concerned with promoting inter-faith dialogue, she does not appear to invite those of us who do not profess a religious commitment or identify ourselves as part of a religious community into the new neighborhood.

The exclusion begins when Gross focuses her article on reforming the feminist practice of “theology” instead of religious studies. Instead of envisioning the feminist study of religion as open to all feminist scholars of religion, Gross seems to imagine it as a type of parliament with representation from recognized faiths. Unless secularism is considered a faith or a form of religion (which is a tenable position), many feminist theorists will not have the credentials to speak in such an assembly.

Another consequence of emphasizing theology might be to further support the Christian influence that Gross would like to diminish. Theology itself is a Christian notion. It arises from the idea that belief (or unbelief, its opposite) is of definitive importance in contrast, for example, to lines of descent or ritual practice. For a religion to have a theology, its proponents must engage in particularly Christian modes of reflection and exposition. Jews, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and pagans are thus subtly pressured to construct their self-descriptions with reference to Christian ideas about belief and behavior in order to take part in theological dialogue. Historical intersections among the world’s faiths and the interpenetration of textual traditions provide basic material upon which a homogenizing discourse can be built. Participation by secular scholars, who, for example, focus on methodologies rather than traditions, might encourage a more varied discussion. Such exchange can only occur if the agenda is enlarged beyond theology.

I consider Gross’s call for a religiously diverse, though religiously committed, community of scholars to reflect developments within the field of religious studies in general. Over the last decade, many religious studies departments in secular colleges and universities have disappeared. Administrative fashion in the humanities has tended toward merging smaller academic units in order to cre-

1 My thanks to Robert Baird for his insights about the centrality of belief in Christianity in his essay “Late Secularism,” forthcoming in Social Text 64 (fall 2000).
ate multi-disciplinary departments, which are supposed to save money. When religious studies positions in the current humanities clumpings become vacant, they are often redefined to fit new priorities. Thus, in secular institutions, assimilation of religious studies departments has often meant eradication by attrition. The study of religion is now most likely to be taught in a seminary or theological school.

One result of this continuing shift to religious institutions is that the teaching of methodologies is less prominent in the discipline of religious studies. If religious institutions show any interest in diversifying, they tend to focus on representing non-Christian traditions, rather than offering varied methods of analysis. Thus, there are fewer positions available in the psychology of religion or the sociology of religion and more openings for scholars who specialize in specific traditions. Often scholars are hired who conform to the criterion Gross suggests in her article: they can be seen to be authentic, “academically trained spokespersons” from recognized religions. Paradoxically, those secular institutions that are still hiring in religious studies tend to follow the theological schools in this practice. In order to raise money for endowed chairs of ethnic studies, religious studies scholars who can be considered good citizens of established religious communities are desirable employees.

When I entered the field of religious studies in the early 1970s, I never expected to find myself today in an academic discipline that counts religious belief as a professional qualification. Starting graduate school as a classicist, I switched to religious studies because it offered the possibility of studying mythology in an interdisciplinary context. Luckily, I arrived in the field at the very moment when feminism was about to disturb everything. My scholarship was propelled by my curiosity about how sustained attention to issues of gender was going to affect contemporary mythologies embodied in religions.

I share Rita Gross’s nostalgic enthusiasm for what now seems like the golden age of the feminist study of religion. In its first several years, the field of women and religion fostered exchanges among feminist scholars that seemed more far-ranging, less specialized and less mindful of religious commitment than those that usually occur at present. If I had to identify a moment when this era ended, it would be when one well-intentioned senior scholar scolded some of us for “trashing the traditions.” The reprimand surprised me. After all, I reasoned, were not the world’s religions sufficiently pervasive, grandiose and idealized to endure a bit of illuminating feminist irreverence?

My appreciation for impiety was not widely shared. Soon after the criticism about trashing, much of the sass went out of feminist discussions of religion and nearly everyone became more respectful of traditions. Even the topic of witchcraft appeared less subversive as ‘goddess religion’ began to be proposed as a supplement to patriarchal religious forms.

I recognize that it is the success and widespread acceptance of scholarship about women and religion that has blunted the original hyper-critical edge.
And, despite my particular yearning for more sacrilege, the excellent work that feminists have accomplished in religious studies makes me very proud to be associated with this field. I am certain that feminist scholarship done within established religious traditions continues to improve the lives of religious women by interpreting texts and practices to allow more freedom and dignity. And, I know that goddess thealogy is a font of creativity that inspires religious innovation, political activism and new directions in art and literature. However, I am concerned that the increasing emphasis on a scholar’s religious identity could stifle some of the intellectual vitality that is needed to analyze and extend these cultural trajectories. Rita Gross’s article both criticizes the restriction of feminist inquiry in religion and, unfortunately, in some ways, exemplifies the trend.

Susan E. Shapiro

What’s Religion Got to Do With It? 
The Politics of Identity and Difference(s) in Contemporary Feminist Theology

Rita Gross’s important call for increased diversity in feminist theology across religious differences sounds a resonant chord. In this response I will follow out some of these resonances from within the context of Jewish feminist theology and religion study. I will take up a number of issues raised in her paper, mostly to amplify her call, but sometimes to critique and modify it.

Redrawing Identity and Difference

First, the title: “Feminist Theology: Religiously Diverse Neighborhood or Christian Ghetto?” While it effectively draws the contrast between a comfortable “neighborhood” and an exclusionary “ghetto,” these terms carry a freight that must be further unpacked. It is important, for example, to note how the problematics of the Jewish Emancipation continue belatedly to register in this framing of the question as one either of neighbor(hood) or ghetto. Implicated therein is a politics of identity that must itself be interrogated if the religious diversity Gross seeks is to be welcomed. The term ‘ghetto,’ of course, is not one that refers to a kind of community formed by choice, but one that was constructed and enforced by Christian states in which Jews dwelled. It was with the advent of the question of whether or not Jews should be granted civil emancipation that the contrast between those who were capable of loving their neighbors (Christians) and those who wished to remain separate and apart from others and, supposedly, were incapable of loving others (Jews) became most
pronounced. It was in this context that the ghettoizing of Jews was figured as a consequence of their exclusivistic character. Still others—those supporting Jewish emancipation—countered that if Jews were not integrated into society it was because of the ways in which they had been ghettoized and excluded by the Christian majority.

The use of the term ‘ghetto’ in her title effaces a key aspect of Gross’s argument. Christian feminists are not merely segregated in a ghetto; nor is this separation enforced by others. Rather, as I read it, the brunt of Gross’s argument is that Christian feminist community resembles not so much the marginalized ghetto, but the hegemony of empire. The problem Gross points to is not that Christian feminist theology is bounded, but that it is the dominant discourse, even when it identifies itself in the name of including difference(s). Further, Gross claims, this domination results in exclusion; it enacts a very restricted (that is, exclusively Christian) notion of identity/identification as the basis of inclusion into feminist community. While feminist theologians may employ a discourse of diversity within Christianity, Gross argues, they do not recognize the politics of domination and exclusion produced by a notion of identity that effaces specifically religious differences between Christians and other religions. Rather than creating a “religiously diverse neighborhood,” Gross suggests, Christian feminist theologians are practicing a form of imperialist exclusion of its religious others. Those other feminists continue to be ghettoized.

This translation of terms, however, unmasks only one level of the problem of religious identity and difference Gross describes. For, perhaps the model of a neighborhood alone—even that of a “religiously diverse neighborhood”—is not sufficient to offer an effective critique of the politics of identity that results in the domination and exclusion of Christianity’s religious others. While Gross emphasizes that the neighborhood should be religiously diverse, a neighborhood is most often a place, like a ‘community,’ where people feel ‘at home’ with one another because of what they share in common, because of some identity or a sense of identification between them. In Gross’s model, then, a “religiously diverse neighborhood” is a place where people can identify with one another because of what they share in common: feminist theology. The differences between religions may thus be overcome or, at least, made secondary in this identity/identification.

The specifically Christian formation of theology, however, remains unexamined in Gross’s essay. I do not mean to suggest, as some have, that non-Christians can neither have nor do theology because of its Christian genealogy.

1 I employ the term ‘non-Christian’ here and elsewhere in this essay, following Gross’s usage. This term, however, is problematic in that it reinscribes Christianity as the hegemonic identity and identifier, polarizing between Christian self and non-Christian others. Because of this, I have chosen to focus on Judaism and Jewish studies as an example of what Gross terms “non-Christian,” so as to
Rather, I am arguing that effacing this genealogy risks leaving incomplete Gross's critique of the politics of identity undergirding contemporary feminist theological "neighborhoods." For, just as enlightenment and emancipation Jewish philosopher-theologians sought to demonstrate that Judaism, like Christianity, was essentially aimed toward love of the neighbor—thereby justifying their inclusion as 'fellowmen' in the then secularizing modern nation-states—so does the discourse of a shared, if religiously diverse, theological "neighborhood" risk importing an uninterrogated concept of specifically Christian theology into and as the basis of this religious diversity.

In order to enact such a questioning, the term 'neighborhood' (even, "religiously diverse neighborhood") might be further modified or supplemented so as to enhance the aspect of Gross's critique that highlights the politics of difference. As Iris Marion Young suggests with respect to her critique of the term 'community,' perhaps we could employ the model of the 'city' in order to emphasize a politics of difference and to critique the hegemonic potential of associations founded on identity/identification:

I propose to construct a normative ideal of city life as an alternative to both the ideal of community and the liberal individualism it criticizes as asocial. By "city life" I mean a form of social relations which I define as the being together of strangers. In the city persons and groups interact within spaces and institutions they all experience themselves as belonging to, but without those interactions dissolving into unity or commonness. City life is composed of clusters of people with affinities—families, social group networks, voluntary associations, neighborhood networks, a vast array of small "communities." City dwellers frequently venture beyond such familiar enclaves, however, to the more open public of politics, commerce, and festival, where strangers meet and interact. . . . City dwelling situates one's own identity and activity in relation to a horizon of a vast variety of other activity, and the awareness that this unknown, unfamiliar activity affects the conditions of one's own. . . . City dwellers are thus together, bound to one another, in what should be and sometimes is a single polity. Their being together entails some common problems and common interests, but they do not create a community of shared final ends, of mutual identification and reciprocity.2

This supplement of the 'city' would frame the "religiously diverse neighborhood" of feminist theology in such a way that the effaced hegemonic notions of Christian identity/identification that produce exclusionary practices with regard

---

to their religious others would be recontextualized in terms of a recognition of irreducible differences. City life as "the being together of strangers" opens up another model through which to think about feminist theology as a "religiously diverse neighborhood." The emphasis would then not be only on including religious diversity, however mapped onto a uniform terrain as defined by Christian theology, but on the recognition that those who are most 'at home' in theology, those who have even unwittingly reproduced its hegemonic character with respect to their religious others, are also strangers. We are 'strangers together.' This dynamic shifts both the politics and the ethics of feminist theology.

Regarding not only Christian, but also non-Christian feminists as strangers is important because the discipline of feminist theology can be displaced from its hegemonic roots and orientation only by disrupting the 'at-homeness' of the mainstream. It is this displacement, however figured as a radical inclusiveness, to which Gross's critique of the present practices of feminist theology leads. A related (although certainly not an undertaken, and perhaps for Gross, not even a desired) displacement of theology as the primary site of feminist religion studies is a move entailed in a thoroughgoing critique of current hegemonic practices that Gross acutely points out in her essay.

Theology and Religion Studies

Theology is a relatively secondary subfield in the current formation of the academic study of Jews, Jewish culture, and Judaism. Jewish studies is still in thrall to the Wissenschaft des Judentums movement of the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment). The early Jewish practitioners of Wissenschaft embraced this approach to the study of Judaism with great zeal in order to prove that Jews have a history like other religions and cultures, that it too can be studied scientifically, and that those men who studied it in this way displayed the bildung and sittlichkeit necessary for social as well as civil emancipation in the West. Never entirely secure, always feeling somehow still on trial, contemporary scholars of Jewish culture and Judaism continue to cling to this tradition of Wissenschaft. This, as well as the sense that it is a fundamentally Christian discipline, has made theology a rather secondary critical practice in Jewish studies. Theology is a central discipline neither in departments of Jewish studies, nor in Jewish seminaries, where rabbinics, bible, prayer, and homiletical training is emphasized. An historical approach to the study of these fields has been undertaken in liberal Jewish seminaries which, indeed, were founded in relation to the Haskalah and the movement of Wissenschaft des Judentums.

I mention this not because I think the historical study of Judaism(s) should not be undertaken. Rather, I note the continuing importance of the Wissenschaft des Judentums movement so that the different situation of Jewish study/ies over against the larger academy in today's universities and seminaries will be
recognized. Jewish feminism may have greatest representation and strength outside of the study of theology and, even, outside of the parameters included in the American Academy of Religion. This is so because many of my feminist colleagues in Jewish study were trained in history or literature. The fields of bible and rabbinics also evidence a steadily growing feminist presence. The field of Jewish philosophy strikingly lags behind. Feminist Jewish theology has been an important, if, in comparison with feminist Christian theology, a significantly more modest component of Jewish feminism.

When Gross suggests, then, that those of us who are members of a minority religion (in North America) should teach courses in Christian seminaries on “world religions,” this suggestion is problematic for a variety of reasons. First, the conflation of the identity of the scholar with that of the religious practitioner produces significant problems for the academic study of religions. Gross suggests that these “world religions” should be “presented authentically, by academically trained spokespersons from those religions.” In my view, a ‘confessional’ orientation is relevant, perhaps, to engagements in inter-religious dialogue. This, however, must be distinguished from the teaching of ‘world religions’ in an academic and, even, in a seminary context. Requiring that in addition to academic training a teacher must also be a practitioner of the religion she or he teaches if it is to be “presented authentically” introduces yet another kind of discrimination and marginalization into theological and religion study. Second, the very category of ‘world religions’ tends to exclude those religions and ways of life which are considered more local or parochial—in a word, as less ‘far-reaching’ either as regards number of practitioners or its significance. Who is to determine which religions are to be included under this rubric and which not? Third, in Gross’s view, the site for intervention is the Christian seminary. While this is, indeed, an important locus of feminist teaching, especially of theology, relegating the study of non-Christian religions to a framework other than the theological, which remains the exclusive province of Christianity, reproduces the very problem Gross would undo. That is, the hegemonic status of specifically Christian theology with regard to feminist theology is maintained by making ‘world religions’ the site of the study of Christianity’s religious others.

For example, when I was an associate in the Women’s Studies in Religion Program at the Harvard University Divinity School, I was located in the discipline of ‘Christian theology.’ My Muslim colleague, however, as a scholar of Islam, was located in the area of ‘world religions.’ Neither of these locations particularly suited either one of us. In the one case, the Jewishness of my subject was hidden and effaced, even as my work was rendered theological, while in the case of my colleague, her theological interests were not considered relevant to her location in ‘world religions.’ We each also wondered what made my work closer to Christianity and hers to ‘world religions.’ Indeed, we wondered at the whole division of disciplinary identities in this way between (Christian) self and (non-Christian) others. It is this division that I am concerned will be reproduced
and further institutionalized if Gross’s suggestion is put into practice. Rather, the discipline of feminist theology itself should include Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and other religions’ theologies, even in a Christian divinity school. Otherwise, the hegemony of Christian theology will be further reinforced. Further, feminist theology must be open to other disciplines in which feminist religion study is undertaken, else it risks marginalizing those for whom the academic study of Judaism (for example) is not primarily theological in character.

**Jewish/Judaic Study**

Just as feminist theology should be open to other disciplines in the study of religion, so Jewish studies should be more open to the study of theology. Jewish studies must critique its implication within the heritage of the Enlightenment/Emancipation project, in particular as instantiated by the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and its academic offspring. Jewish studies is still unsure of its location in the academy, even as departments of Jewish/Judaic study have grown across North America. Feminist Jewish study, as I have already indicated, is implicated in this ambivalent location between religion, ethnic, and area studies. Jewish/Judaic study would be further strengthened by critiquing the apologetic heritage of the Jewish *Wissenschaft* movement and by reconfiguring its relation to theology. The connections between (for example) Jewish studies, religion studies, and feminist theology could then take place in a variety of institutional and intellectual locations, from Jewish seminaries to departments of religious studies, and from Christian seminaries and divinity schools to departments of Jewish/Judaic study. In such institutional reconfigurations, we would all be ‘strangers together’ rather than split in a politics and ethics that polarizes disciplinary and religious identity and difference(s) between self and other(s).

**The Problem of Feminist Graduate Teaching and Professional Training**

One of the most compelling aspects of Gross’s argument is her naming of the problem of the absence of feminist professors of minority religions from graduate and professional theological training. While she focuses her solution to this problem on Christian seminaries, Gross describes the problem much more broadly. Indeed, the fact that there are almost no women professors training graduate or professional students in feminist (and, indeed, in almost any aspect of) Jewish studies is increasingly a topic of discussion among my feminist colleagues in Jewish/Judaic study. While Gross’s experience outside of feminist theology and, especially, in Buddhist-Christian dialogue is one that she happily finds to be radically inclusive, many feminists I know have no like experience within Jewish/Judaic studies. While the Association for Jewish Studies has significantly progressed with respect to the inclusion of feminist and gender
studies in its program and even of feminist women on its board, the field itself continues to lag behind. Whether in departments of religion/religious studies, Jewish/Judaic study, Jewish seminaries or in Christian divinity schools or seminaries, notably few feminist women train graduate or professional students in Jewish studies. Most feminist scholars teach either at undergraduate institutions, such as liberal arts colleges, or teach only undergraduate students at universities in which there may be graduate and professional schools in other disciplines and areas, but in which Jewish/Judaic study is only an undergraduate major or program. This absence of feminist women teacher-scholars at the graduate and professional level is one that will have a continuing negative impact not only on Jewish/Judaic study in the future, but also on feminist religion and theological study. As Gross notes,

[I]f non-Christian feminist theologians were more appropriately employed, in positions in which they could do more research and writing and from which they could directly influence future generations of theologians through their presence and their teaching, the marginalization of non-Christian feminist theologians would be significantly lessened.

I agree fully that redressing this lacuna should be a top priority for feminists. It should be a priority, however, not only for feminist theologians, but also for feminists in religion studies and related ethnic and area studies programs, such as Jewish/Judaic study. A forum such as this roundtable occasioned by the significant and timely call to thought and action put forward in Rita Gross’s provocative essay is a very important moment, one which we dare not let pass.

RESPONSE

Rita M. Gross

First, let me thank all the respondents to my lead-off essay for many thoughtful comments. I will not be able to make even half the comments that I would like to make, or to respond to every suggestion or question, in the short space allotted to me by the editors for my final comments. Thus, I apologize in advance if I do not remark on something that deserves a reply. Perhaps the conversation can be carried on at some point in the future. For the most part, also, I will respond to issues rather than to individuals, and shall not name specific individuals in most cases. Be assured that I have read every response several times and it has had its impact on my final wrap-up. Two things surprised me about the responses as a group. First, I did not expect nine responses. Editorial willingness to seek out so many responses indicates that the issue I bring up is taken
seriously. However, I was even more surprised that there were no Christian theological responses because my comments are directed mainly to Christians; only Christians can undo Christian exclusion of other religions and Christian claims to religious superiority. I think it is essential that the editors’ suggestion that Christians now respond to this entire roundtable discussion be carried out.

Two things need to be said as preliminaries. First, this short piece was written to get people’s attention, finally. I have made this case in more sustained arguments and in less provocative language previously—only to be repeatedly ignored by most of my feminist colleagues. This very short piece is an extreme distillation of many articles on the theology of religious diversity and on the relationship between religious studies and theology that I have written over the years. Second, I am not particularly attached to any of the terms I used in this piece, especially to the two terms that received the most commentary—‘ghetto’ and ‘theology.’ If we can find better words for the claims and ideas with which I am concerned, so much the better. But I will not easily be dissuaded from the basic claims I have put forth in this very short essay.

It’s Time to Be Less Provincial and Eurocentric

Like Carol Christ, I want to tell a story from the ‘old days’ of the Women and Religion section. In 1975, the first year in which I was chair of the section and responsible for the section’s program, I felt that it was important to include materials on women who were not part of the Euro-American world. Therefore, one of the six program sessions was about women in other religious contexts—I no longer remember the exact content. Everyone who had been following the papers on women and religion, whether Christian or non-Christian, except for me, left the room at that point. That evening, when I asked other feminists with whom I had been working closely why they had left, they said that the material was on Asia and other places irrelevant to them, and besides, there were non-English words in the titles, so how could I expect them to be interested.

Twenty-five years later, I am still trying to point out to feminists interested in religion that Europe is not especially the center of the world, even as I keep trying to convince them that people from religions other than Christianity, with

a weak nod to Judaism and Goddess spirituality, need to be included in discussions of feminism and religion. Actually, this claim has two parts. The first, that feminists need to make a concerted effort to extend their concerns with diversity well beyond the current limit of diversity within Christianity, was sufficiently articulated in my short opening statement. The other, that Christian feminist theologians or scholars of religion need to educate themselves about religious alternatives, was not explicitly stated in my opening comments. It is time to stop pretending that one can be theologically literate, or literate in religious studies, if they know next to nothing about even one of the many great wisdom traditions of Asia or of indigenous peoples. Perhaps one of the reasons that people like Grace Burford have given up on feminist circles in the study of religion is their massive Eurocentrism, the subtle feeling that most people just aren’t interested in what feminists like Grace or myself do because it’s not about ideas or religions that are associated primarily with Europe.

Despite the fact that I have staked my career to the cause of feminism in religion, and have paid very heavily for that action, sometimes when I am in an explicitly feminist gathering at the AAR, I feel more hemmed in, frustrated and unheeded than in any other environment in the AAR. The atmosphere is so parochial, so defensive, so embattled, so stifling and limited. I feel as if I would do anything to be able to open up some windows and get some new air currents moving about. Can’t we break out of this tired Eurocentric worldview (self-imposed ghetto) dominated by Christianity into a truly multi-religious, multicultural environment? Because if we don’t, I predict that feminist theology will only become ever more marginalized, and that marginalization will not be undeserved, in my view.

**Theology, Religious Studies, or Something Else?**

A significant number of respondents took issue in some way or another with the term ‘theology’ and I am largely sympathetic with their concerns. ‘Theology’ is a very problematic term for anyone who is not Christian and I use the term very loosely because I do not know what other term to use. We are given two options: ‘religious studies,’ the supposedly neutral observations and conclusions made by uninvolved observers about the religious beliefs and behaviors of ‘others’; and ‘theology,’ which, in the consciousness of even many people highly educated about religion, implies a preceding adjective—‘Christian.’ Neither of those options works for me; when I write about Buddhism, I am not an uninvolved outsider, but neither am I a Christian. When I use the term ‘theology,’ I mean that I do critical and constructive work, in addition to descriptive work. At this point, the phrase ‘critical and constructive thinking about any aspect of religion’ conveys what I mean when I use the term ‘theology.’ This phrase includes anyone of any religious persuasion, including members of small traditions and people interested in thinking about religion who do not identify
with any specific religion. (You are right, Naomi. The way I expressed myself could have led to the conclusion that only card-carrying members of a specific religion should be admitted to the ‘Parliament,’ but that was not my intention.) I would also argue that the term should include thinking about and commenting on whatever is central to any religious tradition, not just intellectual issues and ideas about ultimate reality. It seems to me that this expanded, extended, stretched meaning of the term ‘theology’ could include the concerns of those who had misgivings about the term, but if I have miscalculated, please suggest other terminology.

In the emerging discipline of Buddhist critical and constructive thought, this precise issue is very hot. Some are almost allergic to the term ‘theology’ because of its Christian associations; others of us shrug our shoulders and use the term because of its associations with constructive and critical thinking. I have argued for the use of the term in Buddhist contexts2 and would argue, for different reasons, that it be used as a generic, rather than a specifically Christian term, in feminist religious thinking.

Just as it would be beneficial to de-center feminist religious thought from its Eurocentric focus, so it would be useful and appropriate to defuse the notion that critical and constructive thinking about one’s own religion is a uniquely Christian activity. For this reason, I lay claim to the word ‘theology’ for my own Buddhist critical and constructive thinking, despite its awkwardness and misfit, if one is literalist. However, I have learned from these responses that, just as I now always define what I mean by ‘feminism’ the first time I use that term in any presentation, I should likewise always define what I mean by the term ‘theology,’ for which I thank you. The only other acceptable alternative, as I see it, is to find some new term for critical and constructive thinking about religion that clearly includes Christianity, as only one perspective on a level playing field, within its domain. I think that is an unlikely development and would suggest that it is simpler and wiser to disallow Christian ownership of the term ‘theology.’ But if someone can come up with another term that is likely to gain wide currency, I would be eager to hear about it.

Further limiting non-Christians from doing critical and constructive work within the academy is the usual division of labor between ‘theology’ and religious studies. All traditions except Christianity are to be approached only under the rubric of religious studies, in the pursuit of a supposed ‘objectivity’ that is impossible. We are to be described as objects observed by someone else. “Buddhists, they” not “we Buddhists” is the required discourse of the academy. This situation is eerily similar to the position in which we women found ourselves thirty years ago at the beginning of the current feminist movement—objects

---

‘othered’ by men who described us and assumed we were incompetent to participate in the world of scholarship and critical thinking and that it would be better for us to be ‘objectively’ described by men, in a few footnotes here and there, than for our subjective voices to be heard.

It is not that I am opposed to the methodologies of religious studies. I regard training in religious studies as essential for anyone working with religion in any academic context including seminaries. Especially, I would suggest that anyone who wants to comment on their own tradition be deeply trained in the methods of religious studies and study their own tradition using those methods. I mistrust the thinking of most commentators on religion who lack training in religious studies. However, I insist that it is also important to realize that religious studies is not as objective as it claims to be, that it contains its own implicit ‘theology’ because there is no neutral place, including religious studies, upon which to stand and from which to make one’s descriptions. There is an additional problem with the methodologies of religious studies; they all are derived from European theories. To me, after twenty-five years of Buddhist immersion, it is questionable how adequately, by themselves, religious studies methodologies can represent Buddhism, or any other tradition not nurtured by European thought-forms. In sum, the methodologies of religious studies are a useful tool, necessary but not sufficient, if the goal is accurate representation of Buddhism, especially in the explicitly religious context of seminaries.

What I am opposed to is a double standard having to do with religious identity and scholarship that is rampant in the academy. Some respondents objected to my recommendation that those who teach world religions in seminaries be scholar-practitioners of one of those traditions, on the grounds that religious identity should be an inadmissible criterion for employment. Once I would have held that position myself, but I have been subjected to a double standard too often to agree with that position any longer. It is assumed that most people teaching about Christianity and Judaism will self-identify as Jews and Christians and that is no bar to their membership in the academy. The case is the same with Muslims, perhaps to a lesser extent. But for Hindus and even more so for Buddhists, public self-identification, especially if combined with an interest in ‘theology,’ is very dangerous, probably more dangerous than doing explicitly feminist work before attaining tenure. What is this situation if it is not an implicit claim that we Buddhists and Hindus cannot be trusted to represent ourselves because, like women, we are too subjective and emotional to do so? Or perhaps the problem is that if we present our own positions authentically, they will prove to be “too attractive,” like Carol Christ’s authentic presentation of Goddess spirituality?

---

The danger wrought by public self-identification as a Hindu or Buddhist is so grave that only this year, in 2000, is the topic being openly addressed within the AAR, in the panel “Coming Out as a Hindu (or a Buddhist) in Academia.” For this reason, my position on the issue of religious identity and employment has changed considerably. Also, I would argue that different standards hold for programs in religious studies located in colleges and universities than for seminaries. I still would argue that religious identity should not be a criterion for employment in a religious studies program, but I would point out that if that standard were really applied, a self-identified Buddhist, Hindu, etc. would not be excluded, as is now largely the case. Because religious studies is fueled by ‘science envy’ and longs for an impossible neutrality and objectivity, the result is that those who “care against” religion fare much better than those who “care for” religion in employment in religious studies programs. And those who “care for” unfamiliar, ‘foreign’ religions easily stand out as especially suspect. As for seminaries, I can only summarize my much more complex article briefly, in two propositions: first, especially in a religiously diverse society, seminaries must teach non-Christian religions; second, in the religiously charged environment of a seminary, these courses should be taught by scholar-practitioners of those traditions. Quite frankly, I do not trust most Christians to represent me adequately and authentically; yet many seminaries limit their faculty to Christians. Thus, I am discriminated against for employment in two radically different types of institution for the same reason—I am publicly self-identified as a Buddhist interested in critical and constructive thought. (Members of other religions could also find themselves in this position.) The fact that I am also a feminist only makes the situation more difficult still.

Religious Diversity and Racial Diversity

Because one of the respondents seriously distorted my opening essay to claim that I use “diversity to disallow concerns of race to be included” (see Amina Wadud’s response), there is an opportunity to make some useful observations about the relationship between religious diversity and racial diversity. As I discussed more fully in my book Feminism and Religion: An Introduction, the history of the current feminist theology movement has evolved through several phases. In the first phase, from the early seventies into the early eighties, the movement was quite small and not at all Christian-dominated. Most or all of the leaders were white, but many were not of middle-class origins or heterosexual, though those facts were not at the forefront of our discussions. In my conversations with women of color in those days, many of them told me they were


5 See “The Virtues and Joys of the Comparative Mirror.”
attracted to feminism but felt it was more important for them not to criticize men because black men already had so many critics. It is a mistake to claim that the early days of feminist theology were dominated by white women because women of color were excluded by us. In the eighties, the feminist theological movement expanded greatly in size, as many Christian women from many different ethnic and cultural groups, as well as many more Christian white women, identified as feminist theologians. In those years, as I wrote in my opening statement, “we . . . heard from an ever-widening circle of diverse voices as people who felt excluded expressed their frustrations and added their contributions. But . . . we stopped too soon [emphasis added]. Genuine diversity, for those of us involved in religion, must include religious diversity. And religious diversity and Christian diversity are two different things.” How that call for religious diversity can be distorted into a call against racial diversity is incomprehensible to me. Unfortunately, since the author does not in any way disagree with my message, that religious diversity in feminist theology is important, for women of color as well as white women, and since I said nothing to suggest that racial diversity should not be a concern, I am suspicious that the skin color of the messenger is the real problem.

My suspicions are increased by the fact that concern for racial diversity and concern for religious diversity actually complement each other rather than working against each other. In fact, it would be impossible to promote religious diversity without at the same time promoting racial diversity. Christianity was and is the religion of Europe and was brought to the rest of the world by white European colonizers. People of color are the vast majority in the rest of the world’s religions. Thus, lack of interest in religious diversity is more likely to have racist overtones than concern for religious diversity, as was pointed out by Judith Simmer-Brown in her response. As I write this response, I am attending a small Buddhist-Christian dialogue conference. Of the ten Buddhists present, only three are white; all eleven Christians are white. Need I say more? (To be fair to my Christian colleagues, it is important to point out that Christians of color who usually attend this meeting were not present because of personal conflicts in their schedules.)

The real problem is that, after the feminist theological movement expanded in the eighties, it marginalized the rest of us who are not Christian, which includes many feminist theologians who are not white. Many Christian feminists seem to have succumbed to the pernicious equation of ‘religion’ with ‘Christianity’ that is so pervasive in North America. Is Carol Christ’s hypothesis correct, that Christian feminists are more concerned about their links with other Christians than their links with other feminists because of economic considerations?

I would prefer to think that our Christian feminist colleagues are experiencing a blind spot rather than willfully ignoring us. When I read this opening statement to an academic gathering at Garrett Seminary and Northwestern
University in the spring of 1999, a group of feminist theologians, most of whom teach at various Catholic colleges in the Chicago area, approached me immediately, with shock and concern written on their faces: "We had no idea we were excluding people like you. We feel so excluded and marginalized within Christianity ourselves that it just didn’t occur to us that there was anybody we could be excluding!" I want to believe that. On the other hand, now the issue has been raised very clearly. It is time for Christian feminists to smash the destructive equation of ‘religion’ with ‘Christianity’ that seems to be present in their thinking, rather than to contribute in any way to North American ignorance about religious diversity and to the dangerous and very common tendencies in North American civil life to elevate Christianity above other religions. We need a consciousness-raising movement regarding the existence of religious diversity and the worth of non-Christian religions that would parallel and complement consciousness-raising moments already in progress regarding racial/ethnic diversity, sexual orientation, and gender.

I have managed, while exceeding the page limit set by the editors, to address only a few of the issues brought up by these responses. But I must comment, only in passing, on one more topic. I have continued in this response to use words like ‘non-Christian’ and ‘non-white.’ Believe me, as someone who has taught ‘non-Western’ religions my whole life, I am well aware that those words reveal a Christian, white hegemony. I use them only for the same reason I continue to use the term ‘theology.’ I don’t know what other terms to use. On the other hand, as a Buddhist, I am accustomed to using the ‘non’ prefix in very positive ways. Usually we realize that it’s okay simply to point out what we are not about. The ideal emotional state is aloha, aroha, amoha, non-aggression, not-craving, not-confused, and the unfabricated state of mind is unborn, unceasing, uncaused, and non-dwelling.