

Homemade Holiness: Re/Configuring Gender Studies in Religion—Epilogue

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In *The Feminine and the Sacred* (2001), prominent French feminist theorists Catherine Clément and Julia Kristeva published their correspondence in which they exchange remarkably different views on the feminine and the sacred.¹ Literary critic Clément, with her Jewish and Marxist background, and psychoanalyst Kristeva, who is a self-declared atheist though deeply “bound” by her Christian background, adamantly cross swords on the matter. In spite of their divergent perspectives that kept them debating over topics like sacred cows, the Virgin Mary, purification rites, and sacrificial cults, both Clément and Kristeva assume throughout the book that there is a special connection—a certain intimacy—between the feminine and the sacred. Widely travelled and anthropologically interested, Clément is fascinated by women’s committed and visible performance in religious rituals the world over and poses the engaging feminist notion that “the sacred among women may express an instantaneous revolt that passes through the body and cries out.”² Kristeva, from within her feminist-psychoanalytic discursive frame, considers the sacred as something experienced in private, as that which “gives meaning to the most intimate of singularities, at the intersection of the body and thought, biology and memory, life and meaning.”³ Women, according to Kristeva, stand at this intersection in a unique and dramatic way, because they are—more than men—deeply involved in the body/meaning intertwinement. Being marked by both biology *and* meaning, women are on “equal footing” with the sacred, but at the same time most relentlessly adverse—“a potential atheist.”⁴ Both Clément and Kristeva consider the connection between the feminine and the sacred immensely crucial to explore, as well as a topic suspiciously ignored, not least of all in feminist intellectual circles.

1 C. Clément and J. Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

2 Clément and Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, 10.

3 Clément and Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, 178.

4 Clément and Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, 15–16.

The special connection between the feminine and the sacred that Clément and Kristeva each draw attention to in their own way depends heavily on the distinction they both agree to make between religion and belief on the one hand and the sacred on the other. They locate the experience and significance of the sacred in human materiality and subjectivity, desire and meaning, and particularly, from a feminist point of view, in resistance, bodily ecstasy, and female *jouissance*. Both explore and contest these views in their epistolary exchange. They explicitly do not build on religious studies views of the sacred or theological debates on holiness in their deliberations, although they allude to these discourses regularly in their letters to each other.⁵

Although congenial with the interests and aims of *The Feminine and the Sacred*, the research project of this volume has intentionally taken a markedly different route. First, to separate the discussion of the sacred from the historical and systematic study of religion(s) and the phenomenon of religious belief is not a productive starting point for us as theologians and religious studies scholars. On the contrary, as the contributions in this volume show, a critical exploration of conceptions of holiness and the sacred as defined and used in various religious traditions and contexts is essential to understand their gendered impact and consequences. To perform a thorough critique of dichotomous conceptualisations of the sacred versus the profane because of their profound gendered implications, the primary goal of this research project, requires scrutinizing engagement with the actual religious discourses, symbols, and practices that have constituted and consolidated the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane.

Second, as the title of this volume indicates, we have not opposed—nor juxtaposed—“the feminine” and “the sacred” as the key terms of our project. Instead, we choose to operate under the title *Everyday Life and the Sacred: Re/configuring Gender Studies in Religion*. Not the feminine as such, but the places, spaces, conditions, and practices of women’s lives have constituted our primary object of research. Moreover, we did not assume a special connection between women and the sacred beforehand, but we have been eager to learn how women confront, identify, and relate to the sacred in the light of both their religious heritages and daily life arrangements, including their emancipatory trajectories. As stated in the introduction, we assume that focusing on the sacred and the profane, on holiness and everyday life in their interconnectivity,

5 For similar approaches see for instance: F. Devlin-Glass and L. McCredden, *Feminist Poetics of the Sacred: Creative Suspicions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); G. Pollock and V. Turvey Sauron, *The Sacred and the Feminine: Imagination and Sexual Difference* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007); E. Anderson, “Writings as Sanctuary”, *Literature and Theology* 27 (2013): 364.

both in the light of theoretical debates and based on exemplary case studies informed by gender-sensitive approaches in theology and religious studies has proved a fruitful strategy. Indeed, that these will give rise to new impulses to reflect on religion and spirituality in close connection to the social and cultural contexts and the actual living conditions of today.

Three concerns stemming from ongoing debates in the feminist study of theology and religion have given important impulses to this research project. First, the critique of the dichotomous perception of the sacred versus the profane.⁶ Then a positive and renewed interest in the relevance and meaning of the concept of the sacred.⁷ Finally, a recognition of the significance of studying everyday life and daily practices for understanding contemporary forms of and trends in religion and spirituality.⁸ In this epilogue, I will discuss these and their interrelatedness in consideration of some research results, insights and questions articulated in the contributions to this volume.

6 See P.M. Magee, "Disputing the Sacred: Some Theoretical Approaches to Gender and Religion", in *Religion and Gender* (ed. U. King; Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), 101–120; M. de Haardt and A.-M. Korte (eds.), *Common Bodies: Everyday Practices, Gender and Religion* (Münster: LIT, 2002); A.-M. Korte, "Recapturing the Sacred: Feminist-Theological Hermeneutics and the Authority of Holy Texts", in *Holy Texts: Authority and Language* (eds. C. Methuen et al.; Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 13–30; K. McPhillips, "De-Colonizing the Sacred: Feminist Proposals for a Post-Christian, Post-Patriarchal Sacred", in *Post-Christian Feminisms: A Critical Approach* (eds. L. Isherwood and K. McPhillips; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 129–145; K. Biezeveld, *Als scherven spreken: Over God in het leven van alledag* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2008).

7 See H. Wilcox and I. Visser (eds.), *Transforming Holiness: Representations of Holiness in English and American Literary Texts* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006); D.F. Sawyer and D. Llewellyn (eds.), *Reading Spiritualities: Constructing and Representing the Sacred* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); B. Kevane, *Profane & Sacred: Latino/a American Writers Reveal the Interplay of the Secular and the Religious* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Pub, 2008); M. de Haardt, "Making Sense of Sacred Space in the City?" in *Exploring the Postsecular: The Religious, the Political and the Urban* (eds. A.L. Molendijk et al.; Leiden: Brill 2010), 163–182; A. Fedele and K.E. Knibbe (eds.), *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality: Ethnographic Responses* (New York: Routledge, 2013); B. Newman, *Medieval Crossover: Reading the Secular Against the Sacred* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013); A. Day et al., *Social Identities between the Sacred and the Secular* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013); G. Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World: A Cultural Sociological Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); J. De Groot and S. Morgan (eds.), *Sex, Gender and the Sacred: Reconfiguring Religion in Gender History* (Malden: Blackwell 2014).

8 See S. MacKian, *Everyday Spirituality: Social and Spatial Enchantment* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012); N.T. Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); E. Hense et al., *Present-Day Spiritualities: Contrasts and Overlaps* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); J.L. Mecham et al., *Sacred Communities, Shared Devotions: Gender, Material Culture, and Monasticism in Late Medieval Germany* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014).

Beyond the Sacred Versus the Profane

The most shared assumption of the contributions to this anthology is the urgency of deconstructing the dichotomous precepts of the sacred versus the profane; our aim is to step beyond this pair of interpretative terms that have dominated our field of studies for so long. Feminist theology argued from its inception that this oppositional pairing has strongly gendered implications. The distinction serves to legitimate the exclusion of women from religious authority and full participation in institutional and public religious ritual in a cultural and religious context that associates women's bodies and activities primarily with the profane over and against holiness. The idea that women's conduct or any artefacts related to women's ordinary lives are "far from holy" is deeply ingrained in the Western religious imagination. Therefore, it is not only necessary to be very critical towards the distinction between the sacred versus the profane as an analytical or interpretative category but also toward other dualist models and conceptualisations in which the sacred or the profane prominently figure or are—even implicitly—imbedded.

The articles in this volume show that this basic critical assumption is not only an important analytical tool but that it is also a productive and even creative heuristic stance. First, our book addresses and "unsettles" some related distinctions that touch in various ways on the established dichotomy of the sacred versus the profane—demonstrating the breadth and the explorative capacity of this gender-critical approach. Let me point to some of these explorative examples found throughout the book.

Systematic theologian Maaïke de Haardt shows that a focus on place and space offers a specific view in this debate. In the context of her study of "lived religion", she opens possibilities of going beyond gendered dualistic thinking and transforming traditional religious and theological discourses marked by the dichotomy of the sacred versus the profane. According to her, this gender-sensitive approach brings to light the actual *locatedness* of everyday life and the experience of the holy revealing how place and space profoundly influence what we call "religious" and "sacred". While De Haardt concentrates on place and space in this exploration, systematic theologian Akke van der Kooi reconsiders the relation between the sacred and the profane taking the perception of time into consideration. Van der Kooi shows that rethinking "lived time" from a feminist-theological point of view challenges the idea that the sacred and finitude stand at the opposite ends of the spectrum. Studying reflections on time in contemporary women's artistic oeuvre, Van der Kooi argues that the sacred *is* transcendence carried along by finite forms. Bible scholar Willien van Wieringen explores the Samson stories in Judges 13–16. She reflects on how

the experience of humour and holiness seem to be at odds. In sacred spaces or spheres, one is not supposed to tell a joke or view things from a satirical angle. Scripture, nevertheless, does offer some intriguing examples of humour and satire. Even the Samson narratives seem intentionally ironic; in particular, when we read them in a gender-critical perspective. In fact, drawing the line between humour and holiness is part of our religious and scholarly conventions and depends on our “insider” or “outsider” position regarding these.

Second, several contributions to this volume have taken the deconstruction of dichotomous conceptualisations of the sacred versus the profane as a hermeneutical challenge. They ask the question: how can authoritative texts from particular religious traditions in which the dichotomy is apparently present—or considered to be present in long-standing interpretations—be read to resist or to overcome a dualistic understanding of the sacred versus the profane? Hebrew Bible scholar Dorothea Erbele-Küster argues that a necessary first step and part of a feminist hermeneutical approach is a gender-critical questioning of the status and authority of “holy”, that is, religious texts. Erbele-Küster demonstrates how Leviticus, a core text of the Bible when it concerns authoritative representations and the regulation of holiness, could be read in a gender-sensitive perspective to inform (Christian) theology and anthropology. She claims that the menstruation rules in Leviticus 11–15, when read as “boundary markers” (Mary Douglas), and as “cultural constructions of the gendered body” (Judith Butler), provide a new perception of the female body in light of the sacred. The regulations could be reconceived as constituting bodily practices of holiness. According to Erbele-Küster, this gender-critical method yields a reconstruction of the relation between the sacred and everyday life. While at the same time, this reading offers an indispensable insight into the linguistic and cultural relativity of biblical texts.

Not only exegetes consider the deconstruction of dichotomous conceptualisations of the sacred versus the profane to be primarily a hermeneutical challenge—a challenge of confronting and re-reading the authoritative texts of their particular religious traditions. Systematic theologians Kune Biezeveld and Helga Kuhlmann also revisit core texts and concepts of their theological traditions to find starting points for a new, dynamic understanding of the relationship between everyday life and the holy. Both authors use contemporary gender-critical perspectives to discuss the perils and costs of unbalanced approaches to holiness and everyday life, which can lead to the devaluation or exclusion of the one or the other. Biezeveld begins with a theological re-evaluation of everyday life and its so-called profanity, while Kuhlmann starts by rethinking the concept of holiness. Both authors strive to make the ingrained oppositional distinction between these two concepts more porous and their

interrelationship more dynamic. As Kuhlmann states, “In my view of Christian tradition, I try to show that it is possible to interpret the Christian concept of the holy in such a way that everyday life and everyday acts can be appreciated as doors to experience the holy”.⁹ Her interpretation rests on a threefold movement: drawing the holy from heaven to earth, from specific sacred times, and local zones, to everyday life, and from God to the people. For Kune Biezeveld, who wants to break through the one-sided emphasis on salvation and God’s saving acts by adding the category of blessings, this re-reading points in a direction where everyday life reappears, theologically spoken, as created reality.

Rethinking the Sacred

In addition to the deconstruction of the oppositional pairing of the sacred versus the profane and its cognate dualisms, the second primary interest of this research project lies in “recapturing the sacred”. A positive and renewed interest in the relevance and the meaning of the (concept of the) “sacred” is already manifest in recent studies of religion and gender.¹⁰ The search for an “un-gendered”, “post-patriarchal”, and “de-colonized” understanding of the sacred has proven the sacred to be a seriously problematic realm of inquiry as well as a fascinating area of research for gender studies. In particular, the fact that violent sacrifice, striving for purity/virginity, and establishing untainted bloodlines in the monotheistic religions all functioned initially to secure male priestly power and are deeply involved in long-established notions of holiness, makes recapturing the sacred from a feminist perspective a challenging task.¹¹ This volume takes two avenues toward new directions. The first route is concerned with the disentanglement of the sacred from its intense and complicated theologically embedded associations with sacrifice, purity, and taboo that desacralize women’s bodies and lives. The second route is a critical reformulation of established concepts of the sacred based on a reconstruction and redefinition of women’s daily lives and practices, which are (in)formed by classic religious “disciplined” forms of holiness such as cloister life, prayer, singing and clothes.

9 See the article by Helga Kuhlmann in this volume, p. 34.

10 See above, n. 7.

11 See among others K. De Troyer et al. (eds.), *Wholly Woman—Holy Blood: A Feminist Critique of Purity and Impurity* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003); C. McNelly Kearns, *The Virgin Mary: Monotheism and Sacrifice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Concerning the first route, as several authors in this volume demonstrate, it is an essential and crucial step to extricate our notions of the sacred from their deeply gendered and theologically framed associations with sacrifice, purity, and taboo, and the unfathomable dreadful. In addition to Dorothea Erbele-Küster, who reinterprets the regulations of menstruation in Leviticus 11–15 with this aim, New Testament scholar Magda Misset-van de Weg, and religious studies scholars Jacqueline Borsje and Gé Speelman present concrete examples of this “disentanglement”. These contributors also navigate gender-critical readings of formative religious texts.

Misset-van de Weg analyses Paul’s efforts in 1 Corinthians to arrange the early Christian *ekklēsia* as a holy community capable of reflecting God’s sacred cosmic order. She shows that, on the one hand, Paul succeeded to include women as full members in the *ekklēsia* as the “body of Christ”. She demonstrates that he did so by transferring cultic terminology like “sanctification”, “holiness”, and “saint” to all believers. Thus, he left behind the exclusive associations of purity and holiness that referred to the temple cult. On the other hand, women became marginalized and “set apart” within the *ekklēsia* that often gathered in their own homes. For Paul envisioned the community as a body of believers, an exemplary sacred space, a visible holy ordering, foundationally marked by the gender difference in the appearance and performance of its individual members, to which the veiled bodies of women pre-eminently testified.

Following the critical readings of Qur’anic texts on *hijab* offered by female Muslim scholars, religious studies scholar Gé Speelman traces various types of demarcation that are implied or understood to extend from scriptural references to *hijab*—women’s veiling. She points to striking differences in the understanding of this distinction and the gendered consequences. When this demarcation is interpreted performatively as a partition between the sacred and the ordinary and primarily understood as pointing to the ethical standards that distinguish between believers and those who do not believe, this demarcation does not necessarily imply a substantial difference between female and male believers. But when this differentiation becomes spatially interpreted as a system of social divisions that regulates community and family life, as often has been the case in history, it proves to have strongly gendered and segregating consequences.

Jacqueline Borsje offers another fine and detailed example of disentangling the sacred from its powerful and complicating Christian theological associations with sacrifice, purity, and taboo in “The Power of Words: Sacred and Forbidden Love Magic in Medieval Ireland”. With an in-depth and self-reflective reading of medieval texts, she unravels the relation between “saints” and “spells”, addressing the continuing struggle to distinguish between good and

evil extraordinary powers. Borsje demonstrates that not only prevailing scholarly distinctions between, and reflections about religion and magic need examination in this context, but so do the assumptions about religion and magic that have become part of the current feminist agenda. Dividing lines between the sacred and its precarious opposite are not, she argues, only relics but are produced again today.

The second route reformulates, reconstructs and redefines the examples of women's daily lives and practices. Hereby the classical forms of religious orientation or "disciplining" come to life. The historians of religion, Mathilde van Dijk and Angela Berlis, and systematic theologian Hedwig Meyer-Wilmes, reassess examples of women's active efforts toward holiness that are only discernable through attentive reconstruction.

In her contribution, Van Dijk unravels how newly emerging late medieval Christian practices of sanctification in which women openly participated were defined, and earnestly hampered, by concepts of sanctity and holiness charged with gendered associations and fascinations with sacrifice, purity, and taboo. Van Dijk analyses how the Sisters and Brethren of the Common Life in fifteenth-century Deventer pursued their ideal of spiritual perfection and sanctification based on the imitation of Christ in daily life and modelled as a *via media*—a way of being *in* this world but not *of* this world. The sisters had to find a middle course between the religious and the secular life: physically close to ordinary life, spiritually detached from it. Van Dijk shows how the sister's publicly practiced sanctification soon became suspect and thwarted because in the eyes of both the civil and ecclesiastical authorities as women they were weaker than men and "descendants of Eve after the Fall". Therefore, the pastoral and diaconal work that pressed the sisters beyond the convent to practice their convictions was increasingly perceived to be contrary to their aim to sanctify their lives after Christ's model, much as it might have seemed a literal imitation at first sight.

Systematic theologian Hedwig Meyer-Wilmes explores the contemporary experience of communal singing and listening to Marian hymns stemming from fourteenth-century prayer. Her contribution points out how the materiality of bodily experience can resonate with the Christian interpretation of female suffering and compassion, while, at the same time, it results in a transfiguration of daily life (Dorothee Sölle) for those involved. Meyer-Wilmes argues,

When singing or listening to the *Stabat Mater*, there seems to be 'two-fold energy' at work because of the coincidence of dissimilar moments. The *now* of the performance manifested in the bodily presence of the

participants—singers and listeners—encounters the *then* of a narrative staged for us *now* in a form that still moves us. A thread of the past comes forth that allows us to sense with intensity what presence means: moments of intensively being in the body and the world, moments that are holy.¹²

Angela Berlis then raises the foundational question of how sanctity and irreparable loss relate to each other in particular regarding women's religious heritages. Focusing on the ruins of the Cistercian Monastery of Port-Royal in France, Berlis discusses how sanctification of this desecrated and "wounded" location could take place. She shows how its very destruction transformed the place from a "generational" venue into a place of living remembrance—a *lieu de mémoire*. The sanctification of the ruined spot, so Berlis, lies in the actual and ongoing commitment of various groups and individuals to not forget the horror that fell on this place.

Studying Everyday Life and Daily Practices: Homemade Holiness

In the final section of this book, where current daily life practices are studied more extensively, a new perspective opens: homemade holiness. Here four examples of contemporary religious practices initiated and performed by specific groups of women are discussed and analysed from a qualitative empirical perspective. Most characteristic for these practices is that at first sight they seem marked by being common, by their "homeliness". These narrative practices occur at home, in daily life, in the local neighbourhood, community, or on the street, and they are mostly manifest extensions of "ordinary life". The homeliness of these performances, practices, and discourses relate to what the women *themselves* consider to be sacred.

Goedroen Juchtmans, studying "Women as Ritual Experts in Sacralising the Everyday Home Life", explores the ways in which middle and working class women, who mostly combine the care for their families with work outside the home, express the sacred in their everyday life at home. Juchtmans takes the perspective of a ritual expert, which she develops in a critical response to the modern, liberal view, on the domestic life that has profoundly influenced the feminist movement and feminist theology. Her analysis is a study of situations in which women are agents and the subjects of their ritual actions at home; where they continually elect to transgress the boundaries between the

12 See the article by Hedwig Meyer-Wilmes in this volume, p. 263.

public and private domain. Regarding the distinction and boundaries between the sacred and everyday life, Juchtmans' analysis presents these women as creative and active mediators of the sacred in their own home settings.

Alma Lanser investigates the relationship between expectations at home and in the church as ingredients of the "lived religion" of young female members of Christian immigrant churches in the Netherlands. Her study tries to figure out what young women, who are active members of these churches, consider sacred in their everyday life. Practicing music: singing, dancing, moving, and clapping are essential at ecclesial community meetings. For the young women that Lanser interviewed, these practices shape the vehicle of faith and mediation for their religious experience—in the church and at home. Listening to *good* music in their daily life—namely, trendy music that they report is not tainted by morally improper texts and images—is for them the fulfilment of what the church commands: to live a sacred life.

"Peace Women in Jerusalem: Traces of the Sacred in the Midst of Injustice and Violence", by Riet Bons-Storm takes the dimension of "public life" as a lens to understand the ultimate values of the "Women in Black", the Jewish women of the "Machsom Watch", and the Palestinian "Mothers of Bethlehem". These women strive to uphold their highest values: peaceful living and justice for Jews and Palestinians; they sense a felt need to cross the expectations of women's roles to testify to this. Protecting the vitality of the fire for the realization of these ultimate values and empowering each other, they come together and organize public time and space in which they transgress normative restrictions. In these appearances and actions, the Jewish and Palestinian women give expression to their vision using various references to share what it means to be a woman in their respective societies.

In her research of a substantial collection of contemporary miracle stories, gathered by a Dutch public broadcasting company, Anne-Marie Korte analyses where and how the sacred appears in these stories. Korte analyses the miracle stories in a gender-critical perspective, aiming to show what a systematic exploration of these narratives can offer for the debate on the experience and understanding of the sacred from and within everyday life. She points out that a substantial amount of these present day tales are told by women who act as religious interpreters par excellence, as conscious and eloquent mediators, who not only let their feelings, intuitions, and blood ties speak. These women also use their wit, creativity, symbolic, and communicative powers to relate and share their miraculous experiences. The fact that women often—but not exclusively—take the lead in telling miracle stories in this new style does not point to their marginal position. It reflects rather the fact that thanks to

dominant processes of emancipation and religious individualism and eclecticism in Western countries, in particular, women have found and created new positions and practices of religious meaning-making.

The daily practices studied in this final section of the book share the following characteristics:

- They consist of a select and well-elaborated appropriation of elements of women's religious traditions or heritages, an ownership that is particularly determined by a fixed location and a connection to everyday life activities;
- Commonness and homeliness pre-eminently mark the symbolic terms, objects, and acts that are at the centre of these practices. At first sight, they seem like total extensions of *ordinary life*;
- However, these practices consist of a dynamic of receptivity and active cultivation; the women pay close attention to aspects of daily life that at first seem to fall fully under their control. However, the events or experience that they initiate require cultivation of care, responsiveness, surrender, and dedication to a cause or event that does not occur as a matter of course or force. This dynamic of receptivity and active cultivation that “makes the sacred happen” appears to be the particular capability that these women acquire by performing the practices.

Conclusion

What can we say about “everyday life and the sacred” in retrospection? Does the title we chose for this book, *Everyday Life and the Sacred* still express the polarity of the sacred and profane, as discussed by Clément and Kristeva, to which they offered a fresh perspective by adding *the feminine* to the sacred? Is “sacred versus profane” still a pair of heavily loaded oppositional concepts from religious studies that we have tried to unravel, wrestle with, and conquer in the volume's many contributions? I think that we have done more.

When the profane is no longer qualified to be in opposition to the sacred, and it is no longer that from which the sacred is differentiated or separated because everyday life in all its complexity and ambiguity takes the first place in our considerations, a shift happened. The relocation makes it possible to look at the sacred in new ways. Crucial for these new perspectives are gender-sensitive and gender-critical analyses, a postcolonial, and a post-secular

approach, but also a profound knowledge of religious traditions and engagement with their central texts and rituals. To tear the sacred from the sacred profane opposition with all its gendered connotations—and to investigate where and how it is found or placed over and against what is *not sacred*, opens new ways of doing research in the field of religion, theology, and gender—and well beyond.