Like for history, gender is a useful, indeed essential, category of analysis for religious studies on multiple levels.¹ Scholars have examined the degree to which given religions are or have been practiced and experienced differently by men and women, sometimes to the point that one may speak of “women’s” religion as opposed to men’s, because cultic practices have been segregated according to gendered categories. Such divisions may be according to simple biological binaries of male and female, for example, in divisions between men and women’s religious roles in ancient Greece and Rome.² Rituals focusing on the bodily differences, fluids and functions of men and women, for example, initiation rites centering on the alteration of boys’ or girls’ genitalia, purity regulations relating to semen and menstrual blood; religious laws and rituals celebrating and/or regulating the birthing process or the relationship between mother and child – are key elements in the ritual cycles and the conceptualizations of the boundaries between sacred and profane in numerous religious traditions.³
Yet gender is not a mere binary within the field of religion. The concept of constructed or “third” genders also have a powerful role, both in forms of segregated religious experience and practice, and in the symbolic vocabulary adopted to define self and “other”, sacred individuals, and finally in humans’ imagining of the divine and the cosmos. Instances in which a “third” or other gender outside a binary of male and female has particular roles, rituals and experiences within the larger community include the hijras (sp?) in India and the so called “bardache” among certain tribes of the Americas. The eunuch in Byzantine Christianity was alternately perceived as problematic and devious, but also, according to some scholars, closer to the angelic body, a status they shared with prepubescent adolescents, and occupying a liminal state between the human and divine worlds. This symbolic imagining was reshaped in the Islamic world. The idea of the “manly woman”, a woman, who because of her spiritual endeavors, often including extreme asceticism, and behavior is transformed to a masculine (and thus superior) spiritual status has a long history in both eastern and western Christianity, and echoes within Judaism and Islam. In theosophic Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, gender is an essential component in conceptualizing the divine and the demonic, both of which are divided in to masculine and feminine pairs, and in describing the relationship between God and human, where the Shekhinah, feminine in her relationship with other divine sefirot, or aspects of the divine, is often understood as becoming masculine in her encounter with male students of the Torah, even as these normally male scholars, become feminine relative to her. In such a system, as in others, gender is mutable, and what and who is male, female, or something else, has as much or more to do with the symbolic meanings assigned to these designations than with the genitalia of individual humans.

The brief discussion above outlines but a few of the ways in which gender is significant in analyzing religious ritual, law, and symbolism, generally. However, gender often plays a particularly important role in processes of religious demarcation, transfer, adaptation, and resistance between different religious communities or between competing segments of the same community.

**Demarcation.** Competing religious and ethnic groups are often described as “feminine” in relation to the true, superior, masculine group making such claims. This kind of discourse has long been part of western, European Christian rhetoric, whether in describing the weak, cursed, fearful menstruating feminized Jewish men in relationship to the rational, spiritual, masculine Christians during the Middle Ages, or contrasting feminized Bengali Muslim and Hindu men to properly masculine British Christians in the nineteenth century. Medieval Jews, Muslims, and Christians, also used excessive, “wrong,” animalistic masculinity as a way of condemning those in power or competition with them,
both within their own circles, or in their polemic against Christians and Muslims respectively.\textsuperscript{10} Accusations of sexual misbehavior has often also been a common method of marking given groups or individuals as religiously problematic or undesirable, at least within religious traditions stemming from the Mediterranean.\textsuperscript{11} Finally, women’s behaviors, bodies, customs, clothing, treatment or roles within a given tradition have frequently become a means by which women’s roles may circumscribed and women may be marked as religiously problematic within a tradition, or by which one religious tradition may criticize another.\textsuperscript{12} This method of demarcation is exemplified most recently in the arguments and legislation regarding Muslim women’s clothing in Europe.\textsuperscript{13} All of these various rhetorical strategies serve in some way to create clear(er) dividing lines between religious desirable and undesirable individuals and communities.

\textbf{Transfer, Adaption, and Resistance:} Processes of transfer, adaption, and resistance are also frequently gendered, whether on a symbolic or experiential level. Goddesses and saints associated with fertility are among the most common which are transferred and adapted from one religious milieu to another, Isis and the Virgin Mary, being merely among the best known examples.\textsuperscript{14} In pre-modern societies missionizing via preaching and teaching was often (though not always) done by men, particularly when it involved traveling over long distances, whereas women were used to transfer religious ideas through inter-marriage.\textsuperscript{15} Martyrdom as a form of testimony to the truth of a given religious tradition, and the establishment of monasteries in frontier areas, on the other hand, are aspects of religious transfer in which both men and women engaged. During antiquity and the Middle Ages, modes of representing such martyrdoms were often stylized along gendered lines; however. Descriptions of women martyrs often emphasized issues of purity/impurity, virginity/motherhood relating to the martyrs themselves, and brutality and sexual excess on the part of male persecutors, so that the representation of martyrdom serves not only to teach and transfer, but in its representation, is a form of rhetorical, gendered, demarcation.\textsuperscript{16} In modern contexts martyrdom continues to be “educational” – a form of transferring not merely acceptable and unacceptable forms of religious practice and attitudes, but also serve to enforce ideals of masculinity and femininity.\textsuperscript{17} Monasteries were often segregated or semi-segregated between men and women, so that their function as nodes of knowledge/religious transfer were structured according to gendered divisions and organization.\textsuperscript{18} In the past, men were often under greater pressure to convert from one religion to another, whether because of increased exposure and public access, or for the sake of economic advancement, whereas women frequently served as the carriers and preservers of religious traditions and practices, especially during periods of persecution or pressure from the outside, and thus served as a main source of resistance to compulsion

For the online handbook of Eurasian Religions in Contact, authors are encouraged to consider these and other issues relating to gender and inter-religious encounter, exchange and resistance in individual case studies. The trends sketched above are meant as examples, contributors are encouraged to select what paradigms most fit their own findings within their research areas.

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1 Joan Wallach Scott “Gender: a useful category of historical analysis,” in Joan Wallach Scott, Gender and the politics of history. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) 28-50


4 Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History, ed. Gilbert Herdt (Zone Books, 1994)


6 Shaun Marron, Eunuchs and sacred boundaries in Islamic society (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995)


13 Sahar Amer, What is Veiling? (University of North Carolina Press, 2014) 75-130


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