

**Lena Gemzöe, Marja-Liisa Keinänen and Avril Maddrell (eds):** *Contemporary Encounters in Gender and Religion: European Perspectives*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 364 pp.

When one encounters well-known feminist scholars writing on religion and chapters on gender in traditional works on the history of religion, one senses the impaired vision afflicting both the field of gender studies and the area of religion research – preventing the two from seeing each other properly – may have been cured. It would be about time. However, the occasional encounter naturally does not always give one the whole picture, and unfortunately the double blindness identified by Ursula King still often rings true. This in turn highlights the continuing need for volumes such as *Contemporary Encounters in Gender and Religion: European Perspectives*.

In their introduction to the volume Lena Gemzöe and Marja-Liisa Keinänen present a form of reckoning pointing to both the developments made and the blindness that remains. They also point to the challenge of this blindness, a challenge connected to both the complexity of religion and the multifaceted aspect of gender. As post-colonial theorists, among others, have highlighted, comparing aspects of gender and religion is not straightforward. Far too often a Euro-American framework is set as the norm, leading to misunderstanding and simplifica-

tion. Nevertheless, this volume as a whole testifies to the many ways gender and religion research can learn from each other.

As *Contemporary Encounters in Gender and Religion* focuses on Europe, some topics are of more interest than others. One such topic is secularisation. Many of the book's chapters relate to this theoretical perspective and, in line with previous research, challenge a simplistic understanding of a secularised Europe, highlighting today's diverse religious landscape. However, as called for by the editors, many of the chapters also avoid making religion simply a case of identity politics, instead incorporating the social, spatial, and historical aspects of contemporary European religious life.

The volume's construction is not particularly novel. *Contemporary Encounters in Gender and Religion* includes a section on feminist perspectives on male religious worlds, a section on gender, sexuality, and religious diversity, a section on alternative spirituality, a section on body, space, and movement, and, finally, a section on feminist theology. This amply covers the main areas of the current European research field and as such is not particularly thought-provoking. Throughout the volume, however, there are chapters that stand out and present novel perspectives and alternatives for future research.

Jill Dubisch's chapter in the first short section on studying gender and religion is an example of a scholarly work taking a step further and

allowing new perspectives. Dubisch poses the question of whether there can be religion without gender. How one answers this question goes back to how one understands religion, among other things. Dubisch does not wish to deny the possibility of an understanding of religion that goes beyond gender yet highlights that from today's perspective religion without gender is hard, if not impossible, to imagine.

If there is a double blindness in the study of religion and gender, Marja-Liisa Keinänen in her chapter on feminist perspectives on the masculinisation of religion in turn points to a possible triple blindness. Keinänen's chapter is a critical reckoning of some current trends in religion and masculinity studies, where a lot of the headway of previous gender and gender and religion research seems to have been ignored, with the risk of a re-hegemonisation of the study of religion. In the worst case – a scenario that according to Keinänen's reading is not far off in some current projects – we will end up with gender and male studies of religion as two separate fields.

Muslim women are a recurring topic in European studies of religion and gender, as *Contemporary Encounters in Gender and Religion* highlights. There is a tendency to place Muslim women in the position of 'Other' and different, but in her chapter on sharing experiences Lyn Thomas presents the results of a project that highlights connections rather than differences. The focus

is still on the other, but the project she presents illustrates how women of different so-called 'suspect communities' can come together. In this case the focus is on Irish Catholic and Muslim women, but the chapter inspires thoughts of other possible connections.

Studies of alternative spiritualities have brought important insights to questions of power relations, agency, and identity, and the field has challenged scholars to understand the role of religion in people's personal lives in new ways. Terhi Utrianen's chapter explores contemporary angel practices in Finland. She points to how these practices, compared to many well-known feminist stands on religion, may seem somewhat unpolitical and not particularly serious. In a Finnish context, where religion is often seen as something private and subdued, women who openly express their claim to enchanted lives with invisible others can, however, at least to some extent, present a challenge in the social and public arena.

Space is currently on the agenda in many types of project, and Avril Maddrell's chapter in *Contemporary Encounters in Gender and Religion* highlights how a spatial perspective can bring something to the study of religion and gender, but also how gender can open new insights in the study of space. The focus is on a Marian shrine in Malta and the complex authorities present in and around this space. Some clear hierarchies, but also a challenge of dichotomies and an assumed understanding of

power relations, are recognised.

In the section on feminist theology Elina Vuola presents yet another area of blindness in religion and gender research, namely, a form of blindness to theology, but also a blindness in feminist theology to the theological thinking of ordinary women – a group otherwise paid a great deal of attention in gender and religion research. Once again the challenge is to take research a step further and truly try to learn from each other and see what each perspective can bring to the other. Theology needs empirical research but the study of the empirical also needs the understanding of the conceptual offered by theology.

*Contemporary Encounters in Gender and Religion* is summarised by Linda Woodhead. Woodhead both looks back over what has been and to the future to what can be. The potential for further growth is there, but there are also challenges. There is a need to avoid turning away from the difficult questions and Woodhead points to several fields where there is still scope for learning. One such field concerns the balance between qualitative and quantitative research. The research in *Contemporary Encounters in Gender and Religion* is largely qualitative, and this with good reason – quantitative research needs to be developed and consider the perspectives presented in volumes such as *Contemporary Encounters in Gender and Religion*. However, researchers also need to acknowledge the usefulness of a quantitative approach.

As can be expected, *Contemporary Encounters in Gender and Religion* does not give the final word on gender and religion in a European setting. If there is something missing in the volume, it is perhaps a more honest and clear acknowledgement of the problem of trying to present European perspectives, since – despite some common themes – the field is broad and varied. However, with both its contributions and its gaps this volume inspires further research. The many interesting case studies presented highlight important perspectives, but also the need to keep pushing ahead and moving forward.

**Sofia Sjö**

Åbo Akademi University, Finland

SOFIA SJÖ is a senior researcher in comparative religion at Åbo Akademi University.  
E-mail: sofia.sjo@abo.fi