

Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy  
of Traditions and Cultures 17

Morny Joy *Editor*

# Women, Religion, and the Gift

An Abundance of Riches

 Springer

# **Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures**

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Morny Joy  
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# Women, Religion, and the Gift

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of two remarkable women:*

***Dr. Beatrice Medicine*** (1924–2006) and  
***Dr. Joan Ryan*** (1932–2005).

*The indefatigable work of these two scholars in support of the women of the First Nations in North America inspired the writing of this book.*

***Beatrice Medicine***, *Hinsha Waste Agli Win* (“Returns-Victorious-with-a-Red-Horse-Woman”), retired as a respected elder amongst her people, the *Sihásapa* (Blackfeet Sioux), a division of the Lakota people, in Standing Rock Reservation, Wakpala, South Dakota. The title of a volume of her collected writings, *Learning to Be an Anthropologist and Remaining “Native”* (University of Illinois Press, 2001), is an especially apt description of Bea’s life and work. She spent her career in multiple roles as an educator, expert witness, and consultant, constantly combating the existing stereotypes of Native Americans and witnessing to their lives and struggles, especially those of women. The CV, included at the conclusion of the above volume, attests to her extraordinarily active career. She received her Ph.D. from the

*University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1983. Prior to receiving this degree, and afterwards, she taught in a number of universities in the United States and Canada. Among her positions were those of Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, California State University, Northridge (1982–1985); Professor, Department of Anthropology; and Director, Native Centre, University of Calgary (1985–1989). Among her many honours was the Malinowski Award, presented to her by the American Society for Applied Anthropology in 1996. A special honour was being the Sacred Pipe Woman at the Sun Dance at Sitting Bull’s Camp in 1977.*

***Joan Ryan’s*** life was dedicated to urging Canada to acknowledge the rights of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. She became the first female head of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Calgary (1978–1983). She was also responsible for helping to found the Canadian Anthropology Society (CASCA) and its journal, *Anthropologica* (formerly *Culture*). After taking early retirement in 1987, Joan became affiliated with the Arctic Institute of North America (AINA) at the University of Calgary. It was then that Joan wrote her splendid tribute, *Doing Things the Right Way: Dene Traditional Justice in Lac La Martre, N.W.T.* (Arctic Institute and the University of Calgary Press, 1995). In recognition of her life of dedicated service, Joan was awarded the Prix Weaver-Tremblay Prize for exceptional contributions to Canadian Applied Anthropology, as well as the Chief David Crowchild Memorial Award of the City of Calgary.

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# Introduction

This volume on women, religion, and the gift is a study of the many ways women have made remarkable contributions to religious traditions in various eras and regions of the world. Unfortunately, these gifts have often suffered from neglect. All too often, they were unacknowledged, or attributed to men, and their remarkable contributions remained without approval, let alone praise. It is nevertheless fascinating that, in the last 35 years, there have been a number of books written about women and the gift, mainly by male scholars who provide analyses of the place or the role of women or the “feminine”, specifically in connection to gift-giving. In an earlier edited volume, entitled *Women and the Gift: Beyond the Given and the All-Giving* (Joy 2013a), I surveyed the work of such male theorists, among them are Derrida (1979, 1992) and Bataille (1985, 1987). In this book I also invited contemporary women scholars to assess these male views. My request was motivated by the fact that, in many of these works, women were either associated with a mode of generosity, i.e. the “all-giving,” or they featured as “the given,” i.e. given away, in a male economy where they were treated as commodities. This last category of “the given” is described in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss. He observes that women constitute the supreme gift in that they are given away by male relatives in marriage to other males (Joy 2013a: 193–218). While Lévi-Strauss also describes this exchange as complying with the incest prohibition (1989: 124), he also justifies his description of the supreme gift, pronouncing that such an exchange of women cements social relationships, thereby establishing the basis of all exchange.<sup>1</sup> The other category, the “all-giving,” identifies women as extravagantly generous in their giving of themselves in the care of others – sometimes amounting to an extreme gesture of self-sacrifice. Within a religious orientation, such commitment has been further exploited and linked to a woman’s required compliance with rules of appropriate conduct that are declared as divinely ordered. Consequently, though the topic of women is addressed in both the above categories of “the given” and the “all-giving,” the thoughts and words of actual women are virtually absent. Women have very rarely been consulted on these matters and decisions. It is unfortunate, then, that the above allotment of tasks and roles does not grant women any independent

status. They are not recognized as decision-makers, donors, or even as partners of comparable worth in any activities featuring gift exchanges.<sup>2</sup>

The earlier collection of theoretical essays on the gift (2013a) that was mentioned above featured contemporary women scholars who offered responses, rebuttals, and alternative perspectives to these mainly philosophical and theological declarations. This present volume, in contrast, examines the topic of the gift in the context of the lived experience of women – a context where women are potential agents and are not necessarily hampered by definitions of prescribed behaviour. A number of the contributors to this volume will explore other distinctive appreciations of the gift. Their approaches differ, however, in that they avoid many of the constraints imposed by an exchange or profit model of economy. This permits them to examine many modes of gift-giving and receiving within a less controlled frame of reference. Such a more comprehensive approach can allow a dynamics of generosity and magnanimity that does not demand traditional forms of female self-renunciation.

The essays in this volume, as a stand-alone project, focus on the actual participation and contributions of women to a number of the religious traditions of the world. The contributors are women scholars who are passionately engaged in portraying significant facets of the gift in their relevant religious contexts. Each of these women scholars introduces an item or instance from a religious tradition that is part of her own research or personal experience. There is, however, one necessary qualification. This is the fact that such gifts – which I use in an open-ended and expansive sense – have often been dismissed or misunderstood. Such disregard could either have occurred during a woman's own lifetime or has been implemented at a later date by male scholars.

In this volume, then, women's gifts to religions have mainly been presented in an open-ended, even figurative, way, though there are also a number of chapters where gifts are dealt with in a more literal manner. Each essay provides a different perspective on the gift and its manifestations. The emphasis will not be on reclaimed lives of outstanding women such as Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Marguerite Porete (d. 1310), or Sor Juana de la Cruz (1651–1695). Instead, this volume seeks to investigate specific elements of women's lives, including those aligned with the domestic or private domain, which have so often been relegated to insignificance. Several of the papers either explicitly or implicitly question unjust structures that have dictated women's inferior status in many religions. Others challenge what is considered as submissive female conduct. Unfortunately, it also needs to be acknowledged that many previous efforts to correct such inequities have rarely succeeded.

The gifts of women described in this volume all have spiritual and religious affiliations and implications in that their activities take place basically within a religious context. But the principal aim of this book is not to explain the religious reasons for the lack of acceptance of women's positive contributions or gifts. Nor is it to recommend solutions that can be applied to religious institutions and practices. My principal interest is to explore both positive and negative reactions, including indifference, as they figure as part of a dynamics of the gift as it has implications for

women's lives. The diversity of the topics, locations, historical periods, and actual religions do not lend themselves to any easy formulas or generalizations. The gift itself, in its many faceted variations, allows for fascinating explorations as to why some women have been denied respect and acknowledgement of their integrity, while others have received not only tolerance but occasionally acceptance. There are tales of desolation but also tales of inspiration. The essays in this volume thus raise a number of issues that dispute conventional platitudes. My hope is that they will generate creative tension and debate that, in turn, will encourage further in-depth research and insight. In this way, the volume is envisioned as making a substantial contribution to the complex study of women and their encounters with religions, both past and present.

I am only too well aware that I am writing these words at a time when the issue of "gender" is raising insistent and unprecedented questions in ways that far surpass previous contentious issues about sexual dimorphism and the binary divisions that subscribe to, or even dictate, separate "masculine" and "feminine" gendered attributes. Such traditional formulas can no longer decree the idealized roles that they once did, as religions come to terms with contemporary controversies raised by LGBTQ scholars and proponents of gay marriage. In light of these pressing demands, a question arises as to whether books such as this present volume remain relevant. I realize that this is indeed a serious challenge that requires circumspect reflection. My own response would be one that acknowledges and fully supports the compelling nature of the contemporary examination and realignment of sexual preferences/identities. This exercise will result in major, even momentous, changes in religions that are responsive to such claims. Yet, at the same time, it is good to remember that, for the greater part of world history, the position of women in most of the major traditions of the world has never been a decidedly advantageous one. Coincidentally, this present era marks a beginning of addressing the subjugated status of women in the majority of religions. I believe, however, that much crucial work still needs to be undertaken in many major areas in the study of religion. This investigation will encourage a more spacious awareness of what methods of analysis, e.g. intersectionality, queer theory, and other pluralistic approaches, will be most appropriate to be adopted.<sup>3</sup>

My own orientation, as a heterosexual woman, has mainly questioned received knowledge as to what constitutes "femininity". This has resulted in a number of books, e.g. *Divine Love: Luce Irigaray, Women, Gender and Religion* (Joy 2006) and *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives* (2003), that are challenging of accepted precedents, principally stereotypes that affect definitions of both sex and gender. I appreciate that my LGBTQ colleagues are extending the range and possibilities of alternative gender identifications. This is a movement I warmly welcome. Yet vast quantities of relevant historical material remain to be excavated and examined regarding the nature of sex and gender practices and attitudes, specifically in relation to religion. This will require the radical rewriting of archives and records. For such a task, the combined insights of feminist, intersectional, and LGBTQ approaches and knowledge can all be constructively brought to bear on traditional heteronormative ideals. Such diverse orientations will revitalize,

if not utterly transform, the way that “gender”, as a generic mode of self-identification, can be redefined and renegotiated in relation to contemporary modes of existence.

For many years, as an aid in my own classroom to enable analyses of women’s status in religions at diverse times and locations, I have employed a diagnostic tool for which I have coined the term “symbolic status”. It has both psychoanalytic and religious reverberations and has helped me to assess the prevailing gendered conditioning of women in religions.<sup>4</sup> My position is that until contemporary times, and then only infrequently, have a relatively small number of women achieved a respected status. By this term, “symbolic status”, I intend to signify a parity of esteem for both women and men within a religious tradition. Obviously, such an understanding avoids appealing to either a hierarchical model of gendered distinctions or to enforced gender complementarity. It acts as an interpretative device to evaluate women’s status in religions from a historical perspective, rather than employing the modern criterion of equal rights. Contemporary debates of women’s rights and religion are still without resolution (Joy 2012). In order to measure the standing of women in relation to men, utilizing the measure of symbolic status, I propose asking the following questions:

1. Are women permitted to become qualified to assume the highest authority in their tradition, i.e. to attain a level of religious agency that is most respected in that tradition? This involves further questions, such as: Can women function as authority figures in preaching, teaching, and advising all persons, regardless of their sexual affiliation? The access to such agency usually depends on being allowed access to relevant specific studies. This, in turn, permits one to elucidate sacred texts in their original languages, so as to both teach and regulate religious institutions – whether on a local or global scale. Unfortunately, because women have been deemed lacking certain traditional male-gendered qualifications, they have been denied admittance to the elevated destiny that is associated with teaching and interpreting sacred texts and systems of divine knowledge.
2. Are women permitted to officiate at sacred rituals, both public and private? Sadly, public and official ceremonies continue to be the prerogative of men in most religions. The male model is recognized as the ideal or norm as the female frame signals a deficiency in the requisite credentials. This failure to meet requirements assigns women to an inferior status that excludes them from presiding at the most important religious rituals. They are automatically relegated to domestic tasks in the private realm.
3. A further question entails whether women can achieve the highest state of spirituality or wisdom that a tradition upholds. All too often, women, with their purported intimate connection to the body – with its physical liabilities and unstable emotions – have been regarded as simply a distraction or, at worst, a temptation that causes the male to stray from his own aspirations to achieve this exalted state.

The responses to such inquiries can be dispiriting at best.

In summary, women have rarely been allowed admission to religious ranks of a stature that would award them parity of worth or authority. Occasionally, in a number of traditions, women have at times been revered – certain women mystics in the medieval centuries in both Hinduism and Christianity come to mind. Occasionally, there have been breakthroughs on the part of women. Joan of Arc supplies a cautionary tale. This is indeed a reminder that these breakthroughs have been seldom praised or promoted as models to be imitated. Most often, such developments have either been denied any acknowledgement or they have later been reinterpreted by male authorities. The women involved then appear as aberrant and in need of correction, even disciplinary action. The work of Phyllis Mack (1992) and Grace Jantzen (1996) attest to such unfavourable developments. Many tentative reforms introduced by women thus turn out, in retrospect, to have been merely a temporary divergence, rather than signalling any permanent improvement in the lives of religious women. With few exceptions, then, women have not been regarded as deserving of high esteem in religious matters. Most women are usually praised because they have demonstrated the requisite female virtues of humility, purity, and obedience. As a result, regardless of present-day debates on gender identity, the tradition of male privilege as it is all too apparent in the major religions – based on reasons and precedents that are often of dubious provenance at best – will still constantly need to be questioned.

In response, this volume does attempt to introduce a number of constructive interventions by women. It will supply the locale, activities, and achievements that run counter to conventional dismissive appraisals of women. This reflects a further important aim of this volume: it is a restorative one. It is written in appreciation of women's vital roles in the gifts they have both offered and continue to offer.

Before introducing the individual authors who have contributed to this volume, however, I would like to explain in more detail my particular strategy in using the word “gift” and its connotations. There are many current debates on the meaning of “gift” and its application to women. I surveyed many of these in my Introduction to *Women and the Gift* (Joy 2013a: 1–52). These meanings range widely. It can actually refer to a donation of money to support a temple or a ceremony. Sacrifices are also material offerings to a deity, and whether it is a sacrifice of petition or appeasement, there is always an anticipation of an appropriate response. Then, there are gratuitous offerings, often associated with women, with no expectation of any remuneration. In contrast, a calculated gift entails an expectation of a return, usually of equal monetary value. The word “gift” in this volume, however, can effect somewhat unpredictable results, depending on its uses in a material, abstract, or figurative manner. It has a variety of resonances, such as that of generating new ideas, of supplying an alternative model, and also of re-envisioning obsolete ones. Innovative creative activities can emerge from reading or writing a narrative and attending sacred ceremonies that may include movement, dancing, meditation, and chant. In these ways, the gift can be an agency of change.

There have been lively discussions recently, contrasting the stark difference between contemporary exploitative capitalism and an originary, precapitalist gift that did not calculate a profit in return (Osteen 2013). Ultimately, however, it was

not such a non-calculating evocation of the gift that had a profound impression on my own appreciation of the gift.

In his book, *The Price of Truth* (2010), Marcel Hénaff undertook a careful analysis of Marcel Mauss's work, *The Gift* (1924). He placed a very different emphasis on the gift as it featured in Mauss's work on the topic of Melanesian islanders' gift-giving ventures. In effect, what Hénaff proposed was that there were no monetary or commodity values involved in Melanesian gift-giving. What was at stake was a form of "reciprocal recognition" that had nothing to do with commerce. As Hénaff observes: "The good offered is not considered something to be consumed but is presented as a mark of respect, as an expression of the desire to honour the existence and status of the other, and finally as testament to an alliance" (2010: 153). What is of utmost significance in this context of the gift is recognition. Such a gift is priceless. This development introduced an entirely innovative dimension into discussions of the gift.

In his analysis, Hénaff only mentions women in passing, but he does refer to the anthropologist Annette Weiner's study of the people of Melanesia, especially of the women. In her work, she expanded on the ideas of both Mauss and Levi-Strauss, describing how Melanesian women were not simply pawns in marriage. They took part in trading among themselves, exchanging both basic and sacred objects. In giving and taking certain goods, the women acted as autonomous and respected agents and were regarded as having a parity of status with men.<sup>5</sup> There is not sufficient space to deal fully here with this topic, but in *Women and the Gift* (2013a: 8–13, 194–207), I have written in depth about its wider repercussions, especially the implications for women.

"Recognition" as a term has entered into many contemporary discussions. Its current usage can trace its lineage back to Hegel, and Paul Ricoeur has revisited his work and subsequently supplied up to 23 definitions to it in his work *The Course of Recognition* (2005, 1–22). But the definition that Ricoeur himself favours is one of recognition as indicating a confirmation of the integrity of another person. This type of recognition is the basis of Ricoeur's ethics, as developed in *Oneself as Another* (1992: 296). According to Ricoeur, I must regard each person with the respect that I grant to myself. The ethical implication is that every person whom one encounters is to be accepted as a human being who is to be treated with the same consideration as I deem myself to be worthy of. This is because recognition, with its profound respect for others, does not condone the exclusion of other human beings. (This takes on special connotations for Ricoeur with reference to the excluded and the downtrodden [Joy 2013b].) Recognition is a very precious gift. What becomes immediately obvious is that such an understanding needs to be incorporated into any future discussions of women and the gift. Recognition has certainly not been evident in the treatment and attitudes towards women in the vast majority of religions even today.

My own response nevertheless was to adopt this innovative insight as another tool to assist in my own diagnoses of the condition of women in religions with specific application to contemporary discussions. A certain qualification, however, would need to be added. This would be that, given the culturally acceptable norms

of past societies and specific religions, it would be extremely difficult to consider the concept of recognition as playing a meaningful role in attitudes and ethical conduct towards women. As I stated earlier, I had initially used “symbolic status” as a device to estimate the level of acceptance given to women in a number of significant religious activities. Symbolic status supplied a type of objective measure that allowed an estimation of the prevailing attitudes towards women in past eras. But the concept of recognition, as it is defined by Ricoeur, can greatly enrich such evaluations. What is implied by recognition is the willingness to accept another human being as fully human. Ricoeur does not explicitly name human rights as one of his criteria in his ethics. His understanding of recognition is much more complex, incorporating solicitude for all others that I know and hold dear but justice for all others in the world whom I do not know personally (Ricoeur 1992: 118–194). Such a stance emphasizes that the intimate and intrinsic nature of our relationships with all others – which Ricoeur posits as integral to human identity – be of a personal or political nature.<sup>6</sup> One would also have to add that it is a deep love of this world and its creatures that also informs Ricoeur’s position. It is this type of demanding ethics that needs to be integrated into any estimation of women and their position in religions.

As a result, it appears that at times it will be appropriate to consider the position of women by using both of the above measures of appraisal. The tool of symbolic status supplies certain facts and objective criteria by which to make an objective appraisal of their social and cultural conditioning in religions. At other times, in current contexts, however, it is more beneficial to question whether, from an ethical perspective, women have been recognized and enabled to participate in religious events, to pursue studies, to officiate at ceremonies, etc., in ways that respect their inherent worth and integrity. Although these respective tools may not always correspond exactly to the variations in subject matter of certain chapters in this book, the term “recognition” provides an invaluable element in helping to reflect on the dynamics of women in relation to religion.

The chapters in this book are not arranged in a precise chronological or thematic order, and so each one may be read independently. They represent an extraordinary range of topics. In addition, they incorporate a variety of academic approaches towards their subject matter. As such, the book could appear somewhat indiscriminate in its use of method and theory. There is, however, one predominant and unifying theme that resonates throughout all of the chapters. This is the undiminished yearning of women over the centuries to search for ways to participate in a religion that does not diminish them but allows them to flourish and express the fullness of their being. It is the quest for such a realization that is at the heart of what I propose as the diverse modes of “gift-giving” by women to religion. This yearning is indeed a sentiment, even a passion, to which many of the essays in the volume bear poignant witness.<sup>7</sup>

The first essay, by **Carol Meyers**, concerns the topic of sacrifice, which is, in both literal and metaphoric senses, a contentious topic for women. Sacrifice in its literal guise can imply the ritual slaughter of an animal in an attempt to beseech, placate, or express gratitude to a divine being. It is basically accepted that none of



the major religions appear to have permitted women to perform such a ritual. Carol Meyers, however, dismisses this conventional view, critiquing certain works that still imply women's roles in ancient Israelite rituals had negligible impact. Meyers' position also stands in marked contrast to a statement made by Luce Irigaray, who states:

One thing is obvious: in the religions of sacrifice, religious and social *ceremonies are almost universally performed by men*. Men alone perform the rite, not women or children (though male children can sometimes act as acolytes). Women have no right to officiate in public worship in most traditions, even though that worship serves as the basis and structure for the society. (1993: 73)

With these remarks, Irigaray does not intend to support the idea that women should immediately become ritual specialists in sacrifice. Her intention is to alert the reader to the fact that women's exclusion from officiating at such rituals is symptomatic of what she regards as a much more fundamental form of sacrifice that is related to women. This exclusion implies that women's necessary subordination relies on their association with an unruly natural world, which, in turn, needs to be subdued by regulated practices and rituals. As Irigaray further observes:

The religion of men masks an act of dispossession that has broken the relation to the natural universe and perverted its simplicity. Clearly, religion is a figure for a social universe organized by men. But this organization is founded upon a sacrifice of nature, of the sexed body, especially of women. It imposes a spirituality that has been cut off from its roots in the natural environment. Thus it cannot fulfill humanity. (1993: 191)

In making this comparison, Irigaray posits women's exclusion from sacrificial activity as dependent on this affiliation of their bodies with nature, at once lush and fertile, yet wild and untamed, and sorely in need of strict management. A corollary of this position is the idea, conspicuous in Christianity, that if one wishes to be spiritual, the body must be chastened because of its natural evil proclivities.<sup>8</sup>

Drawing on recent archaeological and anthropological studies, Meyers contests any such absolutist pronouncements about the absence of sacrifice, principally in relation to women. Her presentation first contextualizes a gendered view of religious life by first situating the role of women in the ancient Near East, i.e., in cultures other than those of ancient Israel. She contends that investigations of sacrifice and sacrificial offerings in ancient Near Eastern societies have mainly focused on reports in surviving written documents. These sources have mostly recorded sacrificial rituals connected to official cults honouring patron regional deities. Such public sacrifices were enacted at communal shrines, altars, and/or temples by professional priests. The textual records are largely the product of male scribal traditions, obviously attesting to the activities of male priests and worshipers. On Meyers' account, this approach is blinkered because it omits the fact that female priests and functionaries did exist in many Near Eastern cultures. Meyers states that women were involved in aspects of communal sacrificial practices and in rituals of ministering to the dead, e.g., ancestor cults, and as priestesses at shrines. Yet the records ignore the fact that much religious praxis among premodern peoples also occurred in households where women were probably the major practitioners of domestic religious rituals.

Meyers' work seeks to redress this imbalance in the received knowledge by inspecting the practices of ancient Israelite women, using ethno-archaeological materials to compensate for the lack of texts. (Their practices are, in Meyers' view, virtually absent from the Hebrew Bible.) Meyers allows that, while Israelite women could also bring sacrifices to be offered, they were never part of the priestly sacrificial rituals of the actual slaughter of animals. (Meyers does nonetheless relate the story of Hannah, where she and her husband together sacrifice a bull in fulfilment of a vow made when she prayed for a child [1 Sam 1: 11].) Although women did not play a major role in official temple practices, Meyers argues that their ritual activities should be considered to be as essential to the maintenance of society as were the great temple sacrifices. She declares that there were only a few temples and that the majority of Israelites worshipped in their homes. From this perspective, she declares that the existence of sacrificial offerings made by women in households were vitally concerned with both essential activities of reproduction and life maintenance that assured the continuity and prosperity of their families and ultimately of the nation.

Such exacting work on the part of Meyers also provides a stimulus to rethink the ways in which scholars from later historical periods tended to obscure such information of women's participation in sacrificial rites. Meyers emphasizes that the later Jewish tradition defined sacrifice as strictly a male act. As a corrective, Meyers proposes that women's roles in rituals, with sacrifices of food, need to be regarded as those of specialists in their own right. Norma Joseph's contribution later in the volume on contemporary women's relation to food and nourishment, portraying women's roles in relation to household rituals and sustenance, provides a latter-day update of this important ritual component. Both papers advocate a re-evaluation of rituals in domestic or private life as having just as important a role in the preservation of the life of a community as the major public ceremonies. All too often, such roles are relegated to the private domain and regarded as having little impact on the males' major spiritual dealings with deities. It is as if the modern public/private division has intensified this attitude and cast a negative retrospective shadow that has demoted women's private tasks and rituals, judging them as unworthy of any esteem. Yet Meyers contends that such indispensable tasks, and the gifts that the women also offered to deities, need to be appreciated as being just as essential to the flourishing of human existence and propitiation of the deity. Meyers' work can be appreciated as establishing a solid ground for reconceiving Israelite women's ritual tasks as those of a ritual specialist, who could attain a measure of symbolic status, depending on the importance of her role. Further examination could then expand on such activities as constituting women's vital contributions to life and religion in their historical period. However, what becomes apparent in this chapter is that it would be difficult to establish convincingly, from the lack of relevant textual material, exactly what these levels of importance for specific tasks might have been.

In her chapter, Diah Arimbi praises an Indonesian woman novelist, Abidah El Kalieqy, and her work as comprising a very valuable gift to Indonesian women. Abidah El Kalieqy's narratives provide a rich source of insight into the daily lives of Indonesian females, notably on the controversial topic of women's rights in an Islamic setting. Abidah El Kalieqy furnishes Indonesian women with candid

knowledge about their struggles against violence that does not appear in any other medium. She argues that *bahasa perempuan* (female language) is not only crucial but also accurate in presenting women's own experiences and views. This approach helps women readers to strongly identify with the characters, which then leads them to resist the idealized female identity that is promoted by the dominant male Islamic religion and culture.

Arimbi believes that it is indeed necessary to examine women's intimate experiences and the related issues of religious rights in Indonesian Islam through fiction such as Abidah's. This is because fiction can depict powerful episodes of women's struggles with religion over issues that involve a need for rights talk, given the absence of any public discussion on such urgent matters. By scrutinizing this issue of much-needed religious rights discussions, fiction can supply dramatic illustrations and accurate local details of the manner in which women are religiously conditioned in Indonesian Islam. For Arimbi, such a close examination of religion's role is necessary because it plays such a dominant part in the narrowly focused formation of women's religious identity.

Arimbi assesses Abidah's fictional tales of specific issues as providing therapeutic assistance. This has proven to be more powerful and influential than if they were to have been represented in clinical terms or abstract arguments. The characters in the narratives articulate women's own concerns, addressing these issues in an animated and informative way. Such narratives then relate easily to the life experiences of many women as they identify with their own sufferings and grievances.

Abidah takes ethical and moral positions and is extremely insistent on a requisite project of cultural transformation. Arimbi also demonstrates that, in breaking the public silence on these hitherto private matters, as well as providing a voice for women to emulate, Abidah has indeed created a "feminist novel" that speaks to and for women. This is essential, especially in establishing new societal values that will support justice and equality.

Arimbi will also describe Abidah as a revisionist author who refuses to keep silent. This is illustrated when she replaces heroes with heroines and revises the stories of heroic male figures with affecting stories of ordinary women. Her graphic writing can be deemed as an exceptional and unprecedented gift to the women of Indonesia, supporting them in their struggles for reform in a society that prefers silence and resignation. Abidah celebrates female survival. This celebration can be discerned in the multiple creative ways by which women have appropriated her ideas. In her analysis of Abidah's work, Arimbi illustrates the wonderful way that Abidah has given courage to many women to act with a strength that imitates her everyday heroines in their quest for justice and compensation.

**Jinfen Yan** describes the life and unkind times of Lady Wang, who lived in China some time during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries CE. Lady Wang was an outcast concubine who was left to fend for herself after her consort's rejection. What is remarkable, however, is the long narrative poem that she subsequently wrote, *The Complaint*, which depicts her ordeal in vivid detail. *The Complaint* is written according to the genre of what Jinfen Yan refers to as a Daoist "visionary excursion", where Lady Wang goes in search of release from her earthly travails. Such a

visionary excursion is a quest for immortality, in keeping with the Daoist tradition, though it has been primarily associated with men.

This work, written by Lady Wang, provides an extremely rich source of both philosophical and mystical insights. Yet her book fell into obscurity. As a result, instead of attaining the renown that such a complex and extensive work deserved, the book was relegated to a collection of “strange stories” and myths. It was not even attributed to Lady Wang. Only in the twentieth century has the epic tale by Lady Wang finally been accorded the attention it merits and her authorship acknowledged. It is now recognized as a classic of Daoist literature with its many finely drawn details of the visionary journey towards immortality – a state that Lady Wang herself is said to have achieved. Something that Jinfen Yan also stresses is Lady Wang’s struggle for both autonomy and integrity – a distinction that was denied to the women of her time. Yan is resolute in her appreciation of Lady Wang’s achievement in *The Plaint* and in claiming it as a major contribution to the Chinese Daoist tradition – a gift that was of great import and lost for many centuries. Today, restored to its rightful place, *The Plaint* has moved beyond the confines of a male-dominant genre to offer a gift of inspiration for all those who wish to follow the arduous path to become an accomplished being and an Immortal. Women were not forbidden from aspiring to and attaining immortality, so it can be affirmed that, in Daoism, women were deemed capable of achieving the highest spiritual state, one of the categories that I nominated earlier as necessary for attaining symbolic status. Given also the different practices and rituals that were part of the disciplines she needed to perform, Lady Wang could also be classed as a ritual specialist of high degree. Despite the untoward circumstances, typical for women of her time, that initiated Lady Wang’s own quest and the “disappearance” of her writings for many years, it needs to be acknowledged that Daoism now affirms Lady Wang as an Immortal.

**Kathleen McPhillips’** paper is a re-examination of contemporary notions of sainthood that contest the idealized hagiographical writings of women saints’ lives. Her case study is a rebuttal of many traditional pious and sentimentalized platitudes that haunt hagiography. It is also a graphic illustration of the ferocious opposition that independently minded women – even, or especially, nuns – can incur in dealing with male clerical hierarchies. McPhillips investigates the case of Mother Mary MacKillop, a recently canonized Australian saint who lived from 1842 to 1909. She poses a number of disturbing questions about the process of affirming contemporary sainthood. The first query wonders how one can recognize or “hear” a saintly voice in a post-traditional, postmodern society. Subsequently, she inquires in what way textual portrayals of saintly women can be read “otherwise”. How, indeed, can such a contrarian voice as Mary MacKillop’s be understood today? In McPhillips’ view, this can only occur if both the conventions of discourse and the criteria for sainthood are carefully scrutinized.

McPhillips poses such questions because, in today’s secularized world, traditional forms of sainthood can easily appear as eccentric, if not anachronistic. Such traditions, with their notions of unquestioning belief in absolutist dogmas and intransigent institutions, together with the glorification of lacerated bodies, tend to alienate rather than attract. These practices demarcate a particularly hazardous

territory for women. This is because many accounts of female saints have tended to produce an idealized version of a masochistic womanhood that equates femininity with subservience and denial, if not the utter dereliction of her body.

These outdated virtues are highly problematic for contemporary women as they are at odds with current feminist-inspired values of integrity and self-determination. Instead, McPhillips recommends that a rereading of the lives of women saints against the grain, using insights from postmodern and feminist theory, as discerned in the work of Jacques Derrida and Edith Wyschogrod, could prove to be a corrective. It could help to foster, as McPhillips suggests, a project of creating an innovative “feminist religious imaginary”. McPhillips’ paper suggests a new type of reader’s manual to undertake such a reinterpretation of the lives of women saints by examining the life of one recalcitrant woman, Mary MacKillop – who was even excommunicated from her faith by doctrinaire priests. McPhillips proposes that constructing such a counter-modality of feminist hagiography could reveal the lives of women saints to be dangerous texts, i.e. texts which have the potential to reveal a type of “speaking self” that has not been colonized by the Law of the Father.

McPhillips observes that, as yet, there have been no feminist accounts of McKillop’s life that have sought to cross-examine the official version so as to disclose the insubordinate voice of the saint herself. She proposes that, in order to understand who Mary MacKillop was and what she can offer to contemporary women, one has to venture beyond the superficialities of traditional hagiography. One has to delve into the deeper waters of heteroglossia, where contradiction and ambiguity intermingle and where the blurry outlines of a nascent feminine subjectivity might begin to be discerned. Thus exposed, the letters and personal writings of Mary MacKillop could provide a new mode of an unconventional narrative that may provide a contrary wisdom for contemporary religiously inclined women who are seeking an alternative sense of self. This could perhaps be understood as a woman’s unique gift to herself. It would replace the former model deformed by demands to obey orders that amounted to a denial of her own deepest yearnings. This so often has also meant a loss of her integrity. McPhillips’ reading begins to reveal a way that Mary MacKillop’s voice could be heard in a way that defines her own ideas of sanctity, which were certainly not in conformity with prescribed Catholic ideals. McPhillips proposes that perhaps listening attentively to the disclosures of such a discordant voice as MacKillop’s can lay the groundwork for further reclamations of the lives of other sanctimoniously reconstructed women saints. Such a mode of reading could also be appreciated as helping women scholars to rehabilitate a woman saint’s life, freeing her from being subjected to male supervision and interference while she is alive, as well as to posthumous editing of her writings. This would perhaps establish a foundation for a realistic recognition of Mary MacKillop’s accomplishments.

**Sylvia Marcos** has studied and worked with indigenous women of Mesoamerica for many years. She has written a ground-breaking work about their lives and its cosmovision, *Taken from the Lips: Gender and Eros in Mesoamerican Religions* (2006). In her chapter for this book, Sylvia relates her experiences while attending the First Indigenous Women’s Summit of the Americas (2002) and the subsequent

meeting connected with formulating the statements resulting from the summit. At the same time, Sylvia's work depicts the process of indigenous Mesoamerican women retrieving the ancestral spiritual activities and knowledge that are part of a wider project of decolonialization, i.e. the reclaiming of a heritage that was forbidden to be practised by the colonial powers.

The summit posed difficult questions of what spiritual ideas and practices can be retrieved. This is because in any such reclamation a re-evaluation is involved, from a woman's perspective, as to whether they meet the criterion of justice. In this sense, the summit addressed both spiritual and political issues. Its aim was to help to support the formation of a pan-indigenous collective. Being a witness to these proceedings allowed Sylvia to appreciate the claims of the women, which they themselves understand to be a part of their revived "cosmovision". Sylvia describes this interconnected world they inhabit as well as its epistemic framework. She introduces key words: equilibrium, complementarity, duality, interconnectedness, embodied thinking, and equity – all of which contribute to a view of the world and its inhabitants that seeks harmony rather than discord. As part of this dual movement that is oriented towards both a transformation and preservation of the indigenous culture, Marcos describes the way in which the women seek to revive certain spiritual values at the same time as they assess them in the light of contemporary notions of justice. In this way, they hope to bring a balance back to human existence in ways that address not only the ways of human interaction but also the way of life of human beings as they inhabit the cosmos. For their aim is also to help change the present declining condition of the earth, its atmosphere, and the prospect of actual survival of the planet. Marcos's work provides a clear-sighted and sympathetic account of Mesoamerican women's attempt to undertake this extremely demanding task. Again, there are many facets here that can be linked to recuperating a mode of life that evokes an appreciation of a deep spiritual existence – one that has been lost by the indigenous women. Yet, the indigenous women are not only seeking to restore their own former status and respect within a reclamation of their former spiritual cosmos – something that could be understood as a contemporary quest for recognition. Their aim is also, within a renewed cosmovision, to heal other human beings and the environment. This is a special gift that is presenting to a world threatened with ecological disaster.

**Noriko Kawahashi's** paper is a welcome addition to scholarship concerned with women in that she introduces a contemporary society where women continue to be respected as religious ritual specialists who intercede for their people. Her contribution focuses on the ritual roles of the divine priestesses of Okinawa, who both generate and radiate benevolent spiritual forces for their people. This present-day practice on the island of Okinawa is a legacy from the time of the Ryukyu kingdom, which maintained independence from Japan until the seventeenth century. In this society, the female domain was concerned with religious matters and was held in parity of esteem to that of the male domain, which dealt with politics. Even after the kingdom was annexed by Japan and turned into a vassal state, the traditional ritual centrality of women remained resilient in the face of change on this island. The rituals of these sacred priestesses continue to this day.

Okinawan creation myths authorize the division of roles between women and men. Several versions of the creation myth establish that the first female was a divine priestess, while the first male was a political ruler. The uniqueness of the Ryukyu kingdom in Okinawa lay in this integrated unity of religion and politics, which consisted of complementary roles for men and women. This complementarity of two genders has attracted the attention of many scholars. Okinawan religious tradition still demonstrates the significance of this female-specific sphere, which affects the well-being of both females and males in society. The religious predominance of women is observed at multiple levels, as women are believed to serve as the indispensable communicative links between humans and superhuman entities, most prominently deities. Kawahashi's paper focuses on the ritual role of the divine priestesses (*kaminchu*) who both make contact with and share the blessings of benevolent spiritual forces with their entire village. In describing the vital role of the divine priestesses in Okinawa, Kawahashi describes the manner in which each priestess embodies and radiates these benevolent forces as spiritual "gifts" that promote the well-being of the whole village. Given the respect with which they are treated, it seems that the priestesses of Okinawa are being granted the honour of attaining what I have called "symbolic status" in two categories – that of highest spiritual attainment and, at the same time, that of public ritual expertise – a rare occurrence in any religious tradition for women. At the same time, from both the respect and honour that are given to them in today's world, they could also be described as receiving the gift of recognition by the Okinawan people to whom they minister.

The next chapter is written by **JoAllyn Archambault** and **Alice Beck Kehoe** in honour of Beatrice Medicine of Lakota Sioux lineage. Bea Medicine herself had intended to contribute a chapter to this volume, which would focus on both giving and gifting in the religious realm of contemporary First Nations rituals. In her proposal, she stated that the principal ritual she would examine was that of the once-suppressed, but still practised, Sun Dance. She believed that the centrality of the roles of women in this ritual had not yet been articulated from their own viewpoint. But, sadly, Bea died before she could complete the paper. JoAllyn Archambault and Alice Beck Kehoe then accepted the task of writing in Bea's memory, further developing her insights. Their paper describes the crucial role of women in particular rituals of the Blackfoot and Lakota peoples of North America. They describe in detail the various parts of the Sun Dance ceremony that can only be performed by a woman and the times when a woman's presence is indispensable for the completion of a ritual. In this way, they affirm the esteem that is accorded to women in their communities.

In the worldview of the Blackfoot and Lakota, women are the centre and mainstay of the nation. Men defend it. This is a role that places men on its periphery as they are in contact with outsiders. In contrast, women are born with power of reproduction, a gift from the Almighty. They are highly respected because of this intimate connection with the Almighty and their generative ability and are situated at the core of the nation. The separate tasks of the men and women are deemed to have parity. The legend of First Marriages of the Blackfoot people portrays women as

extraordinarily competent at the skills of survival: the maintenance of life, constructing lodges, making clothing, and looking after provisions. They owned their homes and the accompanying furnishings. In addition, they took vigilant care of revered icons entrusted to their communities by the Almighty. Men were regarded as not particularly proficient in such tasks. Women also played an important role in many ritual performances, where men's participation was often mediated by the women. This strength and leadership allotted to women was erased by the many years of colonization. Their status was eroded, and the colonists did not appreciate the honour in which the First Nations women were held, i.e. the regard in which they were held is very much in keeping with their being recognized as leaders in their respective communities.

In their paper, Archambault and Kehoe undertake to describe the centrality of a Holy Woman in one of the most important rituals of the Blackfoot people, the *Okan* or Sun Dance. This ceremony depends on a woman to make a vow to lead it and to perform the difficult austerities required. Other women help in the ceremony by performing necessary tasks. Bea Medicine had long observed and participated in such ceremonies and had intended to provide her own observations. Archambault and Kehoe have consulted her work, as well as drawing on their own contemporary experiences and research. Their work brings to present-day awareness a compelling narrative of the reclamation of the unique and special roles of women in First Nations communities and the special significance of the ceremonies that are helping in achieving the restitution of their former status in ritual and spiritual matters that today would be understood as that of recognition.

In her paper, **Suwanna Satha-Anand** examines the Vessantara Jataka Tale that in Thai history is one of the most popular stories of the Buddha's past lives. For centuries, it has been considered a "national" *jataka*, a most important source of the religious imaginaries of the Thai people. In this tale, Vessantara aspires to achieve future enlightenment by perfecting a virtue of generosity in giving away great gifts. These gifts range from material possessions, jewellery, animals, slaves, and a sacred elephant to even his wife and children. In the traditional reading (or rather listening), the story emphasizes this magnanimous sacrifice of Vessantara as the main focus of the story. Satha-Anand's paper offers a broader critical framework in understanding the story by analysing the great theme of "giving" in context of multiple forms of exchange that pervade the whole story. Satha-Anand argues that, even though both women Amittada and Madsī are "given away" (as payment of debt incurred by her parents in the former and as token of great generosity in the latter), their agency actually plays crucial roles in the story. Amittada urges her husband Jajaka on the journey to bring her servants or else she would leave him, while Madsī's expressed consent and support for her husband in giving away his wife and children actually helps make Vessantara's generosity "perfect." Satha-Anand's proposal of such an interpretation of Amittada's and Madsī's action is something enigmatic and provocative for the Thai cultural world. It demonstrates that a wife's seeming acquiescence need not always be portrayed as an act of submission to authority, but, as demonstrated in this paper, it springs from women's own self-reflection about women's roles in the scheme of events. It could be argued that such



a “gift of self” of these women is in keeping with Buddhism’s highest ideal of selflessness, a virtue and achievement not limited to the monks and men, but perhaps even more subtly applies to women in Buddhist texts and in the Buddhist cultural world of Thailand and beyond. Such an appreciation of women in relation to the gift could dramatically change the status and respect accorded women in Buddhism. Again, it could prove to be a significant step on their way to recognition.

**Norma Baomal Joseph’s** chapter examines Jewish women’s long relationship with food and investigates whether this important aspect of their lives can be recognized. Joseph is aware that women’s connection to food has been taken for granted and that her role in the kitchen, while it is regarded as important, has not been viewed as crucial in a religious sense. By shifting the ethnographic gaze to the kitchen, Joseph also queries whether there is strong enough evidence to appreciate women as ritual experts in this location. Joseph is aware of the pitfalls involved, i.e., that this move could be taken as simply “putting women back in the kitchen where they belong.” In contrast, Joseph observes that food has always been a central element in Jewish community identity and religious life, but that woman’s productive role and her contributions have not been acknowledged. In this sense, Joseph’s work has certain resonances with Meyers’ introductory chapter on sacrifice, demonstrating that women’s roles in connection with food offerings need not simply be slotted into categories of menial work, dutifully done, that do not register in comparison to the more impressive and consequential activities of men in the public and/or religious sphere. Additionally, Joseph raises the possibility of meal preparation being understood as a woman’s exceptional gift, i.e., a type of special offering to her family and community. Joseph applies the language and analysis of gift-giving in an effort to examine closely the role of food and women’s participation within family and community relationships.

As a concrete analysis of religious gift-giving, Joseph undertakes a study of the feast of Purim and the commemorative events, specifically those involving food, that are essential elements of this celebration. Purim is a traditional feast celebrating the victory over the Persians in the fifth century BCE. Three of the four requisite acts associated with this feast involve food: giving food as gifts to friends, giving presents to the poor, and both preparing and consuming a festive meal. In these various undertakings, Joseph discerns women as directing, co-ordinating, and creating these ritual events. From a sociological perspective, women are totally in control of these tasks, but from a religious viewpoint, there has been little, if any, acknowledgment of their performance as constituting ritual accomplishments. Joseph reviews a number of proposals that could be advanced to encourage the valuing of women’s ritual roles in gift-giving as religious. She details the evidence of the centrality of women, firstly within the family, and then within the community. Women are not only givers but also preservers of those resources and ties that are formative in establishing religious identities and relations. In this connection, Marcel Mauss’s theory of gift-giving, whereby both integrity and mutuality are confirmed, is mentioned by Joseph as supportive of such a position. Joseph qualifies her commentary on these acts of giving, noting that research confirms that women, who participate

in the preparation and distribution of these gifts, do understand themselves as both socially and religiously engaged.

Finally, Joseph reflects as to whether these activities and attitudes in relation to the gift-giving rituals at Purim can be extended to include women's other kitchen activities, especially meal preparation. She poses three related yet decisive questions: (1) "Do women create a family by cooking dinner?" (2) "When a woman prepares a meal for her family does she see it as a gift?" (3) "Are meals gifts that create and reflect the bonds and bounds of family and society?" With these questions, Joseph investigates the contours and limits of women's domestic lives that have mostly been restricted to the private domain. By exploring an extension beyond such restraints, Joseph is implicitly interrogating the essentialist ideas of passivity and docility that tend to characterize women's domestic existence. In this way, Joseph's explorations have provided a nuanced appreciation of women's lives that could undermine the stereotypes representative of the public/private divide. It is through the importance of food, as central to both human sustenance and relationships, and by their gifting of it, that Jewish women can realize a sense of strength and influence. Joseph's chapter has clarified a situation where women are involved in a complex network of gifting relationships that support the preservation and performance of family, community, and their religious tradition.

**Azam Torab's** paper explores two types of religious ceremonies, women's votive ritual meals, called *sofreh*, and men's public rituals. Torab examines these two ceremonies as they take place during the month of Muharram. At this time, the ceremonies are in commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Husseyn (AD 680), the third Shi'a Imam and grandson of the Prophet. Shi'a sources present his death as the paradigmatic act of sacrifice. At this commemorative time, both men and women participate in separate rituals that include their votive offerings. In this connection, the votive offerings have a marked significance. What is of interest to Torab is the prominence of the men's Muharram rituals as compared to those of the women, which are contentious and are often maligned. While the men's activities are classed as "Formal Islam," which is a term attributed to the learned scholars (*ulama*), who are male, women's ceremonies are usually designated by the phrase "Popular Islam." This term has connotations of domestic, rustic, and uneducated. The ceremonies of *sofreh*, however, are indeed extremely popular, and they are still allowed by the religious establishment. What is of particular interest to Torab are the specific qualities and attitudes that are evident in this mode of gender binary. Torab introduces the terms "gift" and "commodity" as helpful tools for analysing the wider implications of these ceremonies. They provide a useful lens through which to view the way that gender categories are formed and projected, but also contested, through ritual activities. These insights then have wider implications for the nature of gender ideologies as they function in religion, as well as for power and politics that men often claim as their prerogatives.

The posited opposition of the terms "gift" and "commodity" is familiar territory in anthropological debates on the subject of exchange. The first term, "gift," refers to an offering that is made gratuitously, while the second, "commodity," names objects of commerce, which involve calculations of monetary value. These two