Like other anthropologists, Kalpana Ram could not help but notice that spirit possession is disproportionately an experience of women—more specifically of young, often newly-married women. It is easy, and indeed common, to conclude that spirit possession is a product of women’s marginality and victimization, some kind of (more or less self-conscious) resistance to social conditions and thus a misguided effort to escape the travails of womanhood. The assumption, Ram asserts, is that a woman is “a self-enclosed, relentlessly conscious, and knowing subject confronting a world that is entirely external” (2013: 86) and fairly hostile. Instead, Ram holds that “in entering the world of phantoms, demons, and villages goddesses in rural popular culture one is dragged into a world in which extreme human circumstances, particularly those perceived as tragic and unjust, fundamentally alter the relationship between past and present and between subject and the world” (86). Central to the lives of possessed women in the southern Indian province of Tamil Nadu is injustice, that is, “sundered moral relationships” (95) or more basically violations of caring inflicted by men, other kin, or the spirits themselves. These injustices—especially infertility, a family death, or domestic violence—are phantoms and ghosts, moments that refuse to “recede into the past” (105). In the case of infertility, Ram’s main focus, the inability to have children is a breach of the auspiciousness of pregnancy and motherhood, and “the situation remains dire for women from working-class and poorer classes who are stigmatized as ‘infertile’” (124). Perhaps ironically, such women are believed, and believe themselves, to be plagued by female spirits: it is “the wild goddesses, their guardian deities, and the spirits of the dead who in some cases converge on every phase of a
woman’s life” (128) related to her role of wife and mother, such as menstruation, marriage, pregnancy, and so forth. Therefore, “it is precisely the random and amoral character of capricious goddesses and demon deities that affords a little cultural respite for women” (129) who are not held entirely responsible for their own misfortune. However, women—even possessed women—are not completely without power or “agency” in Tamil Nadu, although that power and agency might not be totally their own. Possessed women sometimes acquire the capacity to heal others, to become mediums of the very forces that afflict them. Such women can “make room” for the spirit, which equals neither a total loss of human consciousness and will nor a perfect preservation of that consciousness and will. What Ram calls the woman’s “porous subjectivity” (147) or “intercorporeality” (145)—woman and spirit sharing the same body—allows her gradually to develop an “agency of mediumship” (154). As no longer a victim of spirit possession but a spirit medium, some women hold court as the spirit or goddess, embodying and literally speaking and acting like or as the deity. Other women, and some men, bring their complaints of injustice to the medium for judgment and relief—injustices that no political court could rule on. How could a court of law rule against infertility or life’s other cruelties? Only a “religious” response offers any comfort and hope: “The modes by which women lament, narrate their lives, petition the goddess, or, in turn, become goddesses who narrate the suffering of the petitioner to gathered witnesses are all a means of both elaborating and assuaging a very particular dimension of justice” (220).

There is hardly a religion that is not implicated in sexuality and gender in some, usually multiple, ways. Sexuality and gender are pervasive experiences in human life and society—and not at all private matters—and despite the notion that religion concerns itself with the “spiritual,” “immaterial,” or “other-worldly,” religions are actually deeply entangled with the fleshly world
of sex and gender. As discussed in Chapter 3 of *Introducing Anthropology of Religion*, the human body is a “natural symbol” and the original and ultimate site of culture and religion; to put this another way, culture and religion are necessarily and universally embodied or inscribed in/on the body, including in/on the sexual and gendered body.

As religious studies scholar Dag Øistein Endsjo reminds us, but as anthropologists have also documented, the idea “that religion focuses primarily on belief and faith is a relatively new phenomenon. We can see that religion was originally perhaps more concerned with correct behavior and correct sexual behavior was a central part of that” (2013: 12). Even more, “when religions regulate your sexual life they are also controlling your life, your identity and even your understanding of what it is to be human” (13). This is apparent in the case of the Indian women just mentioned, whose consciousness is altered by the perception that they are possessed by spirits or goddesses.

Religion is a part of culture, and sexuality and gender are a part of culture, so it is no surprise that, like religion and violence or religion and television, they sometimes become enmeshed. It would be a surprise if they did not. What is a surprise is the phenomenal diversity of that attachment. While most Westerners and Christians presume that religion posits a simple binary of male and female and endorses only heterosexual relations if not taking an inherently dim view of sexuality altogether, this attitude is by no means universal. Quite the contrary, Endsjo concludes:

*It is impossible to find any truly common norms for the huge variety of religio-sexual behaviors and beliefs. What one religion worships as sacred sex, another demands the death penalty for; certain kinds of sex that some find central to their whole religious world*
view represent demonic forces to others. Therefore no one religion can impose its religio-
sexual truths without simultaneously violating the religio-sexual truths of other religions.

The Interfaith Working Group (www.iwgonline.org/sexuality) concurs and goes further. It
stresses that many religions and denominations “have what seem to be inconsistent or
contradictory teachings and policies” on sex and gender and “are currently in a state of flux over
issues of gender and sexuality.” And the issues extend far beyond homosexuality to include
guidelines for heterosexual practices, ranging from

proscribing all sexual behavior; limiting sexual behavior to relationships blessed by the
religious institution; suggesting strongly that sexual behavior be limited to partners in a
loving, committed relationship; and/or teaching that sexual relationships are complicated
and should only be entered into with extreme caution. Some traditions do not consider
sexuality to be a specific category of human behavior, but expect people to regard sexuality
using the same ethical or moral guidelines as for other behavior. A small number actively
encourage sexual behavior without restriction.

Sex/gender regulations and expectations often differ for men and for women, for adults and for
minors, and for laity and for professionals or specialists (priests, monks, etc.). These
proscriptions spill past sexuality to embrace issues of marriage, procreativity, and divorce.

Sexuality and gender are thus not only fit subjects to examine in the anthropological study of
religion, but they allow us—and compel us—to consider once again broader issues of practice,
embodiment, consonance, and vernacularization, not to mention questions of modernity,
secularism, and the formation of the self.
ANTHROPOLOGY OF SEX/GENDER

Before we can embark on an anthropological analysis of religion, sex, and gender, we must first visit the anthropology of sex and gender or what, for reasons that will soon become apparent, we will call sex/gender. Remarkably, sex and gender were not among the prominent topics of early anthropology but were subsumed under the investigation of the history and evolution of institutions like marriage and the family. The general assumption seemed to be that sex or gender itself was not culturally problematic—the dichotomy of male and female was a natural fact—but that the social relationship between the sexes or genders was. Thus, nineteenth-century publications like Johann Jakob Bachofen’s 1861 Das Mütterrecht (Mother Right), John Ferguson McLennan’s 1865 Primitive Marriage, and Lewis Henry Morgan’s 1871 Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family claimed to discern the historical stages of marriage and kinship, usually construed as beginning with no marriage (primitive promiscuity) and proceeding through matriarchy to modern-day patriarchy. In 1924 William H. R. Rivers declared that marriage and family structures could not be understood in terms of the sheer facts of blood ties but were also matters of social convention. But even Friedrich Engels in his 1884 Marxist analysis of marriage and family, The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State, could not quite conceive that sex or gender itself had a history and could be analyzed politically, sociologically, or anthropologically.

One of the first anthropologists to tackle the question of sex and gender directly was Margaret Mead, in her famous but controversial Coming of Age in Samoa. First published in 1928 and subtitled A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization, Mead claimed to reveal, by focusing on young Samoan women, that gender roles and norms, let alone cultural
preoccupations with premarital sex, were not universal. In 1935 she published *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*, a comparative study of three New Guinea peoples.

She reported that among the Arapesh, both men and women behaved in ways that Westerners would regard as “feminine” or nurturing; among the Mundugumor, men and women were both “masculine” and “fierce,” while among the Tchambuli gender norms were reversed relative to Western standards. Her conclusion, which is largely shared in anthropology, was that the “cultural assumptions that certain temperamental attitudes are ‘naturally’ masculine and others ‘naturally’ feminine” (1935: xiii) are just that—cultural assumptions—and instead that “the personalities of the two sexes are socially produced” (310).

The anthropological study of sex and gender advanced dramatically around 1970, simultaneous with—and significantly driven by—the feminist and women’s rights movement. Key to this advancement was the work of female anthropologists such as Rayna Reiter, Michelle Rosaldo, and Louise Lamphere. Between them they edited two pivotal texts, *Woman, Culture, and Society* (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974) and *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (Reiter 1975), which were followed a few years later by Frances Dahlberg’s edited volume *Woman the Gatherer* (1981) in response to the exclusionary model of “man the hunter.” In the introduction to her collection, Reiter accused anthropology of perpetuating a male bias, concentrating on the activities of men and accepting uncritically other cultures’ notions of male dominance while adding a layer of Western male dominance—what she called the “double male bias in anthropological accounts of other cultures: the bias we bring to our research, and the bias we receive if the society we study expresses male dominance” (1975: 13). Worse yet, she argued that anthropologists “read directly from biology to culture, asserting that woman’s role in
reproduction is responsible for the earliest forms of the division of labor, and that male supremacy flows from this division” (11-12).

**The Composite Nature of Sex/Gender**

Thus, the first and most essential accomplishment of this rehabilitated anthropology of sex/gender (and of the feminist movement and feminist theory) was the decoupling of culture from biology, which led to the worthwhile distinction between “sex” and “gender.” Sex came to be understood as biology—as the genitalia and secondary sexual characteristics, as well as the behaviors that humans engage in with them—while gender was now offered as the cultural and social aspects of masculinity and femininity, such as clothing, gesture, and the gender division of labor. From Mead to Reiter, Rosaldo, and Lamphere, nothing about sexed bodies entailed gendered roles and norms.

The space between sex and gender allowed theorists like Judith Butler to insert a concept of “gender performance.” In her influential 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler challenged us to think of gender not as a physical fact but as a social act, in two senses: first, each society has its own concepts and categories of gender, and second, each individual must acquire and perform the norms of gender. In her 1995 review of the anthropology of gender, Rosalind Morris echoed this perspective, writing that viewing gender as a performance—as a verb, “gendering” or “gendered,” rather than as a noun or thing—“defined gender as the effect of discourse, and sex as the effect of gender” (1995: 567).
In a word, the anthropology of sex/gender perfectly reversed the traditional relationship between sex and gender: instead of sex creating gender, now gender created sex. But intellectual advances are almost never simple reversals, and soon anthropologists and other social scientists began to realize that sex and gender could not be so facilely separated. Gender was not only discourse; gender left its mark on the body—bodies were gendered as well as sexed—and sex lefts its mark on gender. Sex and gender were thus mutually constructed and constructing, which is why we have chosen to use the term “sex/gender.”

Having established that there are two (different but not independent) variables in sex/gender and that sex/gender is socially constructed, anthropology and social science moved on to the question of what it is constructed out of. Here, the modular approach to religion as suggested by Wallace and subsequently by Guthrie, Boyer, and Atran (see Chapter 1 of Introducing Anthropology of Religion) proved relevant. Since sex/gender was not a thing or monolithic physical fact, we could and should deconstruct it into its constituent parts or building blocks (see Figure B.1).

Among these building blocks or elements is most assuredly the body, although this variable itself is (a) a composite of many sub-variables, such as genitalia, hormones, body chemistry, DNA, and so on and (b) highly modifiable culturally (for instance, with hormone therapy or surgery). And societies never leave the body alone: they cut it, shape it, scar it, tattoo it, paint it, and manipulate it in myriad ways.
An entirely separate issue is sexual preference. “Normally” and statistically, males desire females, and females desire males, but desire is not directly linked to one’s own body: some male-bodied persons desire males, or both sexes, or neither, etc., while some female-bodied persons desire females or both or neither. Gender identity is another matter again, referring to how one identifies or understands oneself; a male-bodied person may “feel like” a male or a female or something else, and likewise for a female-bodied person.

As Mead described, societies have norms and expectations about the personalities of the genders (in the West, for example, that women are emotional while men are stoic, or that men like sports while women like romantic movies). But Mead also found that societies differ in their gender personality norms, and bodies do not dictate personality: female-bodied persons may have “masculine” personalities, and male-bodied persons may have “feminine” personalities—or aspects of “the other gender’s” personality mixed with “their own gender’s” personality.
Then there is the element of gender display, for instance the norms for dress, hair, body movement and gesture, speech patterns, and other overt “performances” of gender. Finally, there are gender roles, expectations about the activities and tasks that are appropriate for the each sex/gender; for example, until very recently, gender roles for women in the United States were largely limited to wife and mother and perhaps teacher or nurse; men had a wider variety of roles, but nurse or stay-at-home father were not among them.

Recognizing the modular nature of sex/gender allows us to conceive of other modules attaching to sex/gender. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991) is credited with the valuable term “intersectionality” for this effect. A legal scholar, Crenshaw used intersectionality to emphasize the cultural and legal connection between sex/gender and race, that is, in dealing with black women not as “black” or as “women” but as black women. However, intersectionality is hardly exhausted by sex/gender and race (and sex/gender is hardly exhausted by “women”); rather, sex/gender also can be and typically is linked with class, health, physical and social space, language—and of course religion.

**Anthropology of “Other Genders”**

In the conventional Western view, sex/gender is binary: there are two sexes or genders, and gender should “line up” with sex—or gender is sex. In other words, if there are multiple variables, then there are only two “normal” sets or stacks of these variables. Male-bodied persons (“men”) desire women, have male (masculine) identities, personalities, and displays, and perform male roles, while female-bodied persons (“women”) desire men, have female
(feminine) identities, personalities, and displays, and perform female roles. In the worst possible interpretation, any other arrangement is exceptional, even “deviant” or “pathological” (homosexuality was actually classified as a mental disorder in the United States until recently).

The modularity of sex/gender not only opens the possibility of intersectionality but also of sex/gender diversity. Other combinations of sex/gender variables are conceivable and could even be named and normalized in various societies. One of the recurring discoveries of anthropology is that many societies recognize and accept “other” genders, “third” (or even fourth or more) genders. One of the paradigm-setting texts in anthropology was Gilbert Herdt’s (1994) *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*. For instance, several Native American societies have been documented with three or four genders, including the well-known but unfortunately-named *berdache*; societies with such categories have their own terms, such as *winkte* in Lakota, *alyha* in Mohave, and *nádleehí* in Navajo/Diné (see below), for male-bodied persons who displayed certain “feminine” traits and chose to do women’s work. Significantly for this chapter, many such individuals today prefer the term “Two-Spirit.”

In Brazil, Don Kulick found a category sometimes called *travesti*, who were anatomical males who sought a more feminine appearance and role, even taking female hormones and undergoing surgery (but not sex-reassignment surgery). Interestingly, *travestis* were not homosexual, as they did not desire each other; instead, they desired straight men, and many straight men desired them—and remained “straight.” The critical variable in the third gender of *travesti* was not with whom one had sex but *what role or position one played in the sex act*, the *travesti* always being the passive or penetrated partner in sex. Still different are the *mahu* and *raerae* in Pacific Island societies like Tahiti. According to Deborah Elliston, a *mahu* (considered
the more “traditional” of the two types) is person who behaves “in the manner of” the opposite sex; in other words, a male *mahu* dresses like a woman and does woman’s work, but there is no assumption about the person’s sexuality. A *raerae* on the other hand is defined more by sexuality: he is male-bodied and desires men and performs a more modern and exaggerated femininity, characterized by make-up, short skirts, and “effusively stylized manners of gesturing and talking” (2014: 45). Sadly, *raeraes* often deny *mahus* the very sex/gender diversity that they exemplify, by condemning the latter for “hiding” their true homosexuality.

Of course there are sex/gender alternatives for female-bodied persons too, although perhaps not as many across cultures. The “manly-hearted woman” or *ninauposkitzipxpe*, a category in North Piegan (Native American) society dressed, behaved, and displayed the personality traits of men, including speaking freely in public, joking and teasing, showing aggression and boldness, and being openly sexual and passionate. In rural Albania, the so-called “sworn virgin,” although biologically a female, became a “social male.” Foreswearing their sexuality in a public ceremony, they dressed like men, worked like men, and were accepted by other men into the company of men; naturally, they could never marry or engage in sex without betraying their gender.

**RELIGION AND THE SEXED AND GENDERED PERSON**

This long orientation was necessary to establish the construction and composition of sex/gender and the mutual construction of body and culture. It is fair to say that, just as culture is embodied, so the body is encultured. And since religion is a crucial and pervasive domain of culture, religion is not only embodied but the body is enreligioned. Accordingly, religion may attach to virtually any aspect of sex/gender, shaping and being shaped by the sexual body,
sexual practices, gender displays and roles, and institutions like marriage and the family. The specific ways in which religion affects and refracts human sexuality and gender are, however, incredibly diverse.

**The Sex Lives of the Gods**

The Middle Eastern family of religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) present a distinctly sexless and genderless form of divinity; although their god is usually referenced with a masculine pronoun, he has no partner, engages in no sex, and creates asexually. This view of divinity is not universal, though, and may actually be comparatively rare. In many if not most religions, the spirits and gods are sexed and sexual beings.

The ancient Greek and Norse gods were definitely sexually active (and not always noticeably “moral” about it). Gods had spouses, birthed children (as mentioned in Chapter 2, not all gods are immortal or eternal), and lived in families. And some male gods found human women irresistible: as a result of consorting with human women, half-divine heroes like Hercules, Perseus, and Minos were born. Even the otherwise chaste Judeo-Christian creation tradition includes a tale of “the sons of God” who “saw that the daughters of humans were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose...and had children by them” (Genesis 6:1-4), producing a race of superhumans similar to Hercules.

Even when they stayed among their own kind, many spirits and gods have been characterized as sexual and procreative. As recounted in Chapter 2, the gods Gao Na and Kauha of the !Kung or Ju/hoansi people had wives and children and enjoyed sex. The Sun-god of the Desana (see Box
B.1 below) had sex with his daughter and continues to rain down his energy on/into the uterus of the world through his “god-bone.” The Japanese creation story features two deities, Izanagi and Izanami, themselves offspring of several generations of older gods, whose sexual activity led to the birth not only of various beings such as the sea-god Owatatsumi-no-Kami and the land-god Kamihaya-akitsu-hiko but of the very islands of Japan. The Hindu god Vishnu had his consorts in Lakshmi and Sarasvati, and the regional goddess Nandadevi was regarded as the wife of Shiva; her devotees carried a representation of her on pilgrimage to her husband’s Himalayan home, just as a human wife would be delivered to her husband’s household (Sax 1991). Even the ascetic Buddhist tradition was not without its sexual gods: in Chapter 3 we found a Sherpa Buddhist temple culminating with the image of Kuntu-Zangbu, the Perfectly Good One, with his female consort seated on his lap “in a sexual embrace,” signaling that “life, sex, and generativity have been separated from fear and death, which have been overthrown” (Paul 1976: 144).

The sexuality of the deities lingers on in the form of gods of sex and love and in the form of sacred objects. Greek religion brings us Aphrodite the goddess of love and sexuality, as well as Eros the god of sexual desire; Roman religion featured Venus and Cupid. The Yoruba of Africa knew of Oshun the goddess of love and intimacy, while Norse mythology told of several beings such as Freyr the phallic fertility god, Sjofn the goddess of love, and Frigg the goddess of marriage and married women. The Mesopotamian goddess Inanna or Ishtar, the Egyptian goddess Hathor, and the Aztec god Xochipilli and goddess Xochiquetzal are only a few members of the global pantheon of sex, fertility, beauty, and love. And for Hindus the sexuality and procreative power of the gods is materially available in the lingam and yoni, the divine phallus and vagina, respectively, which are adored and adorned by believers across India.
Box B.1 The Sexualized Cosmos of the Desana

There is probably no more sexualized cosmology and cosmogony than that of the Desana people of the Colombian Amazon. According to Gerardo Reichel-Domatoff, creation began in Desana myth with sex. The Sun and the Moon were brother-deities, and the Sun had a daughter (in some unspecified way), living with her “as if she were his wife”; in jealousy, the Moon tried to molest the daughter-wife, for which he was punished by permanent separation from the Sun (1971: 24). This incestuous relationship had other repercussions: causing her blood to flow, “since then, women must lose blood every month in remembrance of the incest of the Sun and so that this great wickedness will not be forgotten” (28). Much more than this, the universe was itself gendered, the land being masculine and the water being feminine in a great cosmic “system of reciprocal relationships” (42). In the sky, “the Milky Way is interpreted as an immense seminal flow that fertilizes all of the intermediate zone, or the underlying biosphere” (43), which is the realm of humans and all organic life. Thus we see two predominant themes in Desana religion and cosmology—fertility and sexuality. Desana thought was replete with sexual symbolism, anchored by the concept of energy, the source of which is the sun. “The Creation of the Universe was the result of the ‘yellow intention’ or ‘yellow purpose’ of the Sun. The yellow color...symbolizes semen among the Desana” (47). The Sun-god was actually named go-á-mëe, from the words for “bone” and “power/potential.” This bone-god was a penis, a divinity that “penetrates the Universe vertically in the form of an immense phallus...in permanent copulation” with the world below (49). Indeed, in the Desana language the word ohokariri means both to live and to have sex, sex being the divine and material source of all life. But of course supernatural sexuality does not remain in the supernatural dimension. At night “the moon descends in the form of a man to cohabit with women during their sleep,” and Vaímahsë, the Master of the Animals, chases women and molests them if he can. It was the very Daughter of the Sun, the subject/victim of the first sex act, who taught “the secrets of sexual life” to humankind (74), and now sexual references and symbols abound in Desana culture. The dew (dihsiko) was “a seminal fluid that fertilized nature” including human women (72), and the rainbow was a great cosmic vagina (79). The range of sexual symbols was too extensive to list here; virtually every object, species, and natural phenomenon such as lightning had some gender or sexual component, all linked through a complex Desana symbology that associated objects with human sexuality, the “sexual energy of the biosphere,” and ultimately with the creative “cosmic energy” (95). “The central preoccupation of Desana religious thinking,” Reichel-Domatoff concluded, “is the control of human and animal fertility, and around this fundamental nucleus revolves the language of their myths and the message of their ceremonies and dances, their moral norms, their social and economic relationships, in other words, all of their institutions and cultural patterns. It is not sex in its carnal, erotic meaning that preoccupies them but the simple fact of male fertilizing power that acts upon female principle and thus creates a new being” (97).

Sacred Sex

Just as members of the Judeo-Christian-Muslim lineage of religions are misled about the universality of sexless gods, so the Western/Christian presumption that religion is generally
opposed to human sex—and that sex is opposed to religion, too worldly or dirty for the pure “spirituality” of religion—tends to blind us to the religious uses and potentially sacred quality of sexuality. A religion can make anything at all “sacred” and can even integrate sex as a sacrament.

Probably the best-known example of sex in the service of religion is Tantrism, part of Hinduism and Buddhism. According to Endsjo, one fundamental Hindu understanding of tantra is that heterosexual intercourse mirrors the eternal union of Shiva and Shakti, the primordial masculine and feminine, the passive and active principles that underlie reality. For Buddhist tantrists, heterosexual intercourse symbolizes the union of passive wisdom (prajña) and the active quality (upaya), which taken together are the essence of perfect liberation. Tantric sex can also be compared to the ritual of sacrifice.

(231)

In her study of women’s art, Carolyn Henning Brown described tantrism as a set of practices and techniques that include

initiation (diksa) into a sect; the recitation of sacred formulas (mantras) and meditation on sacred diagrams (yantras); rituals usually aimed at awakening the kundalini energy that lies dormant and coiled like a female serpent in the subtle body in order to bring about a spiritual transformation of the adept; conceptualization of the whole cosmic process as the work of the feminine energy (shakti) in its different forms; and transgressive rites either symbolically (“right-handed”) or literally (“left-handed”) involving the use of forbidden substances, including sexual union with an initiated woman whose female organ (yoni) is “equated with the Vedic altar on which the male seed is the offering.”
She quoted scholar Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty’s enumeration of the forbidden substances as “flesh, fish, fermented grapes (wine), frumentum [from the Latin for corn or grain], and fornication.”

While most outsiders who are acquainted with tantrism know it only for its sexual elements—controlled, ideally non-organismic sex as a ritual for spiritual advancement—it is actually part of a much deeper ontology which maintains that the individual soul “possesses three bodies—the material body (sthula-sharira), the subtle body (sukshma-sharira), and the causal or body of bliss (karana-sharira)” (Stephen 2010: 457). According to the website Swamij.com (www.swamij.com/tantra.htm), sexual tantrism, in both its “right hand” and “left hand” forms, is part of the Kaula school, which “focuses on concrete practices and rituals. The left-handed Tantrics perform their worships with the use of meat, fish, intoxicants, mudras (certain gestures), and sexual contact. The right-handed Tantrics perform these rituals only symbolically.” However, the writer insists that both such practices are regarded as less advanced than Mishra and Samaya tantra, which aim at higher chakras than Kaula. Insofar as tantrism uses real sex, Georg Feuerstein (2006) claims that the traditional Tantric sexual ritual known as “twinning” (maithuna) is a sacred occasion celebrating the transcendence of experience. For, the ecstatic condition of bliss is not an experience at all, since the experiencer is one with the experienced. In the state of ecstasy, the division between subject and object is left behind, together with the conceptual mind and the ego-identity that could revel in that bliss.
Another tradition in India that merges religion, sex, and marriage (to which we return below) is the institution of devadasi. In Lucinda Ramberg’s new study of devadasi—a term derived from deva for god and dasi for servant or slave—she explains that a woman becomes a jogati when she is given or gives herself to the goddess Yellamma; fulfilling a harake or vow, the women are ritually married to the goddess. Actually, Ramberg indicates that males or females may be given to Yellamma, but either way, all individuals “dedicated to Yellamma wrap themselves in saris and embody the devi [female god]. That is, whether they were recognized as boys (sexed male) or girls (sexed female) as children, they become women and are called jogatis, although male women are more commonly called jogappas” (2014: 3). As such, they serve as the priestesses or caretakers of the goddess “who transact the favor of the goddess outside the walls of her main temple and sex outside the bounds of conjugal matrimony” (3). Jogatis thus violate both sexual and marital norms, yet as “wives of the deity—always married, never widowed—they are auspicious women associated with all forms of fertility and well-being” (6). In the case of female jogatis, once they reach maturity, “many of these young women begin exchanging sex for means of livelihood—in villages usually through a local system of patronage by a higher caste man and in towns through brothel-based sex for cash transactions”; the upper-caste patrons of devadasis are normatively married but “have long-term if not lifelong exclusive sexual relations” with their jogatis. Finally, these spouses of the Yellamma play other ritual roles, such as “singing devotional songs” and “giving blessings” and are part of “all the major festivals and respond to calls from households to bring the devi, perform puja [worship], play the shruti and chowdiki [musical instruments], and sing on auspicious occasions” (7). Ramberg finds that devadasis are heirs to a long tradition of “temple women,” “choreographers, dancers, musicians, and ritual performers whose sexual capacity was harnessed to their position in the temple as wives of the deity” (18).
As alluded to in Chapter 9, modern (neo)pagans often incorporate bodily and sexual rituals into their practices. “The body and sexuality are treated as a sacred part of nature” (2012: xii) in much of paganism, explains scholar and pagan Christine Hoff Kraemer; “Many Pagans believe that in our physicality, and especially our sexuality, we participate in the primal forces that create the universe” (83). She adds that in Wicca, “lovemaking and celebration can be devotional acts (though this does not include indulging to excess in ways that are destructive to the body or to relationships). Sexual ritual also plays an important part in the tradition” (86).

Sarah Pike’s ethnography of pagan ceremonial gatherings concurs that during Neopagan festivals, members “try to escape mundania’s [their term for mainstream society] attitudes toward nature, spirituality, sexuality, and the body” (2001: 25)—whether or not this involves literal ritual sex. On the other hand, in occult movements like Fraternitas Saturni (FS) and Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), “sexual magic” is key to belief and practice. Hans Thomas Halk tells that in the former, the phallus is seen as the earthly manifestation of the divine power of will and imagination; the female kteis (Ancient Greek for ‘female sexual organ’) is the symbol of ‘chaos’ as the primordial source of creation. In contrast to the OTO, which considers male semen to be a vehicle of the divine spirit, in the FS sperm has much less significance than the sexual energies that arise through intercourse.

(2013: 50)

Practitioners do their sexual magic in order “to create astral entities which can serve as helping spirits for magical workings” as well as for “the development of the chakras, using certain runic or yoga postures” (50).
If all of this talk seems simply too far beyond the pale for contemporary Christians, Endsjo gives us a shock with an account of a Swedish Christian congregation that performed explicit sexual acts in their worship. In the mid-1930s it was ordinary “for members of the congregation to expose their sexual organs to each other during the service. Then one of the congregation, usually a woman, went round and combed the believers’ pubic hair. Much of the rest of the service was given over to extramarital intercourse, normally performed quite openly. The practice was voluntary and not everyone took part sexually, but everyone was free to watch” (2011: 229).

*The Body Religious*

“Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit?” (1 Corinthians 6:19). In this verse Paul anticipated the anthropological concentration on embodiment and specifically how religion is inscribed on/in the body, how it occupies, colonizes, and modifies the body. No religion is entirely “spiritual” (and few purport to be), and every religion takes a profound, approaching obsessive, interest in the human body.

As mentioned above, all societies perform body modifications, many but not all of which relate to religion and are motivated or informed by religion. Very often a body is not fully gendered—and fully human or adult—until it is altered in one or more ways; that is, the socialized (and “religionized”) body is not a natural object but, in Mary Douglas’ words, a *natural symbol* and therefore, to an extent, a cultural and religious “problem.”
Across cultures and religions, the female body is often a particular problem, if only because, as Sherry Ortner put it in an influential essay, the female body is commonly regarded as “closer to nature” than the male form. Especially because of the physical female role in birth and breastfeeding, because of other bodily processes such as menstruation, and because of the association of women with childcare and other domestic functions, Ortner posited that femaleness in many societies “represents lower-level, socially fragmenting, particularistic sorts of concerns, as opposed to…higher-level, integrative, universalistic sorts of concerns” usually associated with maleness (1974: 79).

Whether or not this analysis is valid, women’s bodies have certainly been subjected to many rules and restrictions by religion. One of the primary issues, as seen in Chapter 6, is “pollution,” the idea that some actions and substances are impure or unclean and have the effect of dirtying or soiling a person. In a way, religious conceptions of pollution and purity are only extensions of natural or otherwise cultural reactions to noxious or frightening phenomena, such as blood, bodily excretions, and dead bodies. However, religion elaborates on this basic emotional response and frequently adds a dimension of gender to it.

In Chapter 6, for instance, we learned that the Hua of Papua New Guinea had complex rules of pollution particularly focused on food but also involving “blood, breath, hair, sweat, fingernails, feces, urine, footprints, and shadows” (Meigs 1984: 20). Virtually everything that a person touched or that came from their body carried some of their nu or personal (spiritual but also physical) essence. Men had to avoid the nu of women, as well as foods thought to contain feminine nu and sexual intercourse which depleted their male nu.
A great number of societies harbor ideas that female substances are polluting to men—not that these substances are necessarily evil or abhorrent as such but that they are dangerous and destructive to men, like anti-matter to male matter. Such beliefs were common in Papua New Guinea, where societies like the Sambia or the Etoro held that males must be purged of female substance in order to become true adult men. Boys, issuing from a female body, clinging to a female body, and ingesting milk from a female body, were covered and filled with female substance, which had to be removed by induced vomiting and nose-bleeding and by rough scratching of the skin. As adults, sexual contact with women was also threatening: the Sambia were especially concerned with inhaling female substance, so “men keep their noses secretly plugged during coitus, avoiding incorporation of the vaginal smell they describe as harmfully foul” (Herdt 1987: 79). Men also apparently made the sex act quick: “They fear their wives’ bodies and therefore the shorter their contact, the less chance of pollution or depletion” (166). The Etoro were an extreme case of such behavior: not only was sex forbidden on most days of the year due to men’s dread of female substance, but they also claimed that each act of sex drained them of some of their vital male essence and that witches also enriched themselves by stealing this essence.

Religions have imposed other regimens on female and male bodies alike. Everything from women’s sexuality and sex organs to their faces and hair have been subjected to religious inscription. In the Torah/Old Testament, the mere act of giving birth renders a woman unclean for seven days, as does her menstrual period, according to Leviticus 12; childbirth requires an animal sacrifice as “atonement” for the joyous occasion. If a man is touched by her menstrual blood, he is also unclean for a week. And if a man has “an unusual bodily discharge” of semen,
for instance while sleeping, he must ritually cleanse himself, rinse any objects (but break any clay pots) he touches until the next evening.

Islam too has a code of *tahara* or cleanliness/purification. According to the Muslim website The Way to Truth (www.thewaytotruth.org/pillars/tahara.html), both bodily and spiritual cleanliness are enjoined upon a Muslim, pure water required for *wudu’* (minor ablution) and more serious *ghusl* (major ablution). Blood is impure and demands washing; likewise, “*mazi* (a white sticky fluid that flows from the sexual organs when thinking about sexual intercourse, foreplay, and so on), prostatic fluid, and sperm are impure.” During the period of menstrual or post-partum bleeding, a woman should not pray, observe the fast of Ramadan, go on pilgrimage, enter a mosque, or have sexual intercourse; when menstruation ends, she should perform *ghusl* (and make up any lost days of fasting).

Islam’s prescriptions for the female body are well known, controversial, and widely criticized outside the religion. Two of the predominant traditions are *hijab* or “veiling” and female genital operations, also known as female circumcision or, less politely, female genital mutilation (FGM). *Hijab*, literally “screen/curtain” in Arabic, refers to a range of practices, from wearing a scarf to cover a woman’s head and hair, to *niqab* or a covering across the face, to full-length total-body covering like the *abaya* or cloak. Women’s movement in public is also commonly restricted: she should not be in public without a husband or male relative and certainly not in the company of an unmarried non-kin male. These rules reflect very great concern with women’s morality and chastity, and indeed in 2010 an Iranian cleric stated that immorality and promiscuity in women not only destroys society but causes earthquakes.
While it is hard for Westerners to comprehend, many Muslim women do not find *hijab* oppressive and actually experience it as liberating. As the American female converts interviewed by Janet Testerman (2014) explain, *hijab* simply means “modesty” to them, and they claim to enjoy the freedom both from the leers and propositions of men and from the pressures of beauty and fashion. This does not mean that Muslim women are bereft of style or the desire to be stylish; instead, some Muslim women choose to accessorize their scarves, veils, and cloaks with color, and as Emma Tarlo (2010) discusses in her *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith*, there are now fashion designers making and selling modest but fashionable clothing for Muslim women. There are even Islamic fashion shows in Muslim cities such as Dubai, Jakarta, and Kuala Lumpur. Such developments led Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) to ask us to ponder whether Muslim women really need saving from their religion.

More problematic for most outsiders (and many insiders) is the practice of female genital mutilation—or practices, since the operation can range from relatively minor cutting to surgical removal of the exterior genitalia and suturing shut of the vagina. These operations are painful and dangerous, often leading to infection, difficult sex and childbirth, and at worst internal tears (fistula) that can cause incontinence or death. It is worth acknowledging that many observers associate FGM with culture more than religion. Ellen Gruenbaum (2005), for instance, while hardly endorsing the practice, admits that it has several motivations, including cultural notions of femininity and beauty, virginity and marriageability, cleanliness and hygiene, obedience and morality, and ethnic identity. Also, a recent study by UNICEF (2013) shows that FGM is by no means universal across Muslim societies: while 98% of women in Somalia and 96% in Guinea (on opposite sides of the African continent) have undergone some version of the operation, Egypt
(91%) is the only Arab country where it is highly common, and in Yemen (23%) and Iraq (8%) it is relatively uncommon.

For all the attention that it receives, Islam is hardly the only religion that obsesses about the female body. Orthodox Judaism also has strict regulations for the dress and behavior of women. The website Orthodox-Jews.com (www.orthodox-jews.com/orthodox-jewish-women.html#axzz3E3oNHs3M) teaches that women should wear only skirts and never pants and cover their hair with a “tichel” or hat, scarf, or wig. Orthodox women “dress modest as required by Jewish law,” they state, as in Islam. Torah/Old Testament law (Deuteronomy 22:5) instructs the sexes to avoid wearing clothing intended for the opposite sex, and “it is immodest for a woman that her legs be seen,” says the website. Indeed, a woman’s body should be concealed “from the neckline till the knee” exposing nothing “besides their face and hands.” Adds the site, After marriage, Jewish ladies are required to cover their hair. It is a biblical law, that considers the hair a beauty of a woman and therefore it shall not be shown in public after marriage. There are many ways of covering the hair. Some extreme ultra-orthodox Jewish women shave heads and wear only a kerchief (tichel) on their head. Most Yeshivish and Hasidic women Jewish women wear wigs. Modern orthodox women might wear only a hat or other covering that covers only part of their hair.

This worry about female hair is almost indistinguishable from Islamic norms.

In other religions including Christianity, there is also handwringing about women’s bodies. More than a few American Christians agree that pants on women are a sin, as any web search will reveal. Many American Christians also fret about female sexuality and virginity, evinced in the recent trend of “purity balls” in which fathers promise to guard their daughters’ virginity until
marriage and “abstinence pledges” in which young people agree (sometimes in writing) to “save themselves” for their wedding night. As one other odd example, mothers in Cameroon have been observed protecting their daughters from premarital sex by “ironing” their breasts with hot stones to keep the breasts small and thus ideally to postpone sexual maturity. Statistics indicate that this procedure is not completely successful, as twenty or thirty percent of girls in Cameroon become pregnant before age sixteen.

The religious attention is not exclusively on women’s bodies, however, and everything from men’s genitalia to their hair are objects of religious interest. Many societies and religions, including Western Christianity, practice male circumcision, which in the West has lost much of its religious meaning but which has its origins incontrovertibly in the Torah/Old Testament, where circumcision is a ritual act and a sign of dedication to God. Australian Aboriginal societies practiced circumcision—normally when the boy was in his teens—but added subsequent operations such as subincision (cutting along the underside of the penis) and routine penis bleeding, the blood used for ceremonial purposes. We saw above how societies in Papua New Guinea would scratch, bleed, and otherwise purge male bodies, to which we will return later. Still other societies have inflicted scarring on the chest, face, or back, along with knocking out teeth or piercing the nasal septum, all for the purpose of initiation and ritual adulthood.

Male hair too is a frequent focus of religion. Orthodox Jews may grow a long curl of hair on each side of the head (so-called “ear-locks”) while commanding a man to cover part of his head with a yarmulke. On the other hand, some religions may order a man—especially a priest or monk—to shave or tonsure his head; quite the opposite, an orthodox Sikh man should never cut his hair and wear his unshorn hair under a turban (while also donning a short sword, a bracelet, and
special undergarments). Men have the added territory of facial hair, which is subject to varying regulations: Muslim men are often expected to grow a beard, but Mormon men are generally expected to be clean-shaven.

Finally, just as cultures and religions postulate female substances, they also have beliefs about male substances. Frequently, it is these purported substances (part material, part spiritual) that make a male-bodied person a “man” and, not surprisingly, they are often associated with semen and help explain cultural ideas and behaviors about male sexuality, as well as other masculine conduct. The Sambia introduced above call their male essence jerungdu, which Gilbert Herdt defined as

physical (biologic) strength, the supreme essence of maleness in body, personality, and spirit. The concept subsumes hardness and resolve, bravery and warlike exploits, among its connotations.... Jerungdu is bodily essence, a substance akin to life-force. At bedrock, it is semen (kweikoonboku) that bestows this power. Jerungdu is thus a substance uniquely male, produced and transmitted only by men.

(1987: 31)

The fact that women have no jerungdu and are literally a threat to the man’s supply accounts for the sexual tension between husbands and wives. The fact that boys are not born with their own natural supply accounts for some exceptional behavior that will be discussed toward the end of the chapter.

The Etoro equivalent of Sambia jerungdu was called hame, which women jeopardized and witches coveted. Among the Gisu of Uganda, a similar stuff was lirima, the manly quality of violent emotion, courage, and determination. The Gisu felt that it made them a violent society,
but they inculcated *lirima* in males nonetheless through initiation, especially circumcision. The Wodaabe or Bororo of northern Africa saw their male essence as endowing men not with violence but with seductive charm and beauty. They claimed that men possess *togu*, a substance that not only makes men male but makes them irresistibly attractive to women. It is the source of male beauty—or more precisely of Wodaabe male beauty, as men of other societies do not have it. During their competitive male dances, a man would select a woman in the audience to work his *togu* magic on, and she would be smitten, even if she was already married. After the dance, he might try to carry her away from her less *togu*-ful husband, which the Wodaabe called “stealing beauty.”

One last example comes from China, where *jing* is the name for the stuff of maleness, which Tiantian Zheng characterizes as “both a substance (sperm) and an intangible energy” (2009: 116). It is “the most essential element for sustaining men’s life and vitality” but is also in finite supply, so men try to conserve it and spend it wisely, which means not wasting it all on wives. Instead, they think that “copulating with as many women as possible, especially with virgins, helped nourish their seminal essence and life vitality” (117). Zheng claims that public success at attracting young women is important for Chinese businessmen.

*It is Better to Marry than to Burn*

Every woman among the Newars of Nepal is married three times during her life—first to a “bel” nut or fruit, a symbol of Vishnu or Buddha (a relationship called *Ihi*), then to the sun (a marriage called *Bara Tayegu*), before marrying a human husband (Gutschow and Michaels 2012). In other words, as the case of the *devadasi* above illustrates, religion often plays a central—if
idiosyncratic—role in marriage. Indeed, one of the more pervasive and divisive debates in American society is over the nature and definition of marriage, which many people consider a religious sacrament, a universal social institution, and exclusively heterosexual and monogamous (sometimes on the whimsical grounds that the first marriage was between Adam and Eve, not “Adam and Steve”).

Anthropological research has of course discovered that marriage is incredibly diverse across cultures and that the relationship between religion and marriage is neither universal nor stable. Most basically, marriage is not present in all cultures (the Na or Moso or Mosuo of western China traditionally did not have an institution of marriage, nor of “fatherhood” at all), nor most emphatically do all societies endorse monogamy (actually, most have endorsed polygamy, or more precisely polygyny, the practice of multiple wives for one man). Even in Christianity, the attitude toward marriage has shifted dramatically over time.

Marriage is not a sacrament in all cultures, if only because the concept of “sacrament” is altogether foreign. Instead, in more than a few cultures, marriage is a small matter—marriages lightly made and dissolved—while in others it pales in ritual significance to adulthood initiations or funerals. Traditionally, Buddhism and Jainism put little stock in marriage, since marriage and sexuality more generally were worldly attachments incompatible with the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. This hardly means that marriage was and is unknown in Buddhist societies; writes Endsjo, “Buddha accepted marriage for lay people who were not striving for liberation in their present lives” (2011: 66). And as we saw in earlier chapters, ordination as a Buddhist monk has been temporary in some societies, like village Thailand, where most boys would eventually leave the monastery and embark on a mundane life, including marriage. According to Shayne
Clarke’s (2104) recent work on ancient Indian Buddhist monastic rules, there is evidence that monks did not break all ties with their spouses, sometimes visiting them (and even apparently having sex with them) and occasionally entering the monastery with their wives and children.

More surprisingly still, Endsjo agrees with biblical scholar April DeConick that Christianity has not always considered marriage a sacrament, or even a desirable estate. As the title of this section underscores, the original attitude toward marriage was encapsulated in 1 Corinthians 7:8-9, in which Paul wrote, “Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion” (New International Version). That is, sexuality ideally was to be avoided completely, and celibacy and singlehood was the perfect Christian life; marriage was a compromise for those who could not restrain their desires. DeConick reminds us that in the early fourth century, bishop Eustathius and his followers “abhorred marriage” and believed that married people had no hope of redemption and therefore it appears that they did not view them as real members of the church. So it is not at all surprising that we learn that Eustathius taught that it was necessary for men to leave their wives and women to leave their husbands.

(2011: 82-3)

Likewise Aphraates argued that “marriage is not the ideal, and in fact, happens to generate conflict between humans and God, having no spiritual value” (84), while Tatian held that “marriage is fornication” (85), and both Tatian and Marcion maintained that birth itself was evil and an unfortunate consequence of marriage.
John Boswell also concluded that “Christianity remained overwhelmingly ambivalent about most forms of heterosexual marriage during the first millennium of its existence” (1994: 111). At the same time, he found that same-sex relationships and marriages were not always condemned. He mentioned, for instance, an eighth-century manuscript that featured four ceremonies for marital unions—three for heterosexual couples and “a comparable ‘prayer’ for uniting two men” (178). He added that same-sex marriages were recognized and celebrated by the Church through the Middle Ages.

Contrary to Buddhist indifference and early Christian antipathy toward marriage, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam tend to view marriage as a social responsibility, if not a religious office. As Endsjo puts it, “In Judaism, men and women were not just expected to marry; they had a duty to do so” (2011: 71). And of course many Torah/Old Testament marriages would polygynous. In Hinduism too marriage has been conceived as a social obligation, at least for a particular stage of life, the “householder” or _grihastha_, the “married family man.” Later in life, as discussed in Chapter 10, a man ideally abandoned his home and family (and his marriage and sexuality) and became a _sannyasin_ (and occasionally a woman became a _sannyasini_), wandering alone in the forest and living off of begged alms. These ideals did not preclude other anomalous marital relationships: “In certain special circumstances, Hindus do not get married to other people but to animals or even to physical objects. A man by the name of Nandi Munda from the Indian village of Ghatshila in the state of Jharkand married a mountain called Lakhasaini in 2007” (Endsjo 2011: 69). As we have seen, people sometimes also marry divine beings, and if this sounds strange, recall that some Catholic nuns consider themselves married to Christ.
Islam is more articulate on the subject of marriage than some religions, because it is a more jural system than many other religions. Famously, Islam not only dictates issues like inheritance and child support but allows polygyny (up to four wives per husband). Contemporary Muslims may justify this prescription by arguing that a man’s sexual needs are greater than a woman’s or that marriage is preferable to infidelity. Endsjo also mentions several alternative forms of marriage in Islam besides the familiar lifelong relationship. Mutah is characterized as “fixed-term marriage with clear time limits”; misyar is a union in which “the man does not have to live with the woman or support her financially,” and urfi is a secret marriage formalized on paper (71). In Morocco until 2004, a woman also required a male guardian to negotiate and approve her marriage, an institution known as wiyaya or tutelle.

Where there is marriage there are also norms of proper age of marriage, of premarital/extramarital sex, of marital property, of marital roles, and of course of divorce. Christians sometimes assert that God hates divorce, and a few decades ago divorce was a much larger public issue in the United States than homosexuality; divorce was actually constitutionally outlawed in Ireland until 1995. Amy Young Evrard (2104) notes that there are multiple forms of divorce in Morocco under Islamic law, including khul’ or “divorce for compensation” in which the wife essentially buys the divorce from her husband by returning any dowry or other gifts; talaq or “repudiation” in which the husband simply verbally declares a divorce (and can retract his decision up to three times); and tatliq or court-petitioned divorce.

From these few examples, it is clear that religious pronouncements on and participation in marriage vary widely by culture and historical era. They also vary by the age, gender, and religious status of the individuals. In this last regard, there are commonly different expectations
for laypersons than for religious professionals or specialists (e.g. priests, monks, ascetics, sannyasins, etc.), although not all religions—indeed, very few other than Catholicism—demand celibacy from their officials. Finally, many religions advocate marriage within the religious community (that is, religious endogamy), but not all do so with equal stridency or with equal threats of repercussions. In their study of faith and families, Vern Bengston, Norella Putney, and Susan Harris (2013) determine that same-religion marriages are more effective at passing religious belief and commitment to the next generation and that the parent with the stronger faith in a different-religion family tends to transmit that faith to children; divorce, they assert, disrupts the religious transmission in the family. This may explain why many religions are so adamant about intra-faith marriage and so opposed to divorce.

The Sexual Division of Religious Labor

The fact that marriage rules and roles are distinguished by gender (the old “double standard”) highlights the issue that many aspects of religious belief and practice are divided by sex/gender. Just like the rest of culture, religion is distributed unevenly through society, and just like the rest of culture, sex/gender is a regular axis of this distribution. Indeed, one of the truisms of sociology is that women are more religious than men, making up a large percentage of church members and engaging in more religious activity.

In most of the major institutional translocal (“world”) religions, males dominate the religious offices, even formally excluding women from roles like the Catholic priesthood. Sometimes these constraints are bolstered by mythological claims, such as the Christian origin-story in which Adam (the male) was created first and therefore given primacy and in which Eve
disobeyed and brought disaster on humanity. In other cases, subsequent teachings evaluate women as physically, mentally, emotionally, or morally unfit for religious burdens: the Buddha allegedly despaired of women’s capacity for spiritual practice, and religions like Hinduism or Jainism that expect nakedness and itinerancy from their spiritual athletes consider these conditions inappropriate for a woman and a violation of her “natural” obligations as wife and mother.

Not all religions officially exclude women from their roles, including leadership roles, which makes the claim of inherent religious incapacity impossible to defend. Good or evil, many religions appreciate the religious power of women. In Chapter 3 we discussed Melford Spiro’s research on Burmese Buddhism, in which the witch (soun) was almost always female; yet the master witch (hsaya) was always male. On the subject of the nat spirits, Spiro also established that women predominated in the nat cults, while men tended to focus on Buddhism. The nat shrines were places for women, and it was almost exclusively women who participated in nat rituals; nat “shamans” or specialists were mostly women. Men generally took less interest in the nats, some believing that Buddhist forces were superior to the nats and a significant proportion doubting the existence of the nats altogether.

Speaking of shamans, a number of religions had or have well-developed roles for women as shamans. One of the best known is the Japanese miko, the shrine maiden or priestess. The miko provided a variety of functions, including cleaning the shrine, performing sacred dances, and entering into trance to perform divination or drive away evil spirits. Of course, probably the most renowned female diviner was the Oracle at Delphi in ancient Greece, a woman who prophesied for the god Apollo and answered the questions of visitors to his temple. Early
Chinese society also had a tradition of female shamans or *wu*, whose tasks included “invocation, divination, dream interpretation, healing, exorcism, driving off evil spirits, and performing ecstatic rain dances” (Dashu 2011).

One of the most female-centric religions ever recorded is that of the Ryūkyū Islands of Japan. As explained by Susan Starr Sered, in that place women dominate the religious life of the family, community, and (in the past) state. Only women can officially mediate between the supernatural and human beings, women are expected to be much more knowledgeable about religious matters than men, and men are required to participate in religious rituals led by women. It is of interest that the Ryūkyūans have adopted certain Chinese ancestral rites in minute detail—with one exception: in Ryūkyū unlike China the rites are conducted by women. In general, Ryūkyūans are dissatisfied if rituals are conducted by men. Ryūkyūan men do not even pray at the household hearth. Women are so thoroughly associated with the sacred that in the past the rare man who entered the sacred groves had to practice a form of ceremonial transvestism—that is, dress like a woman. This was true even for the chief ministers of state. (1994: 14)

Ryūkyūan religion was also integrated with the family. The sisters of the men of the household protected the household spiritually, and the sister of the king was the chief priestess of the society. And women acted as both priestesses (*noro*) and shamans (*yuta*). Interestingly, Sered told,
the very few male shamans on Okinawa are men with major physical disabilities that preclude their functioning in typical male roles. These men have a low social status and a reputation for being emotionally disturbed.

Almost all the clients who call on yuta are women. Even if the woman is accompanied by a husband or son, it is the woman who communicates directly with the yuta.

One of the most important conclusions that Sered drew in her survey of Asian and Southeast Asian religions was that women tended to concentrate on indigenous religions whereas men tended to apply their energy to new and translocal religions like Buddhism or, when they arrived, Christianity or Islam.

Africa has its traditions of female spiritual importance as well, such as the secret Sande organization among Mende people of western Africa. Ruth Phillips insisted that the Sande was crucial to the education of girls, including “all the ritual knowledge and many of the practical skills women needed throughout life and paralleled the training given to young men by the Poro society. Proper attitudes towards their future husbands, sexual behavior, childbearing, and rearing were all expounded to young girls during Sande initiation,” and the masks worn by members were “the most artistically elaborated of the Mende mask types” (1978: 265). The high profile of women was perpetuated in a number of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian religions such as Santería and Candomblé. Writes an anonymous Dr. E on the website of the Santería Church of the Orishas (santeriachurch.org/the-importance-of-women-in-santeria), Santería has always been a religion that honors women and upholds their importance in society. Some of the most important and pivotal figures in the history of Santería have been women. Women shaped the way our religion evolved in the new world. Women
preserved the lore of our religion by passing on the secrets of our ceremonies, our sacred songs, and the lexicon of information found in our divination systems. Plainly put, Santería is a women’s religion.

In the much-misunderstood religion of Vodou (popularly known as “voodoo”), the female priestess or *mambo* is a key figure. Karen McCarthy Brown (2011) documents the life of one such woman in her *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*.

Nevertheless, in most documented religions, and especially in the “world religions,” males have been the dominant actors. Commonly the most powerful roles are reserved for males, special attention is placed on rituals celebrating or achieving maleness, and certain institutions and spaces are occupied by males. As mentioned in the discussion of the Sande women’s society in West Africa, one of the prominent such institutions is the Poro men’s society in the same region. In his classic ethnography, Kenneth Little called the Poro “the men’s association par excellence” and “a central organization in community politics” (1965: 349). The Poro association had its own enclosure or house which “may be regarded as a veritable powerhouse of supernatural force” (335). The Poro house was the site of ancestor spirits as well as “a number of medicines of great strength” (335). Basically, every male member of the region’s tribes was inducted into the group; a male who was not a member of the Poro was considered less than a man, unfit for marriage or procreation. “By joining the society they established their status as men. They became so *hingga*, to use the Mende term, i.e. ‘those entitled to procreate’ (358). He further informed us that the Poro ran a school for boys, which taught them knowledge but also masculinity:

> Pain is inflicted deliberately upon them to instill habits of self-discipline, and they are taught to obey the elders of the society without question. In the old days training lasted for
two or three years, and sometimes longer; and throughout the whole of this time the Poro had complete control over virtually every youth in the country. Should a boy die during the session, he was simply buried in the bush and no particular attention was paid to the matter.

(358)

In his study of the Poro among the Kpelle people a few years later, Richard Fulton characterized it as a translocal institution that integrated peoples across western Africa: “There are specific variations and rigidly regarded local secrets, but ethnographic literature emphasizes that members of Poro who travel or move from place to place within the Poro bounds are readily identifiable, recognized, and accepted as having the same ‘religion’ and possessing certain ‘rights’ and a certain position under Poro” (1972: 1218-19). Finally, Poro had both sacred and secular functions. In its strictly sacred manifestations, the Poro is the means of organizing relationships with the spirits that are the foundation of the Kpelle belief system. These spirits can be divided into five categories: (1) ancestral spirits, (2) genii, (3) miscellaneous bush and water spirits, (4) spirits of the associations, and (5) specific Poro spirits…. The Poro controls several masked figures that represent spirits and perform a variety of functions....

(1126)

On the secular side, the Poro society operated as police, judges, diplomats, and advisors to political leaders, providing all-important legitimation to the social system.

A men’s house like the Poro house is a strikingly common feature of indigenous religions and societies. The Sambia and other Melanesians maintained a men’s house in the village, which Herdt termed a “culthouse.” There the “men’s club,” as Herdt called it, “honors the old men and
denigrates women, so we may refer to it also as a phallic cult. Much of its power derives from secrecy; or, to be more precise, from the way that men use secrecy to accomplish military, ritual, and sexual aims” (1987: 101). Boys were removed from the care of their mothers and relocated to the cult house. Also stored in the house were the key sacred objects, the flutes. The flutes were made from hollow bamboo tubes between one and three feet long and were only played by grown men; the instruments “are said to be hostile to women and children. They are also felt to be ‘married’ to the initiates” as the youths proceed into manhood (146).

Interestingly, Herdt found that the flutes were said to be made in mythical time by women, and the spirit of the flute was female (186). On the other side of the world, the Mundurucu of the Amazon rainforest likewise maintained a men’s house or eksa, which was “the residence of all males above about thirteen years of age” and the home of the karoko or sacred flutes (Murphy and Murphy 2004: 82), which no woman dared touch on pain of rape.

Despite all this sex/gender exclusion in favor of men, the anthropological literature shows us many instances of sex/gender division and complementarity in religion, rather than the simplistic picture of men monopolizing religion to the exclusion of women. Indeed, among Australian Aboriginals, scholars like Diane Bell (1983) have found a complete parallel women’s religious life alongside that of men. In Australia (and some other places as well), religious knowledge and practice are “secret-sacred,” and the sexes are not supposed to reveal their knowledge, objects, and rituals to each other; the penalty in former times was death. So male anthropologists typically had no access to the religious life of women and even presumed that there was not much if any important female religious activity. Female anthropologists like Bell, though, were able to observe the beliefs, artifacts, designs, and ceremonies of women which are often quite distinct from those of men.
As described by Todd Sanders, the Ihanzu of Africa evince not only a sex/gender complementarity and co-dependence in religion but also another bracing challenge to Western assumption of gender dichotomy. The Ihanzu are renowned in their area for their power of rainmaking, centered on their two royal rainmakers, always one man and one woman. Making rain requires “the powers they jointly command,” since “one gender without the other is pointless and impotent” (2008: 70). Even more, in women’s rituals for rain, the female dancers “embody both genders…. By combining and collapsing masculinity and femininity within themselves, women dancers create the ultimate gendered combination to bring the ultimate communal good: rain” (141). Most profoundly, because the Ihanzu grasp the interdependence of the sexes/genders, in their culture “male and female characteristics do not map themselves neatly onto male and female bodies” (154). Indeed, Sanders concludes that both men and women “find it impossible to sum up everyday gender relations in any meaningful way…. The relative status of the genders is situationally defined and varies a great deal. There is no single ‘gender system’” (68).

RELIGION, FEMALE AGENCY, AND THE POSSIBILITY OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY

If there is one area of religion in which women are particularly distinguished (or particularly afflicted, depending on one’s point of view), it is, as previously mentioned, spirit possession. It is well established that women across cultures are more prone to possession and trance than men (although men have their share of possession/trance experiences too). Possession may seem like the ultimate loss of self—literally the occupation of a foreign spiritual self within the victim’s body—but just as anthropology complicates the supposed boundaries between religion and
non-religion (the “secular”), between matter and spirit, and between male and female, so the anthropology of religion complicates the boundary between self and other, and between illness and therapy, and affords an opportunity to consider how women may be empowered in circumstances that appear distinctly disempowering.

In his classic commentary on the subject, I. M. Lewis chronicled the situation in male-dominated Somalia, where the spiritual possession of women was associated with various kinds of social and emotional deprivations—frustrated love, loneliness, neglect or abandonment, jealousy and the instability of marriage, and such. Possession occurred when “spirits enter the sex-war” that was Somali society (1966: 315), and Lewis posited that

this characteristically woman’s affliction operates amongst the Somali as a limited deterrent against the abuses of neglect and deprivation in a conjugal relationship which is heavily biased in favor of men. In a society which offers them little domestic security and very inadequately protects them otherwise from the pressures and exactions of men, women, I am arguing, may thus resort to spirit possession as a means both of airing their grievances obliquely and of gaining some satisfaction. This way of looking at the phenomenon immediately ranks it with such other modes of mystical retaliation as witchcraft and sorcery in societies with other cultural traditions and cosmologies.

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Four decades later, Erika Bourguignon roughly concurred, arguing that “possession trance constitutes a psychodynamic response to powerlessness by providing [women] a means for the gratification of wishes ordinarily denied to them. Powerful alters enable them to act out wishes they cannot express directly. Possession serves both as an idiom of distress and of indirect self-assertion, facilitated by ritualized, culturally structured dissociation” (2004: 557).
While the oppression and deprivation of women across cultures is in no way exaggerated, some anthropologists and other scholars have criticized this overly-passive view of women in regard to religion in general and possession in particular. In a celebrated essay on possession by zar spirits among women in the northern Sudan village of Hofriyat, Janice Boddy reported that over forty percent of adult women were considered possessed; among the key age group of thirty-five to fifty-five, the rate of possession was two-thirds. Even more, “once possessed, a woman is always possessed thereafter” (1988: 4). But this does not mean that the woman is lost or even particularly victimized. Instead, a woman “can hope to gain some control over her symptoms first, by accepting—both subjectively and publicly—the possession diagnosis, then by undergoing a curing ceremony during which she enters, via trance, into a contractual relationship with the spirit(s) responsible for her lapse in health” (11). If the cure and the resulting accommodation are successful, “what begins as an uneasy truce between a willful spirit and its reluctant host might graduate to positive symbiosis as their relationship stabilizes and matures” (11).

Boddy does not argue that spirit possession was pleasant, nor were the conditions that instigate it positive for women. A Hofriyat woman was restricted and stressed by their culture and religion. As a result she was burdened with “problematic selfhood” (12). She was expected to be fertile, maternal, chaste and pure (undergoing an extreme version of female genital mutilation), and spatially segregated from men. Not surprisingly, then,

a woman will usually consider herself ill should she have witnessed or experienced something untoward or paradoxical, out of keeping with Hofriyat notions of the way things ought to be: for example, smelling the odor of sweat at a wedding, throwing dust on her
elaborately braided hair upon hearing news of a death, or taking fright when walking abroad alone at night. These situations, however common, are all in some way cultural contradictions: weddings extol the purity of women; women’s braids signify their married fertility, the opposite of death; humans are diurnal and women ought to remain indoors.

What subsequent trance practices—or “zar therapy,” in Boddy’s words—accomplished was a transformation of the woman’s self. By externalizing these unconventional and antisocial experiences and emotions and attributing them to a spirit agent rather than to herself, she became convinced “to recognize them as separated from herself in the first place” (18). Thus possession actually became positive, a re-affirming experience: “The paradox of Hofriyati possession is that it defends the person while also enabling the self: it is at once a self-enhancing and self-maintaining condition” (19).

Lesley Sharp took the argument a step further. Based on her own research in Madagascar, and referring to Boddy’s work, she questioned both the assumption of female suppression and of the negativity and cultural marginality of possession. Among the Sakalava people, it was the tromba spirits, ghosts of dead royalty and thus former human beings, that plagued women. During tromba rituals the dead aristocrats “come to life and interact with the living...by possessing mediums, the majority of whom are female.... Since the majority of mediums are female, while spirits tend to be male, the most striking aspect of tromba possession is that one watches a female medium transform into a male spirit” (1993: 122).
In a word, Sharp judged that tromba possession “is not a peripheral domain in the community of Ambanja; rather, it is a central and defining aspect of Sakalava culture. Furthermore, tromba possession may be permanently empowering, its significance extending beyond the ritual context into everyday life” (16, emphasis in the original). Additionally, while men were seldom mediums for the spirits, they cooperated with women in the ritual as musicians and “spirit interpreters (rangahy)” in a “division of duties along gender lines” (123). After a woman’s first possession experience, characterized by “headaches, dizziness, persistent stomach pains, or a sore neck, back, or limbs” (123), the diagnosis of possession led, as in Hofriyat, to a set of ceremonies “in order to permanently install the spirit within her” (123). Once the relationship between the woman and the spirit was established, “a tromba spirit remains active in the medium throughout her lifetime, and although it may become dormant once the medium has reached old age, the spirit departs only after she is dead” (123). Furthermore, “often the older the medium the greater her spirit repertoire, since she collects increasingly powerful (and older) spirits as she herself ages” (124). In short, spirit possession was not only relatively normal and important in Sakalava society, but it could be a source of prestige and power for women, whose selves were not so much displaced as enhanced by the invasion.

The upshot here, as Kalpana Ram contends in her study that opened this chapter, is that possession cannot be understand merely in terms of female oppression and “resistance” to that oppression. Nor is possession a total loss of a woman’s personality, self, or agency. Ram refers to the kind of religious experience that Boddy and Sharp documented as an “agency of cultivating mediumship,” which she describes as “the agency of making room for that which is alien, disturbing, or simply foreign” (2013: 255, emphasis in the original). It is a conscious (if not utterly free and certainly not independent of culture) choice to nurture a new kind of self, to
allow oneself to be re-educated and re-formed, which challenges a number of Western assumptions—about the self as unitary, enclosed, and permanent, about agency as equivalent to “resistance” and worse to “political resistance,” and about women’s passivity in the face of spirits and society alike.

**Box B.2 Women’s Piety and “Docile Agency” in Contemporary Islam**

As mentioned previously, one of the more incomprehensible developments for many observers in recent years has been the conversion of Western women to Islam and the return of many formerly “liberal” and “modern” Muslim women to “traditional” practices like the veil. Saba Mahmood has provided an extremely important analysis of the contemporary Islamic women’s piety movement in a 2001 article and then her 2005 book Politics of Piety, stressing the “challenges that women’s participation in the Islamic movement poses to feminist theorists and gender analysts” (2001: 202). These women, like the possessed women just discussed, force us to rethink “oppression,” “agency,” and what most Westerners would criticize as “nonliberal movements.” Mahmood finds that Muslim men and women themselves are critical of “what they consider to be an increasingly prevalent form of religiosity in Egypt that accords Islam the status of an abstract system of beliefs that has no direct bearing on the way one lives and structures one’s daily life”—a trend that they call secularization (‘almana) or Westernization (taghrib). In reaction, the “women’s mosque movement” endeavors “to educate lay Muslims in those virtues, ethical capacities, and forms of reasoning that the participants perceive to have become either unavailable or irrelevant to the lives of ordinary Muslims” (204). These virtues include many that Westerners associate “with feminine passivity and submissiveness (e.g. shyness, modesty, perseverance, and humility)” (205), leading women and men outside Islam to judge the actions of these women as a kind of false consciousness or an internalization of their own subordination, even as a masochistic use of agency. But, citing Boddy, Mahmood insists that we see things otherwise. She argues that ordinarily “agency” is viewed as “the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles” (206)—in a word, to resist. She responds that the pursuit of piety obviously cannot be accounted for in terms of “gender equality, or resistance to male authority” but neither to “a re-inscription of traditional roles” (208-9). And since it is a social and religious movement, it cannot be discredited as passivity and lack of agency. Instead, Mahmood insists that the women’s Islamic piety movement can only be understood in terms of a different kind of agency than Western liberals know and enforce, an agency “predicated on her ability to be taught, a condition classically referred to as docility” (210, emphasis added). A docile agent is not one who surrenders her will—that would be a contradiction—but one who wills herself “to be instructed in a particular skill or knowledge” (210), which is truer to the etymology of the English word “docile,” from the Latin for “easily taught.” Although Mahmood has come under some fire for the (mis)interpretation that she is describing or advocating female passivity or even regression, she is quite correct that religion—indeed all culture—entails a, perhaps paradoxical, decision to be taught, a submission to instruction.
She discusses one of the more problematic lessons in the women's piety movement for Westerners, namely modesty or shyness (al-haya'). “To practice al-haya’ means,” Mahmood writes, “to be diffident, modest, and able to feel and enact shyness” (213), and it is, paradoxically once again, a religious virtue (fadail) that must be consciously acquired and cultivated. As one woman explained to Mahmood, “I realized that al-haya’ was among the good deeds…and given my natural lack of al-haya’ I had to make or create it first. I realized that making (sana’) it in yourself is not hypocrisy (nifaq), and that eventually your inside learns to have al-haya’ too”; she then added that achieving al-haya’ “means making oneself shy, even if it means creating it” (213). In common with other virtues such as sabr or quiet endurance in the face of hardship, or indeed of hijab and modest dress, Mahmood posits that such pious ways “are the critical markers, as well as the ineluctable means, by which one trains oneself to be pious” (214, emphasis in the original). They are, in other words, “the means both of being and becoming a certain kind of a person” (215, emphasis in the original)—ironically to Western ears but recognizably to religious and anthropological ears, to choose to submit to personal re-invention, to use one’s agency to alter one’s agency into what looks like un-agency.

Rachel Rinaldo extends Mahmood’s argument in her examination of women’s piety in Indonesia. She discovers a female religious agency that is not only pious but activist, that “incorporate[s] both Islam and feminism” (2013: 1). In that populous Muslim country, Rinaldo says that women “swelled the ranks of rallies calling for change, mobilized food deliveries for the poor, organized commemorations of one of the country’s female heroines, and demanded an end to violence against women” (1). Nor is this activist-feminist agency incompatible with Islam; rather, what she pointedly calls pious agency is “an agency that is influenced by religion and for which being a religious subject is central” (9). In fact, she identifies two different kinds of pious agency, represented by different women’s organizations in the country. The first is pious critical agency, which “involves a critical, public engagement with interpretations of religious texts, generally based on a contextual interpretive method” and “facilitates activism for women’s rights and equality”; the second is pious activating agency, which employs “interpretations of religious texts to advocate for women’s greater political participation” (10). Meanwhile there is also feminist agency, seeking “gender equality and the empowerment of women” (10)—which,
Rinaldo suggests, is not anathema to Islam or to either form of pious agency. “Pious agency and feminist agency are not dichotomous; they can and do intersect” (10). She concludes that modern Western resistant/liberal agency and docile/nonliberal agency do not “exhaust the possibilities of agency” for women (19) and that the former does not equate to “secular” any more than the latter equates to “religious.”

Amy Young Evrard’s (2014) study of Moroccan women’s movements asserts the same thing. She finds pious Muslim women petitioning for greater rights for women, for legal reform in the areas of marriage, for representation of women in government, and for protection from violence. Much of this activism is conducted in the idiom or language or “frame” of Islam and the Moroccan mudawwana law. We can rightly call this Islamic feminism, but Evrard goes one more step, recognizing the possibility of Islamist feminism. The very idea of Islamist feminism, even of Islamist women, and certainly of Islamist women’s organizations may sound like an oxymoron to some, but Evrard assures us that they exist, as in the Justice and Spirituality Organization and the Party of Justice and Development. She concludes that men and women in Islamist parties and movements “are not always of the same mind on women’s and family issues” (260) and that “Morocco’s Islamist women may be looking for cooperative dialogue and engagement” (261) with moderate women—a fact that is drowned out by the focus on male Islamists and by Islamist extremism.

With all the attention to the religious patriarchy and supposed lack of female agency in Islam, the patriarchy and supposed lack of female agency in Western/Christian countries is sometimes overlooked. However, there are at least two examples of pious female agency in the United States and Europe. One is the women’s spirituality movement. Cynthia Eller (no relation)
conducted research within this loosely integrated community of women, examining their identities, their goals, and their inspirations. While it was incredibly and intentionally diverse—she found that “dissension is so easily tolerated, and the urge to create dogma so readily suppressed. Even the grossest of internal contradictions seem to create very little anxiety among spiritual feminists” (1993: 4)—she discerned four core principles. The first was that it was female-focused, even separatist. In fact, she found not only an exclusion of masculinity but often of conventional heterosexual femininity: “lesbianism or at least bisexuality is something of a norm in feminist spirituality, and heterosexuality is regarded as a deviation—at times, a wholly unacceptable one…. [I]f her partners are female, she can talk about their shared sexuality. But if her partners are male, she would risk social censure to talk too long or loudly about her lovers or about male sexuality” (21).

A second principle was the rejection or transcendence of “traditional” religions, locating the movement within the “alternative religious milieu” (7). It drew from very many eclectic sources, including New Age, the therapy/recovery movement, Jungian psychology, ancient religions (especially the ostensibly matrifocal “pagan” religions), Eastern religions, Native American religions, as well as Judaism and Christianity. It often incorporated aspects of magic, altar building, meditation and dreamwork, divination, pilgrimage, and inevitably the notion of the “goddess,” the supernatural representation of the feminine. She stressed the role of the more general therapeutic/psychological movement, with women’s spirituality being a form of healing and recovery: “In spiritual feminist thought, it is a given that all women need healing: if not from specific illnesses or infirmities, then from the pains suffered as a result of growing up female in a patriarchal world” (109). Therefore, “whatever makes a woman stronger is valid feminist spirituality” (3).
The third principle was “feminism” understood broadly. It blended political and economic concerns with spiritual ones, including women’s rights, income differences, reproductive rights, and so on. In fact, she noted that there was some tension between the secular/political feminists, who preferred to focus on “practical” matters, and the spiritual feminists, who believed that even a political movement necessitated a spiritual foundation. Fourth and finally, she found that membership was particularly English-speaking and affluent. The profile she painted of the movement member was “white, of middle-class origins, fairly well-educated (beyond high school), of Jewish or Christian background (usually, though not always, having had a significant amount of religious training), in their 30s or 40s, and disproportionately lesbian” (18). Together these women organized themselves into “small groups, makeshift organizations, workshops, retreats, training schools, and mail-order courses” and at the extreme “utopian communes,” which served as the institutions for participating in and promoting the movement (11).

The second example of pious female agency in the West goes to—or comes from—the heart of mainstream religion. It is an explicit feminist theology within Christianity. Two of its leading figures are Mary Daly and Rosemary Ruether, both trained as Catholic theologians. In Daly’s books such as her 1968 The Church and the Second Sex, her 1973 Beyond God the Father, and her 1978 Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism, and in Ruether’s 1983 Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology, her 1985 Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities, and her 1992 Gaia and God: An EcoFeminist Theology of Earth, there is an attempt to rehabilitate (or some would say, restore) Christianity from a patriarchal state to a gender-inclusive one. Ruether defined patriarchy as “not only the subordination of
females to males, but the whole structure of Father-ruled society: aristocracy over serfs, masters over slaves, king over subjects, racial overlords over colonized people” (1993: 61).

Patriarchy and misogyny in Christianity and other religions before and since, she reasoned, was a reflection of social institutions and relations, not something inherent in the religions; rather, Christianity was shaped or selectively read and interpreted to reflect and legitimate those unequal gender relations.

Like all vast social and intellectual movements, feminist theology runs in many streams. Some criticize the scriptures for their sexism, while others look to those same scriptures for more gender-inclusive messages. Some speculate on the nature of God, positing an androgynous or a genderless being—anything but a white-bearded man in the sky. Some find a bedrock for a more feminine deity in the person of Mary, while others go so far as to insist that God had/has a female consort (occasionally identified as Asherah) or to find or make room for “the goddess” alongside “the god.” No matter what specific forms it takes, feminist theology illustrates the creativity of religion, the action of female agency to remake women—and in the process remake society and even remake the deity—and the ongoing relevance of religion and sex/gender for each other.

RELIGION AND “ALTERNATIVE GENDERS”

Ironically, I write this final section of the chapter on September 23, which was designated Celebrate Bisexuality Day by bisexual rights activists in 1999 (and officially recognized by Berkeley, California—the first government body to do so—only in 2012). Religions inscribe time
by putting their important dates on calendars, and so do secularists (e.g. Darwin Day), so it is only natural that sex/gender activists would seek to mark themselves into cultural time.

As noted at the outset of this chapter, sex/gender was one of the last domains to receive anthropological treatment, and it continues to be one of the most contentious subjects in American and Western society and politics. Despite the fact that nineteen American states plus the District of Columbia allow gay marriage as of the summer of 2014, much resistance and hostility to homosexuality remains, a great deal of it emanating from religious circles and based on religious principles and scriptures. And of course homosexuality is not the only non-normative gender issue facing religions; there are also bisexuality, transsexualism (including individuals who surgically transform to the “other” gender), and transgenderism (including individuals who in multiple and various ways upset the gender binary).

For instance, Stephen Hunt reports that the Catholic Church persists in regarding homosexuality as a “pathology”; for such sick persons, the Church recommends chastity (since apparently homosexual activity is more offensive than homosexual identity) and therapy. In 1992 the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality in the United States was founded for “the research, therapy and prevention of homosexuality,” and Hunt reckons that “the vast majority of its members are apparently from the evangelical-conservative wing of Christianity” (2009: 2). Indeed, data indicate that almost all (ninety-eight percent) of American evangelicals oppose homosexuality and gay rights.

The objection is clearly theological, a stance typified by the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in the country. The SBC has issued several resolutions in which it rejects homosexuality as a lifestyle “choice” and refers to it as a “manifestation
of a depraved nature,” “a perversion of divine standards and as a violation of nature and natural affections,” and “an abomination in the eyes of God.” The SBC has urged churches not to show approval of homosexuality in any respect.

Although hardly part of the Southern Baptist Convention, the Catholic Charities adoption service of Boston preferred to close in 2006 rather than obey a law banning discrimination against gay and lesbian couples.

Meanwhile, in 1998 a conference of the Anglican Church overwhelmingly passed a resolution (by a vote of 526-70) condemning homosexual relations as “incompatible with Scripture” (8). Anti-gay Christians take a number of inspirations from the Bible, beginning with the paradigmatic fact that Adam and Eve were a heterosexual pair and continuing with references to moral depravity in the tale of Sodom and Gomorrah which permanently established the term “sodomy” for unacceptable sexual acts. The Christian website Gotquestions.com (www.gotquestions.org/Sodom-and-Gomorrah.html) is quite clear and adamant that homosexuality was the reason God poured fiery sulfur on the cities, completely destroying them and all of their inhabitants. To this day, the area where Sodom and Gomorrah were located remains a desolate wasteland. Sodom and Gomorrah serve as a powerful example of how God feels about sin in general, and homosexuality specifically.

Some other passages in the Bible also condemn homosexuality, including Leviticus 11:9-12, Romans 1:18-20, and 1 Corinthians 6:9. Many American Christian religious leaders thus decry the sinfulness of homosexuality, but none as vociferously as the late Fred Phelps of the Westboro Baptist Church (the website of which is literally www.godhatesfags.com), who
picketed the funerals of American soldiers with signs claiming that they died protecting America’s pro-gay culture.

However, as we may expect by now, religions have not been unanimous in their views on homosexuality or other non-normative and non-binary sex/gender categories and practices. Even Christianity does not speak with a single voice on the subject (see below). Indeed, while some religions have been apoplectic about any sex/gender categories other than male and female and any sexual acts other than heterosexual, some religions have been relatively indifferent to the whole matter and some have condoned such categories and acts as special and even sacred.

For example, Endsjo tells that, paradoxically, Buddhism has a tradition of “sacred homosexuality: “Buddhist monasteries in Japan were widely known as places where homosexual love affairs took place…. Some men entered monasteries precisely because of their love for other men” (2011: 122). He also mentions a seventeenth-century author named Ihara Saikaku who wrote that homosexuality was introduced in Shinto mythology by the gods themselves. Likewise, the Greek gods were frequently infatuated by beautiful young men: “Most of the male gods had relationships with young mortal men. Zeus fell so much in love with young Ganymede that he carried him to Olympus. Apollo was deeply in love with the beautiful Hyacinthus, and a rejuvenated Pelops was abducted by a love-smitten Poseidon” (127).

The Abrahamic family of religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), Endsjo assesses, “have traditionally been the most negative and homophobic,” and “Christianity emerges as by the far the most aggressive of the three” (135). While the ancient Hebrews also expressed disapproval
of gender-normative violations (not only in sex-acts but in clothing, etc.), Endsjo reminds us that King David desired and kissed Jonathan, and in later rabbinic Judaism lesbianism was a more serious preoccupation than male homosexuality: some authorities like Maimonides declared corporal punishment for two women in a sexual relationship, but other scholars disqualified such behavior as “sex” at all.

Islam, with its rigid gender rules and roles, is often touted as especially anti-homosexual, although many Muslim societies have long traditions of homoerotic relationships, including the Afghan bacha bazi (literally, “playing with children”) practice in which men train boys to be dancers and sex objects (see the film The Dancing Boys of Afghanistan). Interestingly, such men do not consider themselves “gay” or “homosexual,” any more than the men who have sex with travestis or raeraes do (see above). And in 1977 Unni Wikan described the xanith role in Oman, for male-bodied individuals who were culturally classified as women, who adopted many of the norms of women (such as wearing perfume and make-up), and allegedly functioned as passive sex partners or prostitutes for men—men who considered themselves both heterosexual and pious.

In an important study, Tom Boellstorff contends that while Indonesian society generally disapproves of homosexuality as illness and evil, homosexuality is not so much wrong as “incomprehensible” in Indonesian Muslim thought: “gay Muslim” is, he says, “ungrammatical,” like “square earth” or even more like “earth happy twelve the” (2005: 576). Gay and Muslim simply do not go together. Yet he discovers gay Muslims in Indonesia and asks how they reconcile the two identities. First,
In Islamic thought in Indonesia as elsewhere, the central concept organizing sexuality is that of marriage, which has historically been seen as a contract between families, not just two individuals. The sins against marriage in Islamic doctrine are typically adultery, premarital sex, and prostitution, not male homosexuality, because sex between men is assumed not to lead to children. If male homosexuality is mentioned, it usually takes the form of incidental references rather than sustained commentaries, as reflected in the scholarly literature on Islam in Indonesia.

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In other words, the primary issue is not a man’s sexual behavior but his marital status, which explains why so many ostensibly gay Indonesians marry women. Because of the religious norms, it is unclear whether homosexual acts count as “adultery,” and some male-desiring men assert that their desires make them “unfit” for marriage, which exempts them from Islamic law on the matter. Finally, others interpret that homosexual acts are at worst a minor sin and at best a creation of God: “all forms of desire (nafsu) are planted in each individual by God and represent irresistible forces that cannot be denied, a common view among Indonesian Muslims” (580). For more on homosexuality in Islam, see the 2007 film *A Jihad for Love*.

Outside of the Western/Abrahamic religions, the relationship between sexuality, sex/gender categories, and religion becomes yet more complex. Many cultures, as presented earlier, recognize more than two sexes or genders and provide religious rationales and roles for them. A famous one is the *hijra* or *aravani* in India. Serena Nanda explained that a hijra is anatomically male but rejects categorization as either male or female; as her book is titled, they are neither man nor woman, and they “only become hijras by having their genitals cut off. Emasculation is the *dharm* (religious obligation) of the hijras, and it is this renunciation of male sexuality through
the surgical removal of the organ of male sexuality that is at the heart of the definition of the hijra social identity” (1999: 15).

The *hijra* category makes sense within Hindu notions of spirituality and sexuality. The hijra understands him/herself as a *sannyasin*, an ascetic and sex-renouncer (see above) and also refers to the fact that “Hinduism in general holds that all persons contain within themselves both male and female principles” (21). Moreover, Hinduism holds a belief that there was a third sex, which itself was divided into four categories: the male eunuch, called the “waterless” because he had desiccated testes; the “testicle voided,” so called because he had been castrated; the hermaphrodite; and the “not woman,” or female eunuch (which usually refers to a woman who does not menstruate).

Finally, the god Shiva “incorporates both male and female characteristics” and is himself an ascetic, providing a blueprint for hijra identity. Accordingly, the hijra not only dresses and acts like a woman, but ironically is particularly associated with fertility and divine power. For this reason, they dance at weddings and childbirths—the most auspicious and fertile moments in human life—as well as sometimes serving as passive sex partners for “straight” males.

Also bearing religious connotations was the set of gender categories in Native American societies known collectively (and somewhat insultingly) as *berdache*. One of the great students of Native American gender, Will Roscoe (1998) listed dozens of such terms, such as the Inuit *sipiniq*, the Blackfoot *ake:skassi*, the Apache *nde’sdzan*, the Hopi *ho’vo* or *ho’va*, the Lakota *winkte*, and the Zuni *lhamana*. Walter Williams (1992), himself a gay anthropologist, insisted that all berdaches (he uses the word) he interviewed had engaged in sexual relations with men.
and were therefore “homosexual,” but cross-cultural examination suggests that sexuality was not necessarily the defining trait of these roles. Typically, male-bodied persons adopted some aspects of female display and behavior, perhaps wearing women’s clothing or performing women’s work; in some societies, women might also affect the behavior and display associated with men. They might be heterosexual, homosexual, or celibate. More important than their sexuality was the high esteem in which they were held in many societies.

Most importantly for our purposes, these categories, like the hijra, had or were given a religious meaning. A common umbrella-term for the berdache roles is “Two-Spirit,” suggesting the belief that they embody not only a male or female spirit but both spirits. Although this name only came into wide use in the 1990s, it conveys a positive value, since a person with two spirits is more spiritual than a person with only one. Hence,

In many Native American societies, Two Spirit individuals were traditionally revered as gifted and spiritual people who performed highly respected spiritual, medical, and economic roles. They were ceremonial leaders; they performed the duties of shamans/priests who acted as advisors in conflict resolution, and as medical doctors; they were caretakers and teachers of children; and they served vital economic roles with their cultivation, cooking, and weaving.

(Sheppard and Mayo 2013: 262)

In other words, their special spiritual condition translated no only (or primarily) into a “gender” or “sexual” role but into a collection of religious and social roles. For an example of a Two-Spirit organization, visit nativeout.com/twospirit-rc/two-spirit-101.
Box B.3 The Nádleehí and the Sex/Gender Cosmos of the Navajo

According to Carolyn Epple, the Navajo category of nádleehí highlights the inadequacy of Western terminology for sex/gender while opening up a completely different ontology. She wrote that a male nádleehí “may (to varying degrees) wear women’s clothing; participate in activities associated with women, such as cooking and washing; and have sexual relations with other men. In general this configuration of ‘other-gender’ behaviors has been treated as a single phenomenon across cultures and such individuals have been termed ‘berdache’” (1998: 267). However, she rightly stressed that collapsing the nádleehí and other “third genders” “into a single category has often ignored the variability across Native American cultures and left unexamined the relevance of gender and sexuality” (268). She therefore urged the anthropologically-appropriate step of finding out what nádleehí means to the Navajo and how it fits into their wider scheme of the universe. She offered the challenging assessment that “the role of nádleehí—and possibly of others who share assumed commonalities—is not one of gender at all” (273); “gender” in this sense is a foreign Western concept. In the indigenous understanding, nádleehí was intelligible within what Navajo call Sa’ah Naaghai Bik’eh Hozho or “the natural order.” The fundamental qualities of the natural order, she reported, are that “it is male and female and organizes everything as male and female; it is a living cycle and organizes everything as a cycle; it interconnects everything; through that interconnectedness it cycles everything into everything; and it is an ongoing cycle, since each male or female has the other (i.e., female or male, respectively) into which it can cycle” (276). To elaborate, Sa’ah Naaghai Bik’eh Hozho “can be understood in male aspects, or Sa’ah Naaghai, which include protection, aggressiveness, and building up one’s defenses; and female aspects, or Bik’eh Hozho, which include fruitfulness, creativity, and nurturance” (277). In other words, the very natural order is male-female: “Everything exists in terms of this arrangement: humans, air, and water as well as less tangible things like thought or emotions. All males and females are themselves both male and female” (277). Further, the natural order “is also the continuous cycling of male and female into each other,” even at the individual level. This means that the familiar notion that there is such a “thing” as maleness or femaleness—in dress, in work, in sexuality—“is at odds with many Navajos’ understandings” (278). Rather, the existence of all beings and forces “as both male and female, with male and female cycling into each other...suggests that masculine and feminine are not as completely separate or mutually exclusive as is usually assumed” (278).
Even more, “Because everything exists as both male and female, gender valuation to many Navajos is largely situational, even when it appears in combination with seemingly fixed attributes such as genitalia. While anatomy is often the basis for female or male social, familial, and kinship roles, from another perspective each sex’s genitalia also belongs to the opposite sex” (278-9). The powerful implication of this different way of perceiving gender is that the “situationality of male and female challenges a key assumption made in the use of terminology like berdache, person of alternate gender, gay, and two-spirit. Since what is male or what is female may not be definite, there is no basis for determining whether the individual has the personality aspects, occupations, attire, and other features of only one gender or of both. As such, the ‘two’ cannot be delineated from the ‘one spirit’ or the person of alternate gender, berdache, or gay from everyone else” (279).

gender but go further to defy the Western notion of stable binary gender classification. As Carolyn Epple claimed for the Navajo (see Box B.3), rather than a “third gender,” such identities were part of a very different ontology than the Western/Christian one—one where gender was unstable and even situational. This is why Roscoe emphasized that a better term for such people than two-spirit was changing ones.

A still greater violation of familiar gender and sexual activities and identities, and of the supposed universal religious condemnation of same-sex contact, is societies and religions that not only allow but essentially require same-sex contact. A number of Papua New Guinean groups fall into this category, including the Sambia and the Etoro. We have already learned that the Sambia attributed manhood to a semi-spiritual substance called jerungdu. However, they also believed that boys are born “dry,” without an innate supply of jerungdu-bearing semen. The only source of semen, naturally, was adult men, so boys were told that it was necessary to acquire some of their elders’ male substance by orally stimulating young adult men. This behavior, which has been dubbed “ritual homosexuality” because it was not a permanent identity (neither party considered himself “gay”) and because it was performed as part of initiation and other such religious rituals. Interestingly, while the Sambia made boys into men through oral sex, neighboring societies used anal sex or manual sex (rubbing semen into the boys’ skin)—and each group thought the others’ customs nasty but their own good and right.
Finally, as mentioned at the start of this section, even Christianity is not of one mind about homosexuality and other non-normative genders and sexual acts. Stephen Hunt puts it mildly when he asserts that “Christian stances are now extremely complex and divergent given the explosive mixture of biblical hermeneutics, ‘scientific’ evidence and the extension of human rights issues” (2009: 10). These stances range from “rejecting-punitive” to “rejecting-nonpunitive,” “qualified acceptance,” and “full acceptance” (10). As for the scriptures that appear to vilify homosexuality, liberal Christians “point out that some verses, such as those supporting slavery or the inferiority of women, are now rendered void and against the will and just nature of God. Liberals cite these issues, alongside the redundancy of ancient Judaic laws prohibiting same-sex relations, when arguing for a change in theological views on homosexuality” (6)—illustrating the nearly infinite possibilities of religious interpretation.

Liberals have a still stronger case for toleration, he adds,

in their insistence that negative views by the Church regarding homosexuality have changed in intensity over two millennia. Hostile attitudes, even persecution, have periodically been expressed with varying degrees throughout Christian history. At times religious stances have reflected or endorsed wider cultural attitudes. Lending some credence to the view that the earlier Church was more tolerant of homosexuality than it was in later generations is the evidence that widespread persecutions of homosexuals and other minorities did not occur until the twelfth century.

(6-7)

As we saw above, early Christianity accepted same-sex relationships and even provided liturgies for same-sex marriages.
At the extreme of gender tolerance, “there are those who affirm all aspects of homosexuality and range further in accepting lesbian, bi- and transgender people. LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender]-welcoming church programs make an explicit attempt to include LGBT individuals in church membership and ministry” (13). And just as there is a feminist theology rethinking the relationship between Christianity and women, there is a “queer theology” rethinking the relationship between the religion and non-normative sexuality. Websites like www.queertheology.com and queeringthechurch.com preach the good news of sex/gender inclusiveness in Christianity and provide an assortment of print, digital, and audiovisual resources to promote this goal. Organizations and networks of congregations like DignityUSA (www.dignityusa.org) and Metropolitan Community Churches (mmcchurch.org) are doing the Lord’s work for LGBT people from inside the church.

CONCLUSION

Religion is diverse and culturally constructed. Sex/gender is diverse and culturally constructed. Together, they mutually construct each other in ways that trouble the conventional Western/Christian sex/gender dichotomy and the prevailing Western/Christian understanding of the connection between sex/gender and religion. Further, religion and sex/gender are both composite cultural phenomena, with many internal subvariables and the capacity to absorb or embed elements or modules from other aspects of culture.

Accordingly, some religions envision the spirits or gods themselves as gendered and as engaging in sexual or conjugal/marital relations. For humans, sex is not universally viewed as dirty or sinful; instead, sexual intercourse can have sacred value and use. And in all societies, just as
culture is inscribed in/on the body, so religion is likewise embodied—just as the body is en-
religioned—in a myriad of ways.

Religion does not only leave its mark on the body but also on the society. Knowledge, roles,
tasks, and spaces are distributed across society unevenly by gender, leading to a gendered
division of religious labor. This means that women, even in male-dominated societies and
religions, often have significant religious roles to fill, and we cannot imagine that the only
choices for women are either to be a strong self or to be religious. Rather, female agency and
religious piety can and do intersect; all that is required is for women (like men) to choose to
learn and practice religious values and attitudes. Similarly, not all religions condemn same-sex
sexual or emotional relationships or even believe in two mutually-exclusive genders. And “gay”
or sexually non-normative agency is not utterly incompatible with piety. Tolerant people (LGBT
or not) are finding or inventing ways for LGBTs to be religious and for religion to be LGBT.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Why do many Western/Christian people assume that religion is necessarily hostile to non-heterosexual acts and relationships—and often even to heterosexual acts and relationships?

How do religions function to shape sex/gender categories and behaviors, including human bodies and social spaces and institutions?

How does the anthropological concept of “agency” relate to questions of religious belief and membership on the one hand and sex/gender values and activities (and activism) on the other?

What are some of the conditions and traditions in which sex—including same-sex sex—is not only unobjectionable but actually obligatory, and what does this mean for an anthropological understanding of self, sex, and religion?
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