

## Empowering and engendering 'religion'. A critical perspective on ethnographic holism\*

In the following paper I will argue for a reconsideration and revitalisation of the so-called holistic paradigm in ethnography, and anthropological theory more generally, by drawing on some preliminary results of an ethnographic case study as part of my research in the field of gender and religion. On the one hand these illustrations serve to support a version of ethnographic holism beyond a 'classificatory approach' in which traditional boundaries are both crossed and deconstructed between categories such as religion, the political and the personal, and everyday life. However, I will also be pointing out that as 'ethnographic holism' is a highly multi-interpretable concept, there are also certain 'dangers' involved in an uncritical appropriation, particularly in view of both internal developments within recent anthropological theory and its confrontation with the proliferation of other new disciplines of and thinking on 'culture'.

### **A revitalisation of ethnographic holism?**

Inspired by contemporary discussions on the ethnographical monograph as first and foremost a text or form of discourse, Robert Thornton (1988) explains 'ethnographical holism' as a rhetorical device characterised by a classificatory approach in the ethnographer's 'imagination' or 'fiction' of a social or cultural 'whole'. According to Thornton, this fiction is founded on a mistaken analogy between the social whole ('society' or 'culture') and the text as a rhetorical whole. The latter actually constitutes, rather than being a description or representation of the first, in that the parts or 'chapters' of the ethnographic text are taken to correspond with the mutually determining

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parts of a social 'whole', whether these be groups, institutions, symbols or behavioural patterns.

Whilst Thornton's critique is directed at what he himself terms one of the 'hallmarks' of anthropology as a discipline, a call for a return to a more holistic perspective such as in its minimal definitions in textbook introductions to anthropology – that is, aiming to understand and explain cultural systems by focusing on the way all social or cultural institutions or 'parts' are interrelated (Ferraro 1998: 362) or viewing things 'in the broadest possible context' (Haviland 1996: 13) – could also be argued in view of a possible securing or perhaps even redefinition of the discipline's future. Signe Howell (1997), for example, in an assessment of the somewhat awkward relationship between anthropology and cultural studies, localises the differences in their divergent methodology. The focus of cultural studies is only on 'cultural representations, products and processes' rather than social life, institutions and particularly people and consists of the main divergence between them. Following up on this assessment and critique, it therefore could be argued that anthropology's distinct methodological feature *vis-à-vis* many types of analysis that claim to be situated within the field of cultural studies is precisely its ethnographical holistic view of society or culture, focusing on 'wholes' rather than more particularistic and therefore limited analyses of specific social-cultural phenomena.

In the following paragraphs, I will first be briefly illustrating how such an ethnographical holistic approach proved necessary in my own research. I found such a perspective applicable to all levels of the research process, from epistemological frameworks, through to methodology, for example by focusing on people and practices rather than merely 'texts', and issues of representation. Here however, I show how from the perspective of gender, in the first place I had to cross categorical boundaries at the level of description and analysis, thereby arguing for a kind of ethnographical holism beyond the traditional classificatory approach, while avoiding methodological particularism.

### **Religion as a gendered and political phenomenon. The case of strictly Orthodox Jewish women in Antwerp**

In an account of the problematic relationship between feminism and the study of religion, Rosalind Shaw (1995) identifies some paradigmatic features of religious studies, which sustain an absolute incompatibility between the mainstream discipline and feminist perspectives, preventing the possibility of any kind of paradigmatic shift towards a 'gendering of religious studies'. The typical 'view from above' perspective on religious phenomena not only entails an exaggerated emphasis on religious texts but also a dominant focus on those religious traditions that privilege scripture (usually the so called 'world religions'). A further consequence is that attention is only given to the scholarly elites within these scriptural religious traditions who claim the power and authority of textual production, interpretation and implementation. Traditionally and even today the greater part of these religious specialists consist of privileged men, thereby placing them at the centre of the object under study and relegating many other men – and certainly women – to the periphery, uncounted as religious subjects in their own right. Secondly, according to Shaw, the 'view from above' perspective accompanies a concept of religion as *sui generis*, as 'a discrete and irreducible phenomenon which exists "in and of itself"' (Shaw 1995: 68). Both the 'religion as scripture' and the

*sui generis* understanding of the category 'religion', render a gendered perspective impossible as the vision of the 'uniquely' or 'irreducibly religious' *a priori* excludes the relevance and therefore analysis of all other social, political content and especially the power dimensions in the definition of religion. Religion is conceived of as distinctly apolitical, and therefore cannot be conceived as a gendered phenomenon.

Elaborating on these hypotheses and the broader theoretical and methodological problems in the 'gendering of religious studies' and the (im)possibility of a paradigmatic shift of the mainstream, my research also includes an empirical study of women of the strictly Orthodox Jewish congregation of Antwerp (the Machsike Hadass),<sup>1</sup> in which I attempt to show how such a decontextualised, *sui generis* and categorical notion of religion can be challenged. By applying a gendered perspective, even within a western-European tradition of the so-called 'world religion' and scriptural type, the women in this strongly patriarchal religious tradition no longer appear to be reduced to the site of religious discourse or the status of mere consumers within religious practice. In order to render the strictly Orthodox Jewish women in my case study as religious agents rather than invisible and irrelevant or as the eternal 'other', the abstract and undifferentiated *homo religiosus* in the religious studies approach was challenged by recurring to the perspective of ethnographic holism.

In religious studies 'Judaism' as a type of the *sui generis* category of religion is often studied and represented by its central holy scriptures (the Hebrew bible, the Talmud, and commentaries). For traditionalist<sup>2</sup> Orthodox Jewish communities such as the Hasidim, even in more ethnographical accounts, the focus will often be on those handling and interpreting the texts, the so-called 'scholar's society'. Hereby, the world of the *yeshiva*, rabbis and synagogue – in short the public institutional sphere that is dominated by men – is taken as 'representative' of the traditionalist Jewish religious way of life. From as young as three, strictly Orthodox Jewish boys start to learn Hebrew and visit the *cheder*, where they will be first taught of the stories from tradition and scripture. They later take to Talmudic *lernen* at *yeshiva* and even as married men, the ritual of studying next to prayer, still forms the greatest *mitzvah* or religious commandment the observant male Jew must perform. In taking the masculine for the generic, however, as many feminist critiques of modernist epistemology and methodology have shown to

1 My fieldwork took place from spring 1998 through to autumn 1999 and consisted of in-depth interviews with self-identified Hasidic (from differing groups such as the Belz, Satmar and Ger), 'Hasidic-oriented' and Mitnagdic women, all affiliated with the Machsike Hadass congregation of Antwerp in Belgium. Their ages ranged between 38 and 65 years and they self-identified from 'fairly involved' to the status of high-profile spokespersons within the community, as some of them were *rebbetsins* (wives of rabbis) or anyhow involved in community activities such as teaching, voluntary work or counselling. The empirical data was supplemented by other material such as leaflets and literature on the role of women and Jewish family life and laws, which is distributed and sanctioned by the religious institutions of the community itself. Finally, secondary literature such as novels, which are widely read by women within the community, were analysed.

2 I here use the term 'traditionalist' for the Antwerp community I studied, as distinguished by S. C. Heilman and S. M. Cohen in *Cosmopolitans and parochials. Modern Orthodox Jews in America*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989, in Belcove-Sahlin (1995: 15). Heilman and Cohen distinguish between three wings of Jewish Orthodoxy in the United States: traditionalism (ultra-Orthodox, contra-acculturative); centrists (adaptive acculturative, modern Orthodox) and finally the nominally Orthodox. 'Strictly Orthodox' (Webber 1994) is increasingly replacing the more pejorative 'ultra-Orthodox' in the literature as a general descriptive term for traditionalist Jews such as Hasidim and Mitnagdim, also often referred to as the *haredim* (Heilman 1992).

be the case in many areas of research, such studies fail to address the question how 'religion' might be understood from the perspective of women.

Not until the second decade of the twentieth century did religious education become introduced for Jewish girls, when the first Beit Ya'akov school for girls was established in 1918 in the city of Krakow, Poland. Confronted with the growing assimilation of Jews into the surrounding modern secular society, which particularly young Orthodox women who visited public non-Jewish institutions became receptive to, rabbinical authorities feared for them 'leaving the fold' in their traditional roles as wife and mother and reverted to their acceptance on the formerly exclusively male terrain of religious study. To this date, girls in strictly Orthodox Jewish schools, such as those present in Antwerp, follow a curriculum similar to the very first Beit Ya'akov school in Krakow, where besides the usual secular subjects, they are taught the Bible, ethics, prayer, commentaries, Hebrew grammar and the code of Jewish Law. Within this education however, the study of the Talmud is not deemed necessary for girls, or for their future role as wife and mother. According to Jewish law, women are exempt from a number of positive *mitzvot* (commandments) that are absolutely incumbent upon men. The usual justification for their exemption is that certain of these ritual obligations are tied to fixed times, the performance of which could interfere with women's familial responsibilities in the home. Besides Talmud study, contemporary strictly Orthodox Jewish women do not perform rituals such as the wearing of the *tefillin* and *tzitzit*,<sup>3</sup> the daily recitation of the Shema prayer, the hearing of the shofar and others, which can all be seen as paradigmatic – male – public religious rituals. There are similarly no official religious functions, such as rabbi or judge for women, nor do they enjoy parallel *rites de passage* such as the well-known *bar mitzvah* ceremony, which marks the male transition to religious adulthood and responsibility.

The Jewish resistance to modernity at the beginning of this century in Eastern Europe spurred an expansion of women's role in the religious domain, thus to some extent forcibly and paradoxically accommodating gender transformations in the surrounding society in order to preserve tradition. Present-day strictly Orthodox Jewish communities, like many other traditionalist or fundamentalist religious and religious-nationalist movements, continue to oppose western secular modernism by claiming that traditional gender roles must persist as prescribed by religious law. The further interpretation, practice and enforcement of religious law in the hands of male religious specialists can thus be understood as the dominant authoritative religious discourse constitutive of gender in these communities, legitimising and 'naturalising' the position and roles of women and men through divine sanction.

The women therefore seem to be barred from all forms of control over the production and reproduction of the religious sphere in its institutional and cultural dimensions, positioned as the object only of holy texts, doctrine and religious law. Both in the tradition of feminist and anthropological epistemological premises, only ethnographic research into the standpoints and religious practices of strictly Orthodox Jewish women themselves could lead to an alternative conception of religious agency, thus challenging the limiting and ungendered focus on 'religion as text' in the discipline of religious studies as hypothesised above.

3 *Tefillin* are the two leather boxes containing scriptural passages that are bound to the left arm and on the head and worn during prayer. *Tallit* is the rectangular garment to which the *tzitzit*, fringes are attached, numbering 613, representing the divine commandments.

Referring to Shaw's second consequence of the 'view from above' perspective, namely the notion of religion as a *sui generis* category, I further argue by drawing on my case study for a version of ethnographic holism that crosses certain boundaries that themselves cut across issues of disciplinary boundaries and differences. In moving beyond Thornton's understanding of holism as a 'rhetoric of classification', ethnographic holism can alternatively be understood as a means to cross-classificatory categories that may have been presupposed and remained unquestioned in more traditional anthropological perspectives. The results from my ethnographic case-study suggest that in the first place, at the level of analysis and description, the boundaries between the categories 'religion' and 'politics' were crossed in multiple ways.

### **Crossing categorical boundaries at the level of description and analysis**

Underlining Shaw's critique of religion as a *sui generis* category from the perspective of gender, my empirical research in the first place set out to show religion to be a gendered and therefore in general terms an *intrinsically* political phenomenon. The deconstruction of the universal abstract subject within the religious domain immediately places questions of difference and power differentials as central rather than peripheral to religious traditions and communities. In the community I studied a particular cultural construction of gender clearly functioned as one, if not the main, parameter that determines who does and who does not bear the ontological capacity of access to positions of control and continuation of the tradition, its social structure and its symbols. Many ethnographic studies of women's religiosity within patriarchal religious communities have focused on the ways in which women have resisted or negotiated their prescribed 'subordinated' religious roles, for instance by developing alternative forms of religious agency within or outside the margins of the official religious tradition. The strictly Orthodox Jewish women I interviewed by and large reproduced the religious discourse that positions them outside the official religious institutional structures. However, by virtue of the claim of religion to all aspects of everyday life in this particular tradition, these women do possess certain forms of 'religious capital' that from an analytical viewpoint challenge the boundaries that are often drawn between realms such as religion, the political and the personal, and everyday life.

The fact that these forms of religious agency are mostly situated in the domestic or 'private' realm furthermore contributes to their invisibility and difficulty of ascertainment within ethnographic accounts. Strictly Orthodox Jewish communities are not only highly difficult to access, but also apply their ideology of the separation of the sexes in interacting with the surrounding society so that male researchers are *a priori* usually barred from access to the women and their lives within the female, domestic sphere.

Despite the fact that Jewish religious law defines women only in the way in which they relate to men, my informants were very much cognisant of the laws that seem to construct them as 'other', interpreting these in terms of their 'rights' and illustrated the ways in which they could enforce them in actual practice. The domain of the home as woman's 'place' was not only in no way conceived as inferior, but home and the family were often regarded as an equally if not more important facet of Judaism. Through such *mitzvot* as the obligation to honour one's parents, to celebrate the holidays, the maintenance of the *kashrut*, but also exclusively men's obligations such as to be 'fruitful and

multiply', women's responsibility in building the home, the 'centre of Jewish life', which one of my informants literally called an 'institution', a 'fortress' or even the 'miniature temple', women's role as the 'high priestess' of the home is put at the same religious level as that of men's study and prayer. On the one hand notions such as that of the woman as *ezer kenegdo*, or helpmate for her husband, existing and acting in order to enable him fulfil his holy mission were reproduced, yet simultaneously interpreted as an act of tremendous responsibility, in that the wife is the very 'support pillar' on which all others depend. If a woman did not know how to perform her mitzvot, then her husband would also fail. He has to be sure that all is taken care of at home and his wife 'knows how to cope'. My informants expressed their own religiosity in terms of less tangible, visible, yet equally – or sometimes more important – forms of religious praxis such as creating the right 'atmosphere' and feeling of religion at home, providing the fundamental background of religious education for the young, preparing both girls and boys for their future roles and responsibilities.

In view of the fact that in these traditionalist types of religious communities, 'religion' reaches into the private sphere and ordinary daily life, the role that the woman as a mother and housewife must fulfil is thus elaborated to the fulfilment of a religious role that is seen as on par with the more public religious role of men. Not only were these strictly Orthodox Jewish women shown to be religious agents despite their exclusion from the religious institutional framework and its public roles. A gendered perspective furthermore showed how the sacralisation of sexuality in itself turned out to be a paradigmatic form of female religiosity, placing the category of 'sexuality' and reproduction within a framework of the construction of gender and power as central to an understanding of religion.

Only three of the positive mitzvot apply exclusively to – married – women, the most important of which is the mitzvah of *Tabarat ha-mishpacha* or the laws of family purity. Every month the married Orthodox Jewish woman must pay a visit to the local *mikveh* (ritual bath) where after a period she must cleanse herself ritually of her status as *niddah* (menstruant), including sexual abstinence during her menstruation and seven days thereafter. The laws and the accompanying detailed practices surrounding the ritual of immersion, the period of *niddah* and all forms of interaction between wife and husband all relate to women's reproductive capacity and her sexuality. According to those of my informants willing to speak on this highly private subject, the family purity laws were 'the most important mitzvah of all', referring to the woman's tremendous responsibility in guarding the prescribed ritual purity of the whole family. This also refers to her ability to 'control' men's purity, as the husband who sleeps with a ritually unclean or menstruating wife is also breaking these laws, even though he may not even be informed of the fact. Here again, the ultimate authority in terms of the precise knowledge and interpretations of the rituals and laws do ultimately rest with male religious specialists: the rabbinical authorities.

Through the impact of religious education and changing attitudes to sexuality and gender in the surrounding society, young women are becoming more and more knowledgeable about the 'deeper meanings' behind these practices. Many *rebbetsins* and other women who give young women 'bridal courses' are reinterpreting the laws and traditions surrounding women's sexuality in a positive way, sometimes as even 'empowering' to female religious identity, moving away from the sphere of ignorance and taboo of earlier times. This is connected furthermore with a view of sexuality as a sacred sphere itself, often juxtaposed against the negative emphasis on sexuality in

Christianity. The practice of both protecting and simultaneously celebrating female sexuality was furthermore connected to the requirement of 'modesty' (*tzniut*) in women's demeanour and behaviour. According to many women modesty was the most important religious principle and practice for women, the standard of the female form of piety and that which distinguishes them from others, including non-observant Jews, making it absolutely central to religious identity in general.

With these brief illustrations drawn from my ethnographic case study, I therefore argue that in order to describe this particular religious community, a holistic perspective entailed not only crossing a *sui generis*, classificatory bounded category of 'religion' by relating it to other categories such as gender, politics, the personal, sexual and everyday life, but also to some extent deconstructing the boundaries themselves, that is, making issues of gender, sexuality and power central and intrinsic to the very concept of religion itself.

### **Reifying the 'whole'. Possible theoretical and political dangers of ethnographic holism**

Making my case following an assessment of the failure of religious studies to take a holistic perspective in the sense that 'religion' had been viewed as a *sui generis* category, I would also like to point to some potential pitfalls of a version of ethnographic holism that similarly applies a *sui generis* concept of 'culture'. Such a notion of culture as a bounded and reified 'whole' must be avoided in anthropological theory and especially in referral to the contexts in which it is often appropriated in many political and scholarly discussions on both global and 'multicultural' society.

Sustaining my main argument in favour of ethnographic holism in anthropology, I repeat that a revitalised usage of holism must build upon older premises, yet also incorporate more recent critiques of, and challenges towards, traditional approaches both from within and outside of the discipline. In particular I suggest, for example, that theorising on the so-called 'post-modern or post-structuralist fragmented subject', as often appropriated in many versions of cultural studies and related disciplines but also in much current thinking on the cultural construction of sex and gender, is not necessarily incommensurate with anthropology's premise of ethnographical holism beyond more narrow and therefore limited studies of particular social and cultural phenomena.

Noting the 'uneasy tension' between social constructionism and empiricism in current anthropology, feminist anthropologist Henrietta Moore (1994) precisely critiques anthropology for its adversity towards post-structuralism, deconstructionism and its failure to theorise 'the subject'. As argued in the previous paragraphs, for the case of the 'view from above perspective' in religious studies, Moore explains that the – analogous – traditional subject of anthropological enquiry remains the 'unitary, whole, rational individual which is prototypically male' (Moore 1994: 58). In spite of the recognition of cross-cultural variability in notions of the individual, person and self, according to Moore, the subject remains undifferentiated owing to the fact that anthropology continues to work with *collectivities* made up of singular entities, individuals existing prior to culture. In this particular view of culture and society, the subject is seen as unproblematic in that it only has to be socialised into these inter-variable cultural 'wholes'. I agree with Moore that it is precisely here where anthropology could benefit from some insights from post-structuralist theories, but that this by no

means precludes a holistic ethnographical methodology within an emphasis on the importance of 'context' *vis-à-vis* a limited view on 'culture' as in the study of particularistic cultural phenomena in the sense of 'representations, products and processes'.

A categorical view of distinct cultural 'wholes' following anthropology's preoccupation with, and perhaps overemphasis on, cultural difference, nonetheless also harbours some dangers when this leads to both theoretical and political appropriations of an essentialist and equally *sui generis* notion of culture. In an article on attitudes of mutual indifference between multiculturalism (in and outside the academy) and the discipline of cultural studies on the one hand and anthropology on the other, Terence Turner (1994) argues that the latter could make a constructive critical contribution to the former in their often idealistic and decontextualised concept of culture. Anthropology should, however, also take note of the way 'culture' itself has taken on new meanings and is increasingly deployed as an ideological vehicle in identity politics within contexts of social, political and economical inequality and struggle. Culture is becoming politicised in the sense that the people we study are currently often representing themselves as 'wholes', while underplaying dimensions of power, inequality and domination and the differences *within* communities, and in the worst case justifying these differences by reverting to anthropology's familiar idea of cultural relativism.

These processes are especially characteristic of the identity politics of diverse contemporary traditionalist and fundamentalist religious and/or nationalist movements, as I show in my own research how 'religion' is also politicised and deployed in the maintenance of both the community and its internal axes of difference. Although the strictly Orthodox Jewish women I interviewed often stated that some changes in the 'outside world' had inevitably influenced and 'modernised' their way of life, many claimed this did not imply that they lived any more or less observant lives than their mothers or grandmothers had done; they were simply continuing a traditional way of life. Others admitted to an increase in religious stringency and separatism, particularly as this pertained to gendered behaviour and women's sexuality. Whilst locating change and problems in the surrounding modern, 'permissive' society, in order to 'remain the same' this requires a partaking in active resistance to sexual and gender politics. As in many other contemporary traditionalist and fundamentalist movements, this entails an intensification of gender ideology and behaviour surrounding female reproduction and sexuality – or to be more precise, the control thereof – often symbolically and politically linking woman's 'religious' role as wife and mother to being the 'bearer of the collective' or 'guardian of the nation or tradition' (see e.g. Sahgal and Yuval-Davis 1992).

## Conclusion

With these concluding remarks on the political and theoretical dangers of a version of ethnographic holism that uncritically employs or reproduces an essentialist usage of categories such as 'culture' or 'religion', I hope to have illustrated how in my research a form of critical ethnographic holism that goes beyond a classical classificatory approach does hold. This not only implies cutting across and deconstructing categorical boundaries at the level of analysis in favour of a preservation of the notion of the traditional 'whole'. Methodologically, the idea of women as both active religious and political agents, and as symbols of religious and political discourse proved useful. The



perspective of gender also made it possible to reflect on the differences and similarities between political religious movements and communities. The 'whole' itself must therefore be contextualised in that communities themselves are seen as both internally differentiated, dynamic phenomena, to be analysed in even broader global contexts in a more comparative mode.

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