

## Gender and Religion: Too Quiet a Field of Study?

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### ABSTRACT

Despite the burgeoning of gender and religion studies over the last few decades, very few works address questions of sound and hearing. Yet acoustic and auditory practices and perceptions can be closely linked to patterns of gender differentiation. Drawing on recent research in sound studies, with a focus on voice and vocalization, the article discusses what challenges and enhancements a sonically aware approach might afford.

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### Introduction

Ursula King swept into my life while I was an undergraduate at the University of Leeds in the 1970s. As a young lecturer, she brought an engaging teaching style and passion for the field that helped set me on the road to a career in Religious Studies. I recall writing an essay for her on 'Primitive Religion' where I studied the debates over the concept and its terminology. Believe it or not, I am still writing on indigenous religions (Hackett, 2015, 2017). But Ursula King's greatest impact on my career, as for many other aspiring women religion scholars, was her passionate commitment to feminist studies of religion and gender equality in the profession. Through sheer determination, she brought down the last vestiges of resistance against panels on gender, women, and religion at the International Association for the History of Religions. As a result, many of us were privileged to meet as a group at the IAHR Congress in Rome in 1990. It was a formative, historic experience, with a strong dose of *communitas*. I am sure many of us can still hear this academic force of nature, in her distinctive voice, recounting the 'battles' she fought to make our panel a reality.

Inspired by Ursula King's pioneering work in religion and gender studies over the last few decades, I propose in this essay to address a neglected area of

our research, namely the acoustic and auditory dimensions of gender differentiation. Vivian Lee-Nyitray's earlier observation that religious studies was 'such a quiet field of study' (Nyitray, 2001) is particularly germane to both past and present studies of gender and religion. Just as David Morgan has argued in his influential body of work on visual religion (2005) that we need to pay attention to how religion looks and is seen, I have sought to make the case for how religion sounds and is heard (Hackett, 2011, 2012, 2016, 2018). In the present context, it seems appropriate to visit the triangulation of sound, religion, and gender via the theme of (human) voice and vocalization.

The time is ripe for more sound-critical studies of religion with the turns to multisensoriality and materiality in the study of religion and culture (Promey, 2014; Houtman & Meyer, 2012). A more sonically aware religious studies has the potential to challenge the primacy of visuality in Western scholarship and to consider the cross-cultural, comparative, and critical significance of aurality (Weiner, 2011, 2009). As Birgit Meyer has so cogently argued, the material and media turns in the study of religion give new emphasis to how language, bodies, pictures (and we must add sounds) matter in a concrete, sensorial sense, rather than as mere vehicles of abstract meaning (Meyer, 2012, 40 n. 13). What then might be the outcomes of a sound-based approach for studies of religion and gender, particularly women, in a range of cultural and historical settings? Earlier works analyzed the manifold aspects of women's invisibility. What is currently lacking are more thorough interrogations of the strategies of exclusion that render women inaudible or place limitations on women's sounding and hearing practices in a range of religious and cultural contexts. We need to ask how gender differences are mediated through sound, and constituted and/or naturalized by mythology and theology. In contrast, certain vocal practices associated with women, such as wailing or singing, may be privileged in certain ritual contexts. Moreover, women may assert their spiritual agency through sonic expression, such as by reclaiming ancient matriarchal sounds using overtone chanting, drumming, or remixed vocals and instrumentals. Non-vocal sounds, such as humming, shouting, and crying, may be used by women to disrupt male liturgical dominance.

Before addressing some examples, we need to recognize the complexity of the phenomenon of sound which encompasses sounds produced, transmitted, imagined, and/or heard by one or many persons (Kahn, 1999, 3). Scholars of sound do not limit themselves to musical sounds. Noise and silence are also integral to their object of study, thereby requiring a range of disciplinary perspectives, from (ethno) musicology to the history of technology and culture, phenomenology, aesthetics and acoustic science (Sterne, 2012, Novak & Sakakeeny, 2015). Add to this the difficulties of studying sound because of its fluidity, ephemerality, and temporality, along with the predilections of Western thought for the visual in the human sensorium, and we come closer to understanding the relative absence of scholarship in our field. As noted by Christine Ehrick (2015) in her historical study of women's radio speech in Latin America, '[m]any of us have been well-trained to look for gender; this study asks us to consider what it might mean to listen for it.' In analyzing how sound may be gendered and gender sounded, she posits that '[a]s we learn to

become more 'ear-oriented' scholars, we come to perceive power, oppression and agency in entirely new ways.'

Voice and vocalization provide an optimal starting point for any research on the sonic dimensions of women's religious lives, for, as Ehrick rightly states, the human voice is 'one of the most immediately gendered sound categories' (Ehrick, 2015). It needs to be conceptualized as a 'sonic expression of the gendered body' rather than equated with (feminist) writing or discourse (ibid.). Voice is not just a sonic and material phenomenon but also a powerful metaphor, according to anthropologist Amanda Weidman who has written extensively on gender and the politics of voice in relation to colonial modernity and classical music in south India (2015). She reminds us that in the Western cultural imagination, the physicality of the sound produced by vocal organs is secondary to the notion of the voice as an index or signal of identity, individuality, authenticity, presence, agency, authority, and power. Similarly, Steven Feld et al., contend that the 'physical grain of the voice has a social life' and that 'voice is among the first mechanisms of difference' (Feld et al, 2005, 341).

As in the case of the female body, the female voice is often perceived as dangerously ambiguous. Religious justifications may shape such perceptions. There is a long tradition of trivialization, demonization, and fear of the female voice going back to ancient times (Beard, 2014; Cavarero, 2005; Carson, 1995). Within Orthodox Jewish communities the issue of *kol isha*, the halakhic prohibition on men from listening to a woman's singing voice, still obtains, because of its perceived links to sexual incitement (Berman, 1980). Later scholars debated whether *kol isha* referred to the speaking voice as well as the singing voice, and Maimonides' interpretation shifted the emphasis from the inherent sexuality of women and their voices to the potentially destructive sexuality of unsanctioned women, symbolized through their speaking and singing voices (Koskoff, 2014, 95-96). Some rabbis have declared that it is permissible for a man to hear a recording of a female singer when the singer is not visible to the listener although this is still debated. The ultra-orthodox Lubavitcher women that ethnomusicologist Ellen Koskoff studied in the early 1970s in Brooklyn, New York claimed that the restrictions of *kol isha* were necessary for the community to maintain balance and for women to be protected from their own sexual power (Koskoff, 2014, 96-100). However, even though in theory the Talmudic writings do not restrict men from hearing their wives sing, Koskoff observed that, in practice, married women hardly ever sang in the presence of their husbands for fear of being inadvertently heard by a close male neighbour, relative, or one of their husband's students (ibid. 97). Because of urban living conditions, this meant that virtually all adult (menstruating) women were 'effectively silenced' (ibid.). Incidentally, before Conservative Jewish women were allowed to sing at public rituals in the United States (from the 1970s) some singers had become renowned for their performances of Jewish spiritual music in alternative spaces such as Yiddish American theatre from the end of the 19th century (Friedmann, 2009; Koskoff, 1987, 66). The early women cantors had to modulate their voices to sound more like men, but that has now changed.

Medieval mystic and composer Hildegard of Bingen believed her body to be the vestment of the spirit, with a living voice, and so considered it proper for the body, with its soul, to use its voice to sing praises to God (Holsinger, 2002, 134). She worked through her compositions to fashion a 'female voice' in which to sing, one that was interactive with the divine through inspiration. She succeeded, according to Margot Fassler, in 'making God 'sound' in a woman's voice' (Fassler, 2004, 92-93). Singing for Hildegard was also a deeply embodied performance that reflected both the pleasures and suffering of devotion. Bruce Holsinger contends that approaching Hildegard's conception of music as a somatic, erotic, and often gendered aspect of her visionary life serves to expose the limitations of a more strictly formalistic analysis of her compositions (2002, 102).

The age-old oral tradition of lamenting that combines singing and weeping at moments of transition is dominated by women in many cultures (Bowers 1998). As it often occurs in private or communal settings rather than public ritual contexts it is consequently treated as folk and para-liturgical, rather than liturgical, music. Jane Bernstein emphasizes more the intermediary role of these lamenting women who turn personal mourning into a communal experience, and who mediate the human and spiritual worlds with their intermediary sounds of cries and wails, blurring the boundaries between speech and song (2004, 209-212).

This is well evidenced in Elizabeth Tolbert's study of female vocality and performative efficacy in the Finnish-Karelian lament or *itkurvisi* (1997). She describes how the combination of 'stylized weeping, singing, and ritual speech results in a powerful and moving manner of performance, one that is unique to the lament and to women' (ibid. 180). The lament is characterized as intrinsically feminine because of the presence of texted melody. Women lamenters are said to 'cry with words', as opposed to men who simply 'cry with the eyes' (ibid.). They use a special ritual language appropriate for the dead whether at funerals or remembrance feasts. The lament serves as a bridge between the world of the living and the world of the dead. This performative work of individual grief for the community is, according to Tolbert, conducted 'in an ecstatic manner reminiscent of a shamanistic trance' (ibid. 181). The crying voice, with its balancing of structural elements, improvisatory processes, and affective features, is believed to signal the presence of spiritual power. As noted by Tolbert, 'the expressive qualities of the lamenter's vocality are a sign of both her individuality and her magico-religious power' (ibid. 191). Lament performance is not, as some scholars have argued, a symptom of lack of emotional control or powerlessness. Instead, Tolbert argues, it is a tool of empowerment, for:

it is the very quality of the female lamenting voice, vocality that embodies musical, textual, and iconic expressions of affect, that transforms the powerless crying of an individual woman into the collectively powerful form of 'crying with words,' and expression of courage and beauty that defies helplessness in the face of death (ibid. 192).

While the lament tradition has been disrupted by modernization, new lament contexts are emerging such as at Karelian cultural events. Interestingly, one of the most common topics for lamenters in contemporary Finland is the Karelian refugee experience. The lament performance helps counteract the loss of Karelian culture and homeland, and facilitate new forms of Karelian identity.

Shakira Holt writes about the longstanding association between women and shouting in black Christian communities of struggling populations (Holt 2012). Because the practice involves a range of ecstatic worship behaviours, the 'shouting sphere' tends to be prefigured as feminine. Holt proposes that shouting is not just a religious practice for these women, but is also a 'binary-breaking performance which confounds - if only fleetingly - the divisions which have so often oppressed, menaced, and harmed them' (ibid.).

For examples of modern-day vocal self-fashioning we may consider the divas of contemporary spiritual music whose voices circulate globally thanks to their recordings, websites, and performances (Maxwell, 2003). Artists such as Deva Premal, the German mantra singer known for her meditative New Age music, and Snatam Kaur, the American-Indian Sikh singer and songwriter, and French Canadian vocalist Anael have cultivated a sonic aesthetic that is predominantly feminized, calming, and, for some consumers, healing. The performers represent themselves as 'hyperspiritualized' rather than 'hypersexualized'. Abida Parveen, the great Pakistani Sufi singer who dresses androgynously, stated unambiguously in a press interview 'I'm not a man or a woman, I'm a vehicle for passion.' The listening publics of these global divas encompass both religious devotees (mainly diasporic) and spiritual seekers.

### Concluding Reflections

In her programmatic introduction to *Gender, Religion, and Diversity* (2005), Ursula King writes about the challenging intellectual task of analyzing the often hidden gender patterns in religious life. It is my hope that this brief foray into the potential, if not the necessity, of sonically aware studies of gender and religion constitutes a productive response to Ursula King's call for increasingly refined and differentiated 'mapping' of the 'complex, yet subtle and often invisible [I would add 'inaudible'] lines of connection' between religion and gender (ibid.: 3). By the same token, such research might stimulate much needed attention to gender and religion questions in the interdisciplinary field of sound studies.

In conclusion, making sound a central or aspectual category of analysis can provide fresh angles on how and why women are valued and devalued in specific religious contexts, and on the politics of gender differentiation broadly conceived. It can provide new understanding of how sight, sound, noise, and silence have been gendered, thus serving as functions of power in social relations. It may also be more culturally appropriate in certain environmental contexts where hearing and oral communication predominate, as ethnomusicologist Steven Feld has convincingly shown (Feld, 2012). Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier, in her study of aurality in nineteenth century colonial

Colombia, tellingly suggests that 'ideas about sound, especially the voice, were central to the very definition of life' (2014, 5). As Ursula King has given voice to the significance of gender in the study of religion, may we give voice to the sonic expressions of women (in all their material, physical, and metaphorical diversity) in future studies of gender and religion.

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