To put it schematically: “women” is historically, discursively constructed, and always relative to other categories which themselves change; “women” is a volatile collectivity in which female persons can be very differently positioned. . . . The history of feminism has also been a struggle against over-zealous identifications; and feminism must negotiate the quicksands of “women” which will not allow it to settle on either identities or counter-identities, but which condemn it to an incessant striving for a brief foothold. . . . Can anyone fully inhabit a gender without a degree of horror?1

Gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power.2

Although scholars in the human sciences might try to fix their reference, the terms religion and religions do not belong solely to the academy. Outside of the academic arena, these terms have been taken up and mobilized in conflicts over legal recognition and political empowerment. They have been entangled in . . . historical struggles of possession and dispossession, inclusion and exclusion, domination and resistance.3

“Women” is historically, discursively constructed, and always relative to other categories which themselves change,” Denise Riley observes. Perhaps no one should be more aware of the persuasiveness of this claim than the feminist student of religious traditions—traditions that are themselves often deeply implicated in the historical and discursive construction of “women” as a category. Gender, Joan Scott argues, is
simultaneously the interpretation of perceived sexual difference and a primary means for talking about power. This definition resounds profoundly for those who think about religious discourses and practices. As soon as the divine is analogized to the human realm, gender emerges as a problem of both difference and power. Once that analogy has been mobilized, the two realms seem to oscillate endlessly back and forth, each reflecting and reinscribing the other’s claims. Meanwhile, “religion” is, as David Chidester ably demonstrates in his study of colonialist contexts such as southern Africa, a non-innocent category. Critical feminist readers will no doubt recognize stark parallels between the colonial situation and other political arenas in which the organization of human social life is thoroughly framed by the power to define and to name.

Each of these terms—women, gender, and religion—is inherently unstable. None of them is tied in an unproblematic way to an easily discerned, identified, or fixed object. Any attempt to fix their meanings is tied to complicated political, institutional, and material interests. Each term represents, in other words, a powerfully “troubled” category. This book brings together a wide range of attempts to examine the places where these terms overlap; at the same time, it keeps the provisional status of each of these terms in plain view.

This book comes into being more or less a quarter-century after the first feminist incursions into the academic study of religion, incursions that were part of a broader intellectual and activist movement to generate a field of academic inquiry that has been widely institutionalized as “women’s studies.” To be sure, feminists and women intellectuals/activists/practitioners have most certainly done battle with religious traditions and institutions for much longer than a quarter-century, as historical evidence stretching back into premodern settings can amply attest. But the impact of feminist studies upon the academic study of religion has a shorter history, one that has certain things in common with women’s studies as a whole and that diverges in other ways under the influence of the particular circumstances of the academic study of religion. Feminist work on religion has participated in the multiform strategies taken up by feminist studies as a whole: historical recovery and reconstruction, imaginative reconstitution of traditions and practices, and ideological critique.

But feminist studies in religion have also had their own trajectories that distinguish them from both women’s and gender studies on the one hand and traditional religious studies on the other. In some cases, feminist studies in religion have amplified the attention these fields have focused on a particular problem. For example, where there have been tensions in feminist studies in religion, these have often resided at the border between “insiders” and “outsiders,” raising the question of who has authority to speak about and critique religious traditions and institutions—and whose perspective bears the greater authority. Although these kinds of questions have also troubled religious studies and women’s/gender studies as fields, they have been articulated most trenchantly in feminist studies in religion.

Moreover, feminist studies of religion have brought to women’s/gender studies a serious yet salutary challenge. If “women” has long been recognized as too abstract a category to be useful for analysis, “religion” has rarely been