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*A Garland of Feminist Reflections:
Forty Years of Religious Exploration*

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A Review of *A Garland of Feminist Reflections: Forty Years of Religious Exploration*

Ravenna Michalsen¹

A Garland of Feminist Reflections: Forty Years of Religious Exploration. By Rita M. Gross. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009, viii + 340 pages, ISBN 978-0-520-25586-9 (paper), US \$24.95; ISBN 978-0-520-25585-2 (cloth).

Despite this being essentially a work of retrospection, sections of Rita M. Gross's *A Garland of Feminist Reflections: Forty Years of Religious Exploration* read like a passionate call to action for anyone interested in scholarly integrity. In Chapter Three, titled "Where Have We Been? Where Do We Need to Go?" she writes: "We need to do whatever it takes to undermine the assumption that *gender* is a women's issue, is another term that can be used interchangeably with *women*. Until then, the paradigm shift in modern humanity that is our most basic agenda will still be incomplete" (69). The nineteen previously published essays selected for inclusion in this latest work reflect both Gross's intensity as a scholar as well as the growing spaciousness Buddhist practice has lent to her approach to obstacles, often in the form of negative feedback or lack of support.

A Garland of Feminist Reflections opens with the offering of a previously unpublished autobiographical essay, "How Did This Ever Happen to Me? A Wisconsin Farm Girl Who Became a Buddhist

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Theologian When She Grew Up.” While the title pokes fun at the romance of fairy tales, the essay is unflinchingly realistic. Gross was a precocious young woman raised in rural poverty and “taught to laugh at and scorn all other religious beliefs and worldviews” (24-25). Neither of her parents went to high school and as Gross tells us, “education was not valued at all in my home” (25). Now a professor emerita at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and a senior teacher within both Khandro Rinpoche’s Western sangha and the Shambhala community, Gross had difficulty obtaining books to read throughout her childhood and after the death of her mother, at age twenty-one, she was excommunicated from the Lutheran Church for heresy. Gross then entered the History of Religions graduate program at the University of Chicago in 1965 and this marks the beginning of her academic awakening. At the time of her entrance the Divinity School consisted of “about four hundred students, twelve of whom were women” (29). Six of them entered with Gross.

During graduate school, partially fueled by the growing awareness that Judaism, to which she had converted, was male dominated, Gross embarked on a project examining the religious lives of Aboriginal Australian women. While she found that Western scholars who wrote about Aboriginal Australian religious practices rarely mentioned women, their field notes betrayed observations of a religious life “that was different from that of men and practiced separately” (30). This disparity between data and published presentation eventually led Gross to formulate her observation that androcentric models of scholarship were being employed across the field to the detriment of meaningful research. After encouragement from Mircea Eliade regarding the importance of these observations, something which he, as a man, had never noticed previously, Gross decided to continue her research into the religious lives of women (30). Despite the innovation of her work, which has continued to hold sway for the past thirty years, Gross reports defensive and dismissive attitudes from faculty throughout her

graduate career. One comment in particular appears to haunt Gross and sadly, versions of it can still be heard in the halls of academia: “the generic masculine covers and includes the feminine, thereby making it unnecessary to focus specifically on women” (31).

Her 1975 essay “Androcentrism and Androgyny in the Methodology of History of Religions,” which is based on the conclusions of her doctoral dissertation, opens the book’s section on method. This essay presents Gross’s fundamental argument, that all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences must shift from an androcentric methodology to an androgynous methodology. She writes that the prevailing androcentric view, unconsciously or not, has skewed the gathering of data and subsequent analysis in all work in the history of religions “done to date” (55). The burden of androcentrism is placed squarely on the shoulders of religious historians, not on the religious systems they investigate. Androcentric thinking has three main markers, first, “the male norm and the human norm are collapsed and become identical” and therefore, second, “it is assumed that the generic masculine habit of thought, language, and research is adequate” (57). Finally, and this is the point which Gross pursues at length, when women are considered from the perspective that sex role differentiation does occur in religion, they are “discussed as an *object* exterior to ‘mankind,’ needing to be explained and fitted into one’s worldview” (57). Unfortunately, it is right at this moment that the clarity of her insight into academic androcentrism loses out to her anger and Gross closes her discussion of women as ‘other’ by comparing their (our) ontological and epistemological status to that of “trees, unicorns, deities, or any other object that must be discussed to make experience intelligible” (57).

Gross then suggests an alternative to androcentrism: androgyny, which she loosely defines as “both male and female” (59). This alternative view of humanity and mode of viewing data is a

“fundamental reorientation of consciousness to the deeply internalized realization that, however similar or different men and women may be in any religious situation, however dominant one sex or the other may be, they both represent modes of the human” (60). This paradigm shift, she argues, is necessary and profound, although preliminary. It removes the center-periphery dynamic of men and women as represented in research as well as the insulting, token chapter on women often tacked on to scholarly works. However, this (acknowledged to be) highly abstract conception of an androgynous understanding potentially gives equal weight to male and female roles in any given tradition and, if such equality does not exist within the tradition, such a view is just another mode of skewing. While Gross’s proposal of an androgynous outlook is appealing in its relief from androcentrism, it does not appear to leave room for the mystical element and such figures as angels and *ḍākinīs* often found in religious texts, oral traditions and ritual ceremonies. In the genre of hagiography, for example, female figures may *not* always represent “modes of the human,” and their role might be that of a hagiographic trope furthering the protagonist’s (male or female) story of liberation. Textual exegesis of a medieval hagiography might necessitate the envelopment of one’s personal or scholarly view of gender by that of the author, purported author, protagonist or potential audience of said text in order to better decipher the various rhetorics at work.

Despite her deep involvement with Tibetan Buddhism, its meditational deities, and semi-legendary figures, Gross maintains a deep interest in the *human* religious experience, even if she occasionally mourns the amount of time and effort she has spent on the question of women in religions. In Chapter Three, “Where Have We Been? Where Do We Need to Go?” Gross writes of the importance for men to recognize themselves as gendered beings. She argues for the shift away from the field of women and religion and towards gender and religion. This view is supplemented by Chapter Six (“What Went Wrong?”), in which Gross

describes society thirty years after feminism as a place in which women are now free to be men. While her definition of feminism, “freedom from the prison of gender roles” (112), has not changed, Gross notes that men have not and do not pursue that freedom and that the rhetoric of the women’s movement actually helped to achieve that inertia. In the throes of her argument that men must “defect from the conventional male gender role and become more ‘feminine’” (122), Gross performs a beautiful sleight of hand suggesting that this seemingly impossible task can absolutely be accomplished because women have been defecting from their traditional gender roles for thirty years now.

The other sections of this garland reflect the variety of Gross’s interests: there are essays on Jewish Theology, the Hindu Goddess, Yeshe Tsogyal and Engaged Buddhism. However, whatever the topic, the thread of Gross’s initial methodological move is everpresent, now adorned with forty years of reactions to parse out and reflect upon. As much as this reviewer enjoyed the strength of Gross’s point of view, Chapter Fifteen (“The Clarity in the Anger”), was welcome. Located in the final section of the book, *Buddhist Feminism: Feminist Buddhism*, “The Clarity in the Anger” addresses another theme in Gross’s many years of scholarship and teaching: her anger. Using a Vajrayana Buddhist understanding that clarity and anger are the enlightened and confused forms of the same energy (243), Gross examines her former intense aversion to male-dominant gender practices and the seeming discord between committed Buddhist practice and commitment to a social or political cause.

The result is mixed. While Gross writes that “I have long regarded the surprising discovery that anger about one’s own perceived unjust situation is not helpful to anyone as the most significant statement about Buddhism and feminism that I have ever made” (232), her conclusion to the essay is that one can be involved in causes and

practice, but that a view of the inseparability of relative and absolute truth must be maintained in order to do it skillfully. An admirable view to be sure, but perhaps unreachable. This is a moment when Gross's commitment to Engaged Buddhism grates against the unprejudiced clarity of her more scholarly articles. The underlying assumption here regarding success in social justice issues appears to be that activists should have a committed Buddhist meditation practice. My word choice here is deliberate. Gross problematizes the use of the word "should," writing that it is connected to attachment and passion, the enlightened aspect of which is compassion. "Without the gentling effects of deep spiritual discipline" Gross writes, attachment prevails over compassion and becomes ideological fixation, usually with a helping of anger. Anger is definitely an emotion Gross appears familiar with, but so is her unwavering commitment and passion regarding the cause of feminism. Are her ungentle articles from the beginning of her career rendered less useful because of her own ideological fixation? At least to this reviewer they are not.

Anger, or at the very least dissatisfaction, is a consistent theme within *A Garland of Feminist Reflections*. While she recognizes that an academic career was perhaps the only vocation that allowed her to do the work she wanted to do, Gross also reports frustration and disappointment with academia throughout the course of her career. Teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, she was accused of bragging about her accomplishments in research and publications, and she in turn accuses her former fellow colleagues of a lack of collegiality, appreciation and drive. However, it was the lack of thoughtful students that appears to bother Gross the most. She reports that most of her students did not want their conventional thinking disturbed, and that course evaluations were routinely concerned with how easy the course was, rather than how thought-provoking (36). Given how unhappy she was, it is not a surprise that when offered early retirement, Gross took it.

While readers can sympathize with this uncomfortable situation, the tone of its narration is difficult. There is a brittle quality to Gross's reflections regarding her years at University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, and one gets the distinct impression that personal acrimony in her department long ago got in the way of any mutual appreciation of scholarly achievements.

A Garland of Feminist Reflections is arranged into five sections, and within each section the essays are arranged chronologically. This reviewer recommends the work; the theoretical breakthroughs of 1975 remain fresh, and there is just enough unrefined anger in the earlier essays to make the reading often exciting. Gross's conversion and dedication to Buddhism, girded by her many years of Buddhist scholarship, lend a more thoughtful quality to the later essays and a fairly joyous conclusion to the entire work: "In sum, what is it about being a Buddhist that delights me so much? The profundity of its view, the transformative power of its spiritual disciples, and the results—real change, a transformation from unhappiness to contentment" (318).