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## Interdisciplinarity and Theology: Accidentally Queering the Curriculum in a Master's Seminar

### Abstract

This paper examines some of the challenges and opportunities for “queering the [religion] curriculum” in the context of an interdisciplinary course. I reflect critically on the experience of teaching a wide-ranging seminar-based Master's course in religion and gender with successive groups of students from different disciplinary backgrounds. I focus on two issues: first the connection between interdisciplinarity and the queering of the curriculum, and second the implications of this for teaching queer perspectives in Christian theology specifically (using the example of the work of Marcella Althaus-Reid). The seminar is characterised and used by students as a space in which disciplinary “silences”, around religion as well as around gender, can be broken, and in which different disciplinary schemes for categorisation become mutually destabilising.

In this paper, reflecting on the experience of teaching a specific Master's level course in religion and gender, I examine the connections between interdisciplinarity, queering the curriculum, and the ambiguous or ambivalent placing of theology within the university curriculum. The teaching practices and experiences recounted here have developed organically over several years, in a highly collaborative teaching process in which course and even seminar design have rarely been the sole responsibility of any

member of academic staff— and in which the boundaries between student and staff groups have themselves not always been obvious, with senior graduate students presenting seminars and on one occasion an invited outside “expert” becoming a student.<sup>1</sup> The ‘queering of the curriculum’ recounted here is thus not a deliberate policy but rather an accidental process discovered in retrospect.

Part of the Master’s level programme for Theology and Religious Studies at Leeds is a module entitled Contemporary Issues in Religion and Gender. This module has been on the books since at least the early 2000s, and my involvement with it dates from 2007. It was originally conceived as, and has remained, highly interdisciplinary, drawing on the strengths of a diverse Theology and Religious Studies team; the focus on “religion and gender” establishes the subject matter but not the range of permitted disciplinary approaches, nor yet, indeed, any geographical or tradition-specific focus. Its stated objectives are:

To familiarise students with contemporary debates on religion and gender; to develop advanced critical skills in theology, history and sociology of religions; to teach students to think and express themselves independently about the issues involved.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Staff with significant involvement in the module have included Emma Tomalin, Esther McIntosh, Rebecca O’Loughlin, Adriaan van Klinken, and most recently Caroline Starkey; this paper as well as my teaching on the module reflects and relies on these and other colleagues’ efforts.

<sup>2</sup> THEO5100M Contemporary Issues in Religion and Gender, 2017, <http://webprod3.leeds.ac.uk/catalogue/dynmodules.asp?Y=201718&M=THEO-5100M> (accessed May 2017).

The module is taught in seminar format, focused on set readings, and is examined by extended essay; essay titles are negotiated by the students with the module leader, developed from broad suggested themes.

The student body has varied considerably in size and composition. A significant feature, from the point of view of this roundtable, is that Contemporary Issues in Religion and Gender tends to recruit students from outwith Theology and Religious Studies; indeed, in many years “outside” students have been the majority. They come from programmes run by the university’s Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies (which themselves range across development studies, social policy and cultural studies as well as gender studies and queer studies), and increasingly over the last few years from Arabic, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies. Quite apart from the diversity of disciplinary backgrounds, as Master’s students the participants range from, on the one hand, people in their early twenties coming straight through the education system to, on the other, middle-aged or retired people with one or more careers behind them.

The net effect of all this is that I enter the seminar room, on the first day of this course, to find a group of postgraduate students some of whom have never studied religion before but know a lot about studying gender; some of whom have never studied gender before but know a lot about studying religion (from various different perspectives); and a few of whom have relatively little background in either. This is the point from which what I have termed the accidental queering of the curriculum begins.

I find, asking around the seminar, that many of the students are excited about this class. They have come here for something that they know is important but (so it is expressed) they cannot find elsewhere in the academy – maybe even something they are not supposed to talk about on their other courses. Is it possible – I ask myself as I look around the seminar room – that we have already established a queer space by putting up the title “issues in religion and gender”? We have deliberately not promised to teach within a discipline, nor prescribed an approach or a role that the student has to perform (academic, religious/secular or gendered); but we have gestured towards a space in which there is something not fully accounted for but worth thinking about – some body of questions or some network of relationships of which sense has not yet been made.

As a way into “contemporary issues in religion and gender” and into the articles and texts that we will study, I tell the students some genealogical stories about categories of binary organisation. Not everybody in the room has a background in gender studies, so I start by talking about gender through an examination of modernity’s gendered binaries – reason/emotion, soul/body, public/private. At some point (because many of them have done gender studies) somebody asks about sex/gender. At some point somebody asks about race and colonialism, and whether and to what extent anything I have just said makes sense outside the West. After a while – because not everyone has done theology or religious studies – we talk about religion in relation to the gendered binaries. I consider religion’s privatisation, feminisation and racialisation in modernity, the characterisation of religion and superstition, “folk” and official religion. The theology & religious studies students in the room, in response to the comments of their peers, start raising questions about the category of “religion”.

In the second part of the seminar I put news articles on the table – anything recent that has religion and gender in it – and we talk about the events in question and how they are being represented, trying to hold onto some of the categories for long enough to make them work for us. At this point we are also, usually without noting it, becoming more aware of the different participants’ own formation – gendered, religiously and culturally and academically located – as they respond to the material.

As I began talking about gendered binaries, the whiteboard in the seminar room started out as two neat-ish columns. By the end of the session it is a mess; I do not have enough dimensions to work in. Either I have queered whatever curriculum the students came in with, or they are terminally confused - or, quite possibly, both. The main point is that the subject matter – the conjunction of religion and gender, absent the specification of disciplinary location that might have helped to “discipline” the subject matter back into its categories – produced the mess. We have not even reached the point of defining questions that the course will answer. We have come closer to the point described by Ann Burlein (drawing on Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick and others), “working with students on inventing words and concepts capacious enough to articulate some of this complexity”.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, we are working in the spirit of Burlein’s commitment to noticing how lived human difference exceeds its current conceptualisations; and crossing religion and gender in an interdisciplinary space is part of what got us there. Next week, I tell the students, everything will be more organised; we will be reading proper academic articles.

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<sup>3</sup> Ann Burlein, “Looking for Religion in All the Wrong Places,” *Bulletin of the Study of Religion* 39/4 (2010), 2.

I am joking, though. In practice, as the course progresses we tend to add in more sets of mutually destabilising binaries. Early on, for example, we read Kwok Pui-Lan's critique of Mary Daly's white-feminist theology.<sup>4</sup> It is a good starting point for understanding postcolonial debates about "white men saving brown women from brown men", with which at least some of the students are already familiar (and the others need to be). This in itself would be an important agenda. Focusing on religion, however, queers the pitch again. Given the specific focus of Daly's project and Kwok's critique, this piece makes us spend time talking about theology, feminism, and ethics – and the commitments and obligations of academics.

When I first encountered this module, it was divided rather clearly into "theology" and "religious studies" sections – treating the name of our academic unit as defining a binary rather than a range of approaches. For a range of reasons, mostly pragmatic, that distinction has been increasingly downplayed, and has now disappeared altogether in the framing of the module. The result, however, contrary to what some of my theologian colleagues would fear, has not been the disappearance of theology. Texts like Kwok's, where there is 'theology' (like Daly's) that is profoundly shaped by a religious tradition and savagely critical of it, criticised from perspectives (Kwok's) that the original author did not even consider, call into question any attempt to externalise or exoticise the religious – or even the theological. 'Theology' acquires porous boundaries; you can and should ask critical theological questions regardless of

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<sup>4</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan, "Unbinding our Feet: Saving Brown Women and Postcolonial Religious Discourse," in *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse*, eds. Kwok Pui-Lan and Laura Donaldson (New York: Routledge, 2002), 62-81.

your religious identity or your academic specialisation, because there is theological speech that claims to address or to place your body, your life and your imagination – and possibly your academic work. ‘Religion’ exceeds the boundaries of unitary traditioned religious identities, the sort that make insiders and outsiders easy to separate from each other; it is hard to place either Daly or Kwok on the religious map.

As a theologian I have often, in fact, been nervous about the theological dimensions of the course. When I ran versions of the course that were more focused on theology or included more work with primary texts, I received complaints. Students wanted to know about religion and gender issues as they are lived: more concrete examples, more interaction with social-scientific approaches, and less material that assumed they would care, personally, about how some specific heteropatriarchal texts and traditions could or should be interpreted. Heeding the complaints and starting from the other end - framing the course in terms of the study of religion – I notice, however, that we start discussing the theological questions. This is partly because the students’ own religious – and secular – commitments and experiences enter the space, as they find themselves represented and misrepresented, and look in their texts and traditions for ways to “talk back”. It is also because, more or less by accident, we have waived some of the rules that pertain elsewhere in the academy – both the ones that reproduce heteropatriarchal religious structures (privileging the voices of religious “experts”) and the ones that sideline or silence religion while leaving those structures in place. The undisciplined and visibly diverse character of the ‘religion and gender’ space allows breaches of disciplinary speech rules; it is possible to talk about religion, to “out” one’s own religious commitments, and to be heterodox.



The most direct attention we pay to Christian theology in the course is in the session that focuses most directly on sexuality. We read Marcella Althaus-Reid's wonderfully provocative piece on doing Christology among poor women in Latin America "wearing skirts without underwear".<sup>5</sup> It is striking for a theologian to observe how the reading of Althaus-Reid is opened up by positioning her in an interdisciplinary module on gender and religion. The context obviously offers numerous unusual ways in which to apply her critical tools. For example, by the time we get to this session, we have read articles about honour-based violence, and Althaus-Reid's "indecent" enables connections to be made between the symbolic, the institutional and the interpersonal workings of "honour". The frame of the course also, however, provides a way of engaging with the constructive, perhaps the more theological, aspects of Althaus-Reid's project. Talking about incarnation (via Althaus-Reid) makes a different kind of sense when we have been through numerous ways of understanding and representing and doing justice to bodies – and to encounters with the divine. It is much easier to do Christology with the peasant women in Althaus-Reid's story when we have already read and argued about the devotional practices of Rajasthani women survivors of domestic abuse (but is this really "liberating"? And can you interpret Sita like that?), and about the performance of masculinity by Tablighi 'al-Jamaat adherents in rural Kenya (but this makes it all sound much too nice, protest my British Muslim students – the author is ignoring the religious politics, the ideological agendas... what

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<sup>5</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, "On Wearing Skirts Without Underwear: Poor Women Contesting Christ," in *From Feminist Theology To Indecent Theology: Readings on Poverty, Sexual Identity and God* (London: SCM,2004), 83-94.

is it that they're teaching?).<sup>6</sup> It is easier to relate to indecent theology when we have spent time with a whole range of worked examples of the religiously not-quite-decent – and tested, in a multiply diverse space, the boundaries of decency.

Althaus-Reid's work would more often appear in a theology course. Depending on where she was placed in such a course, she might have to do a lot of the work of queering the curriculum by herself – and indeed her project is framed as a critical and constructive move within Christian theology. In a theology curriculum she might appear as a marginal figure and - going by my experience of discussing her work with Christian theologians – very easy to dismiss altogether. She is easy to dismiss because she is so queer, so “out there”, so “dancing theology in fetish boots”, even though – as I occasionally point out – she has read and engaged, systematically, with the texts a systematic theologian is supposed to read.<sup>7</sup> When Althaus-Reid is in a “religion and gender” course, however, while she is still surprising and creative and boundary-stretching, we do not hear the immediate question about the value or the validity of her project. In other words, the interdisciplinary space might be more hospitable – even to the clearly theological aspects of her work – than is the context of her “home” discipline.

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<sup>6</sup> Tamsin Bradley, “Physical Religious Spaces in the Lives of Rajasthani Village Women: The Ethnographic Study and Practice of Religion in Development,” *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 10/1 (2009), 43-61; Halkano Abdi Wario, “Reforming Men, Refining Umma: Tablīghī Jamā’āt and Novel Visions of Islamic Masculinity,” *Religion and Gender* 2/2 (2012), 231-253.

<sup>7</sup> Lisa Isherwood and Mark Jordan, *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots: Essays in Honour of Marcella Althaus-Reid* (London: SCM, 2010).

One possible conclusion we might draw from this is that queering the curriculum, and particularly queering the theology curriculum, is easier if we are in a position to be able to sit light to disciplinary boundaries. We might also think, however, that (in the higher-level course I have been describing) this only works because I start with a group of students who already have diverse academic expertise related to disciplinary formation. I have the luxury of being able to de-center the academic “expert”, sit light to the various canonical texts of our disciplines – knowing that they are still there if we need them – and bring all the resources in the room to bear on understanding the complexities of religion and gender as it is lived. I am still reflecting on whether and to what extent this sort of practice can be taken beyond the Master’s-level seminar.