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Religion, Gender and the Pluriversity: Creative Imaginations

Ten years ago, I was privileged enough to be involved in the launch of the journal *Religion and Gender*, and to contribute to its inaugural issue. As founding managing editor and later as one of the executive editors, I actively contributed to developing the journal's editorial direction and establishing its reputation as an innovative, interdisciplinary journal at the intersections of the study of religion, gender studies, and adjacent fields and disciplines. Currently no longer involved in the day-to-day management of the journal, as a board member I am delighted to see how the journal has matured and has, indeed, established itself as an important platform for critical scholarship of gender and religion. I extend my warm congratulations to the team that has worked, and is working, hard to achieve this.

The tenth anniversary is an opportunity to look back – and doing so, I particularly regret that we have not been able to stay true to our initial commitment to publish the journal open access and allow for a wide, unrestricted dissemination of its content and to facilitate transparent, global conversations. Blame our naivety, but we genuinely believed that *Religion and Gender* could be part of a broader push towards open access publishing in the Humanities and Social Sciences. However, change in the world of scholarly publishing proved to be slow and difficult. The shift towards open access has faced a variety of economic, political, and strategic challenges and set-backs, resulting in the journal's decision in 2019 to adopt a traditional subscription-based model instead. Although understandable and perhaps unavoidable, this decision raises critical questions about the accessibility, dissemination and societal impact of the academic work that the journal publishes and seeks to promote. These questions are particularly relevant for a journal in a field characterised by 'political origins and edges' (Korte 2011, 11, 14). Perhaps these questions have become even more pertinent in the light of current debates about decolonising academic knowledge production.

Whose knowledge does *Religion and Gender* publish? Who is able to access it? Which structures and norms does it explicitly or implicitly reinforce or interrogate? Where and how does it make an impact? These questions remain important for any academic journal, and certainly so for *Religion and Gender*. Reviewing the journal's record so far, the commitment to addressing this kind of questions is evident, but it is also apparent that more work is to be done with regards to broadening authorship, giving more space to authors of colour and scholars based in the global South, interrogating whiteness and eurocentrism, centring questions of race, engaging with decolonial and Southern theories, and embracing pluriversality. *Religion and Gender* can only be a truly international – that is, global – journal, and a viable, critical field of studies, when it interrogates and helps to transform the 'geopolitics of knowledge' in academia and beyond (Reiter 2018). It is

interesting, in this context, that one sentence in the original profile statement of the journal has been removed from the current version: 'Albeit international in scope, the journal takes seriously that it is situated in contemporary Europe' (Korte 2011, 1). Although dropping this sentence is to be welcomed, if it reflects the journal's ambition to be truly global in scope, one can ask whether no longer acknowledging this situatedness in Europe (or Euro-America) (for instance, in terms of publisher and the majority of its editors and authors) is enough for the decolonial project of 'provincialising Europe', as it can also tacitly perpetuate an implicit Eurocentrism.¹

Decolonial scholarship in the school of South American thinkers such as Enrique Dussel, Arturo Escobar, and Walter D Mignolo has coined the term 'pluriversity' to conceptualise 'a process of knowledge production that is open to epistemic diversity' (Mbembe 2016, 37; also see Sousa 2018). Where the pluriversity seeks to interrogate the 'self-proclaimed universality' of Western epistemologies, and to acknowledge the existence and validity of multiple ways of knowing the world, it first reminds us that the universality of the key terms 'religion' and 'gender' too often is taken for granted. Yet postcolonial scholarship, both in the study of religion and of gender, has demonstrated that these constitutive terms are the product of particular intellectual and epistemological histories and cannot be unproblematically assumed to refer to universal phenomena (for religion, see Chidester 1996, Masuzawa 2005; for gender, see Oyěwùmí 1997; also see Auga 2020). Yet beyond deconstructing and decentring such key concepts and related theories and methodologies, how to imagine alternative, decolonial ways of studying religion and gender?

The journal's original profile statement includes another sentence, which is still in place, stating that *Religion and Gender* 'analyses and reflects critically on gender in its interpretative and imaginative dimensions and as a fundamental principle of social ordering'. I suppose that what is said here about gender also applies to religion, as the other key category of analysis and reflection. Looking back at the ten volumes published so far, it strikes me that the journal appears to have put greater emphasis on the interpretative than on the imaginative dimensions of (the interconnection between) gender and religion. This can possibly be related to a point made in the introduction to the journal's inaugural issue, where it suggests that a tension exists between 'scholarly-analytical approaches to the study of religion and gender' and 'the political origins and edges of classic approaches of gender, sexuality and religion'.² If I am not mistaken, the journal's primary commitment proves to be, in practice, to scholarly analysis more than to politically engaged and socially transformative scholarship (although obviously this binary can be problematised and much of the journal's content reflects that this is a somewhat fluid scale). I wonder whether greater attention to gender and religion, not only as interpretative but also as imaginative categories can help to address and overcome this conundrum in a constructive manner. It is a critical step in a process of decolonisation, that requires us to 'move beyond the critique of colonialism and toward the active construction of the pluriverse through the systematic elaboration of different ontologies and corresponding epistemologies' (Reiter 2018, 5).

Engaging with creative arts, understood in a broad sense, is one vital methodology for exploring the imaginative dimensions of gender and religion and the potential for a re-imagination of these categories and the realities to which they refer. For instance, in my own work, at the intersections of religion and queer studies in African contexts, I have begun to explore the ways in which autobiographical storytelling and creative writing reveal the (re)imaginative potential of religion, gender and sexuality. Thus, the autobiography of a self-declared 'lesbian sangoma' (traditional

¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2008.

² Korte, 2011, 11.

healer) in South Africa who uses the motif of ancestral possession to legitimate her same-sex desire presents an indigenous epistemology of the body, of gender and of sexuality as performative and liminal categories constituted in the sacred (see Nkabinde 2008; also see Van Klinken & Otu, 2017). Somewhat similar, Laura Grillo (2018) demonstrates how indigenous religious ritual provides women in Côte d'Ivoire with a site of a creative arts of resistance, where they perform their 'female genital power' in order to enact moral and spiritual authority. In both cases, the imaginative power of ritual and narrative allow for a reimagination of the categories of gender and religion, as well as of the body and of sexuality, beyond the reified meanings of these categories in Eurocentric thought. Both cases also indicate the political potential of such creative reimagination, as it opens up space for agency and social transformation. My wish for the next decade of *Religion and Gender* is to see the journal grow in the commitment to studying religion and gender in the pluriversity, provincializing Eurocentric knowledges, and exploring the multiple and shifting meanings of 'gender' and 'religion' and of their underlying epistemologies in our contemporary world.

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