

Displacements: Religion, Gender, and the Catachrestic Demands of Postcoloniality

SÍAN MELVILL HAWTHORNE*

Abstract

In this paper I examine the uneasy intersection between 'religion', 'gender' and 'postcoloniality' as it is staged in the sub-field of religion and gender within religious studies and theology. Noting the lack of sustained attention in this field to those postcolonial challenges that might question the prioritization of gender as the site from which critique should be originated, and suggesting that this neglect might compromise the assumption that, because of its alignment with the politics of the marginal, it is comparatively less implicated in colonial knowledge formations, I argue that scholars of religion and gender risk perpetuating imperialist figurations found elsewhere in the academic study of religions. I propose the figure of the catachresis, as theorized by Gayatri Spivak, as a potential step towards displacing those European concept-metaphors and value-codings that both derive from imperialist ideologies and sustain the fiction operational within much, though not all, religion and gender scholarship of a generalizable or normative epistemic subjectivity. I suggest these ideologies ultimately prevent an encounter with the women and men who exist beyond this mode of production and whose priorities may be configured entirely differently to those that seem currently to inform and produce the intellectual itineraries of the field.

Keywords

postcoloniality; religion and gender; catachresis; displacement; value-coding.

Author affiliation

Sian Hawthorne is a Lecturer in Critical Theory in the Department of the Study of Religions, SOAS, University of London. Her research interests lie in the areas

*Correspondence: Department of the Study of Religions, SOAS, University of London, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG, UK. E-mail: sh79@soas.ac.uk

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of intellectual history, narrativity, feminist and postcolonial criticism, and epistemological modelling in the study of religions.

Introduction

Within the academic field of the study of religions, the intimate bonds between Western scholarship, European colonialism, and the discursive production and employment of 'religion' have been well rehearsed.¹ Within feminist and gender studies, there has also been a longstanding, alternately fruitful and vexed set of exchanges between feminist, gender-critical, and postcolonial bodies of theory.² It is thus both curious and troubling that there has been comparatively little engagement in the sub-field of 'religion and gender' (operating predominantly within the fields of religious studies and theology)³ with postcolonial thought, particularly with respect to examining the potential intersections or disjunctures between the field's eponymous objects of study and the constellation of concepts marked as and by 'postcoloniality'. Even a cursory review of literature in the field in the last decade reveals a startling absence of *sustained* or fully systematic reflection on the ways in which the basic operational assumptions, premises, idioms and enunciatory locations of the field might require

¹ See, for example, T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1993; D. Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia 1996; D. Chidester, 'Real and Imagined: Imperial Inventions of Religion in Colonial Southern Africa' in T. Fitzgerald (ed.), *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations*, London: Equinox 2007, 153–176; T. Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000; T. Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007; R. King, *Orientalism and Religion*, London and New York: Routledge 1999; R.T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997; R.T. McCutcheon, 'The Imperial Dynamic in the Study of Religion' in C.R. King (ed.), *Postcolonial America*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2000, 275–302.

² The literature in this respect is vast. For a representative sample see G. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza=La Frontera*, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books 1987; R. Chow, "'It's You and Not Me": Dominations and "Othering" in Theorizing the "Third World"' in E. Weed (ed.), *Coming to Terms: Feminism, Theory, Politics*, New York and London: Routledge 1989, 152–161; T.T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1989; C.T. Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes' in C.T. Mohanty, A. Russo and L. Torres (eds.), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1991, 51–79; C. Moraga and G. Anzaldúa (eds.), *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour*. Watertown, MA: Persephone Press 1983; U. Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures. Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism*, New York and London: Routledge 1997; R.S. Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*, London: Routledge 1993.

³ I will clarify below in more detail and precision what I intend by the phrase 'field of religion and gender', but in the interim it should suffice to say that I am broadly addressing, though not necessarily confining myself to religion and gender scholarship within the intellectual environment – I hesitate to refer to it as a 'discipline' – in which I am embedded and to which I am most committed, namely the academic study of religions.

reformulation, revision, or even rejection in light of the compelling epistemological and ontological challenges posed by a variety of postcolonialisms. Durre Ahmed's volume *Gendering the Spirit: Women, Religion, and the Post-Colonial Response* (2001), Kwok Pui-Lan and Laura Donaldson's collection of essays *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse* (2002), and Ursula King and Tina Beattie's edited volume *Gender, Religion and Diversity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (2004) are virtually lone voices in what appears increasingly to be the wilderness of feminist and gender-critical engagements with religion inasmuch as these have failed to confront their parochial, possibly violent appropriations of 'the other' 'over there'. Even as I invoke the Judaeo-Christian metaphor of a voice in the wilderness redolent with its soteriological call, I must admit the invisible force of my own Christian background, daughter of missionaries in India, which bequeaths me a vocabulary that carries a weight of colonial history. Indeed, Laura Donaldson reminds us of the 'crucial role of Christianity in promoting the Anglo-European imperialist project' and warns that 'one cannot overestimate the historical influence of the Christian tradition in disseminating imperialist ideologies'.⁴ It is precisely the repeated, perhaps unwitting, dissemination of 'imperialist ideologies' by scholars of religion and gender that I believe lies behind their relative neglect of postcolonial reflection and which is my concern in this paper. As Kwok and Donaldson caution, 'without critical attention to colonial representation and epistemic violence, feminist scholarship in religion has the danger of replicating the colonial gaze in the name of serving a feminist agenda'.⁵ Morny Joy has sounded a similar warning in her article 'Postcolonial Reflections: Challenges for Religious Studies' (2001) regarding the need for scholars in the study of religions to attend to the postcolonial nature of their own position and, by way of example, to those women who are marked as the field's objects but who insist on an enunciative position at odds with this imposed object status. Joy charts a cogent set of responses to this positioning by some postcolonial female scholars, who – against the grain of various imperialist, universalist renderings of subjectivity or the ostensibly benevolent yet coercive operations of white feminism⁶ – insist on the specificity of their own complex, mobile subjectivities; these are neither unreflexive

⁴ L.E. Donaldson, 'God, Gold, and Gender' in L. Donaldson and Kwok P-I. (eds.), *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse*, London and New York: Routledge 2002, 5.

⁵ L.E. Donaldson and P-I. Kwok, 'Introduction' in *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse*, 2–3.

⁶ The term 'white feminism' is employed as a general term in critical race and black feminist theory to refer to the failure of many ethnically white feminists to acknowledge their privilege, evidenced in their alignment of misogyny and racism as straightforwardly analogous forms of oppression. It is used to unmask the assumptions that direct this equation of misogyny and racism as proceeding from, and enabled by white privilege. See, for example, H. Carby, 'White Woman Listen: Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood' in The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham (ed.), *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in Seventies Britain*, London: Hutchinson 1982, 212–235; A. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, New York: Random House 1981; bell hooks, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, Boston: South End Press 1981; G. Joseph and J. Lewis (eds.), *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives*, New York: Anchor Press 1981.

imitations of the western metropole, nor dialectically constructed antagonisms that leave oppressive structurations intact. Instead, as Joy outlines, they are learning opportunities extending from the entangled nature of the subject as instantiated in interactions between ‘two autonomous human beings’. Joy suggests that attention to these enunciations is a precondition for what she evocatively names ‘intellectual adequacy in a postcolonial world’.⁷ The question of adequacy is one that bears directly on the nature of the catachresis (as postcolonial practice) that I wish to explore below. Moreover, it also speaks to the nature of the task that I will suggest is a necessary undertaking – that of displacement – in tackling the question of the propriety of aligning the three terms ‘religion, gender, and postcoloniality’ inasmuch as they can be assumed to be coeval categories sharing a degree of family resemblance.

An overdue question that confronts scholars in the field of religion and gender today is that of the necessity or advantages of thinking ‘religion’, ‘gender’ and ‘postcoloniality’ together, and when they are placed in proximity what the nature of that placement might be: ontological, epistemological or an amalgamation that sees these as always already entangled? In seeking intellectual adequacy, do we not need to ask what imperatives demand the assemblage of these categories and identifications, or what constraints or ethical obligations might require their dispersal and disaffiliation? I have been wondering whose categories ‘religion’, ‘gender’, and ‘postcoloniality’ are. Can their ownership be traced and what might the implications of identifying such a proprietor be for the field of religion and gender? On the one hand each term is operationalized in various intellectual contexts – that is, not only within religious studies or theology – as an epistemological signifier bearing some relation, however heterogeneous, to a concrete material reality such that whole bodies of knowledge are erected on their foundations; on the other hand they are furiously contested on the basis of that very heterogeneity which is taken as signifying an effective contentlessness or politically suspect and/or staged character. Moreover, they bear ontological capital: they are identity markers in which a variety of diverse populations either invest or contest themselves, claim or reject their framing. By way of seeing the entangled nature of the *ontic* and *epistemic*, the case of ‘religion’ can prove instructive. In what follows, I want to outline briefly a broadly Asadian understanding of historical operationalization of ‘religion’ under the sign of secularism and within colonial knowledge formations in order to track the ways in which this particular genealogy continues to play itself out in the work of religion and gender scholars when we disregard or domesticate postcolonial challenges to the stability or priority of our eponymous foci.

Genealogies of Religion: The Fraternity of Secularism and Colonialism

Eduardo Mendieta has suggested that ‘How the West allegedly became secular is a story not just about the containment of religion within the West, but also...

⁷ M. Joy, ‘Postcolonial Reflections: Challenges for Religious Studies’ in *Method & Theory in the Study of Religions* 13:2 (2001), 177–195: 183.

about what distinguishes the West from the rest'.⁸ The Enlightenment master narrative of reason as both the foundation and the pinnacle of 'civilization' relied on the notion that reason had conquered or contained religion. 'Religion' insofar as it implied a simultaneously temporal and spatial valuation, thus operated as a negative signifier in a series of conceptual dichotomies – public/private, secular/religious, religion/state – that were fundamental to the self-understanding of European modernity. For the historian and anthropologist of religion Daniel Dubuisson, the category of religion was absolutely fundamental for the creation and nourishment of the idea of the Occident as world-historical vanguard:

Created by the West, enshrined in Western epistemology, and central to its identity, the concept of religion eventually came to be the core of the Western worldview. Since this notion is intrinsically linked to all the philosophies, complementary or competing, that have been invented in the West, the West cannot, at the risk of its own disintegration, do without it, because these global conceptions would then decompose into scattered or juxtaposed fragments.... Would not abandoning the idea of religion be the equivalent for Western thought of abdicating part of its intellectual hegemony over the world?⁹

Modernity, narrativized as the Age of Reason, required a contrastive foil that would necessitate and ordain its doctrines of progress and historicism; the west could point to its defeat of 'superstition' as the means by which it had achieved the triumphs of industrialization. By asserting a distance from the atavism, despotism, and irrationality religion was taken to represent, the west was, moreover, able to distinguish itself philosophically and materially from those non-western societies and cultures it set out to subjugate. However, Dubuisson here hints not only at the role that conceptions of religion played in securing the west as the best so to speak, but also at the religious origins of secular modernity. One of the seemingly founding gestures of the Enlightenment, the assertion of the human individual as autonomous, rational, and interior, was unthinkable without the splenetic programme of the Protestant Reformation which had initiated a slow revolution in which previously unassailable articles of faith, particularly the location of the site of truth, were challenged and reconceived. The mediating authority of the clergy was displaced such that interpretive responsibility

⁸ E. Mendieta, 'Imperial Somatics and Genealogies of Religion: How We Never Became Secular' in P. Bilimoria and A.B. Irvine (eds.) *Postcolonial Philosophy of Religion*, Dordrecht: Springer 2009, 236. While I am citing Mendieta's work here, I should note that the framework and hermeneutic lens he employs is derived from Talal Asad's elegant rendering of the conjoined genealogy of religion and secularism that has proven foundational to what I have named elsewhere as the 'political turn' (see S. Hawthorne, 'An Outlaw Ethics for the Study of Religions: Maternity and the Dialogic Subject in Julia Kristeva's "Stabat Mater"' in *Culture and Dialogue* 3:1 (2013), 127–151: 127) in the academic field of the study of religions as well of course in the adjacent fields of anthropology, sociology, history etc. See particularly T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (cited above) and *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2003.

⁹ D. Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, trans. William Sayers, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 2003, 94.

now lay with the individual and state religion replaced global Catholicism shifting the balance of power towards the nation state. The full implications of the principle of an individual's autonomous judgment in matters of religion were slowly to be realised in the Enlightenment elevation of human reason. As the centre of gravity shifted from clerical authority to the individual as arbiter of salvation, it was simply a matter of time before the emphasis on human autonomy in relationship to the divine proceeded to an eventual rejection of the foundational veracity of the Christian faith. Religion no longer warranted a privileged place in the public sphere; it was stripped of its historical role as arbiter in those public institutions that were to legislate truth and power. The state took over the roles of education, healthcare, and welfare that the Church had historically played, and religion was subsequently domesticated as a matter for the individual's conscience. This privatization of religion constituted its demotion from having permeated every aspect of life to now being segregated from political, economic, and intellectual realms.

It is worth acknowledging the gendered dynamics of this redistribution. Aune et al. point to the masculinized character of secular modernity when they note that its

core characteristics ... – rationalization, separation of church and state, bureaucratization, industrialization, capitalism – were mainly driven forward in the public arena by men. The division of women and men into 'separate spheres', coupled with the privatization of religion as it lost its social influence, feminized religion, connecting it with women's activities in the private sphere.¹⁰

Scholars in the field of religion and gender have, of course, recognized the dangers of such an alignment and have worked within the feminist rubric of the 'personal is political' to dismantle its logic and to rescue female religiosity from the trivialization that its domestication appears to imply. However, resisting the equation of the feminized nature of privatized religion with that which is marginal – for example, by insisting that scholars of religion should reform the androcentric fiction that idealizes (and idolizes) a normative male religious subject and ignores the differential accounts of religiosity that result from the purported specificity of non-normative subjects – has risked reinscribing the priority of the public sphere inasmuch as the demand for the recognition of women's religious expression as political practice reinforces the assumption that the public arena is the only space wherein civic recognition is possible. It has also, as I will elaborate below, presumed a universalizable model of gender configured according to what is in fact the ethnocentrically particular history of post-Enlightenment politico-philosophical conceptuality marked by preoccupations with emancipation, civil rights, and individual agency and autonomy.

With the spatial distillation of religion to the private sphere in the service of European secularism, temporality was also redistributed in the western (historicist) imaginary and this in turn affected a different redistribution of space: conceived of as sequential and inexorable, secularism marked a teleological movement in time from primitive reliance on the erroneous reasoning that religion represented to the civilized and civilizing present secured by reliable rationality. In the aftermath

¹⁰ K. Aune, S. Sharma, and G. Vincett, (eds.) *Women and Religion in the West: Challenging Secularization*, Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2008, 5.

of the Enlightenment, the use of the term 'religion' to classify worldviews at seeming odds with secular modernity indicated an *a priori* division between superstition and reason, the past and present, and, most significantly, between 'us' and 'them'. Thus, the mobilizing narratives of western secularism – the autonomous subject, the conquest of religion, and the rise of scientific empiricism as conveyor of truth – carried with them what Mendieta refers to as the 'colonial and imperial underside of modernity'.¹¹ 'Religion' once more played a pivotal role in orienting western ontology, enabling a distinction to be conjured between the enlightened nature of European modernity and the 'religious' (read: erroneous, primitive, and degenerate) worldviews of colonized populations. The contrastive function of 'religion' served in this case as the ground of possibility for the colonial imaginary: that of the European duty to civilize.

What is too easily forgotten, and what Talal Asad has done so much to remind us, is the extent to which 'religion' was an ethnocentric and normative descriptor; the contemporary common-sense notion of religion's universality obscures the history of its production and its subsequent violent inscription on cultural practices, traditions, and conceptual schemas quite alien to the specificity of its European provenance. The representation of non-western traditions and worldviews as 'religions' interpellated them into a highly provincialized debate that not only restricted their possible modes of articulation and signification but also predetermined their reception and dissemination. Thus to use the term 'religion' to refer to non-western traditions is to subject them to a conceptual regime that always already implies their inferiority whilst at the same time mistakenly assuming a shared referentiality, that of the agonistic dichotomization of the religious and the secular realms characteristic of post-Enlightenment European history. The west's struggles to overcome religion were struggles to overcome Christianity but Christianity was nonetheless the primogenitive model for those traditions we now understand as religious. The effect of taking Christianity as a prototype of 'religion' meant that the parameters for what counts as religion were determined on the extent to which a tradition or practice conformed to the Christian model wherein belief in a transcendent deity is an essential feature. In the context of the colonial imposition of the Christian prototype, it should be noted that praxis or kinship networks, rather than creedal belief, were far more often the basis for participation in those non-Christian traditions that were translated as 'religious'. Moreover, the modern Cartesian preference for interiority privileged belief as the essence of religiosity, precisely a repetition of the Enlightenment privatization of the religious, wherein it is ideally sequestered from the public realm of the political: an emphasis on belief stresses the internal, personal dimensions of a creedal idiom and implies that all other spheres of human activity – political, cultural, intellectual or economic – are protected from the menacing cognitive modalities that bear the signature of the 'religious'.¹²

Similar to the privileging of belief was the assumption of the centrality of a canonical textual tradition as a defining marker of religion. As Richard King

¹¹ E. Mendieta, 'Imperial Somatics', 238.

¹² This segregation is doubly problematic because it not only marginalizes and disarms the significance of the religious sphere for debates in the public domain which 'religion' nonetheless structures and originates, it also effectively protects all 'religious' traditions from public scrutiny and criticism in the marketplace of ideas.

has argued in the context of the colonial translation of 'religion' into the South Asian context,

'religion' and the related group of concepts and orientations that cluster around it ... functioned as *prescriptive* models or blueprints This is no more apparent than in the tendency...to locate 'authentic religiosity' within the sacred texts of a tradition and in the interpretation of prescriptive statements within those texts as descriptive accounts of historical truth.¹³

Here King draws attention to the residual aftermath of the colonial imposition of a highly Christianized understanding of religion. Inasmuch as India can serve as representative, the translation of a – by now – obscurely Christianized '*religio*' into the rich and layered discursivity of subcontinental Asia reduced it to a crude homogeneity which could then be divided into discrete units on the basis of presumed differences in doctrine derived from constructed textual traditions – Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Jaina, Buddhist etc. – indirectly enabling the colonial policy of divide and rule. The various colonial demands for the collation of texts as the locus of religiosity – reflecting, it should be noted, the Protestant preference for literacy – had the further effect of sanctioning and sacralizing high-caste Brahmanical representations of social order and conservative gender valuations. Thus the prescriptive character of 'religion', its differentiation from secularity as embedded within colonial knowledge formations, and its fabrication of distinct textual traditions, gave rise to a number of new creations: Hinduism (a term coined by the British evangelical Charles Grant who advocated a robust programme of Christianization in the 1770s), and 'Buddhism' and 'Taoism' in the 1820s.¹⁴ Their codification as *religions* did not describe some pre-existent unity but rather signalled a deliberate and inventive act of assemblage of diverse elements into a seemingly coherent whole on the model of Christianity.¹⁵

However, even if 'religion' has been a colonial-cum-scholarly invention, what now must be understood is its postcolonial nature: its function after the fact as a strategic mechanism for collective identification, and its active task of (re)translation within postcolonial frameworks where social categories are remade and put to work as acts of resistance, displacement, and creation. Thus, in a postcolonial context 'religion' may become the sign of hybridity carrying with it both the history of its invention and the tactical (mis)appropriation of colonial conceptuality. Whilst abandoning the terminology of 'religion' might satisfy the critique of the colonial invention/imposition of 'religion', it would inevitably ignore the creative, transformative and resistant nature of postcoloniality. Homi Bhabha has suggested, for example, a modelling of hybridity as resistance to colonial authority by colonized populations through the practice of subversive mimicry.¹⁶ For Bhabha, anti-colonial 'resistance' 'is not necessarily

¹³ R. King, 'Imagining Religions in India: Colonialism and the Mapping of South Asian History and Culture' in M. Dressler and A. Mandair (eds.), *Secularism and Religion-Making*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 2011, 37–61: 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ For a compelling analysis of the effect of the colonial and neo-colonial translation of religion on the Sikh tradition see A.P.S. Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation*, New York: Columbia University Press 2009.

¹⁶ H.K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge 2004, 101, 121–124.

an oppositional act of political intention, nor...the simple negation or exclusion of the "content" of another culture.... It is the effect of an ambivalence produced with the rules of recognition of dominating discourses'.¹⁷ Thus, the appropriation of 'religion' as an identity term whose content is remade as a consequence indicates that colonized populations' resistance to and re-employment of colonial conceptuality ensured that this conceptuality was also acted upon, transformed, and subverted. The ambivalence affected in the central or identity term – religion – is exemplified for Bhabha in an early 19th-century missionary register which reports the encounter of the missionary Anund Messeh with an assembly of Indian converts to Christianity near Delhi:

He found about 500 people, men, women and children ... in reading and conversation. He went up to an elderly looking man ... 'Pray, who are all these people?....' 'We are poor and lowly, and we read and love this book'.... Anund, on opening the book, perceived it to be the Gospel of our Lord, translated into the Hindoostanee Tongue.... 'These books', said Anund, 'teach the religion of the European Sahibs. It is THEIR book; and they printed it in our language, for our use'. 'Ah! no', replied the stranger, 'that cannot be for they eat flesh'.... [Anund] explained to them the nature of the Sacrament and of Baptism; in answer to which they replied, 'We are willing to be baptized, but we will never take the Sacrament ... because the Europeans eat cow's flesh'.¹⁸

Bhabha understands the tale to epitomize a form of native subversion of the terms of the colonizing religion; the Indian converts are prepared to adopt some aspects of Christianity but are not willing to do so wholesale. As Bhabha puts it, 'in embracing the Christian religion they never entirely renounce their superstitions towards which they always keep a secret bent'.¹⁹ Thus, the native Indian embrace of the Christian faith via hybrid demands, as depicted in this case, figures a subversion of Christianity, constituting a form of resistance that is more dynamic than a straightforward repudiation or negation because it is in the gestures of hybridity and mimicry that the colonizing idiom is reworked and transformed. Christianity is, as a consequence, particularized and subordinated to a local idiom. The hybridity that characterizes this case achieves the displacement of the Gospel, 'the English book', and with it, the colonial claim to universality. As Bhabha suggests, 'If the appearance of the English book is read as a production of colonial hybridity, then it no longer simply commands authority. It gives rise [instead] to a series of questions of authority'.²⁰ The subterranean theme of resistant displacement that these forms of colonized appropriation appear to cite is one to which I will return below, particularly in order to assess the extent to which, as strategic responses to the oppressive weight of colonial conceptuality, they are successful. However, I first want to examine the ways in which the academic field of religion and gender (within, although not entirely restricted to, religious studies) in its insistence on the universality of 'gender', might unwittingly, reproduce the colonial dynamic directing the secularist valuation of religion that I have traced here.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 102–104.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

The Value-Coding of Religion and Gender

Religion and gender as a distinct field of study within religious studies²¹ has been staged as a critical intervention against the exclusion of gender as an analytic cat-

²¹ I want here to clarify, finally, and probably rather too belatedly, what I am framing in this paper as the 'field of religion and gender' given that it has for me a specificity that can be – and has been – contested in respect of whether that scholarship which might be broadly read as concerned with the themes of religion and gender in a multidisciplinary context should be subject to the critique I am pursuing. I would firstly acknowledge that as a scholar who has trained in two *interdisciplinary* fields (Religious Studies and Gender Studies), I understand well that drawing disciplinary boundaries is a fraught, unfortunate, but often institutionally necessary and practical business. I do not primarily mean 'field', therefore, in the more general sense of a kind of multidisciplinary cluster of scholarship focused on the broad themes of religion and gender as conducted as a specialist focus in disciplines such as anthropology or sociology beyond the field of religious studies. The different genealogies and priorities of these fields and the types of intellectual contestations and geo-political demands that have produced their research agendas have often meant that 'religion and gender' scholarship therein has tended, in the main, to be fairly well attuned to the substance and detail of postcolonial critique, producing as a consequence often very nuanced and carefully rendered representations that largely, although not entirely, avoid the problematic I am calling attention to in this paper. I have in mind here, as a particular and most obvious example, the contemporary vigorous debates in multidisciplinary scholarship on Islam, modernity, gender, and secularism that have grown apace since the beginning of this century. I intend my remarks in this paper, rather, to be mainly, though not solely, directed towards my own field within religious studies, one that has laboured since the mid-1960s to carve out a space for considerations of religion and gender informed by the feminist ethos of description and prescription that emerged out of second-wave feminist political practice and which has been directed at reforming both a variety of confessional traditions and the institutionalised, academic study of religions. I have charted the genealogy of this field elsewhere (see S. Hawthorne 'Religion and Gender: Contentious Traditions' in P. Clarke, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 2008, 134–151; 'Religion and Gender' in F. Malti-Douglas, et al. eds. *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*, Farrington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference, Thompson Gale 2007; 'Feminism: Feminism, Gender Studies, and Religion' and 'Gender & Religion: History of Study' in L. Jones, et al. eds. *Encyclopedia of Religions*, Second Edition, vols. 3/5. Farrington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale 2005, 3023–3027; 3310–3318) and would argue that it has been in fact the scholars in this field who have done the most to establish the study of religion and gender as a legitimate, important, and *distinctive* academic field (framed in terms of curricula, degree programmes, research centres, publication and conference foci, etc.), indeed to the extent that some of the work in disciplines outside the study of religion have often ended up reinventing the wheels turned by feminist scholars in religious studies and theology some decades ago. However, for all the pioneering and inspiring work that has been conducted in this field, it remains my view that there has been a regrettable dearth of postcolonial reflection as a mainstream activity in the field inasmuch as the basic premises, assumptions, and trajectories derived from the field's feminist origins have not been subjected to anything approaching a systematic, collective, and fully reflexive assessment wherein the epistemological and ontological implications of postcolonial critique are taken seriously. That said, I would also maintain in more general terms that any scholarship identifying itself as invested in the categories of religion and gender that fails to assess its working assumptions in response to the demands of postcoloniality is also a target of critique in this paper.

egory within the broader interdisciplinary study of religions. Emerging from the pioneering work of feminist scholarship in theology, it has tended to share and replicate feminist commitments to retrieving women's voices as well as to examining critically men's voices as specifically gendered and heterogeneous, and to work for the reform of the conceptual domains that reproduce various forms of gendered (and indeed sexual) exclusions. Having noticed the relative silence that seems to attend the aggregation of 'religion', 'gender', and 'postcoloniality' – as though their affiliation is so obvious as to pass without remark such that it literally passes without remark – I began to wonder if this was a sign, inherited from the historical feminist framing of the field, of a complacent assumption that all marginalities share a family resemblance such that experiences of exclusion along the intersectional spectrum of gender, sexuality, race, class, and all the other 'others', are traded as so many badges of honour. It seems that the symptoms of this complacency can be tracked through a variety of practices, only two of which I will address here, but both of which replicate what I believe can be read as a colonialist dynamic: (1) the tendency to employ an ethnocentric model of gender masquerading as universal but in fact informed predominantly by western feminist assumptions and political agendas which have selectively appropriated non-western traditions and models in their service; (2) a propensity to conflate feminist and postcolonial interests and experiences as similar if not the same.

A notable example (by virtue of its influence and prevalence in 'religion and gender' curricula in religious studies) in respect of the first practice is the work of the self-identified feminist Buddhist theologian, Rita Gross who claims that her work constitutes a 'feminist revalorization of Buddhism'.²² In *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (1993), Gross seeks to show how a reconstructed authentic core of Buddhism reflects and supports feminist values, insofar as it 'is without gender bias, whatever the practical record may reveal, and that sexist practices are in actual contradiction with the essential core teachings of the tradition'.²³ She extrapolates from this to suggest that many religions may have originally possessed an egalitarian, non-sexist central vision uncontaminated by later patriarchal distortions. Gross's work has attracted strong criticism from some feminists, most particularly Marsha Hewitt who has argued that the major problem with Gross's reconstructive efforts – and

²² R.M. Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press 1993, 305. I do not intend here to single out Gross as an exemplary or exceptional offender (I would certainly, for example, include my own work as guilty of the practices I am identifying as problematic in this paper), but rather to draw attention to a general tendency in even the best and most pioneering religion and gender scholarship in the field to reproduce a colonialist dynamic whilst being seemingly alert to the dangers of doing so. Thus, elsewhere Gross has stated that 'since no one can speak for all perspectives, every position, every scholar will overlook or underemphasize something vital The question is not whether a scholar has included every possible perspective, but whether she speaks authentically and non imperialistically from her own standpoint' (R.M. Gross, *Feminism and Religion*, Boston: Beacon Press 1996, 51). It is precisely this issue of one's 'own standpoint' that I think needs to be better, more thoroughly excavated as a collective enterprise for those of us committed to identifying ourselves as scholars in the field of religion and gender and who simultaneously attribute the motivation and ethics of our work to be embedded in feminist theory and practice.

²³ *Ibid.*, 210; my emphasis.

indeed for feminist revisionist histories in general – are that she establishes herself as the arbiter of the Buddhist tradition, imposing on an alien context a historically specific, ethnocentric, and ideological vision of appropriate religiosity informed by liberal feminist values. What Gross does therefore is endorse the universality of feminist insights against evidence to the contrary ('the practical record'). Her attempts to transform Buddhism into a set of ideas palatable to modern western feminist philosophy instead subjects Buddhism to what Hewitt calls 'ideological colonization' insofar as the determination of what constitutes the irreducible feminist core of the religion 'is decided in terms of the primacy of feminism, not tradition'.²⁴ Gross suggests moreover, in contradiction to her claim that early Buddhism contained the elements of a feminist sensibility, that a revalorized Buddhism will in fact be achieved, not by mining its egalitarian past for resources but by learning from the prophetic traditions of Christianity and Judaism with which she sees Christian feminist theology 'in direct continuity'.²⁵ Thus Gross appears to replicate the universalist impulse of colonialist conceptual regimes that promoted Christianity as the progenitor model of *religio* and demanded conformity to its imperatives and structurations, in order to elevate feminism as a soteriological model unconstrained by temporal or spatial specificity. Operational here, is an assumption of the fundamental sameness of women in time and space as they are forced into a negotiation with patriarchal structures.

Of course, there are many good reasons for elevating feminist insights above those that are inimical to women's interests but this cannot be done by playing fast and loose with the historical record or indeed with women's and men's own accounts of themselves and their relations to their traditions. To impose feminist values retrospectively on material wholly different historically, philosophically, or geographically is to indulge in a form of discursive imperialism that weakens the intellectual credibility and political force of feminist and gender-critical work. Thus the response to the difficulties posed by Gross' work and by scholarship in religion and gender that replicates this colonialist dynamic cannot be to seek an alternative to the kind of project she pursues but rather to ask the necessary question of whether such a practice should be undertaken at all. Saba Mahmood has certainly urged caution regarding the certainty of those feminist political commitments that proceed from secular valuations of religion 'when trying to understand the lives of others who do not necessarily share these commitments....'. For Mahmood, '[W]e can no longer arrogantly assume that secular forms of life and secularism's progressive formulations necessarily exhaust ways of living meaningfully and richly in this world.'²⁶ Mahmood's point echoes Gayatri Spivak's assessment of a broader problem for white Anglophone feminism which glosses a significant problem when it attempts to include a recognition of 'postcolonial marginality' in the articulation of its mission: 'that a concern with women *and* men who have not written in the *same* cultural inscription ... cannot be mobilized in the same way as the investigation of gendering in one's

²⁴ M.A. Hewitt, 'Ideology Critique, Feminism, and the Study of Religion' in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 11 (1999), 47–63: 57, 58.

²⁵ R.M. Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 134.

²⁶ S. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2005, xi–xii.

own'.²⁷ The lesson here is that the conceptual terrain – the categories, histories, methods, and assumptions – of Anglophone feminism is so ethnocentrically specific that its extension beyond that specificity to co-opt the values and histories of others in the service of its own project should be approached very warily if at all. Demands for women's autonomy and recognition of their religious agency have animated much scholarship in the field of religion and gender insofar it has proceeded from a feminist sensibility and have certainly proven politically transformative in the western academy. However, we should note Mahmood's warning against the scholarly co-optation of women's agency in support of 'the goals of progressive politics' because it obscures those 'dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance'.²⁸ But where in the work of scholars of religion and gender do we find an account of those subjects who resist the conceptual schemas in which we place them, that is, where their resistance and autonomy is not in the end reinscribed within a hermeneutic that reads their agentive practices within a binary logic of either subversion of, or collusion with patriarchal norms?²⁹ Where is an acknowledgement of the autonomous domain in which they articulate a conceptuality wholly, or even partially, different to the academic and western construction of their worlds and values? As Mahmood quite rightly argues,

If we recognize that the desire for freedom from, or subversion of, norms is not an innate desire that motivates all beings at all times, but is also profoundly mediated by cultural and historical conditions, then the question arises: how do we analyze operations of power that construct different kinds of bodies, knowledges, and subjectivities whose trajectories do not follow the entelechy of liberatory politics?³⁰

²⁷ G. Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1999, 170.

²⁸ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14.

²⁹ For a detailed and elegant elaboration of this point see S. Langsdale, *Damaged Bodies: Women's Agency in Trecento Florentine Soteriological Discourses*, PhD SOAS, University of London 2013, especially Chapters 1 and 6.

³⁰ *Ibid.* Mahmood's broader project, at least as developed in *The Politics of Piety*, is nonetheless problematic. Even though she articulates extremely well what is in fact one of Talal Asad's key arguments – that the 'religious' and the 'secular' are mutually constitutive and entangled – Mahmood is unable to avoid the rather pedestrian temptation to represent pious Egyptian Salafi women as paradigmatic embodiments of 'radical alterity'. She does so in ways that I think end up simplifying a more complex locutionary encounter, tending to contrast too starkly Salafi women's praxis and milieu to a fairly homogenised western liberal subject. As a consequence she ends up ideologizing the lives both of the Salafi women in Cairo and of western feminists (in particular) such that they both emerge as ultimately contentless political ciphers, with the Egyptian women read reductively as signifiers of postcoloniality and distilled religiosity uncontaminated by globalizing secularism. Another related aspect to this latter point that is equally problematic is Mahmood's conflation of secularism with the western liberal philosophical tradition which presents an impoverished conception of secularity, one that stands in sharp contrast to those of scholars such as Ruth Mas, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Arvind Mandair, William Connolly, Ananda Abeysekara, Akheel Bilgrami, and Amartya Sen, amongst others. Thus, while I agree with the general argument that Mahmood makes regarding the *generally* parochial nature of western (liberal) feminist theorizations of gender (and indeed of religion), I do not believe that she herself presents an account that escapes the dangers of ideological reading that she calls attention to.

We should recognise here that in the genealogy of 'gender' as a category of analysis its contours were sketched and then embellished in a manner closely allied to western, liberal feminist trajectories of liberation. We must therefore ask the many ways in which gender might be constructed apart from the particularity of its history in the west.

Mahmood's argument here connects to the second practice that I have suggested is problematic within the field of religion and gender: the conflation of women's experiences of oppression with all other forms of marginality. Could it be that as scholars of religion and gender, whose professional lives are oriented around the preservation and intricate patrolling of that territory we have laboured to mark out as a place safe from the intrusions of androcentric chauvinism, we presumed we were sufficiently cognisant of the operations of power in the means and forms of exclusion that there was little more to be said when it came to integrating postcolonial perspectives? Is this why the 'postcolonial' – as though it can even be spoken in the singular – passes without saying or if it is said then it is domesticated with all the other 'others'? Generally speaking feminist scholarship in the field of religious studies has tended to suggest such a coalition. Margaret Suchocki, for example, has posited an equivalence between the colonialist practice of religion making in the image of Christianity and androcentrism, suggesting that 'Absolutizing one religion such that it becomes normative for all others is a dynamic with clear parallels to sexism, whereby one gender is established as the norm for human existence. Therefore the critique of gender can be extended as a critique of religious imperialism'.³¹ Similarly, Morny Joy has argued that 'the process of "othering" that has been inflicted by dominant Western values is similar to the way women...have been judged and found wanting according to prevailing standards of masculinity and/or rationality'.³² However, the metaphorical extension of concepts related to the historical fact of European colonization in order to amplify the alterity and exploitation of women (in particular) employs a series of problematic assumptions – not least that all European colonialism operated in the same way and towards the same ends – which result not only in the elision of the specificity of the European colonial period but suggest that all women share a similar experience of oppression assessed predominantly in the terms prescribed by Anglo-American feminism which assumes 'gender' to be *a priori* the site of intersection.³³

What has made it possible for scholars in the field of religion and gender to see postcoloniality as just another marginality amongst others rather than see it

³¹ M.H. Suchocki, 'In search of justice' in J. Hick and P.F. Knitter (eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 1989, 150.

³² Joy, 'Postcolonial Reflections', 178.

³³ See C.T. Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial discourses' in C.T. Mohanty, A. Russo, and L. Torres (eds.), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1991, 52. I do not mean to suggest here that Joy herself (con)fuses the position of women with that of the colonized subject – she in fact takes pains to listen to those postcolonial voices which challenge the feminist appropriation of the experiences of non-western women – but rather to draw attention to the broader tendency in some feminist scholarship to ignore the specificity of the colonial era in order to draw on its rhetorical power.

as perhaps the place from which theorizing 'our' reconfigurations of centre and periphery – to whom this 'our' might refer must be named (how do we ensure that 'our' becomes more attuned to its own differences?) – must be rethought and perhaps even overturned? Part of the answer lies, I think, in our failure to attend to the ethnocentrism of the field's history such that 'gender' becomes prioritized as the site of origination for critique (because it is assumed to be the site of origination for the self) rather than the historical facticity of colonialisms and their afterlives. Thus 'gender' as both an ontic category – inasmuch as it is claimed as the place of enunciation – and an epistemic one – to the extent that it provides the content and analytic framing for that enunciation – appears to be unimplicated in colonial value codings. However, the creation and valuation of 'religion' as a discursive entity, as I traced above, was carefully calibrated to a curiously European construction of gendered difference, wherein 'religion' and 'female' were semantically clustered and devalued under the fraternity of modernity and the colonial fantasy of the civilizing mission.³⁴ These colonial histories have formed the present, for all of us, however differentiated our relations to those histories might be and it thus remains the place from which the necessity of triangulating what Kwok and Donaldson name as the 'critical trilogy'³⁵ of religion, gender, postcoloniality must be tested. The Indian feminist Uma Narayan, addressing the agonistic encounters between western and non-western feminists, has argued that

Colonial history is the terrain where the project of 'Western' culture's self-definition became a project heavily dependent upon its 'difference' from its 'Others' both internal and external. The contemporary self-definitions of many Third-World cultures and communities are also in profound ways political responses to this history. Working together to develop a rich feminist account of this history that divides and connects us might well provide Western and Third-World feminists [with] some difficult but interesting common ground, and be a project that is crucial and central to any truly 'international' feminist politics.³⁶

Narayan here implies that 'western' efforts of self-definition are also therefore profoundly 'political responses to this history'. Might we not then read the prioritization of gender within the field of religion and gender as precisely embedded in a neo-imperialist politics that of necessity invokes a temporally and spatial differential – hierarchical – relation to a series of Others that is (mis)represented as lined up with just so many forms of marginality, where gender is nonetheless a first amongst equals? Is this not a collusion with the infernal machine that insists on, indeed requires, the homogeneity of the periphery? As Sangeeta Ray has suggested regarding the exclusionary practices of white feminists, 'it is almost as though the very heterogeneity of women in the west needs

³⁴ For two well-known analyses of the tensions between the different priorities of race and gender within colonialist discourse and the advantages accrued to white women under colonial rule via the construction of racial alterity see R. Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity, and Representation*, London: Routledge 1996; M. Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998.

³⁵ Donaldson and Kwok, *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse*, 1.

³⁶ U. Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism*, London and New York: Routledge 1997.

to be shored up by anchoring that heterogeneity in the homogeneity of the other'.³⁷ Thus, when we fail to account for and to the colonial history that is the place of common ground, are we not indulging in a project of self-definition that repeats the colonial appropriation of the other in order to accrue social and intellectual capital? I mean these questions as a provocation. I know that there is good, nuanced, careful work both within the field and in the broader multidisciplinary domain of religion and gender scholarship beyond the bounds of religious studies. But I still wonder why it is that we did not start from the place of the other with whom we casually assert political and intellectual alliances, from the 'history that divides and connects us'.

The Catachrestic Demands of Postcoloniality

It has been with these questions in mind and directed to my own treacherous itineraries, collusions and dissimulations, that I have looked for a frame in which the questions of adequacy, propriety (noting the relation of this term to ownership), agency, and ethics, and also of semantics, surrounding the relationship between 'religion', 'gender' and 'postcoloniality' might be theorized and put to work. As a relatively faithful reader of Jacques Derrida and via him of Gayatri Spivak, it was not long before their mediations on the lexical utility of 'catachresis' suggested that this might take the field of religion and gender some way to, at the very least, beginning the work of displacement that postcolonial thought demands as I have suggested in the Introduction to this Special Issue. In Derrida's formulation,³⁸ a catachresis is an opportunity to reconfigure a sign's relationship to its own 'proper' (that is, normative) sense through an 'improper' use (whether deliberate or not). Spivak seizes on this implication to represent catachresis as an agentive and *necessary* act of 'reversing, displacing, and seizing the apparatus of value-coding',³⁹ a definition that extends with political intent the Derridean formulation of catachresis as indicating the original and indeed originary incompleteness that is inherent in all systems of meaning. For Spivak, catachresis signals a necessary category *crisis* because of a sign's inadequacy (for example, the erroneous assumption of a term's universality) and the possibility, therefore, of a space in which to articulate difference because inasmuch as a category is a catachresis, it is the misuse of a proper noun whose referent is *inadequately* framed, an abstraction that covers over the spectral quality of the material referent: catachreses are 'master' or 'code' words that are without literal referents, for example, 'woman', 'the masses', 'Third World', 'West', and, I would add, 'religion'.⁴⁰ The nature of this inadequacy, of catachresis as the mistaken application of a proper noun

³⁷ S. Ray, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: In Other Words*, Malden MA and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2009, 116.

³⁸ J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Brighton: Harvester Press 1982, 255–256.

³⁹ G. Chakravorty Spivak, 'Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value' in P. Collier and H. Geyer-Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory Today*, London: Polity Press 1990, 228.

⁴⁰ G. Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. New York: Routledge 1993, 139.

can function in (at least) two directions: (1) as an imposition of a homogenised identity on a configuration of difference – for example western normative conceptions of ‘woman’ on the totality of female kind – catachresis is a practice of *misuse* and abstraction; (2) as a repudiation of this imposition and a ‘seizing of the apparatus of value-coding’ such that the category in question is used to apply to a referent not intended by the original sign, catachresis is a practice of abuse that reveals the originary use to be diminished or inadequate – an example here would be a claim that a non-western conception of subaltern femininity is, in fact, normative. Peter Hitchcock names such a practice as ‘the Caliban clause in English’ suggesting that the ‘abrogation of the race- and class-bound hierarchies of appropriate language use’ signal ‘the weak spot in cultural hegemony where language is appropriated for ends not altogether English as posited norm’.⁴¹

The destabilizing function of catachresis might appear here to replicate the implications of Bhabha’s formulation of hybridity and native mimicry of colonial idioms as a resistant move I discussed earlier. According to Bhabha, what appears to be the subjection of the colonized to colonial conceptuality – the apparent acquiescence of the Indians to the Christian scripture – is in fact shown to be a form of subversion and semblance that begins to reverse the ‘identity term’ – the Indians’ assertion of their own traditions as the hermeneutic through which the alien tradition will be evaluated, incorporated, or discarded. Inasmuch as mimetic hybridity is undertaken from the position of the subjugated, it would appear to correspond to the Hegelian master/slave dialectic of the independent and dependent consciousness: ‘bondage will, when completed, pass into the opposite of what it immediately is ... and change round into real and true independence’.⁴² Thus the subjugated, dependent consciousness, as the site from which the recognition of mastery is yielded, simultaneously traduces the independent consciousness by distilling mastery to a dependence on the acknowledgement of that mastery from a mere dependent consciousness. When figured as a dialectic between colonizer and colonized, the hybridity that results, according to Bhabha, appears to function in two ways: (1) as a disruption or destabilization of binary conventions of signification that operate according to a logic of identity and difference, origination and supplementation, etc.; and (2) as an act of subversion and overturning, hybridity may defamiliarize the familiar in each of the various sites of identity inhabited and to particularize that which masquerades as universal. As such hybridity might appear to have much to recommend to us in our coming to terms. Hybridity constitutes a form of resistance that is arguably more forceful than dialectic negation; the mimetic processes that precede it do exercise some control over meaning and are thus quite effective subversions of authority. Empowered through the power of mimicry, the colonized is capable of reversing to some degree, colonial subjugation. What must be noted, however, is the extent to which mimicry remains a gesture of secondariness. It comes after the fact of discursive imposition insofar as that imposition provides the material surface for the enactment of subversion. The framework in which

⁴¹ P. Hitchcock, ‘Decolonizing (the) English’ in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100:3, 749–771: 761.

⁴² G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind* [*Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 1807], trans. J.B. Baillie, New York: Harper & Row 1967, 237 (§ 193).

the colonized/colonizer dialectic operates remains potentially, therefore, one of containment.

In its interest in abuse and impropriety, of thinking terms outside of and against themselves, it seems to me that 'catachresis' as theorized by Spivak takes us further than Bhabha's mimetic hybridity can. Insofar as she defines it as a "'wholesome" abuse of a figurative move' she suggests a place of critique not absorbed by a master/slave dialectic. Spivak moves us on to seeing the value-coding of catachresis as an exploitation or perversion of mimicry from a position that transgresses the dialectic rather than being immersed in it. It is thus more deliberative than mimicry.⁴³ Catachresis as postcolonial practice might therefore signify a possible way out from the poignancy that characterizes the postcolonial intellectual seeking to articulate the voice of the oppressed through tropes structurally linked to the oppressor without disrupting the dialectic that hybridity and mimicry run the risk of reifying. Andrzej Warminski's formulation affirms this view of catachresis as a deconstructive labour of force that traverses the boundaries of tropological discourse to trouble them, to prise them open:

As the abuse of all tropes, catachresis threatens to open up the tropological system and keep it from constituting itself, closing itself off, as a system. That is, as a nontrope, catachresis is outside the system of tropes, but as an always possible 'outside' – there will always be at least as many forced uses or abuses of trope as there are tropes that we can classify – it has nevertheless to be accounted for in terms of that system; it is also 'inside' it.⁴⁴

As such, catachresis as a mode of postcoloniality forms a conscious displacement that is not *merely* a reorganisation or appropriation of the purported normative system; it moves the site of articulation and refuses to cooperate with or to acknowledge the propriety of normative enunciations. It appropriates the metaphors of the oppressor and yet 'abuses' them through interventions that exceed the order of the oppressor. I believe that the conceptual richness of the catachresis – the disappearance of semantic stability from the sign, whether 'religion' or 'gender', and their displacement to conceptual terrain of an 'other place' – begins to gesture towards the possibility of making non-Eurocentric, intimately local judgments that avoid the necessity of submitting to the imperialist Western rationality and epistemology that insists on its own specificity as in fact universal. Indeed an alertness to the catachrestic demands of category displacement that mark postcolonial interventions in our field might promise a new conceptuality, where we might begin to pay more than lip-service to the important differences in priorities, sites of origination and critique, and conceptual heterogeneity that mark the categories of 'religion' and 'gender'. The scholarly work to expose the political genealogy of 'religion' has been consequent on a long history of postcolonial challenge, and this work must be more adequately and determinedly extended to the epistemological history of 'gender' in our field. Where scholars of religion have recognised religion's embeddedness in a parochial struggle between the rival regimes of truth of church and state, and the conceptual limitations that result from its colonialist

⁴³ Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 14.

⁴⁴ A. Warminski, *Readings in Interpretation*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1987, liv.

plotting according to a Christianized prototype, scholars of religion and gender must do more to seek out those models of gender that operate beyond, against, or without reference to the western metropole, those that do not simply repeat the tired negotiation of the dualist demands of the public and private spheres aligned so constrictively to the self-understanding of the secular state and its occulted dependence on religious conceptions, or acquiesce with a simplistic choice between emancipation and oppression according to the mores of liberalism. Learning from the catachrestic abuse of gender-critical conceptuality that is the mark of postcolonial resistance and creation – instantiated by the examples offered in the other articles in this special issue – is one way of breaking the cycle of self-absorption and colonialist appropriation that I have identified in this essay.

With catachresis as a focus for the triadic formulation of 'religion', 'gender' and 'postcoloniality' some ground may be cleared, providing a space for reflection on the variety of naming and conceptualizing mechanisms, the forging of connections, the imposition of systems of intellectual prescription, and the histories of struggle that have been wielded, challenged and refused with the field of religion and gender. I suspect that each of these three concepts is potentially catachrestic insofar as if they must be aligned then it should be in the service of indicating and abusing the relationship between categorization and value coding that has restricted their operation to the preoccupations and priorities of the western world. Thus, we should ask what the terms 'religion', 'gender' and 'postcoloniality' might disclose about their own and their respective incompleteness and thus openness when Europe is 'provincialized',⁴⁵ that is, when the specificity of western conceptuality is taken as read and displaced as central or universal. Could it be that gender will no longer be the site where all the usual intersections 'intersect'? Perhaps it will not remain the site of origination for critique once the necessary work of displacement that is the mark of catachresis has been worked through. Is the neglect, by scholars of religion and gender, of the displacements promised by postcoloniality as it works on the value-codings of religion and gender – those that precisely challenge western formulations of female agency, for example, as potentially imperialist interpellations a sign of their incompatibility or possible emptiness as intellectual constructs – indeed, as lived realities – or of a troubling lacuna in the field? What impropriety is promised by the conjunction of these three concepts and which boundaries might their coalition transgress or reify? I think that living for a while with these questions and framings may be one way for the field of religion and gender to start the move towards intellectual adequacy in a postcolonial world.

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⁴⁵ D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2000.

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