

"This Field Which Is Not One / The Body Is Smart: Rethinking Theory in the Study of Religion"

By way of beginning, I want to acknowledge that we are meeting on the lands of the Ute, Cheyenne, and Arapaho people, all the more reason for us to recognize the fraught political terrain and violent material effects of "religion." As queer poet Alix Olson reminds us: every theory has a human price, and you gotta watch how your god is used.

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Once upon a time at an annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, a straight white male friend/colleague and I—both of us Americanists—found ourselves in attendance of three or four back-to-back panels in a single day. By the end of the third (or fourth) panel and en route to receptions (imagine this as a Sorkinesque walk-and-talk, except in this scene I am supporting my own work and not the Important Work of a Great Man), he turned to me and said:

"I figured it out. You ask questions in every session, except those questions are actually all the same question."

He was not wrong, Reader. The question is this: what about gender? What about sexuality?

[I think it's important to clarify that when I ask this question, I don't mean "what about ladies? What about queers?" Or rather, I don't just mean that. I mean "how does your work, which purports to be about religion and the people or do it (or not), fail to account for the people with bodies who are doing that religion (or not)?"]

I could only respond, "Friend, I swear to god: the minute they start asking themselves my question, I will ask about something else."

So imagine my delight when Brad Stoddard invited me to address this very question with you all today – not just the question of gender and sexuality IN the theorization of religion, but gender and sexuality AS the theorization of religion. To some extent the charge of this workshop is impossible: there is no meaningful discussion of gender or sexuality that does not also center race, or class, or ability, or documented status, or mode of religious belonging, or recognize all these categories as comprising but not exhausting "politics." It must also be said that asking a white cis able-passing woman, however queer in however many ways, runs the very real risk of centering whiteness, ability, cisgender identity, and too many other positions of privilege as unmarked, inevitable, and universal. As queer trans writer Parker Molloy tweets every night: "I tried my best today. I'll do it again tomorrow."

We in the academy owe our articulation of identity as imbricated bodily realities and limits to a Black woman scholar, Kimberle Crenshaw, who first coined the term intersectionality. In rooms where religion and sexuality are theorized, some scholars have proposed a post-intersectional mode of inquiry (which, as Traci West has offered, does not discard but meaningfully complicates the intersectional model). But since I'm still asking the same damn question every year in sessions of every single national meeting, I can confidently say that scholars of religion are not done with intersectionality, nor is intersectionality done with them.

For folks unfamiliar with the term, let's refer to a poor queer white woman scholar, Dorothy Allison, and her theorization of intersectionality (though she does not use the term). In "A Question of Class," Allison opines "What I know for sure is that class, gender, sexual preference, and prejudice—racial, ethnic, and religious—form an intricate lattice that restricts and shapes our lives, and that resistance to hatred is not a simple act. Claiming your identity in the cauldron of hatred and resistance to hatred is infinitely complicated, and worse, almost unexplainable." And yet Black women, Indigenous women, women and men and GNC/NB people of color, queer people, poor people, disabled people have worked for decades to explain how and why centering those identities matters, and demonstrated a thousand ways that the world (and, for our purposes, the academy) hates them—hates us—for trying.

It is for this reason that the politics of citation are so crucial in the theorization of religion, or any production of knowledge, for that matter. As professional killjoy Sara Ahmed insists in "Making Feminist Points," "citation [is] a rather successful reproductive technology, a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies." Ahmed draws our attention to the "selective history" of disciplines, to the "techniques of selection" that make "certain bodies and thematics core to the discipline, and others not even part." When we talk about "the founders" of religious studies, when we limit "theorists" of religion to thinkers who identify themselves as such or who have been historically recognized as such by the academy, we participate in the violent and hateful exclusion of those already too often violently and hatefully excluded beyond the academy.

In *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), Ahmed calls for a radical feminist politics of citation, through which "we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow." This paper is a performance of radical feminist citational politics. If we must choose politics or theory, then let us, with Ahmed, choose politics and "be glad [we are] not doing theory!" (8). But her work shows it's possible to do both. "Think of this," she urges us. "Those of us who arrive in an academy that was not shaped by or for us bring knowledge, as well as worlds, that otherwise would not be here. Think of this: how we learn about worlds when they do not accommodate us. Think of the kinds of experiences you have when you are not expected to be here. These experiences are a resource to generate knowledge... We use our particulars to challenge the universal," (9-10). This is the charge, then: to use our particulars to challenge the universal.

I am indebted to so many scholars—space invaders, Ahmed would say, in the academy and in theory, because they refer to the "wrong texts" or ask the "wrong questions" (9)—who have shaped and are shaping the conversation about what it is to study religion. I especially want to acknowledge that three Black scholars—Nyasha Junior, Ed Curtis on behalf of the *Journal of Africana Religions*, and Kayla Wheeler—have directly informed my thinking on these matters, largely through our interactions on twitter. And given the pivotal role Twitter is now playing in the production and dissemination of knowledge about religion, I also want to use this space to consider where the theorization of religion happens. (This is at the core of my current Luce-funded project, *Sacred Writes*, and please come find me this weekend to hear more about it.)

On that note: in March 2018, in response to an extensive Twitter thread calling for quotes about religion paired with animated GIFs, Islamic Studies scholar Kayla Wheeler asked for suggestions of women of color

theorists of religion, as most of the responses so far were quoting white men.¹ Kecia Ali was the first to propose Zora Neale Hurston and Tomoko Masuzawa; Nyasha Junior cited Ntozake Shange ("i found god in myself & i loved her / i loved her fiercely," *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide*, 1976); several others proposed Jasbir Puar. Annette Yoshiko Reed raised an important point: that in asking this question, we need to think about who gets recognized as a theorist, and whether recognition as a theorist requires that the work be (imagined as) universalizable.² Today, I propose that theorizing religion is (or should be) less a call to consider what religion is than a call to consider what religion does, and here I am indebted to Carole Cusack's insightful formulation of this question in *Invented Religions*. Theorizing religion, of course, includes considerations of whose cultural work counts as religion—here we are all of us indebted to Masuzawa—but also whose thinking about religion is worth centering, worth, as we like to say, taking seriously. Every piece of writing about religion offers a theory of what religion is and what it does; we should expand our definitions of theory accordingly.

Let me say that again, because it's important. (I'll pause here to note that Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst helped me clarify this assertion.) *Every piece of writing about religion offers a theory of what religion is and what it does.* That the author does not identify themselves as a theorist—that the academy has not encouraged them to view themselves as a theorist, because they are not limiting their theorization of religion to abstract and universalized statements of how religion works—does not invalidate their theories. Encouraging certain kinds of scholars—especially those in certain kinds of bodies, bodies marked as gendered, or sexualized, or raced, or classed, or disabled—to declare loudly that they are *not* theorists, that they do not "do theory," is an exercise in colonizing the academy, in privileging normative voices and bodies. Limiting theory to something only certain kinds of scholars do, rather than recognizing theory as the very premise of scholarship, claims theory as the special province of those legible to the academy as capable of "doing theory." Theories—and theorists—of religion have by and large exculpated themselves of needing to account for the specificities and intimate and explicit violences of gender, of sexuality, of race, of class, of ability, of the thousand things that make up the people who do religion.

If that is theory, then with Sara Ahmed, let us rejoice and be glad that we are not "doing theory." But rather than cede that territory to normative voices and normative bodies, let us hone our definition of theory to privilege scholars who have to work so much harder to do this labor, whether or not they are confessed theorists of religion.

This paper reimagines a field of religious studies radically reoriented to center the theorizations of religion offered by Black women, women of color, queers, and other thinkers from marginalized backgrounds. Please note: I am not (merely) calling for scholars of religion to cite more Black women scholars, more queer/trans/GNC/NB scholars, more poor scholars, more scholars of color. Certainly we must ask ourselves why such scholars are seldom found on prose syllabi or on lists of the "founders" of religious studies.³ As Ed Curtis challenged: "Religious studies scholars, please don't tell us that you can't include Black women in your 'theory of religion' course. Or that there were are no foundational Black women in the academic study of religion. Only your racism prevents their inclusion."⁴ (This tweet was accompanied by a photo of Zora

¹ <https://twitter.com/krw18/status/969552561115140096>

² <https://twitter.com/AnnetteYReed/status/969619823025115136>

³ <https://twitter.com/JAfricanaRelig/status/1032361442526330880>

⁴ <https://twitter.com/JAfricanaRelig/status/1032232201512017920>

Neale Hurston, who worked with Franz Boaz and Margaret Mead at Columbia, and whose groundbreaking ethnographic research on Vodou and African American folk religions in *Go Tell My Horse* seldom finds its way onto theory syllabi. For more on Hurston's contributions to the study and the theorization of religion, I'll refer you to the *Journal of Africana Religions*, and particularly their 2016 roundtable on Hurston.⁵)

We should include Zora Neale Hurston, and Hannah Adams, and Omar Ibn Said, and other non-white, non-male, non-normative early scholars of religion in such classes. (I want to say "obviously" here, but given the composition of most of these classes, it seems this point is far from obvious to the academy at large.) That would be a good start, and to be frank, I am tempted to use the remainder of this space to just list marginalized scholars who have made invaluable contributions to the study and the theorization of religions. I have named quite a few already, and to that litany we should add Emilie Townes, Anthea Butler, Marcella Althaus-Reid, Mark Jordan, Mary Daly, Amina Wadud, Grace Jantzen, Catherine Bell, Kelly Brown Douglas, Katie Cannon, Beverly Harrison, Carol Christ, Judith Plaskow, Rebecca Alpert, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Leila Ahmed, Lila Abu Lughod, and many others. But merely citing these scholars, adding them to an existent list of foundational thinkers, is insufficient.

Rather, I am demanding—rather stridently, if I do say so myself—that we center the work of marginalized thinkers so as to fundamentally shift the academic study of religion. This is not to suggest that the study or the theorization of religion should begin and end with these groups, but rather to propose that centering marginalized voices forces us to challenge our assumptions about normalcy, about what is worth studying, about what (and whom) we take for granted. Whiteness, masculinity, cisgender-ness, heterosexuality could never go untroubled in a field that centers on the margins.

This requires, too, an interrogation of what kind of work might be understood as a theory of religion. The too prevalent assumption that the study of religion must be dispassionate and disembodied to be properly theoretical—that it must do its work with its underwear on, as Althaus Reid would have said—often prevents us from taking seriously creative work, work beyond the bounds of traditional scholarship, as theorizations of religion. This is where theories of gender and sexuality might prove helpful in undertaking a germinal shift in the way we study religion.

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In some ways, it seems incredible that gender and sexuality could still *be* open questions in the study of religion. I suspect my mindset here is akin to Foucault's when he declared in 1983 interview that "sex is boring." I am so very bored with the question of how we as religious studies scholars should think about gender and sexuality, because how are we not all thinking about these categories by now? How have we not BEEN thinking about them? How can a learned society like NAASR ask scholars to comment on gender and sexuality, or race, or class, or politics, as though they are discreet categories, or cutting edge topics of concern, or anything but the life's work of countless women, queers, people of color – work that will be cited, if it is cited at all, as the niche interests of the nonnormative but never as "theory?"

⁵ <https://twitter.com/JAfricanaRelig/status/1031161289329061888>, <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/621867>

Despite Caroline Walker Bynum's observation in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols* (published thirty-two years ago in the year of someone's lord 1986) that there is no such thing as *homo religiosus*—which is to say there exists no religious being unmarked by gender; "no scholar studying religion, no participant in ritual, is ever neuter" (2)—the academy still treats gender as a marginal concern, usually the concern of those marked as having gender, which is to say women, trans, and gender nonconforming and nonbinary folks. (I offer myself in this position as exhibit A.) In a piece I wrote for *Religion Compass* a decade ago, I adapted the words of queer theory foremother Eve Sedgwick to propose that the study of religion is not merely incomplete but *damaged* if it fails to meaningfully account for sex and sexuality. And yet, here we are. Again, friends, I swear to god: when the academy starts asking itself these questions—really asking itself, rather than asking nonnormative scholars to do its homework for them—I will ask about something else. But in the meantime...

How can theories of gender and sexuality help us understand what work religion does in the world, and how does the work of theorizing religion shift when we center those who do sex or gender otherwise (as Derrida might say)? Answering these questions requires us to define our terms – and to acknowledge that these definitions are, to borrow from Linda Nicholson, both ongoing tasks and ongoing political struggles.

Gender and sexuality are interrelated ways we are encouraged—sometimes on pain of death or dismemberment—to make sense of our bodies and the bodies of those around us. When we speak of gender, we speak of meaning made of the parts and (w)holes of our bodies, the cultural imperative that certain bodies are intended to make other bodies, the strange correlation of certain kinds of bodies with certain colors, or activities, or intellectual capacities, or preferences for baking and power tools. While gender and sex/uality are not reducible to one another, we cannot think gender without first thinking sex (or so Judith Butler tells us). Gender starts, not with identification of body parts, but with assumptions about what those body parts are for and what we should therefore want to do with them: which is to say, make more bodies.

We begin making sense of our bodies and the bodies of those around us by assuming heterosexual reproduction as the primary function of those bodies (this is what Adrienne Rich meant, in part, by compulsory heterosexuality; in "Gender: Being It or Doing It?," Mary McClintock Fulkerson refers to it as a "relationship of reciprocity between body, gender, and desire," 192). Critical theories of gender and sexuality propose that understanding bodies and culture begins with interrogating this assumption – by wondering how else people think about their bodies, how else it might be possible to think about bodies, what else people do with their bodies, and why, and how many more things and meanings people make of bodies than just making more bodies with them.

The Luce Irigaray essay that gave this piece its original name notes that bodies assigned femininity at birth are always imagined in relationship to—and indeed, less significant than—bodies assigned masculinity at birth. In "This Sex Which Is Not One" and throughout the corpus of her work, Irigaray demonstrates the ways language shapes the way that we think, drawing connections among religion, language, and gender. She observes that women's bodies never signify in the absence of men's bodies, which alienates women from the bodies into which they were born. The questions we ask, the frameworks we provide, alienate those embodied Otherwise from the study of religion, by largely rejecting them as theorists of religion per se and by making them novelties rather than core components of scholarly inquiry. Irigaray charges us to

make the study of religion, like the bodies of those who study it, like the language we must use to describe them, multiple, complex, abundant. She exhorts us to recognize that a study of religion that emphasizes multiplicity, indeterminacy—a study that attends to the specificity of our bodies, making the theorization of religion as rich and abundant as the bodies of those who do religion—is not incomplete. It lacks nothing.

Theorizing sex likewise requires attention and acknowledgment of multiplicity and indeterminacy. Sedgwick defined sex as "the array of acts, expectations, narratives, pleasures, identity-formations, and knowledges ... that tend to cluster most densely around certain genital sensations but is not adequately defined by them," (1990, p. 29). Critical theories of sex began with disrupting heteronormative assumptions and challenging the regulation of bodies and pleasures by the state, by proposing that sex—and bodily pleasures more broadly—should be a topic of public concern rather than private preference, and by addressing that some sex is better (or gets treated better, as more moral, more normal, more healthy) than others.

This last bit is what Gayle Rubin refers to as the "charmed circle" of "Good, Normal, Natural, Blessed Sexuality" and "Bad, Abnormal, Unnatural, Damned Sexuality" in her germinal essay, "Thinking Sex" (1984, 13). Most of my scholarly work has focused on the intersection of good/bad sex with good/bad religion, the assumption that those who participate in nonnormative sex acts for religious reasons must be duped or coerced into doing so, or invested in duping or coercing others – and that those who participate in nonnormative religious practices are more likely to engage in nonnormative, likely abusive sexual practices as well. (For more on this, see my book, *Abusing Religion*, forthcoming from Rutgers University Press).

I want to highlight some recent work by scholars of religion and sexuality, who have demonstrated the ways attending to nonnormative sex—we might say questionable sex, or at least sex that gets questioned—helps us better understand the work religion does in the world. Anthony Petro's "Beyond Accountability: The Queer Archive of Catholic Sex Abuse" (2015) reads the documented horrors of BishopAccountability.Org as queering the records of Catholic sex abuse: because the site demands public discussion of these horrible acts, because the discussion of these horrible acts transforms victims into survivors, and because this archive expands notions of queerness and religion to include "acts of abundant evil." Petro argues that we must understand Catholic sex abuse as religious abuse—this, too, is Catholicism—and that we must understand Catholic sex abuse as queer—this, too, is nonnormative sexuality. This argument does not excuse or minimize the horrors of the abuse, but rather calls scholars of religion to account for the whole spectrum (palatable or otherwise) of lived religion and sexuality.

Melissa Wilcox's vivid ethnography of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence in *Queer Nuns* (2018) offers the concept of serious parody as an analytical lens for the study of religion. The Sisters' work—both deadly serious and fabulously campy—troubles the boundaries between religion and secularism, queering our notions of whether we might even reasonably argue for a meaningful distinction between the two categories. Debra Majeed's accounts and analysis of polygyny among African American Muslim women (2015) blends ethics, ethnography, scriptural interpretation, and activism, asking important questions about the utility and goals of religious studies scholarship. She centers polygynous women, disrupting scholarly and cultural trends that privilege men's perspective, men's desires, men's exegeses in considerations of multiple partner marriages. Monique Moultrie's *Passionate and Pious: Religious Media and Black Women's Sexuality* (2017) applies womanist sexual ethics to her ethnographic survey of single Black women church-

women and how they "make meaning from their varied history, lived experiences, and faith perspectives," (2-3). Using the lens of womanism—a word which here means "the discipline interrogating the multilayered oppression of women of color," first coined by Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*—shows Black women as agents in defining religion and its relationship to their own sexual acts and desires (2).

But as important as these contributions are, this work still fits comfortably within the parameters of traditional scholarship. How does the conversation shift if we look at theorizations of religion beyond—or on, in the case of Anzaldúa—these borders? What if we consider letters, poetry, fiction, autobiography, or even the humble tweet as the site where religion might be theorized? What if "theorist" invoked images of Indigenous women queer Black women, Latinx farm workers, and queer Chicana women in our minds?

In the early 20th century, the Dakota writer, educator, musician, and activist Zitkála-Šá wrote a series of personal essays for national periodicals, including the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's Bazaar*. "Why I Am a Pagan" (1902) is a beautiful affirmation of her commitments to her Indigenous heritage, but also an unrepentant rejection of Christian imperialism and a subtle condemnation of the violences she suffered at the hands of white missionaries determined to "civilize" her. Claiming Pagan identity, too, interprets her Indigenous commitments as religion, demanding the category of religion expand to account both for indigeneity and imperial violence. (This is of course in keeping with Tisa Wenger's analysis of Pueblo practices in *We Have a Religion*, 2009.)

Audre Lorde's open letter to Mary Daly (1979) in response to *Gyn/ecology* (1978) affirms Daly's project of expanding the religious imaginary to celebrate feminine aspects of the divine. Significantly, though, Lorde calls Daly to account for conceptualizing Goddess in the image of white women, and for engaging Black women and women of color only as victims of patriarchal violence, rather than as the architects of their own religious meanings and worlds. Perhaps most pressingly, Lorde demands that Daly acknowledge that Daly's theories fail to acknowledge the material risks of being a Black woman advocating for change in the world – that gender does not exhaust Lorde's lived reality. "The white women with hoods on in Ohio handing out KKK literature on the street may not like what you have to say," Lorde writes, "but they will shoot me on sight." She calls Daly—and all of us who would think religion—to address the multiplicity of bodily experience. "The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those differences. Nor do the reservoirs of our ancient power know these boundaries. To deal with one without even alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our difference." Our theories of religion must account for the interlocking oppressions women of color face—as Monique Moultrie's work does, as Nyasha Junior's work does, as Alice Walker calls us to do—or it will be not merely incomplete, but damaged – and damaging.

In March 1968, Cesar Chavez presented an article called "The Mexican American and the Church" at the Second Annual Mexican Conference in Sacramento, California. In this piece, Chavez details the relationship between Mexican American farm workers and the Roman Catholic Church, noting that the Protestant California Migrant Ministry had supported and advocated for workers in ways that the Catholic Church—which many of the workers themselves attended—did not. More than mere activism, Chavez's formulation of the Church as the people ("We ask the Church to sacrifice with the people for social change, for justice, and for love of brother...we ask for servanthood.") expands categories of religious belonging beyond

church attendance or the hierarchy of the Magisterium and directly applies liberation theology to lived religious practice.

Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands / La Frontera* (1987) blends poetry, history, and autobiography to offer a multilayered analysis of how Chicana people make meaning of gender, sexuality, nationality, and religion. In "Entering into the Serpent," she highlights the hybridity of her religious upbringing, which blended Roman Catholic and folk religious elements. Anzaldua argues for the radical materiality of her own knowledge of the divine, the materiality of divine presence in parsing her own multiple identities. "Enter[ing] into the Serpent," into the hybridity of divinity that is the figure of the Virgen de Guadalupe, is for Anzaldua "to acknowledge...that I have a body, that I am a body...the body is smart," (48, 60). Her rejection of religious multiplicity as syncretism (which assumes stable and discreet religious traditions), her insistence on both hybridity and on acknowledgment of divine presence, anticipates more formal theorizations of these concepts in the field of religious studies by decades.

Finally, I want to offer a seemingly facetious example as a place where theories of religion happen. Consider this tweet:

"Roman Catholic Church: @ Mexico, stop creating weird skeleton saints!!
Mexican Catholics: anyway this is Santa Muerte and she loves trans people"⁶

This tweet is accompanied by a photo of Santa Muerte adorned and carried through a Mexican street festival. In fewer than 280 characters, the author @ellameno notes the space between the Magisterium and lived Mexican Catholicism, catalogues religious innovation and resistance, notes the connection between religious innovation and populations made vulnerable through gender and sexuality, and recognizes transgender people as agents of religious meaning making. This tweet was liked almost six thousand times and retweeted nearly two thousand times. How many of us in this room can say with confidence that our work has been read by that many people – that we've had the opportunity to shift understandings of religion on that scale? With these two sentences, this self-described asexual nonbinary xicana geek might have had more of an impact on how the public understands religion than most of us will have in our entire careers.

There are more voices we could add here: Assata Shakur, Winona LaDuke...frankly I think there's space to consider Pussy Riot theorists of religion. But I think I've made my point. I'll close by invoking Ntzoake Shange, who once called "for a god who bleeds now, whose wounds are not the end of anything." If we are to truly parse religion—this radically embodied, visceral human phenomenon—our theory must bleed, too.

⁶ <https://twitter.com/ellameno/status/1023525670461140992>