Towards increasing diversity in the study of religion

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Abstract

The study of religion needs to be enriched by more diverse voices. The author argues that some progress has been made, but more needs to be done, particularly through collaborating with those most frequently muted. The challenge is to not simply to include those outside the traditional bastions of white, male privilege in the global north, but to actively widen the current reach to make an impact on how knowledge is actually created and shared. Initiatives such as liberating and de-colonizing the curriculum are discussed, with particular reference to the study of religion.

Key words
Diversity, decolonising, liberating, curriculum, androcentric

Introduction

The future study of religion will be enlivened by more debates about how, and by whom, knowledge is created, reflecting concerns about diversity, power, equality and ethics as scholars turn to questions of epistemology that both challenge and shape our work. My own focus, and hence the theme of this article, is gender imbalance and colonial-based Christian hegemony.

Scholars in many disciplines outside the anthropology of religion, sociology of religion, religious studies and philosophy are debating more frequently how knowledge across the academy and society more generally has been dominated by a narrow set of perspectives and interests. In universities, debates have centred on the prominence of certain elites often reduced, perhaps crudely, to ‘white men of the Global North’. The realisation, however crude, that universities have been ignoring and oppressing for centuries non-dominant groups has forced a response. It is the Western university where, Bhambra et al. (2018, 5) point out (and see also

Alvares and Faruqi 2012; Day et al. forthcoming 2020; Grosfoguel et al. 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni and la Zondi 2016): 'colonial intellectuals developed theories of racism, popularised discourses that bolstered support for colonial endeavours and provided ethical and intellectual grounds for the dispossession, oppression and domination of colonised subjects.'

Elite domination and colonization extends beyond settler domination of North America to include the privileging of certain perspectives from particular gender, ethnicity, sexuality and class positions, as well as issues such as Eurocentrism, androcentrism, Westernization, indigenization and colonialism, all of which inflects the study of sociology more widely (see, for example, Bhambra 2007).

Developing uncommon common sense

Most taken-for-granted, 'common sense' views of religion inevitably arose from its origins as a field of study created by male philosophers, theologians and clerics, often voluntarily locked away in seminaries, all-male colleges and monasteries, or by early twentieth-century male anthropologists visiting 'other' people in areas previously unknown to white Europeans (Bowie 2006). Observing only the public performances of a group of people directed and performed by men, not being permitted entry into women-dominated spaces and not able to converse in private with women, they formed a narrow idea of what 'religion' might be. As the study of religion becomes redefined and re-modelled there may be, in the future, less emphasis on the field's obsession with individuality and institutions. Spickard's (2017) reflections on such issues centre on the core, narrow idea of a 'western' religion, largely consisting of formal organizations, focused on beliefs and rules.

A more gender-balanced, non-institutional view of religion problematises an idea that ritual is at the heart of religion. Public religious ritual is a performance usually created and delivered by men (although invisibly prepared by women) in front of an audience, often mainly composed of lay women. That composition of performer and viewer, leader and led, reflects the patriarchal, hierarchical power dynamic usually found in many religions, and most other western social institutions. As Morny Joy (2001,181) discussed, 'Studies in religion further replicate this androcentric approach in their emphasis on the official cult, regulated and maintained by men'. How different the study becomes when religion is defined more in terms of the lived and everyday (Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008; Woodhead 2018), consisting of often small, everyday acts, such as cleaning and cooking, or discussing in small groups everyday problems and their resolution. Will male scholars continue to dismiss those acts as peripheral or insubstantial, conforming to an androcentric ideal that 'real' religion is performed in institutions, such as seminaries and universities, traditionally created by and dominated by men? Recall here Robert Wuthnow's (1994, 358) argument that small community groups, usually dominated by women, do not generate 'truth' or 'wisdom': 'In simplest terms, the sacred comes to be associated with small insights that seem intuitively correct to the small group rather than wisdom accrued over the centuries in hermitages, seminaries, universities, congregations and church councils.'

Liberating and de-colonising

As scholars continue to contest and rewrite definitions of religion, the field inevitably becomes more diverse. There is a movement currently pervading scholarship known variously as 'liberating' or 'decolonising' the curriculum. Work here deliberately subverts the academy, even questioning the name of our institutions, asking why our sites of learning must referred to as a 'uni-versity' rather than a 'pluri-versity'. As Mbembe (2016, 37) described it, scholars should be: 'open to epistemic diversity … [pluriversity] does not necessarily abandon the notion of universal knowledge for humanity, but … embraces it via a horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions.'

Being more reflexive about the epistemic traditions scholars hold helps transform our field: this requires dialogue and collaboration amongst scholars from beyond the global north and west to foster not just social cohesion (with its own legacy of serving colonial interests) but

epistemological equality (see, for example, Anderson 2018 and Takayama et al.'s 2016 special issue and introduction). Walter Mignolo (2009, 160), in a deliberately sardonic tone, observed: 'As we know: the first world has knowledge, the third world has culture; Native Americans have wisdom, Anglo-Americans have science.'

Mann warns (2012, 3-4) that it is dangerous to make assumptions about what is a 'fact':

> Analysis cannot merely reflect the "facts"; our perception of the facts is ordered by mental concepts and theories. The average empirical historical study contains many implicit assumptions about human nature and society, and commonsense concepts derived from our own social experience - such as "the nation," "social class," "status," "political power," "the economy."

For example, many scholars continue to advance the 'fact' that women are more religious than men, ignoring their western, Christian-centric bias and their skewed view that religiosity is best measured by giving equal weight to the number of people in pews as to those in front. Men's historical dominance of religion's hierarchal structure speaks to their consistent powerful 'religiosity', were it to be so counted and measured (for more on this, and refutation of related theories see Day 2017).

Considering such questions is having multiple effects as we decide what new methods are required in teaching, writing and research to challenge androcentrism elitism. Creative and sometimes systemic approaches are necessary, including, perhaps, consistent citation analysis to break the androcentric dominance. One method might be to support journals that have house-style rules that use full names, rather than just initials, in reference lists. How can gender balance be monitored, other than through transparency? Other actions might include gender quotas for conference speakers, editors and publication contributors. Editors of *Religion* try to correct the androcentric dominance by placing articles written by female authors first in regular (not thematic) issues.

Scholars are asking what issues and insights arise from field-specific variation. What is the implication for increased diversity in geography, for example, or theology? There will be challenges, some obvious – such as adjusting reading lists – and some more structurally inherent, such as improving BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) attainment. What problems and obstacles

do institutions and individuals face in taking up successful methods of ‘doing diversity’? What support can institutions and colleagues offer to others doing this work? We need to think through, against and with terminology such as 'diversity', 'anti-elitism', 'liberating' and 'decolonising' to ask what work those concepts are doing, and if there are better or best ways to frame such effort.

Progress has been, and continues to be, slow. Although the move to challenge so-called ‘classical’ thinking in the study of religion is not new, there are many institutions that blithely continue to offer the same old courses with the same tired presentation of the so-called founding ‘fathers’ of the study of religion: the sacred trinity of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, the first of whom spent most of his life in libraries expounding on political economy, not recognising sufficiently the gendered nature of labour as did, for example, the later female scholars whose work is rarely read in response to his like Charlotte Perkins Gillman (1899) or Olive Schreiner (1911); the second of the triumvirate depended on dead colonial-missionary accounts for his view of religion-without-gods and the third who offered philosophical, gender-biased arguments, skewing future debates about secularisation (see, for example, Woodhead 2008).

Increasing diversity also demands greater dialogue with students. Publishers of academic journals could do more to solicit emerging work and help novice authors through the publications and review process, particularly as publications are still dominated by white men. Correcting that imbalance needs to start earlier in the process.

Challenging classroom dynamics

How is diversity negotiated in the classroom? These questions were partly answered in a fine, yet disturbing, study that examined why women are not advancing as are men in certain academic departments (Guest, Sharma and Song 2013). Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies are amongst the worst. They found that although it has long been realised that there is a low proportion of senior women faculty within the UK subject areas of Theology and Religious Studies, little had been known about why, or how it could be changed. By analysing data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency and data provide by Theology/Religious Studies departments connected to admissions and progression, together with interviews and secondary analysis, the authors concluded that a male-dominated academic culture is much to blame.

They found that although females outnumber males at undergraduate level (60%–40%) they drop markedly at taught postgraduate level (42%), and to just 33% amongst postgraduate research students. Further, women account for just 16% of professors in the discipline. While they note that this pattern can be seen in other disciplines, the drop-out rate in the religion disciplines is more dramatic. Refreshingly, the authors turn from the usual suspects of women's apparent preference for babies over careers, and to more systemic, cultural reasons. Drawing on research by Helen Beeber (2013) about Philosophy, a cognate discipline, they argue that the male-dominated lecture halls and seminars nurture a form of behaviour that is aggressive and often bullying. Guest, Sharma and Song's (2013, 17) own research participants frequently echoed such a view, with one reporting: 'I think at conferences there's a general feeling of being a bit on the sidelines, a bit excluded because there are these groups of very confident, assertive male post-graduate students with these groups of very assertive male professors….'

Bullying is sometimes seen as a 'normal' part of academic practice in some disciplines, part of the game, the warring, cut-and-thrust of academic culture where people need to develop thick skins and let such negative experiences wash over rather than stick to them. Yet, in what other field of work would such feedback to a colleague be acceptable? Another research participant related her experience of reading journal referee feedback on her first academic paper submission (Guest, Sharma and Song 2013, 18): 'I think one of my worst days was the first thing I put in for a journal and the criticisms were so bad and I just felt so awful about it. It wasn't just the criticism, I could cope with that. It was just the way it was phrased and it was just so acerbic in tone.'

This kind of experience is not unusual, but it is a part of academe that is becoming less excusable. In the future, hopefully we will find more students and academics willing to submit formal complaints and thus identify and isolate the perpetrators.

Finally, I will turn briefly to colonial-Christian hegemony. As previously noted, the study of religion produced in its formative years a narrative about religion that assumed a white, Christian-centric worldview whereby it was the apparent duty of colonisers to convert the 'primitive' others in far-flung, 'exotic' lands. Said (1978) first drew wide academic attention to the sense of superiority embodied by colonial powers. In her review of post-colonial theory in relation to religion, Goulet (2011, 632) cites several examples:

> For example, while maintaining a static binary of East and West, British orientalists initially justified the occupation of India citing a need to help return India back to her Golden Age via a revitalization of Brahminical culture, including religion and texts (Kopf 1969). The orientalist quest for a Golden Age was soon replaced by the want to Christianize India in an effort to 'civilize' her (Bhattacharya 2005). The Anglicization of Indians was further complicated by the maintenance of latent orientalism, for despite the emergence of 'reformed' Indians, they were still viewed as the Other— 'not white⁄not quite' (Bhabha cited in Prakash 1992). This occurred even in instances where Hindus converted to Christianity (Viswanathan 1998).

As many anthropologists have argued, the assumption in the study of religion that propositional forms of 'belief' or an intellectualist search for existential 'meaning' is central to religion has a Christian orientation. Belief may be important to Christians in ways that do not matter to other religious adherents, and yet most social scientists persist in measuring it as a constant determinant of religiosity rather than as a situated, historical, multidimensional construct (for further discussion see, for example, Asad 1993, Keane 2002, Lindquist and Coleman 2008, Robbins 2003, Ruel 1982). When Parsons (1951, 368) said that religion was, at its heart, 'systems of cognitive orientation relative to problems of meaning' he echoed that intellectualist assumption as have most theologians and cognitive anthropologists. Embedded in such arguments is another largely unmarked assumption (Maldonado-Torres et al. 2018, 66–67), integral to the bedrock that supports the Western university project: reason.

> This includes providing criteria for identifying and demarcating the humanities, the natural sciences and the social sciences, as well as for distinguishing reason from faith, secularism from religion, and the 'primitive' and the ancient from the modern. These are central columns in the edifice that sustains modern Western rationality and the modern Western university.

Indeed, that problem was at the heart of debates about whether secularization theses retain legitimacy in a field that increasingly considers transformed, nuanced, inchoate, vicarious and

less visible forms of the religious and spiritual, complex though they may be to pin down and measure (Davie 2007).

The future study of religion will undoubtedly flourish as we unravel such complexities: atheists who see ghosts, for example, or other people who describe themselves as not conventionally religious, and yet experience a sensuous, social supernatural (Day 2013). In important work developing the field of non-religion, Lois Lee (2015) explored the 'content' of secular values and practices while Linda Woodhead (2017) showed how the 'nones' are not a singular category; people who describe themselves as non-religious, atheist or agnostic have other, non-theistic beliefs and practices that sometimes defy easy categorizations or labels.

And, finally, what difference does the study of religion make? Increasingly, scholars are becoming attenuated to an ethical, activist approach that has been evident for some time in the anthropology of religion. See, for example, Gordon Lynch's (2019) research into the history of religious and institutional abuse of children, Linda Woodhead's commentary (2018) on the Church of England's complicity with abusers, Laura Kearn's (2011) review of religious activism around climate change and this journal's thematic issue on advocacy (Stausberg 2014).

In conclusion, the study of religion is taking new directions as its scholars work to trouble many of its practices and assumptions. This will result in a different, more diverse, more equal future.

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