

**Inhospitable Landscapes: Disciplinary Territories and the Feminist  
"Paradigm Shift"**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines Ursula King's claim in her edited volume *Religion and Gender* (1995) that introducing feminist gender-critical approaches in the study of religions constitutes a paradigm shift for the field/discipline. I will sketch a broadly positive assessment of how this claim has been borne out, noting the important connection it advances between scholarly subjectivity and disciplinary identity, and drawing attention to the ways in which the working through of the paradigm shift has implied and instantiated a reconfiguration of disciplinary territory. The topological metaphors that underpin the feminist paradigm shift, as well as traditionally disciplinary terrain and transformation more generally, are helpful for examining how knowledge may be structured, taken apart, and remade, creating and remaking a certain kind of disciplinary citizen-subject on the model of the nation state that enables inclusion, but also exclusion. This latter point then leads to a more critical analysis that examines the function of feminist topologies in religious studies and outlining how the solitary focus on gender in the proposed paradigm shift marginalised race and postcolonial terrain, however much it challenged the androcentrism of religious studies. I will thus suggest that in staying true to the vision that King promotes through all of her work on 'religion and gender', the connection between scholarly and disciplinary identity she invokes, and the future she envisions, demands that the unfinished nature of the paradigm shift must be addressed such that an integrated/intersectional model of inclusion and complexity becomes the foundation for work going forward.

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## Introduction

The organising premise of Ursula King's groundbreaking volume *Religion and Gender* (1995) is the idea, derived from Carol Christ (1987, 1991), that feminist interventions in religious studies and theology represent a 'paradigm shift'. Such a shift, King notes, promises profoundly to transform these disciplines on three levels: 'one's personal existential and spiritual quest, ... scholarly discourse and knowledge construction, ... and the critique of whole religious systems' (King, 1995a, 23). Religious studies and theology in the early 1990s were still largely androcentric enterprises, barely touched, certainly not transformed by, and largely resistant to the revolution inaugurated by feminism's arrival in the academy during its second wave and its critical impact on the intellectual frameworks of most disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Feminist thought and its wide ranging critique of the politics and organisation of knowledge had been like an earthquake, shaking the foundations of well-established fields such as literary criticism, anthropology, history, philosophy, and sociology, dismantling and rebuilding their intellectual architecture, setting out radical new research agendas, and creating lively new subfields of study. For King and the scholars she gathered together in *Religion and Gender*, a change was long overdue if religious studies and theology were to remain useful, serious fields of study or instead justly to be consigned to an intellectual backwater. The paradigm shift offered by feminist knowledge formations was thus to be a significant step in pulling the fields of religious studies and theology back from the brink of the oblivion and irrelevance towards which their conservatism and lack of gender-critical awareness was driving them. The work of transformation held out by the feminist paradigm shift according to King, meant that nothing would or could remain as it was: not only would the methods and content focus of the disciplines be overturned and remade, their accompanying apparatus, architecture, and landscapes would need to be rebuilt, their resources redistributed, and some of their monuments would need to be razed. More importantly, scholars working within the field, especially women scholars, would also be altered as they became 'critically aware of their own positioning in society' and began to 'question the existing structure of knowledge and their own place in it' (1995a, 20).

An important theme, one central to the political project of academic feminism more generally but forcefully and repeatedly restated by King, emerges with her claim here: disciplinary identities and the social and political identities of scholars (in this instance their gender) are intimately entangled with each other: the transformation of one implies the transformation of the other. Further, the connection forged between the particular (gendered) embodiment of the scholar and disparate bodies of academic knowledge organised on disciplinary lines invites attention to the spatial, topological, or territorial metaphors that are so often invoked to explain disciplinary formations and their internal cultures, and it raises a series of connected questions: what is the relationship between scholars' (social) bodies, their political allegiances, and their placement in the terrain of disciplinary formations? What status may these bodies have? Are they all equal citizens with attendant rights and responsibilities, or are some more equal than others? What marks citizenship

in a discipline or field of studies? What relationships between different social bodies are possible? What difference does gender make to one's place in a discipline's territory? What about other forms of social embodiment? What forms of policing and governmentality are instituted and imposed on these bodies when disciplines become territorialised? If territory and the model of the nation state are the reigning metaphors for understanding disciplinary formations, are some territorialisations better than others, more hospitable, more welcoming at their borders? What relations of centre and periphery are established? What forms of inclusion and exclusion are inevitable or avoidable within the disciplinary spaces of religious studies? Does the gender-critical paradigm shift and its intended reconfigurations of the disciplinary landscape challenge or reify the territorial metaphor in ways that are radical and transformative, or in the end absorbed within its oppressive and potentially imperialist logic?

In what follows I propose first to examine these questions in broad terms, looking at the ways in which the territorial metaphor functions, with certain difficulties, to delineate the disciplinary landscape of religious studies and assessing the impact of the "paradigm shift" in reconfiguring its topography and built environment. In the following section I will suggest that for all its radical transformative potential and achievements, the feminist paradigm shift should attend more closely, urgently, and more hospitably to those citizens and knowledge formations for whom and which a prioritisation of gendered embodiment and epistemologies may be alienating such that the paradigm shift itself may need to be subjected to its own topographical transformations. I will conclude by returning to King's intellectual itinerary, her proposals for the future of the paradigm shift, and her subsequent work in the sequel to *Religion and Gender, Gender, Religion, and Diversity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (King and Beattie, 2004) where she perceptively outlines a programme that begins to address the exclusions that a sole focus on gender risks and points to a future where the work of dismantling and rebuilding may and must begin anew.

## Disciplinary Landscapes

In Simon Schama's magisterial study of the history of landscape metaphors<sup>1</sup> in the cultural memory of the West (2004), he notes the cognitive and agentive intention that drives the creation of landscape: 'landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock' (2004, 7), later remarking that 'it is our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape' (2004, 10). Tracing the roots of the term, he notes that it 'entered the English language...as a Dutch import at the end of the sixteenth century ... [*L*]andschap, like its Germanic

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<sup>1</sup> Here we might also note the topological associations embedded in the concept of 'metaphor' itself: from the Greek *metapherein* it means 'to carry or transfer' or 'to carry beyond', as well as 'to transgress' and thus implies a strong sense of both mobility and demarcated or bounded (conceptual) space. It is also etymologically connected to the root 'to bear children' or 'to give birth to' and thus to matter (materiality and mother). Metaphor strongly gestures, therefore, to a space beyond itself. It is a space of suspension, as well as a work of propulsive motion.

root, *Landschaft*, signified a unit of human occupation, indeed a jurisdiction, as much as anything that might be a pleasing object of depiction' (*ibid.*). The crafting of a landscape transforms it first into 'place' distinctive from that which it is separated from, and this crafting subsequently aids its claim to be the territory of specific population who are created as a unified community in this moment, and whose patrimony it becomes. Further, as the etymon suggests, the metamorphosis of a space, whether literal or metaphorical, into 'landscape' serves to create a bounded place over which a community may exercise dominion. The production of landscapes in this original sense, is virtually identical to processes of active territorialisation. Jan Penrose's theorisation of territorialisation is expressed in terms similar to Schama's conception of landscape, when she suggests that place and territory are 'quite different from space....[S]pace is present whether anyone knows about it or not, but space only becomes a place when it acquires "perceptual unity", and it only becomes a territory when it is delimited in some way' (2002, 279). Moreover,

When people create territories, they create boundaries that both unite and divide space along with everything that it contains. By combining some people and certain resources and separating them from other people and other resources, the creation of territories gives physical substance and symbolic meaning to notions of 'us' and 'them' and 'ours' and 'theirs'. (2002, 280)

The creation of territory, and the landscapes and topographical markers within them, is further a precondition for the founding claims of the modern nation state: without bounded territory there is no clarity or force to the divisions of populations into 'us' and 'them'.

There is a certain equivalence between disciplinarity and the nation-state: disciplines mirror the imaginary notion of the nation as a unified cultural community, and reflect the organisational structures of civil society in modernity. Traditional disciplinary boundaries in academia replicate the institutional arrangement of modern civil society into separate political, economic, cultural, and religious spheres, for example. Similarly to the constitution of the modern citizen-subject within the discrete domains of social space, the scholar's identity is both constituted and naturalised by parallel divisions in the arrangements of knowledge into discrete units.<sup>2</sup> Alignment or compliance with disciplinarity seemingly creates domains of inquiry that share objects of study, problems to investigate, values, terms, concepts, methods, and assumptions, governed by a general set of rules and categories guiding the pursuit of knowledge (Klein, 1993, 185–9).

Russell McCutcheon also draws attention to the parallels between disciplines and nations to explain the formation of the 'discipline of religion', arguing that

the study of nation-building overlaps so easily with the study of discipline building...for in both cases, specific rhetorics of unity and homogeneity are used to control and re-present, back to potentially

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<sup>2</sup> See Lowe, 1998.

distinct and unmanageable human beings their own necessary and inevitable groupness and utility—not only to one another, but also to ‘the state’ or ‘the profession’. (2003, xvi)

He later suggests that ‘efforts to construct a coherent and authoritative tradition involve mastering and controlling the dynamic tension between homogeneity and heterogeneity, past and present—defusing historical flux and difference in favour of some posited, essential similarity’ (2004, 70). Such a construction seems to suggest that heterogeneity, plurality, or worse, fragmentation, pose a danger to dominant discourses—disciplinarity—which must be contained, or in the language of nationalism, dispossessed or displaced. And this is the function of disciplinarity: the management of diverse populations so that they are productive, ostensibly unified in a common cause, cognisant of their traditions, and compliant with the protocols and cultural norms of their community. Because of its constitutive multidisciplinary nature, however, the academic study of religions finds itself subsequently in a contradictory position: forced to comply with the disciplinary imperatives of the academy in order to gain institutional recognition, it has raised ‘religion’ as a flag under which its population can unite, whilst having either to disguise or ignore the ephemeral and manufactured quality of its unifying centre, forced to gesture at a multidisciplinary toolbox of approaches and methods as its particular strength, that only brings into sharp focus the incoherency of both the category ‘religion’ and the discipline itself.<sup>3</sup> It is arguable that the forms of disciplinarity promoted by scholars in the study of religions—that is to say, the arguments that have been put forward historically and apparently successfully for the necessity for the study of religion to have its own dedicated institutional and intellectual identity, one not absorbed by the other disciplines—have been an inevitable consequence of the quest to secure institutional validation, recognition and autonomy; it fulfils the basic prerequisites of disciplinary formation in the university system as a whole, one which operates on a ‘discipline or punish’ basis.

This fragile positioning has been further challenged, in the last twenty-five years, by what we might call a ‘political turn’ in the study of religions.<sup>4</sup> By this I

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<sup>3</sup> Whilst cognisant of the risks involved in resisting ‘disciplinary’ claims, I have long hesitated to refer to the study of religions as a ‘discipline’ for these reasons, and prefer rather to name it, topically, as a ‘field of studies’. Nonetheless, the question of quite what constitutes or unifies it as such remains a fraught and unresolved (unresolvable?) one. For the purposes of this paper, ‘field’ and ‘discipline’ are solely serve as markers of institutional presence usually represented in departmental terms, but also by trans-institutional mechanisms of identification—conferences, publications, associations, etc.—which maintain the pretence of a unified intellectual endeavour organised around core principles, methods, and categories. See McCutcheon, 2003, 15-37 for a useful discussion of the normalising and thus political role played by debates regarding discipline versus field, disciplinarity versus multidisciplinary.

<sup>4</sup> Amongst the more prominent contributors to the political turn are scholars such as Jonathan Z. Smith, whose work was influential in inaugurating the debate, Russell McCutcheon, Aaron Hughes, Bruce Lincoln, Willi Braun, Gary Lease, Talal Asad, Donald Wiebe, Samuel Preus, Ivan Strenski, Richard King, Timothy Fitzgerald, Tomoko Masuzawa, Arvind Mandair, Ananda Abeysekera, and Daniel Dubuisson. I do not mean, of course, to suggest that these scholars’ various analyses converge or are even in agreement; rather, what they share is an interest in the rhetorical, discursive or socio-political operationalisation of the category ‘religion’.

mean that a collection of prominent scholars have drawn attention to how the *taxon* 'religion' is closely tied to the (opaque) ethnocentric creation of public/private, secular/religious, religion/state dichotomies that underpin and sustain the project of European modernity and the nation-state, and are intimately embedded in forms of colonialist governmentality, both of which render the continuing use of 'religion' as an organisational category of knowledge deeply suspect, if not both morally and intellectually bankrupt. Forceful analyses, such as those offered by Talal Asad, Russell McCutcheon, Timothy Fitzgerald, Tomoko Masuzawa, Bruce Lincoln, Craig Martin, and Aaron Hughes, amongst others, have all pointed to the ways in which the study of religions, as it formed and consolidated its place in the academy, has traded in a series of rhetorical techniques (involving claims to the uniqueness, universality, irreducibility, etc. of the datum 'religion'), that obscure the manufactured nature of its central category of analysis.<sup>5</sup> Concomitantly, these techniques have masked the ordinariness of the data the discipline 'cuts out' as uniquely religious, and this in turn leads to an uncritical attitude, descriptive impotency, and anti-theoretical culture amongst study of religions scholars where they become, to use McCutcheon's evocative phrase, 'critics, not caretakers' (2001). Indeed McCutcheon, reflecting on a common thread that runs through much of his work, suggests that he has been concerned to apply

a theory of social formation to an academic discipline in order to understand the role played by various rhetorics in creating and sustaining seemingly coherent social identities. These identities, like all social identities, come with issues of turf and privilege and the never-ending threat of fracture and dissolution. (2003, x)

The quest for disciplinarity in the study of religions appears to result in scholars who are not able to fulfil their responsibilities as good academic citizen-subjects, their critical capacities blunted in the effort to impose idealised maps onto a territory that has no natural boundaries, no unified history, no centrifugal force. We thus continue to patrol a territory under siege, defending the seemingly indefensible against the barbaric hordes who demand we cede ground and surrender the flag under which we unite, resisting 'fracture and dissolution'. Of course, I am overstating the case here. Religious studies may be under threat, but not from the naysayers of the political turn (amongst whom I count myself): institutional and political pressures consequent on the implementation of a business model for the Higher Education (the so-called 'marketization of higher education') appear to present a far greater menace to the existence of the field-cum-discipline. And it is these pressures that have exerted strong influence on the continuing tendency to reify disciplinary boundaries and to resist the creative thinking and reconfigurations that may result in a transformed territory, a transnational (that is to say, interdisciplinary, institutionally free-range) entity able better to withstand the forces directed against it. That said, religious studies has long been resistant to change and re-landscaping, regardless of the direction from which challenges may come as Ursula King's work repeatedly demonstrates

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<sup>5</sup> For a by no means exhaustive sample see Asad, 1993; Chidester, 1996, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2000, 2007; King 1999; Masuzawa 1993, 2005; McCutcheon, 1997, 2000, 2003.

and to which I will return shortly. McCutcheon points to the privileging of 'religion' as a unifying force for the discipline as a barrier to renovation and reform and proposes a 'natural' history of the discipline underwritten by several presumptions, that may help to loosen its conservative grip on the intellectual terrain it guards:

(i) nothing springs from the ground fully formed; (ii) there exists no narrative necessity to social development (a.k.a. destiny); (iii) all social movements are fractured systems, always in flux, from which (iv) alienated and discarded residue forms the raw materials that, under some new, previously unforeseen circumstance, *might* lead to the emergence of new social groups intent on establishing through narrative their own exclusive rights to exist and patrol a specific turf by claims of uniqueness and exceptionality....These presumptions are applicable to all social groups, from the nation-state, ethnic groups, and the family, to collections of scholars we call academic disciplines. (2003, xi; emphasis in original)

The basic point that McCutcheon makes here invites questions regarding the direction of travel for the feminist paradigm shift. Is it inevitable that the innovation offered by and the emergence of 'new social groups' such as gender-critical scholars in religious studies are inevitably absorbed into the exclusionary logic of nation-building?

In *Religion and Gender*, Ursula King asks poignantly whether 'feminist scholars [will] always remain sojourners in the field of religious studies or will they on the contrary soon become *fully established citizens* and inheritors of a whole field and its wide ranging cluster of inquiries' (1995a, 24; my emphasis). She notes the fragile nature of the paradigm shift and the intractability faced by feminist efforts to transform the discipline, citing Carol Christ's observation that feminist contributions to religious studies are set 'within an academic power structure which is not only male, but white, heterosexual, middle and upper class, for the most part Christian, and not particularly hospitable to feminism' (Christ, 1992, 87; King, 1995a, 23). She goes on to suggest that

As a discipline, religious studies remains thoroughly androcentric in its key concepts and paradigmatic perspectives of inquiry, but also in its institutionalized practice with its lack of recognition of feminist scholars and their work. The study of women is still marginalized in the study of religion, and the comprehensive study of gender as a category with even larger connotations has hardly begun. (1995a, 24)

As a fundamentally methodological, epistemological, and existential process, building on the alliance between feminist thought and political action, it operates from a 'hermeneutics of suspicion', pushing through to a 'critical deconstruction and reconstruction of the key elements of the discipline', the outcome of which will be its total transformation (*ibid.*; see also pp. 27-28) Clearly mindful of the hostile environment in which feminist scholars during the 1990s were labouring, she diagnoses a number of obstacles to the full

implementation of the paradigm shift whose aim is ambitious and far-reaching: to inaugurate an 'alternative vision which transforms both the subject matter and the scholar at the same time' (1995a, 22). The barriers to such a transformation are as profound and wide-ranging as the intended outcome of the shift and include: institutional barriers to the approval of courses and programmes addressing religion and gender, the difficulty in securing the allocation of adequate resources and funding, the marginalisation and ghettoisation of research in religion and gender as being only of interest to women, and the routine characterization of work in the field as transient and of doubtful quality. Moreover, the minority presence and precarious career prospects of gender-critical scholars were a significant barrier to the integration of feminist and gender-critical perspectives with many feminist scholars being viewed with suspicion for their insistence on the value of self-reflexive, politically oriented research against the presiding assumption of academic objectivity as securing intellectual authority, credibility, and neutrality (King, 1995a, 24-27). Because of the commitment of religious studies during this period to establishing its intellectual credentials and disciplinary coherence on its ability to conduct disinterested research into religious phenomena derived from the regnant methodologies of phenomenology and sociology, it is no surprise that feminist and gender-critical efforts were met with such resistance and hostility. For King, a major element in overcoming this resistance is women scholars playing 'a full part in the future shaping of the whole field of religious studies' such that they would 'eventually constitute 50 per cent of its practitioners' (1995a, 25).

King, of course, is well aware that the gender of the scholar does not necessarily imply an automatic commitment to feminist or anti-feminist principles. Rather, the important point she makes in this respect is that knowledge production is also an 'identitarian project' (Weigman), a view itself wholly consistent with feminist thought and other identity-based fields of study. The feminist gender theorist Robyn Weigman, for example, argues that knowledge production as an identitarian project is 'articulated around privileged objects of study and their equally privileged modes of inquiry. That these intellectual identities have come to rest...on their dis-establishment from the corporeal does not make them less identitarian; rather it reveals how profoundly shaped by structures of identity is the domain of academic knowledge production on the whole' (1999, 127). Thus, the notion that one's disciplinary home(land) is a site of identity constitution, not wholly separate to the social, political, and gendered identity with which one enters the discipline, is a core principle of fields such as feminist theory, women's and gender studies alongside other 'identity' studies. As Weigman points out, however, where 'identity studies have...sought to intervene in the university by critiquing its practices of excluding particular groups of subjects, they have been less successful in establishing the study of identity as a knowledge project that distinctly challenges the identitarian form of the university's intellectual reproduction in the disciplines' (1999, 126). Nonetheless, for Weigman, 'One is constituted as belonging [to a discipline] on an identitarian basis, where the imperative to *be* a biologist, philosopher, political scientist, even a critical theorist is to partake in an identitarian project' (*ibid.* 130). The socially-constituted body of the scholar, which is the site and focus of gender-critical



theorizing, can thus be a mode through which the sustaining claims of disciplinarity to conduct disinterested or neutral research, to pursue a course untroubled by the specificities of gender, or racial identity, for example, can be exposed and undone. Such a view is central to the significant attention given, in King's work but also in that of gender-critical scholars in the field more generally, to the structuring assumptions and modalities of androcentrism in religious studies. What masquerades as a self-sufficient, universal account of the religious landscape is in fact gendered male, provincial, and inadequate to the task of meeting the complex needs of its many and varied citizens. It is for this reason that King has made the repeated and powerful argument that one of the main means by which the paradigm shift will be achieved is by increasing the representation and status of women scholars within the field (King, 1986, 1990, 1995b). What religious studies has required in this account is the extension of the franchise to women in the spirit of representative democracy.

It is clear, therefore, the extent to which the paradigm shift as explicated in *Religion and Gender* is underpinned by feminist theory and its own turn to the consideration of gender instead of a sole focus on women as the category of analysis and action whilst nonetheless maintaining women—the mapping and inclusion of their subjectivities, activities, and also presence in the academy—as an important priority for gender-critical work. The field that emerged in the aftermath of work by King and many others, and which King has done so much to nurture, has laboured to carve out a space for considerations of religion and gender informed by, though not necessarily dictated by, the feminist ethos of description and prescription that emerged out of second-wave feminist political practice and which, in religious studies and theology has been directed at reforming both a variety of confessional traditions and the institutionalised, academic study of religions. It has in fact been 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.). And these efforts have been spectacularly successful: many of the obstacles that King identified have been largely overcome, with much better representation, visibility, and integration of the main themes and methodologies of gender-critical insights into core curricula, research programmes, and publications, and a much stronger presence and prominence of women scholars. No longer is it conscionable to dismiss a scholar's work on the basis of their gender.

However, for all the pioneering and inspiring work that has been conducted in this field, and to and in which I am both intellectually committed and embedded, it has been increasingly my view that there has been a regrettable dearth of postcolonial reflection as a mainstream activity in the field of religion and gender 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 profoundly far-reaching epistemological and ontological implications of postcolonial critique are taken seriously. Thus, perhaps, as McCutcheon warns, the disciplinary machinery of religious studies, is well able to absorb

the threats to its territorial integrity represented by 'new social groups' such as gender-critical scholars by domesticating these potential insurgents into its exclusionary logic when the very bounded spaces and social norms we seek to inhabit as citizen subjects are not subjected to critique and transformation. In other words, the topological interventions undertaken by feminist scholars of religion and gender within the territories of religious studies have (perhaps) inadvertently contributed to the creation of a deracinated landscape that has been exclusionary and inhospitable to those who cannot unite under the flag of gender, however much they may share some of the values of feminist thought, and for whom expansion of the franchise to female scholars may not be the priority. As Schama puts it, '...landscapes will not always be simple "places of delight"—scenery as sedative, topography so arranged to feast the eye. For those eyes...are seldom clarified of the promptings of memory. And the memories are not all of pastoral picnics' (2004, 18). The following section takes up these concerns in order to suggest that 'religion and gender' as a field inaugurated by the feminist paradigm shift, needs to be more expansive and hospitable, and to be more open to the dismantling and reconfiguration of its own intellectual terrain and unifying core from the places of those whose memories are not of a green and pleasant land.

### **Conceptual Borders and Exclusions: Maps and Territories**

As noted above, within the academic field of the study of religions, the intimate bonds between western scholarship, European colonialism, and the discursive and territorial production and employment of 'religion' have been well rehearsed. 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 field of religious studies) 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'.<sup>7</sup> Even a cursory review of literature in the field in the last two decades reveals a startling absence of *sustained* reflection on the ways in which the basic operational assumptions, premises, idioms and enunciatory locations of the field might require 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

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<sup>6</sup> The literature in this respect is vast. For a representative sample see Anzaldúa, 1987; Chow, 1989; Minh-ha, 1989; Mohanty, 1991; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983; Narayan, 1997; Rajan, 1993; Carby, 1982; Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981; Joseph & Lewis, 1981.

<sup>7</sup> See Hawthorne & van Klinken, 2013, 161-2, for an overview of the nature and form of 'postcoloniality'.

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'. There has been little recognition of how 'gender' as a political, social, and intellectual assemblage is rooted in a conceptual terrain that does not necessarily cross the borders of its birthplace. The question here is the extent to which 'gender' is a universal concept or category when its theorisation and prioritisation as a political site of subject formation and agency is deeply bound to the philosophical history of the liberal tradition in which it is embedded and, from there, to the governmental technologies of colonial modernity.

As Pui-Lan Kwok and Laura 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' (2002, 2-3). Morny Joy (2001) too has sounded a similar warning 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 whitefeminism<sup>8</sup>—insist on the specificity of their own complex, mobile subjectivities; these are neither unreflexive imitations of the western metropole, nor dialectically constructed antagonisms that leave oppressive structurings 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' (2001, 183).

An overdue question, therefore, that confronts scholars in the field of religion and gender today is that of the necessity of thinking 'religion', 'gender', 'race', and 'postcoloniality' together. 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', 'race' 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

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<sup>8</sup> The term 'whitefeminism' 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.

knowledge—identity studies—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.

Religion and gender as a distinct field of study within religious studies as already noted has been staged as a critical intervention against the exclusion of gender as an analytic category 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 or transformation of the conceptual domains that reproduce various forms of gendered (and indeed sexual) exclusions. In recent years I have noticed however, the relative silence that seems to attend the aggregation of 'religion', 'gender', with 'postcoloniality' and 'race' (often fudged as 'ethnic diversity')—as though their affiliation is so obvious as to pass without remark such that it literally passes without remark. I have wondered 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, disability and all the other 'others', are traded as so many badges of honour in a lazy discourse of similitude. It seems that the symptoms of this complacency can be tracked through a variety of practices, but particularly (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 and histories (largely emerging from the liberal tradition) which have selectively appropriated non-western traditions and models in their service; (2) a propensity to conflate feminist and postcolonial interests, and the experiences of racism and gender oppression as similar if not the same.<sup>9</sup>

To insist on the similitude of oppression across a spectrum of difference whilst prioritising gender as the tie that binds, is to indulge in a form of discursive imperialism that weakens the intellectual credibility and political force of feminist and gender-critical work, and further, obscures the embeddedness of much feminist thought in white privilege and its persistent, if apparently unwitting, collaboration with racist and colonialist practices of exclusion. Moreover, it suggests that a kind of etiolated feminism is adequate to the task of thinking and writing about practices and persons wholly different historically, philosophically, or geographically. Gayatri Spivak's assessment of a broader problem for white Anglophone feminism is pertinent here when she draws attention to how it glosses a significant problem in its 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 own' (1999, 170; emphasis in original). The

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<sup>9</sup> See Hawthorne, 2013, for a more detailed discussion of these practices.

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.

An example of how this co-optation plays itself out in one of the dominant themes in religion and gender is instructive in this respect. Demands for women's autonomy and recognition of their religious agency have animated much scholarship in the field of religion and gender insofar as it has proceeded from a feminist sensibility and have certainly proven politically transformative in the western academy. However, we should note Saba Mahmood's warning against the scholarly appropriation 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' (2005, 14). The logic she points to here is part and parcel of the liberal principles that underwrite so much feminist thought when it is organised around concepts of rights and the transformative potential of political activism. But it is a rare thing to find in the work of scholars of religion and gender 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.<sup>10</sup> 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? (*ibid.*)

We should recognise here, therefore, 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 and whether gender might be constructed—and deconstructed—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

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<sup>10</sup> For an elegant elaboration of this point see Langsdale, 2013, especially chapters 1 and 6.

are oriented around the preservation and intricate patrolling of that territory we have laboured so hard 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' (1989, 150). 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' (2001, 178). 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 and subjugation (see Mohanty, 1991, 52).<sup>11</sup>

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 as perhaps the place from which theorizing 'our' reconfigurations of centre and periphery, territory and the wilderness beyond—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 not to be implicated in colonial value codings. However, the creation and valuation of 'religion' as a discursive entity was carefully calibrated to a curiously European construction

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<sup>11</sup> 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 to make a general parallel with the nature of gender oppression.

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. 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' (Donaldson & Kwok, 2002, 1) of religion, gender, and postcoloniality—and to which I would add a fourth spoke, race—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. (1997, 80)

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 to be shored up by anchoring that heterogeneity in the homogeneity of the other' (2009, 116). Thus, when we fail to account for and to the colonial history that is the place of common ground, as scholars of religion and gender we run the risk of engaging in a project of self-definition that repeats the colonial appropriation of the other in order to accrue social and intellectual capital.

I would argue, therefore, that we should ask what the terms 'religion', 'gender', 'race' and 'postcoloniality' might disclose about their own and their respective incompleteness and thus openness when the specificity of western conceptuality and political 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 postcolonial interventions on the terrain of the academic metropole 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 in fact imperialist interpellations—a sign of their incompatibility or possible emptiness as intellectual constructs—indeed, as lived realities—or of a troubling blindspot in the field? What impropriety is promised by the conjunction of these concepts and which boundaries and territorial markers might their coalition transgress, dismantle, or reify? I think that the future of the feminist paradigm shift in religious study requires that we work these questions through, that we examine much more carefully the landscape that we built and shaped as ‘sojourners’ in the field, such that those boundaries we erected, almost inadvertently, excluded others with whom an alliance was necessary in order to achieve the transformation of territory we sought. If the feminist paradigm shift is to achieve its promise, it must start the move towards intellectual adequacy in a postcolonial world. In the concluding section of this paper, I will therefore turn briefly to King’s proposals in *Gender, Religion, and Diversity* to find the road markings that point to a better, more hospitable future.

### Shifting Horizons

In *Religion and Gender* King draws out a map for the future of a religious studies transformed by the paradigm shift. Maintaining a commitment to the force feminist frameworks, she nonetheless insists that ‘the feminist critical approach...represents a paradigm shift *within* another paradigm shift which is larger still’ which she names as a ‘discourse and consciousness about globality and globalization’ (1995a, 29). It is at this point that she warns against the dangers of constructing a ‘new, false universalism...on the basis of female experience alone’ because this would merely replicate the androcentric problem. Here, however, King does not develop the theme that was to become more prominent in her later framing of the field, notably the need to consolidate the paradigm shift by going beyond *Religion and Gender*’s focus on the methodological approaches and opportunities represented by a gender-critical framework to account for ‘critical perspectives dealing with the impact of race, gender and class...’, as well as ‘deconstructing religious data from a postcolonial critical standpoint [and] examining the impact of imperialism and orientalism on the relationship between religion and gender’ (King & Beattie 2004, 4). It is in *Gender, Religion, and Diversity: Cross-Cultural perspectives* that this vision is given shape, marking both a moment of reflection on the pathways taken by the paradigm shift, and a reconfiguration of its futurity such that it is more nuanced and hospitable in its vision of the landscape. Many of the papers collected in the volume were first presented at a colloquium she organised at the University of Bristol in 2001, appropriately titled ‘Breaking New Ground: Methodological Innovations in the Study of Religion and Gender’ and evidence a new awareness of the need to expand the purview of religion and gender beyond simply their inter-relation, covering topics such as critical race theory and its challenges for feminist theory, missionary imperialism, masculinity, lesbian and gay perspectives, subaltern theology, and postcolonial ethics. In her ‘Introduction’ to the volume, King notes that the ‘paradigm shift’ was perhaps ‘too tame’ to express the full force of what it was intended to describe, and she aptly adopts a topological metaphor to explain its aftermath. The paradigm shift as King envisions it is not simply a shift, but



rather 'a shaking of foundations, a radical remapping of our intellectual and academic landscape, and with a complete repositioning of bodies of knowledge that relate to religion' (*ibid.*). She fully recognises that in the aftermath of the earthquake rebuilding will require a coalition of differing perspectives and priorities, none reducible to or absorbable by the other. Thus, she suggests that 'If gender categories are products of human discourse and culture, if they were once created in particular ways, they must be open to "re-creation", to new reshaping and redefinition in a global world aware of its new historical situation, faced with previously unimagined opportunities and threats' (2004, 6). The 'diversity' she seeks and welcomes into the territories of religion and gender render it an expansive, hospitable space, its ecology life-sustaining and yes, transformative. As scholars of religion and gender we would do well to heed her visions of the future, the hope that she articulates for a wide open space where thought and life, knowing and living can flourish. The paths she has laid out are worth travelling; the horizons she envisages give me hope that we will move towards intellectual adequacy in a postcolonial world. It has been and remains a tremendous honour to follow in the footsteps of this extraordinary scholar who has always been a faithful guide through the territory of religious studies, its little-travelled by-ways and undiscovered places, and to whom my own journey owes so much.

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