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TITLE

Feminist theory and religious diversity.

The objectives of this paper are:

- First, to explain in what sense quick rejection of religions and underestimation of women’s need to maintain their religious beliefs and practices are in conflict with both the feminist *anti-essentialism* and the feminist value of *inclusivity*.
- Second, to argue that quick condemnation of unfamiliar religious or cultural beliefs and practices is one of the great pitfalls of cross-cultural studies in so far as the purpose of such study is not to feel superior.
- Finally, to propose that there are feminist grounds for learning about and thinking about religious diversity and that for feminists, concern with religious pluralism is necessitated by the most basic values of feminism, that is, the importance of inclusivity and the necessity to widen the canon through dialogue.

As a scholar working recently at the crossroads of feminist, cultural and religious studies, I have often felt discouraged by the derogatory way that religious people talk about feminism. For some of them it is a disgrace to profess to be feminist and still believe in God. But I have also felt discouraged by the lack of interest in religion and spirituality that I detect among some feminists, particularly white feminist scholars in other fields. In some cases this apparent lack of interest seems to conceal a deep suspicion toward anyone, especially one who professes to be feminist, who takes religion seriously. ‘How could a *real* feminist care about such things?’ the unstated question seems to be, as if religion belongs only to another era of Western history, a period prior to women’s relative emancipation; as if religion is so unequivocally bad for women that studying it (or, God forbid, practicing it) threatens one’s integrity as a feminist.

The antireligious currents in academic and popular feminist discourses are very well illustrated in an essay by Debbie Cameron. Cameron says that her response to spiritual talk is ‘not simple indifference (or embarrassment, though there’s an element of that)_ it’s more like irritation or even hostility, of a kind I don’t feel when feminists talk about other things, even if they are remote from my own

concerns or if I have political reservations about them'. Cameron's scepticism of feminist interest in spiritual matters is not confined to traditional religion. Although she believes that traditional religious discourse and practice are dangerous for feminists because they are inherently patriarchal, she also criticizes the feminist turn to alternative spiritual practices, which she says typically reinscribe an oppressive Western association between women and irrationality.¹

Illustrations of the tendency to polarize feminism and religion abound, ranging from the frequent lack of representation of religious feminists and feminist work in the field of religion in women's studies departments that profess a commitment to interdisciplinary scholarship, to the explicitly antispiritual rhetoric of some feminist critiques.² Feminist antispiritual rhetoric makes religion the enemy of female liberation not only because it involves a kind of 'thought control' but also because it undermines material struggles to change the patriarchal conditions of this world. This critique of religion is hardly news within religious feminist circles. Feminist scholars of religion and feminist theologians were the first to scrutinize and reject theologies that sacralize or justify the abuse and subordination of women.

Moreover, feminist antireligious discourse has a homogeneous and thus very shallow understanding of the term 'religion' that needs to be abandoned if we are to do justice to the fact that there is religious diversity. Recently, Tina Beattie pointed out that: 'If feminist methods of research are to be consistent in their respect for contextuality, historicity and materiality, then the *sui generis* model of "religion" needs to be deconstructed in order to acknowledge a plurality of historical, geographical and cultural narratives marked by the play of sometimes irreducible and possibly irreconcilable differences. A failure to recognize this leads to the homogenization of religion, the erasure of difference, and the colonization of religious otherness by the ahistorical and universalizing presence of the secular scholar of religion'.³

Finally and most notably, feminists' disregard for religion is tied to a very narrow conception of 'women's experience'. Feminists often refer to 'women's experience', meaning the experience of affluent, educated, liberated, non-believing, atheist or agnostic women of the First World. Yet, 'women's experience' can neither be unified nor homogenized. Identifying 'women's experience' with the experience of one type of woman excludes the experiences of millions of women around the world. Commenting on this issue, Ramazanoglu writes: 'New-wave feminists have tended to have little interest in religion. Yet religion can be the dominant factor in the personal identity and cultural location of millions of women around the world. If religion is one of the most important and immediate factors which enable a woman to know who she is, and to give meaning to her life, an international feminist movement cannot afford to ignore religion'.⁴ If feminism is concerned with and struggles for human rights, equality and inclusivity, then underestimating the experience of the women who want to maintain their religious beliefs is in conflict with the value of inclusivity.

Moreover, if antireligious feminist discourse depicts the non-believing, atheist or agnostic Western feminist as the 'superior knower' then it follows that belief in God or any kind of spirituality for that matter equals inferior cognitive abilities. The assumption that truly feminist consciousness is essentially a secular consciousness implies that women's religious consciousness equals 'false consciousnesses'. But how can anyone know or define the *true* feminist consciousness? Does it exist somewhere and the women must strive to find it? Who is to say what counts as false consciousness and what counts as true feminist consciousness? Ironically, feminism has a number of interests and concerns, including a commitment to unmask the universalizing pretences of Enlightenment thinkers and a belief in the cultural and historical embeddedness of all claims to truth that rules out essentialism.

¹ Debbie Cameron, 'Can you feel the force (and should you give in to it)?' *Trouble and Strife* 31 (1995), 4, 9.

² For a couple of examples of the antireligious tendency in the academic and popular feminist discourse see Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) and Linda Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990). For a critique of these two works see Michelle M. LeLwica, 'From superstition to enlightenment to the race for pure consciousness: Antireligious currents in popular and academic discourse', *Journal of Feminist Studies* 14:1 (1998), 108-123.

³ Tina Beattie, 'Religious identity and the ethics of representation: The study of religion and gender in the secular academy' in U. King and T. Beattie (eds.), *Gender, Religion, and Diversity: Cross-cultural Perspectives* (London, New York: Continuum, 2004), 65.

⁴ Caroline Ramazanoglu, *Feminism and the Contradiction of Oppression* (London: Routledge, 1989), 151.

Feminists have critiqued the notions that true knowledge is objectively discovered and known, that the self is an unencumbered rational individual, and that Western history unfolds in a steady and unambiguous march toward progress. In this respect, it is precarious to talk of a true feminist consciousness that is essentially anti-religious since this is in conflict with both the feminist anti-essentialism and the feminist value of inclusivity.

What is more, depiction of the non-believing, atheist or agnostic Western feminist as the 'superior knower' who has the *true* feminist consciousness, informs 'first world' Western feminism's construction of 'third world' women as 'other'. Chandra Talpade Mohanty says: 'Universal images of the "third world woman" (the veiled woman, chaste virgin, etc.), images constructed from adding the "third world difference" to "sexual difference", are predicated upon (and hence obviously bring into sharper focus) assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated, and having control of their own lives. This is not to suggest that western women *are* secular, liberated, and in control of their own lives. I am referring to a *discursive* self-presentation, not necessarily to material reality'.⁵

'First World' Western women, be they secular or religious, have a *discursive* self-presentation that has been constructed in opposition to the presentation of 'third world' women who do not share with them the same values and human rights. Western feminists have often rejected Christianity and religions in general as irredeemably patriarchal and inherently oppressive. Western feminists, religious and secular, have also sometimes been eager to criticise and condemn practices that strike them as completely cruel and unbearable for women. When a feminist studies some unfamiliar religious contexts, she is likely to heave a sigh of relief that *she* does not live in that culture. Some practices, such as African genital operations on women, cannot be evaluated as anything but completely horrific by feminist standards. Nevertheless, we must ask if vocal outrage is the most effective way of responding to such practices.

For Rita Gross 'quick condemnation of unfamiliar religious or cultural beliefs and practices is one of the great pitfalls of cross-cultural studies in general. The purpose and the promise of such study is not to feel smug and superior.'⁶ Gross' experience in teaching unfamiliar religions has given her certain insights about how best to proceed. 'First, the ground rules of looking into and learning from the comparative mirror *require* suspension of judgement at first, until one is thoroughly familiar with the situation being studied. One *must* first try to understand *why* such practices exist and *what* purposes they serve, according to the viewpoint of the religion being studied. Empathy is the most critical tool for looking into the comparative mirror in way that do not create further mutual entrenchment and scorn. It must be applied in all cases, even the most unsavoury, *before* appropriate judgments can be made'.⁷

If one takes more time to reflect on a religious belief or practice, there may be some surprising conclusions. Some practices that seem undesirable turn out not to be as completely disadvantageous to women as they might seem at first. For example, polygyny can provide female companionship and help with childcare. In other cases, seemingly undesirable conditions are not really very different from what Western women experienced until very recently, or even experience today. Finally outsiders' judgments about women's situation are often made on the basis of public observation, of what goes on in public spaces. If one knows the situation more intimately, one will discover that women often have a great deal of power behind the scenes, and everyone takes it for granted.⁸

However, some religious ideas and practices remain for a feminist appalling, even after much consideration. Then what? For Gross, 'cross-cultural public denunciations from First World countries and former colonists probably only entrench the situation further. Then resisting changes in women's situation becomes part of national pride and resistance to Westernisation. It does little good to talk about African genital *mutilation* rather than African genital operations, or to decry Muslim practices surrounding gender, to name two of the most inflammatory feminist causes. It would probably be far better quietly to work with *women* from those situations and to support them financially and emotionally'.⁹

⁵ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' in C.Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (eds.), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 74.

⁶ Rita M. Gross, 'Feminist theology as theology of religions' in Susan Frank Parson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 69.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

⁹ *Ibid.*

In order to work with women from those situations effectively and not in a patronizing way, one has to realize not only that the situations these women come from are very different from one's own but also that when speaking of different situations, we mean a number of diverse experiences that are often so different from each other that it is very precarious to imply that they can all be treated in the same way. If I were an atheist and treated all religious women as a homogeneous group of people then I would not do justice to the differences between the cultural environment of Muslim women and the situation of Christian women.

Given that feminist movement was born from the women's experience of being excluded by patriarchal societies, and the resulting convictions that the voices of the excluded deserve to be heard, learning about and thinking about religious diversity are necessitated by the most basic values of feminism, that is, the importance of inclusivity and the need to widen the canon through dialogue. Inclusivity and widening the canon are different ways of expressing an epistemological and an ethical reason why thinking about religious diversity is necessary today.

Widening the canon is the epistemological reason and has to do with the illuminating power of the 'comparative mirror',¹⁰ with the truth of the slogan that 'to know one religion is to know none'. It also has to do with the fact that religions other than one's own may well contain ideas and symbols from which we might learn something useful. In this respect: 'Our own world, instead of being taken for granted, becomes exposed as a world, its contents held up to the comparative mirror and we become a phenomenon to ourselves'.¹¹

Inclusivity is the ethical reason and has to do with the facts that religious diversity is a reality, not a mistake, and that religious diversity is part of the experience of most contemporary people. Intolerance and exclusive truth claims may be unavoidable when religions are relatively isolated from each other, but they are lethal when religions mingle in a common environment as is the case today. I think that we have to take seriously into consideration the fact that in a democratic society religious diversity cannot be a problem. Members of religious communities are also citizens of democratic states. How can one compromise his/her belief that his/her religion is the ideal with other people's right to disagree with his/her view.

There are three theoretical and ultimately ethical approaches to the problem of how to understand normatively the fact that other religions besides one's own exist. The first is the exclusivist position and claims that one's religion alone among the world's religions has validity and would be the only religion in an ideal world. For the exclusivist position, tolerance is simply a *modus vivendi* (especially, when the exclusivist fails to force everybody to accept her/his religion.) The exclusivist cannot compromise his/her religiosity with other people's right to have different religious affinities or no religiosity at all.

The second is the inclusivist position and says that there is *some* merit in other religions, that they are not wholly adequate. But an inclusivist would also claim that these other religions are not adequate because they are waiting to be 'fulfilled' by the teaching that the inclusivist most values about her/his own religion. (This use of the term 'inclusivity' is not the same as that discussed as the feminist value of inclusivity).

The third is the pluralist approach. The pluralist would say that no religion is either the only valid religion or the most valid among religions. Each religion provides something valuable and interesting in a giant mosaic. We probably have personal affinities for one among the religions, but that doesn't elevate the worth of that religion for everyone else. For a feminist who is interested in the value of inclusivity and in widening the canon, the only suitable position is the pluralist approach. The exclusivist and inclusivist positions, if held simultaneously by members of different religions, lead to mutual hostility. The pluralist position provides ways for different religions to live together peacefully, without competition. Pluralism is often confused with absolute relativism. Does anything go then? Theoretically in a democratic society anything goes, unless it is harmful for people or is against public reason, human rights and democracy. A pluralist evaluates religions on the basis of the ethical consequences of their theological teachings. I conclude with a number of crucial questions that can be raised at this point: Is it possible for a member of a religious community to be pluralist? Can a monotheistic religion respect and not simply tolerate religious pluralism? Particularly, is Orthodox Christianity compatible with modern understandings of

¹⁰ Rita M. Gross, 'The virtues and the joys of the Comparative Mirror', *Boston University School of theology Focus* (Fall 1999), 9-16.

¹¹ William Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1988), 165.

democracy? Is it possible for a religion to change in order to respect democracy and religious diversity? What are the criteria for developing a theology of religions?