
Who is the Public Intellectual? Identity, Marginality, and the Religious Studies Scholar*

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In 1997, Russell McCutcheon stirred up a storm in some circles within religious studies in an article entitled "A Default of Critical Intelligence? The Scholar of Religion as Public Intellectual." Published in the journal of a major North American professional association, the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, the essay made the argument that religious studies professors should undertake work as public intellectuals and, indeed, that such work ought not to theologize but to historicize. More particularly, the charge of the religious studies public intellectual, according to McCutcheon, is to locate "social authorizing practices" within history, thereby demystifying them. Several responses to McCutcheon's argument were published in a subsequent volume of the journal, at least one of which was vitriolic (Griffiths 1998; O'Connor 1998; McCutcheon 1998a).

Two years later, the same journal published a review essay entitled "Having Your Cake and Eating it Too: Feminism and Religion" by Katherine K. Young. This essay reflected upon Rita Gross's 1996 volume *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction*. Focused in part upon

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what she saw as a distinction between advocacy and scholarship, Young's critique of Gross's volume parallels McCutcheon in raising concerns about central definitional issues, methods, and "visions" of religion and religious studies. Young joined McCutcheon in rejecting religious overtones of religious studies. In addition, Young devoted significant attention to epistemologies centred around notions of objectivity and neutrality as they might be relevant to her understanding (and rejection) of feminism within the academy and within religious studies. Young's critique was followed by a response from Gross and a rejoinder by Young. Like the exchange which involved McCutcheon, the exchange between Young and Gross was not carried out in the flat academese sometimes associated with professional journals. Young's overall tone, for example, was polemical.

These exchanges made visible heated and ongoing disputes within the academic study of religion: around epistemology; the boundaries of the field; the acceptability of advocacy within religious studies and the academy more broadly (including particular tensions between engagement and disengagement with religion evident in religious studies); the relevance and/or irrelevance of newer scholarships associated with feminism, postmodernism and cultural studies; and the place (or lack thereof) for the academic study of religion within the secular university. In sum, these exchanges point to entanglements of experience and scholarship, history and institution, religion and secular, which have been central to the construction of religious studies as a discipline. Indeed, the exchanges may be read as *synechdochal* for much of what goes on within the academic study of religion today—and much of what has been going on in the field for decades.

Juxtaposing these two discussions makes much more apparent, for example, the way in which the field (and the debate which constitutes it) is gendered. Read alongside one another, the Young/Gross debate leads us to raise new questions about McCutcheon's argument. Most crucially, we are led to ask what happens when the religious studies scholar is "marginal" or "marked" or "subaltern." What happens, we inquire, when the religious studies professional is a woman, an African American, an out gay or lesbian? As importantly, since Young and Gross are women in substantial disagreement, we are

led to ask what happens when the intellectual is a feminist. Put another way: the Young/Gross debate reminds us to inquire about the abstract religious studies scholar advocated by McCutcheon, asking who he (*sic*) is. Such questions dramatically transform the situation within which McCutcheon and his interlocutors debate the nature of the field. They lead us to ask whose religious studies we are discussing and why this might matter.

Juxtaposition of McCutcheon's argument with the Young/Gross discussion points to a parallel concern regarding the "public intellectual." Examining this topic requires reflection on the ways in which the public sphere has been gendered; such reflection brings back into prominence the notion that "the personal is the political" as well as feminist arguments that the public sphere has often been founded upon exclusions. Our reflection leads us, as well, to consider the gendering of the "intellectual." It is, thus, not merely religious studies which risks abstraction in McCutcheon's analysis, but the public intellectual as well.

In raising such topics, we are led to inquire, finally, about the politics of religious studies and of the feminisms articulated within this context. Indeed, this third question arising from the juxtaposition of Young, Gross, McCutcheon and his interlocutors emerges from seeing the Young/Gross debate anew and raises the general concern of the nature of feminism(s) within and without the academy. I, for example, found Young's critique to be founded upon a profound oversimplification or misconstrual of feminism(s). The relation of teacherly and scholarly traditions of feminism to a thorough-going and diverse critique of epistemologies, including objectivities, neutrality and the making of disciplinary knowledges is particularly key. Within the academic study of religion, this debate shapes (often covertly) the triangulation of feminism, theology and religious studies. In recent decades much has changed—making feminist theology an increasingly possible, more visible and occasionally trendy phenomenon, while feminist religious studies remains, for many, elusive or oxymoronic. As McCutcheon hints, the "social authorizing practices" of religious studies which exclude feminist perspectives may require historicizing.

Reflecting on the religious studies scholar as public intellectual and the place of feminism within religious studies through the lens of these two exchanges, then, requires thoughtful (re)consideration of ways the boundaries of disciplinary acceptability are maintained as well as the relation of epistemology to institutionalized knowledge/power relations. This juxtaposition of debates makes visible paradoxes at the centre of religious studies as a discipline and as an identity (Juschka 1997). We are led, that is, to the central question of what it is religious studies professors profess and who it is we profess to be. Young, Gross, McCutcheon and his interlocutors, intentionally or otherwise, raise the spectre of identity scholarships which, like identity politics, are the subject of important critique as well as emancipatory hope (Berube and Nelson 1995, 305–68).

The Paradoxes of Religious Studies and Questions of Feminisms

Russell McCutcheon's discussion, among other points, emphasized the need to distinguish between contributions to public discourse made by religious thinkers and those which folks from religious studies have (or might) make. This distinction is, in itself, a product of a particular theorizing of objectivity evidenced in approaches to the methodological and epistemological underpinnings of the academic study of religion characteristic of a particular faction within the field. Young, of course, agrees with this perspective. Here, religious studies is characterized as science (or naturalistic) and distinguished from theology. Such a perspective is often founded upon the identification of values with a covert crypto-theology (or an overt theology). Herein lies the paradox—a paradox which has been exposed by theorists and historians who make visible the situated, historical character of the varieties of objectivity associated with the notion of science.

As someone who came to religious studies as part of a secularizing journey and who values religious studies for its secularizing and critical edge, the distinction between religion and religious studies is something which I find congenial. Yet, as someone who holds explicit value laden positions (e.g., feminist, anti-homophobic and anti-racist stances) I reject easy characterizations of religious studies as value

free or the binary opposition which characterizes contributions of religious studies folks as public intellectuals as either value free or crypto-theological. Certainly, the history of religious studies has been based upon exclusions and inclusions rooted in post-colonialism (Chidester 1996), gender politics, race relations and related knowledge/power politics; and yet, I would argue, the hope of the field lies in its critical examination of its own “social authorizing practices” rather than enforcement of a “scientific” (read: naive scientific) objectivity or neutrality. While I reject theology, therefore, I also reject the presumption that feminist work within the academic study of religion is, of necessity, theological.

The apparent conflict between feminism (as an advocacy position) and religious studies as an academic endeavour which resists theological advocacy leads, on occasion, to recommendations supporting compartmentalization of our roles. This, of course, is more difficult for some of us than for others. Scholars, like teachers, are, in part, defined by their audiences—as black, as female, as authoritative or not. And those whose “marked” or “marginal” status is visible have no option to “pass” (Caughie 1999). Put another way, while the white male academic may find it (relatively) easy to be “read” (or pass) as “neutral” or “objective” within the context of hegemonic academia, this remains more problematic for women, including women of colour and lesbians, and some men. As each of us moves into religious studies we face a complex array of problematics organized as boundary maintenance devices, excluding or limiting through labeling (as theological) or through vituperous and polemical attacks similar to those contained in the *JAAR* pieces cited above.

To work in religious studies is, perhaps, to work through contradiction and paradox.

As a white lesbian woman educated at an elite graduate institution who now has tenure at a historically white liberal arts institution, my place within the field—and within various publics—complicates my very understandings of marginality, exclusion and inclusion. Such tensions are not uniquely my own; they are the contradictions experienced by many within the social order and within the academy. Though not all “marginalized” or “marked” religious studies profes-

sors—or public intellectuals—will recognize themselves in the contradictions of identity within the academy and beyond described by Jerry Watts, he has described them aptly:

[W]hen a black person speaks of the way in which American culture works intellectually—and this happens in the left and all kinds of circles—what happens is that you come as the bearer of a parochial view. Your status as a speaker is determined *a priori* by your race position. I can speak about black Americans, but I'm seen as speaking about a parochial entity, when I might actually be making a generic point about American citizens, and who these people are. But the way I'm culturally understood as a *black* speaker makes me inherently parochial. It will look like I'm playing identity politics in many cases where I'm trying to make claims about *other* folk, and identity has nothing to do with it, it's just that it's *me* speaking that makes it look that way. And, of course, there are some times when I'm not allowed to speak, when I become an interloper. So I can't buy the idea that we're in this ideal speech moment (Berube and Nelson 1995, 323).

Nor can I, although the taints of parochialism which I carry are those of a white woman and lesbian (Krieger 1985, 236).

For those of us whose self-understanding and professional work locates us within the academic study of religion, such contradictions are embedded within an additional set of tensions—those characterizing the advent of modernity. Religious studies, of course, is a child of modernity, poised at the transition between religious and secular. As Martin E. Marty has described this transition:

In Europe the philosophers of modernity ignored or opposed religion. The God-killers Nietzsche, Darwin, Marx, and Freud set the terms for religious reaction in the new century. In America, however, the classic philosophers and the social thinkers, to a person 'emancipated' from childhood church and inherited institutions, found that in order to look forward on the modern scene in which they were figurative immigrants, they naturally did and must look backward. They contributed to the peculiar mix of secularity and religiousness which, to some extent, survived in the intellectual communities and remained very potent in American public life through the century which followed (Marty 1986, 90).

Out of this “peculiar mix,” in the American context, came religious studies. And, with the arrival on that scene of women (including women of colour and lesbians) and men of colour, the tensions are exacerbated. Paradox reigns.

As Juschka notes, identity scholarships benefit—and suffer from—the difficulties and dilemmas of identity politics; and religious studies does not escape. As she puts it:

It is very clear that Religious Studies as a discipline differs from Women's and Black Studies within the development of identity politics, but the difference would seem to me to be but a sleight of hand. Unlike Black and Women's Studies, which pose at their cores the identities of being black or female, Religious Studies would seem to have no core identity, in the sense of identity politics, to draw upon. However, I would suggest that Religious Studies does play the identity politics game, but to do so it slips in a back door and therefore its play is less clearly identifiable. One core identity Religious Studies posits is that of the scientist (the other, of course, is the theologian) (Juschka 1997, 9).

Thus, in religious studies today, neither the religious nor the secular individual is a fully legitimate “professor.” The religious person is inappropriate, biased, “too theological,” while the secular person lacks the requisite empathy. The theologian is not “scientific,” while the scientist cannot comprehend religion. No one, it turns out, can do religious studies.

Certainly, no woman can seem to do religious studies—for she cannot quite achieve the “neutrality” of masculinity, and thus is doomed to either an honest theological stance or a more deceptive, crypto-theological agenda. The arrival of women—like the arrival of men of colour—pushes new questions to the centre of the debate; the parallel to the juxtaposition of Young/Gross with McCutcheon and his interlocutors is more than a coincidence. The questions raised by the juxtaposition of these two exchanges (like the ambiguity at the centre of religious studies) lie at the intersection of the repudiation and assimilation of religion which is religious studies; at the intersections of identity and its repudiation which are feminisms; at the site of “strategic essentialism” and the claiming of lesbian identity; and in

the place which recognizes whiteness as implicated in the racial organization of the academy in significant ways. The juxtaposition of Young's discussion with the debate surrounding McCutcheon's article destabilizes and threatens us all; likewise, it offers us the hope bred of uncertainty.

The Classroom and Beyond: Problematizing the "Public" in Public Intellectual

The question of the public is, of course, not a new one for religious studies (see, e.g., Hulsether 1998; Cady 1998; Murphy 1998; Jensen 1998; Marty 1998). While McCutcheon emphasizes the need to undertake public intellectual work and makes crucial distinctions amongst varieties of such work, the juxtaposition under discussion here reminds us, as well, to reflect critically upon the notion of the "public." There is certainly a tradition of historicizing and complicating this notion which has been associated with the work of feminists. Thus, Landes, for example, notes that,

feminists value public participation and...they see the need to expand the contents of personal freedom. However, by focusing political attention on the private sphere feminists have challenged the effects of keeping the body and things sexual hidden from view; and they have denied that inherited views of freedom have applied equally to all people or to all aspects of the person. Does liberty, feminists ask, require that we sacrifice emotions to reason or domestic matters to public affairs? Feminism has therefore upset the firm divisions between public and private matters.... Both theory and history have had a role in shaping new feminist understandings. Historians have exposed the changing, gendered contents of public and private life. By engaging with critical theory, structuralist, and post-structuralist arguments, theorists have explored the gendered construction of individual and social identity. In short, among modern oppositional movements, feminism is unrivalled in its contribution to a deepening understanding of the historical, symbolic, and practical effects of the organization of public and private life (Landes 1998, 2).

Feminisms, that is, ask McCutcheon to consider which (gendered) public he means when he uses the phrase "public intellec-

tual.” Likewise, feminist scholarship insists that the historicizations of “social authorizing practices” for which McCutcheon calls are both differently possible for some than others and differently necessary for some than others.

As historians and theorists have reminded us, the “intellectual” *per se* has also been gendered. Whether embedded in the equation of intellectual with objectivity, or the complex history of claims to experience, revelation and science which constitute the Christian theological tradition of the West, to think has often been to be masculine. Though teaching has come to be gendered female (Griffin 1992), the intellectual work of the professoriate remains a masculinized site within our culture. And yet, much of the professor’s work involves teaching!

Among the social spaces which have received significant attention from feminists in recent decades, of course, is the space of teaching—the classroom (also of interest to McCutcheon; see, e.g., McCutcheon 1998b). Though shaped by the particularities of her own experience, Himani Bannerji’s words remind us that the reception of our scholarly and teacherly work in such settings is always situated. She describes her experience teaching as follows:

Once again, I must begin with myself. From my body as a political signifier. The gendered perception of my sex receives a further negative (and also a latently violent) reference from a prevailing racist common sense. This perception of the students is not neutral—it calls for responses from them and even decisions. I am an exception in the universities, not the rule. As a body type I am meant for another kind of work—but nonetheless, I am in the classroom. And what is more, I am authority. I grade and therefore am a gatekeeper of an institution which only marginally tolerates people like us in scarcity rather than plenty. What I speak, even when not addressing gender, race and class, does not easily produce suspension of disbelief (Bannerji 1992, 72–73).

As Bannerji makes clear, existence within the context of a public—in some cases a classroom—is shaped by various politics and institutionalizations of exclusion and inclusion, legitimacy and its absence. And, it is shaped by a relationality which constitutes authority.

Certainly, opportunities to participate in hegemonic objectivity (and hence hegemonic religious studies) are complicated by identity and perceptions of identity (Juschka 1997; Henking 1988, 1994; Comstock and Henking 1997).

As the domain of religious studies exists in specific identity and institutional forms, then, so too “public intellectual” work is situated. In the late 1990s and early 2000s in North America, this situation involves an array of crises and opportunities characterizing this moment in the history of higher education generally and religious studies in particular. In this, we face a range of paradoxes and contradictions which shape our efforts as academics to rejoin the public from which our emphasis on distantiated learning once sought to isolate us. In this, debate about religion, like debate about gender and about higher education, straddles the divide between public and private, challenging the very binarisms which constitute the debate.

The contexts of both higher education and religious studies are themselves, then, paradoxical. Indeed, Joan W. Scott has identified four cross-cutting paradoxes which pervade current debate:

1. The more the university community has diversified, the more relentless have been the attempts to enforce community.
2. The more individualism is used by those opposed to the institutionalization of diversity, the more advocates of diversity invoke individualism.
3. The greater the need for open-ended research, reflection, and criticism in the production of new knowledge, the more instrumental the justification for taking new directions has become.
4. The greater the need for theorizing—for the practice of questioning unquestioned assumptions and beliefs—the faster has been the turn to moralism and the therapeutics of the personal (Scott, 1995, 294).

Standing within and against such tensions—indeed, actively constituting and constituted by them—the religious studies public intellectual must ask herself not whether or not we will be part of public debate; but rather how we ought best enter that debate, how we are (and are not) heard, and how our commitments to values such as feminism,

anti-racist and anti-homophobic work, can best be heard within and beyond religious studies. In this our role is, in part, to remember that the academy itself is a public sphere, for, as Henry Giroux has put it: "higher education must be defended as a vital public sphere in its own right—that is, as a public sphere whose moral and pedagogical dimensions help renew civic life" (1997, 258–59).

In accomplishing this, we must listen closely to the many voices of our culture reminding us of the challenges facing all of us in public discourse. Seeking to comprehend the contradictions within which we live—and undertake our work—includes those which shape our sense of self and our sense of authority. In this, identity has been both a resource and a limitation. At the meeting place of McCutcheon, Young, Gross and their interlocutors and readers, that is, we must carefully consider the many ways in which religious studies and the public intellectual constitute—and are constituted by—history, culture, and the contradictions of our time.

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