Reflections

The Queer-Postcolonial Turn
Spiritualising Gender Studies and Gendering Religious Studies

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I would like to begin this reflection by congratulating the editorial board of Religion and Gender on this proud milestone—its 10-year anniversary—and its interdisciplinary contributors who have enabled the journal to deliver on its promise of contemporaneity, diversity and inclusion. As an Asian-based scholar who has worked on this intersection—genders, sexualities and religions in Southeast Asia—for the past two decades, I have often felt like an oddity in religious studies, gender studies, even area studies conferences. I thus extend my special appreciation to Religion and Gender’s editorial board and contributors for fighting the good fight and keeping the faith, particularly as the race is far from finished!

The journal has succeeded not only in democratising scholarship through its online and open access academic journal but also vexing the dialectics between ‘religion’ and ‘gender’. And a survey of the past decade of scholarship offered through this portal of knowledge, shows that the five key issues identified (Korte 2011, 11), have to a large extent, been realised. The focus has been a North American-European one where postcoloniality reconfigures religions in terms of how it is lived by diasporic or migrant communities in these localities. Feminist and queer theoretical frameworks with hallmark anchors of materiality, embodiment and affect undergird much interdisciplinary scholarship for the study of religion and gender. In that regard, doing queer or doing gender has a parallelism with doing religions in making visible white privilege, male
privilege and class privilege that are embedded in critical discourses. The politi-
cisation of religion and gender is manifest in fleshing out the tensions between
religion(s) and secularism particularly in a European context and such studi-
ies have wider and pragmatic implications for the relevance and resonance of
gender in religion studies and religion in gender studies (and their cognate dis-
ciplines).

Consonant with the ethos of self-reflexivity that has characterised the vision
of Religion and Gender, what would fighting the good fight and keeping the faith
entail in the next decade where gender in religion studies and religion in gender
studies are concerned? And how much of a shift in paradigm would be necessi-
tated in unearthing even dismantling white privilege, cis gender privilege and
class privilege among feminist, queer and race theorists and theologians in
walking the talk?

As an Asian-based, specifically, Malaysian-based feminist-queer religious
studies scholar looking into the centre from the periphery, deploying a post-
colonial critique is to purposefully decolonise gender in religious studies and
religion in gender studies. Decolonising gender in religious studies is illustrated
by the work of feminist-postcolonial theologian Agnes M. Brazal who pro-
poses an ‘ecclesiastical model’ of church as a ‘sacrament of yin-yang harmony’
(Brazal 2019, 434) where yin-yang is not diametrically opposed to each other
but rather mutually constituting. The I Ching (Book of Changes) visualises ‘yin’
and ‘yang’, as the shady and sunny sides of a hill where the changing position
of the sun transforms ad infinitum, each sunny-becoming-shady and shady-
becoming-sunny sides thus rendering yin-yang as relational and fluid (Brazal
2019, 424). This offers a liberating contrast to the dualism of male/female of
Western metaphysics that is the bulwark of the church’s theology of the body
that not only privileges male over female, masculine over feminine but con-
comitantly, heteronormativity over non-heteronormativity, with complement-
tarity of the sexes—equal but different—being as good as it gets! One does not
prematurely celebrate yin-yang as always already queer (as some constrict it as
dualistic) but recognises, as Brazal does, its resonance with the ‘theology of har-
mony’ extolled by the Federation of Asia Bishops’ Conference (FABC) (Brazal
2019, 434), as well as the limits of FABC’s Christian (still heterosexist) praxis.

Delimiting Christian praxis through decolonising religion in gender studies
is exemplified in the queer theologising of Joseph N. Goh who accords epis-
temic privilege to trans men and mak nyahs or Malay-Muslim male-to-female
transsexuals or trans women in Malaysia. Through seven first-hand narratives
with mak nyahs, Goh shows how they evince a ‘queer body-sacramentality’
by forging a personal relationship with God, rejecting toxic communities who
marginalise them as social pariahs, and most importantly, by affirming their

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bodies and sexualities as created by God hence sacred which others police and deem as profane (Goh 2012). A fatwa (religious edict) permits sex reconstructive surgeries only for intersex Muslims, not sex affirming surgeries for trans persons. So identifying as trans and adhering to a religious persuasion (e.g. Muslim, Christian) for 15 Malaysian trans men interviewed, entails reimagining a differentiated sexual ethics that encompasses: ‘engendering identity’, ‘engaging with society’, ‘grappling with gender dysphoria’, ‘embarking on medical transitioning’ and ‘performing faith’ (Goh 2020). A queer and trans theory for the study of religion and gender in such an Asian context, potentially unsettles binarisms of male/female, masculinity/femininity, ethnic majority (Malay)/ethnic minorities (e.g. Chinese, Indian, indigenous, other), Islam (state religion)/other religions, full/partial citizenship and transcendent/immanent. It probes the intersectionality of critical discourses on queer, race, religion and nationalism. The identity politics of ‘trans’ is as critical as politically identifying as ‘queer’ in local and global contexts. Situating queerness within the politicisation of race and religion—with the intent to divide and rule (as British colonisation did)—calls to question the separation of state (secularism) and religion in Malaysia where Islamic resurgence embeds itself in the policing of non-heteronormative bodies and sexualities and marks these as improper or failed Muslims, masculinities and Malaysians.

Working on hyphenated identities in becoming queer and religious is the ‘search for a common ground’ (Korte 2011, 11) or what I posit as ‘critical relativism’ (Bong 2020, 31). A critical relativist position for the study of religion and gender probes the borderline of universality (e.g. sexuality rights) and particularism (e.g. Asian values that prioritises collective good and familial harmony over individual desires and deems human rights as ‘western’ hence antithetical). Yet these are not static and immutable as in the symbolism of yin-yang; the universal is particularised (relativized) and the particular, universalised. The significance of such scholastic endeavours that bring together what is seemingly incompatible, inhospitable or plain messy—religion and gender (including the proliferation of related terms)—when inductively theorised and theologised from lived realities of some of the most disenfranchised communities (including migrants and refugees in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic), becomes a ‘sacramental act’ (Lakawa 2018, 334). As a scholar-activist, one takes on the ‘posture of witnessing’ (Lakawa 2018, 346) the trauma, healing and spaces in-between and betwixt. Recognition of these not-readily-categorised spaces and becomings is especially important as these are the interstices of rupture (of isms) and sometimes, rapture—not just from reconciling one’s sexuality and spirituality, as an example, but also through the process of negotiating what that means.
References


Goh, Joseph N. 2012. ‘May Nyah Bodies as Sacred Sites: Uncovering the Queer Body-Sacramentality of Malaysian Male-To-Female Transsexuals’, *Crosscurrents* 62:4, 512–521
