Spiritual Activism, Pedagogies of the Sacred, and Social Change

Ontological Invitations for Transformation

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We, the women here, take a trip back deep into the self, travel to the deep core of our roots to discover and reclaim our colored souls, our rituals, our religion. We reach a spirituality that has been hidden in the hearts of oppressed people under layers of centuries of traditional god-worship. The vision of our spirituality provides us with no trap door solution, no escape hatch tempting us to “transcend” our struggle. We must act in the everyday world. Words are not enough. We must perform visible and public acts that may make us more vulnerable to the very oppressions we are fighting against. But, our vulnerability can be the source of our power—if we use it.

Anzaldúa, 1981, 195

When Gloria Anzaldúa asks us to commune with the Soul, or Audre Lorde urges us to find something that our Soul craves and do it, our first task is to become attentive to the desire of the Soul and to place ourselves in its service. It is a necessary and delicate undertaking in Spirit-based politics, this joining of the sacred and secular ... . It requires intention, a revolutionary patience, courage, and above all humility. Once this work begins, the temptation to cross narrow boundaries becomes irresistible; connections, once invisible, come into full view.

Alexander, 2005, 283–284

In this short reflection, I draw on innovative forms of spirituality developed by US women of colors to explore several areas that Religion and Gender might investigate in the next decade. I do so with intellectual humility, acknowledging the journal’s expansive aspirations as well as the vital work it has already accomplished. Religion and Gender set out to embrace a vast swath of human knowledge encompassing both the humanities and the social sciences (each
of which represents many academic disciplines). And, of course, religion and gender are, themselves, enormous fields for investigation. Each on its own is incredibly diverse, and this diversity multiplies as we consider their dialogic engagements with each other. Add to these expansive areas the journal’s international scope, as well as the ubiquity of gender and religion in various forms throughout the planet! This expansiveness ensures an abundance of possibilities, opportunities, and potential directions to explore (always keeping in mind the important work already accomplished). As my epigraphs might suggest, I’m especially interested in exploring how a politics of spirit that bridges the sacred and secular might open new avenues for ontological explorations.

As I use the term, a “politics of spirit” represents a Spirit-infused approach to activist work that draws on the Sacred, as well as spirits, ancestors, beyond-human forces, divinities, and/or subtle energies, to effect progressive social change at both personal and collective levels. While such spiritualized politics have been developed by many people and take a variety of forms, I focus on those created by twentieth- and twenty-first-century US women of colors. Marginalized (if not entirely ignored) by mainstream patriarchal religions and experiencing multiple forms of systemic oppression (too often internalized at a personal level), Anzaldúa and many other women of colors respond by developing multi-layered practices and belief systems that draw on nonwestern traditions, esoteric wisdom teachings, and more, to develop innovative spiritualities employed in the service of social change. In what follows, I touch briefly on Gloria Anzaldúa’s spiritual activism and M. Jacqui Alexander’s pedagogies of the sacred to illustrate two of the many forms that a politics of spirit can take, focusing especially on how they open new avenues for metaphysical realist explorations.

Throughout her work, from early writings like “La Prieta” and “El Mundo Zurdo: The Vision” to her posthumously published monograph, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, Anzaldúa incorporates Indigenous philosophies, esoteric teachings, Mexican-American folk traditions, and her own experiential knowledge (which included a variety of nonordinary psychic and supernatural experiences) into her work, creating what she eventually named “spiritual activism”: her term for a radical politics of spirit that facilitates interwoven individual and collective change (Keating 2008). For Anzaldúa, “spirit” is a substantial metaphysical and physical force infusing (and shaping) all existence.

To be sure, “spiritual activism” can seem like a contradiction in terms, yoking together apparent opposites: While “spiritual” typically implies an other-worldly, inward-looking perspective that invites escape from or at times even denial of social injustices, “activism” suggests the reverse: outward-directed engage-
ment in the physical-material temporal world—the actual world that spirituality (and references to “spirit” more generally) seems to deny or downplay. Yet in Anzaldúa’s metaphysical realism, these very different worlds are inseparable (though not identical): spiritual/physical, inner/outer, individual/collective are parts of a larger whole—a complex, interwoven reality. Unlike organized religions, which typically rely (at least partially) on external rules, doctrines, authorities, and truths, spiritual activism does not. It emerges at least partially from within the spiritual activist, and it is anchored in the physical world. Anzaldúa used spiritual activism to enact innovative social transformation while exposing and healing from cultural traumas. She used spiritual activism to “make sense of the deaths and destruction, and pull the pieces of [her] life back together” (Anzaldúa, 2015, 10).

Or take, for another example, M. Jacqui Alexander’s “Pedagogies of the Sacred”—her term for methods, epistemologies, and subjectivities guided by Spirit. Like Anzaldúa, Alexander posits a metaphysical realism—a world in which everything—rocks, trees, oceans, mountains, water, wind, etc.—are animated by (and as) spirit. While Alexander is conversant with (and perhaps a student of) West African (especially Yoruban) religions like “Vodou, Lucumí, and Candomblé” (Alexander, 2005, 292), her quest and her methods exceed externally-imposed frameworks. She anchors her work in an ontological realism and an animist metaphysics: “Sentience soaks all things. Caresses all things. Enlivens all things. Water overflows with memory. Emotional Memory. Bodily Memory. Sacred Memory” (Alexander, 2005, 291). This sentience, composed of ancestral wisdom and an animating world spirit, contains sacred teachings which we can learn to access and work with.

Alexander calls for and enacts a politics of spirit that offers more expansive, radical healing and transformation. As she explains in Pedagogies of Crossing, although “[a]nticolonial and Left liberation movements” try to address colonialism’s damage, their almost exclusive emphasis on the secular is insufficient to effect the necessary transformation. Colonialism’s wounds run too deep and have damaged us at the psychic level, greatly interrupting a sense of healthy selfhood:

Since colonization has produced fragmentation and dismemberment at both the material and psychic levels, the work of decolonization has to make room for the deep yearning for wholeness, often expressed as a yearning to belong, a yearning that is both material and existential, both psychic and physical, and which, when satisfied, can subvert and ultimately displace the pain of dismemberment.

ALEXANDER, 2005, 287
To address this yearning and heal these wounds, she combines ritual, channeled writing, and self-reflection to access (and become a conduit for) spirit. Alexander beautifully illustrates this expansive approach in her final chapter, where she enacts a meditative, psychic method to channel the seventeenth-century spirit, Kitsimba, who offers a broader, deeper historical narrative and guidance for contemporary times. This experiential research lead Alexander to situate questions of subjectivity in a larger, post-secular context: “If texture of living were to be felt and analyzed as not only memory but, importantly, voice and identity, all seeming secular categories in which subjectivity is housed had to be understood as moored to the Sacred since they anchored a consciousness that drew its sustenance from elsewhere: a set of codes derived from the dis-embodied consciousness of the Divine” (294). As these passages suggest, spirit, the Sacred, and the Divine are concrete realities in Alexander's metaphysics, offering the foundation for a deeply embodied politics.

Alexander and Anzaldúa offer decolonial visions and invitations that expand conventional Kantian metaphysical frameworks. Their spirit-inflected (Sacred) work exceeds secular categories, conventional religious structures, and externally-imposed authority of all sorts (religions, academic, social, etc.). This excess liberates their thought, inviting them to innovate, to offer new (or, possibly quite ancient) ontologies, epistemologies, and methods. So what might happen when we bring these politics of spirit into analyses of religion and gender? As Paul Reid-Bowen suggests in the inaugural issue of this journal, western thought’s secularism and over-emphasis on epistemology (thanks at least in part to Immanuel Kant) has lead us to ignore or downplay metaphysical investigations. By so doing, we unnecessarily limit ourselves and our work.

Like Reid-Bowen, I believe that “[t]he time is crying out for a renewed thinking of the things-in-themselves and a revived metaphysical realism ... . There can be no paradigm shift in the study of religion or gender until genuinely ontological questions are addressed” (Reid-Bowen 2011, 65). While Reid-Bowen looks toward object-oriented ontology, a recent development in continental philosophy, to address this need, I believe that the politics of spirit developed by Anzaldúa, Alexander, and others open additional avenues for exploration, such as these: What might investigations of Spirit work and Sacred practices—especially those enacted by women of colors—teach us about metaphysics and ontology? What’s the relationship between spirituality and religion? While the two often overlap, they are not synonymous, and occasionally they diverge entirely. How might we apply spirit-inflected perspectives and strategies to issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other systemic oppressions? How do social-justice movements and activists work with nonreligious or unconventional forms of spirituality?
References


