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What is This?

Race and religion Contribution to symposium on critical approaches to the study of religion

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Abstract

This article is a contribution to a forum on critical approaches to the study of religion.

Keywords

Religion and race both name social practices, and bodily practices. Both mix these practices with abstract ideas, sometimes supported by evidence, sometimes held despite a shortage of evidence—on faith. Both involve power, and they are both sites of massive injustice. Both bring with them complex histories, and both are shaped by social and economic conditions. Their relevance outside of a modern, European and American context, and sometimes even within that context, is a matter of deep dispute. So is the continuing relevance of race and religion, with some suggesting that they are the sorts of concepts that can be overcome, that can pass into obsolescence. Some scholars (Carter, 2008; Hickman, 2010) have argued that these similarities are more than coincidence: race and religion are thoroughly entangled, perhaps starting with a shared point of origin in modernity, or in the colonial encounter. If this is the case, religion and race is not just another token of the type "religion and," not just one approach to the study of religion among many. Rather, every study of religion would need to be a study of religion and race.

On the other hand, faith claims and race claims can seem quite different. The former are often met with *prima facie* suspicion and discomfort by critical scholarship and popular culture, whereas the latter are often met with sympathy. Imagine the differing reactions to studies that begin by announcing an approach privileging "black experience" and an

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approach privileging "evangelical experience." Perspectives of those with different racial experiences are treated with a legitimacy, or even reverence, rarely accorded to faith claims. When religion is taken to be ideology, religion-based beliefs are dismissed or reduced away; when race is taken to be ideology, race-based beliefs of those marked with race still retain some kernel of truth, whereas the racial beliefs of those unmarked by race are treated as invidious fallacies. Although the academy preserves both religion and race in disciplinary structures, it is significant that public universities in the United States have "religious studies" departments but not "racial studies" departments. African American Studies and Latino Studies are acceptable in a way that Protestant Studies is not. This distinction is especially pronounced in the United States, which was founded as a white Christian republic but which has dealt with religious difference quite differently than with racial difference, and yet where Christianity has deeply inflected the nation's struggles over racial difference. In sum, race and religion are articulated differently in different contexts, and affect each other differently in different circumstances.

The way religion is studied and the way race is studied have both changed rapidly over the past few decades, though in what seem like opposite directions. Put very roughly, the study of race has shifted focus from concrete facts to abstract ideas, and the study of religion has shifted from abstract ideas to concrete facts. By schematizing the trends in scholarship this way, it is possible to see the limitations of both scholarly conversations, and it becomes necessary to consider alternatives.

Here is the story that is told about religion. Religious studies was once about beliefs and ideas. Some scholars examined how religious ideas changed over time. Other scholars chronicled and systematized the religious ideas of distant peoples. Other scholars assayed how religious belief affected different aspects of life, from political preferences to economic life. Comparativists looked at different content given to the same religious idea (e.g. saint, martyr, prophet, or God) in different parts of the world or at different times. If race was studied, questions would be framed in terms of how religious ideas resulted in certain ways of treating racial groups. For example, how did the so-called curse of Ham—the idea that a curse on black people is included in the Bible—influence Christians' ideas about blacks (Johnson, 2004)? How did a focus on certain passages from Matthew's gospel fuel the anti-Semitic views of twentieth century Christians (Ruether, 1974)?

What happens next, according to this story about religion, is that scholars began to realize that a focus on religious beliefs and ideas was a product of a very specific religious background, namely, Protestantism (Asad, 1993; McCutcheon, 1997; Masuzawa, 2005). Scholarship had unthinkingly accepted the Reformation dismissal of ritual, practice, objects, bodies, and media as magical (Catholic) non-sense, not a proper part of Christianity. The happy conclusion of this story about religion is the present state of scholarship: a new emphasis on religious practice as having primacy over religious beliefs, on material objects used in religion as having primacy over religious ideas, and a new emphasis more generally on the inextricable intermingling of religion and culture, unthinkable when religion was conceived of as belief in other-worldly entities. Scholarship on religion and race, in this frame, might examine the everyday experience of Jews and blacks in Crown Heights (Goldschmidt, 2006), or the role that televangelism plays in African American culture (Walton, 2009).

Here is the story that is told about race. Scholarship on race used to understand race, explicitly or implicitly, as a brute reality. Even if the circumference of skulls was no longer being measured, the racial groupings of individuals were treated as foundational. What facts

constituted this reality was open for debate. For example, cultural nationalist commitments that crystalized in the 1960s and 1970s tracked race through the mists of history in connections between black Americans and Africa, Hispanic Americans and Aztecs, and Native Americans and ancient indigenous cultures. Other scholars located distinctive aesthetic styles that they took to be constitutive of race, for example, in blues music or in the trickster as figures of blackness. Even those who would dismiss the reality of race entirely would still insist on the pragmatic need for racial thinking and race-based inquiry because of an amorphous sense of shared experience or shared oppression. These currents resulted in important scholarship on race-based religious communities, such as ground-breaking studies of the continuities between African American slaves and African traditional religions (Raboteau, 1978).

A new approach to race scholarship has begun to take hold—an approach focusing on racializing logics (Goldberg, 2008; Melamed, 2011; Winant, 2004). Instead of starting with black people, or Latinos, or Asians, as if sufficiently penetrating inquiry would reveal what these races really are, this new approach focuses on how and why racial categories are created in particular places, at particular times. These racial categories are supported by institutions and applied to bodies, marking them, through the explicit and implicit effects of power. A racializing logic may produce different races in different contexts. For example, settler colonialism may turn Native Americans into a race in the same way it creates ''Africans'' as a race in South Africa and ''Palestinians'' as a race in Israel. Other scholars have focused on other racializing logics, such as the logic of the exception, or the scapegoat, or the foreigner-as-other. Racializing logic is part of the machinery of ideology, and this approach to race focuses on ideology critique rather than on explicating racial community. This approach has produced provocative scholarship, such as work demonstrating how the racializing logic that produced Jews as a race depended on Christian theological ideas that also produced blacks and Native Americans as races in different contexts (Carter, 2008; Jennings, 2010).

These two stories, of religious studies scholarship and of scholarship on race, result in two different accounts of the state of the art for scholarship on the intersection of religion and race. Following the first story, the state of the art focuses on religious practice and material religion; following the second story, the state of the art focuses on the religious ideas implicated in racializing logics. From the perspective of each, the other appears retrograde, moving towards a position that the other is moving away from. The challenge for critical research on religion and race today is to incorporate the insights of both scholarship on religion and scholarship on race. Such a synthesis would be mindful of the connection between religious ideas and religious practices, mindful of both the rich texture of community and the way ideology distorts community.

One potential approach to accomplishing this synthesis is by turning to tradition as a frame for analysis. As it has been used in recent religious studies scholarship (MacIntyre, 1984; Stout, 2004), tradition does not mean the static, dusty commitments of an insular, likely moribund community. Rather, tradition means a set of practices, including styles of reasoning, that grows out of a shared history, has shared values implicit within it, and is supported by institutions. Traditions in this sense are dynamic and contested, having among their components practices for contestation and transformation. For example, old resources may be appealed to for new causes: Aquinas may be appealed to in order to legitimate same sex marriage (Rogers, 1999). In this way, tradition provides a lens for noticing, and performing, ideology critique. Calcified beliefs, or beliefs supporting the interests of a few, are

vulnerable to critique with the resources of the tradition's history and values. The patriarchy of African American Christianity, for example, can be criticized by appealing to the songs and stories of black Christians through the centuries.

Scholars are sometimes wary of tradition because of its perceived sectarianism. Traditions seem exclusive: you are part of one or another, Christian or Muslim, Muslim or American, American or Black. But this is not a necessary element of tradition. Tradition can simply be one lens among many that can be applied in scholarly analysis. Moreover, as a set of practices, tradition is neither necessarily religious nor necessarily racial, though it may incorporate both religious and racial (or racializing) elements, and these elements would be necessarily entwined as components of tradition. Another worry about tradition is that it erects a wall between insiders and outsiders. But this is not the case if critical work consists in explicating the values implicit in a community's practices and history. Indeed, one suspects that the worry about the perceived sectarianism of tradition is really a worry about normativity from those modern scholarly souls who fret over being held accountable to norms not of their own making.

It is unclear, however, whether an approach to religion and race through tradition has the resources to be sufficiently critical—or, more precisely, whether such an approach fosters rather than simply allows the critical study of religion and race. Although it is possible to find critical resources in the histories and implicit values of traditions, those same histories and values bring with them enormous inertia. What is to be done is what has been done, and the task of reconceiving what has been done in a broadly persuasive way is colossal, because so much has been done. Moreover, a truly critical approach is attentive to the systematic distortions in communities' (and scholars') abilities to perceive values and histories. This is nowhere as evident as it is concerning race: writing on religion for centuries ignored race. In a quite different way, scholarship in the humanities was until quite recently allergic to religion—an effect of ambient secularism.

Further reflection on these points of blindness, towards religion and towards race, suggests that they are also points of control. The supremacy of the unraced is maintained by not discussing race, or, more recently, by relegating discussions of race to ghettoized examinations of specific racial groups. Similarly, the supremacy of post-Protestant religiosity is maintained by the secularist strategy that marks other groups as having a religion—and so needing special study or accommodation. Secularism is the obverse of religious pluralism: it chooses which religions to recognize and so determines their parameters. Just as the origins of religion and race are intertwined, perhaps these means of controlling religion and race are intertwined: perhaps multiculturalism and secularism go hand in hand, jointly working to distort. The robustness of religious and racial ideas and practices is reduced to one box to check among several—a belief or a skin color—either way subject to the hegemony of the unmarked: the white post-Protestant.

Another frame for the study of religion and race takes these reflections to be central, but identifies a missing ingredient. What binds together secularism and multiculturalism is neoliberalism. Flows of capital must not be disrupted by practices or ideas that do not submit to the logic of capital. At most individuals can have personal preferences or desires, countable and quantifiable, so race and religion are disfigured into these terms. In the process, following the wondrous logic of capital, what once inhibited market function now creates new markets: for racial music and clothing, for religious jewelry and pilgrimage, and for faith-based charities supposedly serving racial minorities. Neoliberalism creates the simulacrum of tradition, with supposed values and supposed histories, all in fact manufactured by markets

through manipulation of desires (see Cavanaugh, 2002; Pickstock, 2000). Just as one won-
ders whether Toni Morrison has become the quintessential figure of contemporary American
neoliberalism, turning past suffering and anguish of apparent outsiders into a highly mar-
ketable symbol of the all-expansive nature of American empire read by nearly every college
student on her path to Wall Street, and just as one wonders whether the smash hit *The Book
of Mormon* musical serves the same function, one wonders if the same fate awaits Cornel
West and other scholars of religion and race who are quickly becoming canonical. In short,
in our contemporary cultural and economic moment, perhaps it is the critique of economics,
not religion or race, that is the prerequisite of all criticism.

What would this sort of economic-critical approach to religion and race look like? It
might highlight particular sites where the nexus of neoliberalism and empire (or, neoliberal-
ism and the violence that necessarily maintains it) most clearly articulates religion and race.
The "prosperity gospel" is one such site, so prevalent in African American Christian com-
munities, though often preached in multi-racial congregations, and also rapidly being
exported to other racialized communities around the world, especially in Africa and Latin
America. Another site: the racialization of Muslims in the United States after 11 September
2001, a process in which multiculturalism and religious pluralism, exposing their under-
bellies, become one and the same. The most important site for such a critical approach to
religion and race is Palestine. Located amidst the breadbox (oil wells) of empire, a settler
colonial state eerily reminiscent of colonial North America maintains its existence through a
dual racializing/secularizing logic. On the one hand, Palestinians are racialized as other—-
and in so doing Islam is secularized into race. On the other hand, Judaism is secularized into
nationalism—and in so doing is racialized through management of religion. The twinned
racializing and secularizing maneuvers, maintained by their peculiar Christian Zionist echoes
in the United States and increasingly among African Americans, maintain ostensibly free,
but actually subordinate, markets in the region. Analysis of sites such as these requires
attentiveness to both ideas and social practice, to both richly textured community and
ideology critique—all informed by an awareness of the racial and religious logics maintained
by and maintaining late capitalism.

Analysis of religion and race framed by a critique of neoliberalism might be right, but is it
effective? The strength of tradition as a frame is that it is persuasive. By pointing to com-
mitments that communities already hold implicitly, and by pointing to authoritative figures
in communities' histories, issues of religion and race are brought to light but communities
are also called to action. The stuffy jargon that economic-critical analysis often descends into
has a hard enough time convincing other scholars of its usefulness, let alone a broader
audience (or let alone the networks of practitioners or activists that would translate critical
analysis into political rhetoric and practice). At the end of the day, both the economic-
critical frame and the tradition-oriented frame seem necessary, and seem complementary.
The economic-critical frame reveals distortions in the understanding of tradition that the
internal resources of tradition struggle to expose. The tradition-oriented frame offers
resources for richly textured analysis of communities, and these resources double as traction
for critical analysis to catch—that is, to persuade.

One recent trend in purportedly critical scholarship on religion and race seems to move in
a different direction. Transnational networks and crossings have come into vogue (for
example, Tweed, 2006, 2012), echoing a trend in American Studies (Fishkin, 2005; Fluck
et al., 2011; see also *The Journal of Transnational American Studies*, launched in 2008). But
one worries that this may be an update on the exhausted fetishization of difference that

infected the academy a generation earlier. This trend promises insights by promoting a regional rather than national focus, allowing for studies of the Atlantic world or the Pacific world, the dynamic borderlands of the Americas or the mixing communities of the Mediterranean. In such discussions, religion and race become two differences among many boxes to check, as it were, along with gender, sexuality, disability, and so on. Because the centrality of the state is downplayed, normativity (obligations, rights, duties, oughts) more broadly often receives short shrift, except in the critique of those who reject crossings and flows—which is not so much critique as it is dogmatics. Indeed, the turn from the post-colonial to the transnational marks the incorporation of the post-colonial into neoliberal logic, mirroring the flows of capital in the flows of culture, mirroring religious pluralism and multiculturalism in the enumerated multiplicity of communities in the borderlands.

At its best—which is to say, as critical—scholarship on the intersection of religion and race challenges both scholarship on religion and on race. At its worst, scholarship on the intersection of religion and race buys into, and perpetuates, the ideologies that have created, maintained, and manipulated religion and race as discrete objects, violently marking communities and bodies.

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