QUEERING THE SOCIOLOGY CURRICULUM: THE CASE OF *BELIEF,*

SPIRITUALITY, AND RELIGION

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In the past twenty years or so, I have been teaching—first in the Division of Politics and Sociology, Nottingham Trent University (1995–2007) and then the School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Nottingham (from 2007)—a second-year undergraduate elective course called *Belief, Spirituality, and Religion*, currently taught over an eleven-week term. In this brief piece, I share my reflections on how, in designing the curriculum, I uphold, to a certain extent, the conventional curriculum of sociology of religion[1]—by which many students expect this course to be framed—but also to queer this presumption. I often jokingly tell students who have pursued sociology of religion on pre-university level that this course is sociology of religion "with a queer twist." Therefore, they—who are predominantly white, middle class, and secular—should expect to emerge from the learning process disoriented, but, hopefully, intellectually and emotionally stimulated.

The term *queer*, which is variantly deployed in literature, needs to be explicated and delineated at the outset. To me, queer is about positionality: a position vis-à-vis the normative, the established, the hegemonic. In this case, it is a position I deliberately situate the course in relation to the conventional curriculum of sociology of religion. Queer is also

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[1] While there is undoubtedly variation across courses, within the British higher education context, the sociology of religion is predominantly underpinned by Christian normativity. Typical key topics covered are the substantive and functional definition of religion (drawing on the works of Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Peter Berger, and Niklas Luhmann), secularization, religious fundamentalism, and religious movements. The focus is generally on the macro and meso levels, and the micro level is often marginalized.

action. Once the counternormative position is anchored, from there disrupting energies are unleashed, leading not only to the interrogation of the conventional curriculum but also to some form of paradigm shift. *Queering*, therefore, aims to deconstruct supposedly stable and normalized disciplinary contents and boundaries. In my course, this queering manifests itself in three ways, which I think, based on student feedback, enriches the learning experience. I discuss these queering strategies in turn.

De-Centering Christianity, the Institutional, and the Collective

What we habitually conceive as sociology of religion in the United Kingdom is, in essence, sociology of British (Western) Christianity. From a historical and sociocultural point of view, this focus is understandable indeed. However, this taken-for-granted and powerful underpinning often leads to the unhelpful academic habit of using Christianity as the template for the study of religions in general. The secularization theory—which, broadly, argues that modernization leads to the decline of religion—is an example par excellence. For decades, this theory assumed a hegemonic status in the sociology of religion. However, on closer inspection, its empirical foundation, primarily underpinned by the development of institutional Christianity in the United Kingdom (and Western Europe more broadly), is rather specific. This theory, for a long time, was seemingly blind to the growth of Christianity in other parts of the world, and the proliferation of some other religions (for example, Islam) in the West and across the world. Therefore, in my course, I encourage students to be critical about the cultural and geographical specificities of this theory and to take a more nuanced and global look at the relationship between modernity and religion, envisioning multiple trajectories and outcomes. Even strictly within the UK context, students often find it fascinating to explore the complex religious landscape, with, for instance, the decline of

"traditional" Christianity alongside the rise of non-Western migrant churches as well as Islam.

In my effort to decenter Christianity in the learning of religion, I expand the learning of classical perspectives which conventionally focus on the works of Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber, to include also the works of Ibn Khaldūn, the fourteenth-century North African Arab historiographer, historian, and philosopher. I was fortunate to have started my journey with sociology of religion in the 1980s in Malaysia (a predominantly Muslim but significantly multireligious country), where the sociocultural context enabled the learning of non-Western and non-Christian perspectives of religion. Over three decades later, I still recall my excitement of learning about Khaldūn, whose work neutralized the sociocultural disconnect I often felt in relation to the works of sociology's other three "founding fathers." Since I have been on the other side of the fence, so to speak, I have been deeply committed to expanding my students' horizon in this respect. Indeed, I have been encouraged by the fact that they find intellectually stimulating my attempt, for instance, to relate Khaldūn's concept of "asabiyyah" (social solidarity, group consciousness) to Durkheim's concept of "collective consciousness" (especially in relation to "organic solidarity" and "mechanical solidarity"). Referencing especially the seminal works by James Spickard on Khaldūn,[2] I aim to expand the cultural and geographical horizons of classical sociology of religion.

In my attempt to destabilize sociology of religion's focus on the institutional (for example, church membership, official teachings) and the collective (for example, rituals such as baptism and church wedding) dimensions, I also encourage students to pay greater attention to the micro and lived dimension of religion. This approach recognizes that it is by examining how religious actors—including "queer" ones—live out their religions in the

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[2] See, for example, James V. Spickard, "Tribes and Cities: Towards an Islamic Sociology of Religion," *Social Compass* 48, no. 1 (2001): 103–16, and James V. Spickard, *Alternative Sociologies of Religion: Through Non-Western Eyes* (New York: NYU Press, 2017).

everyday context that illuminates our understanding of the embodiment, messiness, complexity, and multiplicity of religious lives.[3] This "religion-as-practiced" approach places greater emphasis on "religious non-experts": their agency and their fumbling, in the ongoing negotiation and living out of religious identities.

The Mainstreaming of Sexuality/Gender in the Study of Religion

My second strategy of queering sociology of religion is closest to the more established deployment of *queer* and *queering*: turning the spotlight on (especially nonnormative) sexuality/gender.[4] In the last two decades or so, the sociology of religion and sociology of sexuality/gender have been establishing a meaningful dialogue, thanks to the burgeoning research on nonnormative sexual/gender identities in institutional and noninstitutional, online and offline, religious spaces.[5] By incorporating sexuality/gender into the curriculum—arguably still a minority practice in the teaching of sociology of religion—I especially aim to sensitize students to the issue of power, in connection to oppression, resistance, and transformation. In this respect, I direct students to the works of Muslim feminists, in addition to the more-commonly taught Christian feminists. This includes Asma Barlas's work on a patriarchy-deconstructing reading of Islamic texts and Amina wadud's work on "gender jihad": the mainstreaming of women's experiences and voices in Islamic thought and praxis.[6]

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[3] Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[4] This formulation is deliberate. While sexuality and gender could be separated analytically, on a lived experience level, they are often inextricably enmeshed and connected. Within the context of this brief piece, I would like to acknowledge this inseparable nexus.
[5] See, for example, Donald L. Boisvert and Carly Daniel-Hughes, eds., *The Bloomsbury Reader in Religion, Sexuality and Gender* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Kath Browne, Sally R. Munt, and Andrew K.T. Yip, *Queer Spiritual Spaces: Sexuality and Sacred Places* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2010); and Yvette Taylor and Ria Snowdon, *Queering Religion, Religious Queers* (London: Routledge, 2014).
[6] Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); and Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006).

On the theoretical level, I introduce students to the work of Michel Foucault in the exploration of contemporary perspectives on religion. Foucault's work is crucial in sensitizing students to the corporeal and material nature of religion and to the working of power in religious practices and relations. With specific reference to sexuality/gender, I encourage students to consider Foucault's critique of the silencing power of religion through the "panoptic gaze" it casts on the production of sexual/gender subjectivities and the critique of religious authority (for example, through demanding the confession of sins) in the development of "ethics of the self."[7]

By linking sexuality/gender (generally perceived as personal and private) to religion (generally perceived as institutional, collective, and public), this exploration also enables students to deconstruct the private-public dichotomy and to appreciate the power structures in religious spaces that regulate and police sexuality/gender—and the resistance to such power relations. This mainstreaming of sexuality/gender into the curriculum also challenges the implicit but powerful secularist bias in academic and popular discourses of sexuality/gender and religion: that religion is inherently sexuality/gender-negative and secularism is intrinsically sexuality/gender-liberating. Within this context, examining controversies within religious spaces surrounding, say, homosexuality, transgenderism, and women's access to leadership roles, enable students to explore broader issues about human rights, equality, citizenship, and the constitution of liberal democracy itself.

The Problematization of "Belief"

In popular—and even academic—discourses, "belief" is conventionally constructed as religious in nature. In my course, I challenge this by provocatively insisting that "to

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[7] See, for example, Jeremy Carrette, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* (London: Routledge, 2000); Lawrence D. Kritzman, *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984* (New York: Routledge, 1988); and Paul Rabinow, ed., *Michel Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

believe is to be human." In other words, even someone who does not subscribe to any religious beliefs must subscribe to a value and belief system (for example, the power and rightful place of science in modern society) in order to make sense of life. Therefore, I allocate the last part of this course to the exploration of overlapping and mutually reinforcing belief systems that position themselves against, or apathetic to, religion: scientism, humanism, secularism, and atheism.[8] My intention in doing this is to disrupt the dichotomous and oppositional relationship between "the religious" and "the secular." I find this binary unhelpful because it does not reflect accurately the empirical reality that many people live their everyday life by creatively incorporating, adapting, and negotiating what popular and academic discourses label as "religious" and "secular."

One of the topics that unfailingly gets students excited (agitated, for some) is debating whether Richard Dawkins is a "fundamentalist scientist." Deploying *fundamentalist* as an adjective to the noun *scientist* compels students to decouple "religious" and "fundamentalism," an implicitly and repetitively inscribed association in popular discourse. It also demands that they return to basics about the constitution of a fundamentalist tendency and worldview, which venerates the infallibility and inerrancy of a particular belief system (including scientism). Put differently, I encourage them to consider the fact that a "religious fundamentalist" and a "scientistic fundamentalist" have much in common indeed.

As this component on religious and nonreligious belief systems is the last in the course, I use this also as an opportunity to encourage students to reflect on the unifying themes of the course: What does it mean to be human? And what resources enable the meaning construction of a human identity that emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of humanity? The broad aim here is to heighten students' reflexivity on the limitations of labels and labeling and to inspire them to consider that social actors, especially

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[8] Key texts include Anthony C. Grayling, *The God Argument: The Case against Religion and for Humanism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Lee Lois, *Recognising the Non-Religious: Reimagining the Secular* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Black Swan, 2007).

young people, capitalize on the proliferation of online and offline cultural resources and authorities to help them construct "ethics for life" in their life journeys. This appropriation emphasizes the functions and usefulness of such resources, rather than their specific nature and label.[9]

Every discipline has its own conventions that establish its distinctive identity. However, this distinctive identity is a product of processes and practices that reflect the politics of knowledge: its conception, production, and circulation through power structures. The good news is that such conventions, however well-established and taken-for-granted, are not immune to positive change. In my modest attempt, the course encourages students to interrogate the foundations and traditions of sociology of religion and to expand and enrich its scope, with the aim to develop a more holistic understanding of the functions and politics of diverse value systems in contemporary society. Indeed, I am pleased to play a small part in the queering of sociology of religion, helping it embrace a more cosmopolitan and self-problematizing spirit.

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[9] Andrew K.T. Yip and Sarah-Jane Page, *Religious and Sexual Identities: A Multi-Faith Exploration* (Farnham, MD: Ashgate, 2013); and Sarah-Jane Page and Andrew K.T. Yip, *Understanding Young Buddhists: Living out Ethical Journeys* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).