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Decolonizing the Study of Religion

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As with many other subject areas within the humanities, the contemporary study of religion is the product of European colonial history and remains firmly embedded in what Aníbal Quijano (2007) described as the 'colonial matrix of power'. This article explores questions about how to respond to these structures of history — in particular what the concept of 'decolonization' may mean and how it may be applied within the context of the study of religion. Such decolonization should be approached as not simply an exercise in 'diversity' but rather as a challenge to (and potentially a dismantling of) the field of study. Such an approach is relevant not only to those scholars who identify within the disciplinary boundaries of the 'study of religion' (or religious studies), but much wider to the broad academic study of (what is thought of as) 'religion' within humanities and social sciences. This article is, in short, an attempt to map out some of the key points about such a decolonization, in terms of curriculum and research practice, on the disciplinary level and within the wider institutional structures of the academy.

The ways in which contemporary scholars talk about religion remain steeped in the ongoing legacies of European colonialism and assumptions of white supremacy.[1] There are various lines of descent for the study of religion, and like much of the humanities and social sciences, they all lead back to colonialism, and in particular the 19th- and early 20th-centuries.[2] Most scholars working on religion would recognize that this history raises a number of concerns and difficult questions.[3] These relate to not only how the discipline got from colonialism to the present, but also the much larger issue of where studies of religion should go from here. That is, to what extent can we say that the study of religion is so deeply the product of colonialism that its structures, presumptions, and methods are irredeemably flawed? Is the study of religion a rotten fruit of the poisoned tree of colonialism?

The response to this question may take various forms, with a range of approaches across what could be called 'hard' and 'soft' expectations of decolonization. If the study of religion was effectively decolonized, then possibly there would be very little left standing of the current discipline – this would be the 'hard' alternative. Alternatively, there is a growing tendency across higher education to talk of a much 'softer' decolonizing process, with 'decolonization' emerging as a go-to approach in

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[1] This article started out as two posts on my blog, 'Religion Bites' (Nye, 2017b; Nye, 2018a). A copy of the paper was made available online in August 2018 (on *Religion Bites*) for a short time for general comment and feedback, which proved a useful exercise in pre-peer review. I appreciate the various comments and ideas from this, in particular from Deborah Grayson and Ipsita Chatterjea, together with discussions with colleagues at my two recent posts – at the Universities of Glasgow and Stirling – along with many discussions and interactions in the broad academic communities on Twitter and Facebook.

[2] Various nuanced histories, placing the study of religion within the colonial era, have been written, including by Tomoko Masuzawa (2005), David Chidester (1996, 2014), Balagangadhara (2010), Richard King (1999), Philip Almond (1988), Daniel Dubuisson (2007), Sven Bretfeld (2012), Jason Ananda Josephson (2011), and Brian Pennington (2005).

[3] There are some scholars for whom this colonial history does not matter, since it does not stand in the way of (what they consider as) the truths of the discipline. The work of Nigel Biggar comes to mind: he is a moral theologian at the University of Oxford, who in late 2017 established a research project at the Macdonald Centre titled 'Ethics and Empire' (Adams, 2017; McDougall et al., 2017; Sultana, 2018; El-Enany, 2018; the website for Biggar's project is http://www.mcdonaldcentre.org.uk/ethics-and-empire). Alongside such obvious celebrations of colonialism, however, there is also a resolute part of the field of religious studies that has shown a marked *indifference* to its intellectual and political roots.

efforts to 'diversify' and to attempt rather limited change through recognition of difference. In effect, such a soft approach may succeed in weeding out some of the most blatant roots of colonialism but in doing so it keeps intact the shell of the current terminology, disciplinary structure, and academic power structures. And so, for these reasons, I am not advocating here a 'soft' approach to decolonization. If this process is started, if such a decolonization is necessary, then how should the discipline develop? And what would this process of decolonization require?

Outlining the parameters of the study of religion

In discussing the relevance of decolonization to the study of religion, I am referring to a field of study that is both broad and quite narrow. In one respect, the study of religion is a small discipline within the humanities which is often also referred to as 'religious studies'. It is bounded and maintained institutionally, within universities in departments, divisions, centres, and through university chairs and other faculty (including many adjuncts and other precarious staff). On a wider level, it is organized by national, regional, and international associations, such as the American Academy of Religion (AAR), the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR), the European Association for the Study of Religion (EASR), and a number of national groups affiliated with the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR). Each of these associations have regular conferences focused on the academic interests of their respective individual members, and thus reflect and materially practice the field of the study of religion. And, of course, there are the academic journals for this discipline, including the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* and *Religion.*

The disciplinary boundaries between this particular area of the study of religion, as institutionalized and practiced in such organizations and conferences, and other disciplines can be quite ambiguous. Thus, there are long-standing discussions about how the study of religion is distinct from areas of sociology, anthropology, psychology, history, etc., that all have some focus or interest in studying religion. There is also deep interaction between the study of religion and theology — very often the two can be found together in a single department (TRS) — and some argue

that the fields are continuous (although this claim tends to be strongly refuted by many scholars of religion). Moreover, there are many scholars and areas of study that have (what is considered to be) religion as their subject matter, far beyond the disciplinary boundaries of the study of religion (for example, in security studies, legal studies, and international relations).

I mention this because although some of my argument here is particular to the institutionally formed discipline of the study of religion, much of what I have to say is relevant much further afield. Indeed, as so often happens with such areas of study, the subject matter of 'religion' is often assumed to be quite simple and straightforward (and often misunderstood) for those working outside the discipline. There is a considerable body of scholarship from within the discipline that is significantly problematizing many aspects of popular and learned discourses on 'religion', and this has still largely been left unexplored beyond the discipline.

Much of what is conceived as the formation of the discipline of the study of religion is rooted in some way or other directly in colonialism (King, 1999; Masuzawa, 2005). Whether this is the text-focused orientalist scholarship associated with philology, the thematic (and speculative) approaches of Edward Tylor, the functionalism of sociology, the ethnographic and particularist approaches of anthropology, or the contemporary phenomenology that was popularized by Ninian Smart in the 1960s and 70s. We do not have to dig very deep (if at all) to find the colonial roots of each of these.

It may be possible to argue that the study of religion has moved on from such colonial origins – that the discipline in the 21st century is no longer what it was, or where it came from. But the effort to explore this legacy has been limited. Most introductions to the study of religion fail to mention or discuss the implications of colonial history (one example of this is the very widely used theory and method textbook by Daniel Pals [2014]). And indeed, the 'classics' of the field remain as classics, perhaps dislocated from their historical contexts, but largely unquestioned about how colonialism shaped their thinking. In doing so there is a failure to address how this past continues to shape the questions and assumptions of the field today.

Colonialism and decolonization

On a broad level, decolonization is about change: it is about responding to changes that are taking place well beyond the classroom — and also about changes that *should be* taking place. Decolonization is about changing how people think, talk, and act through a radical engagement with a plurality of voices and perspectives that have been historically marginalized and silenced. Thus, decolonization is not the same as diversifying (Bhanot and Shukla, 2015; Prescod-Weinstein, 2018). The aim for diversity is to accommodate ('making space' for) 'alternatives' and differences within an existing scheme which largely remains unchanged. Decolonization is not about 'finding space' at the table: it is about changing the room.

Decolonization is about remembering and recognizing the histories of European colonialism and racism that have structured the contemporary world—in particular, the academy. It is about challenging the structural levels of racialization that frame not only who and how we teach.[4] And so, decolonization is a political and academic movement with resonances across much of academia. There have been calls for and explorations of decolonization in a number of academic fields.[5] Decolonization is not simply a theory or a vague ideal for change.

Decolonization requires scholars to recognize their own structural location within the disciplinary history and the institutions where they teach and research. As a white male scholar, I have emerged from many of the discourses and political practices of whiteness that need to be critically acknowledged and challenged in this

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[4] The following are good starting points for exploring the various understandings and meanings of decolonization: Bhambra (2017a, 2014); Mirza (2015); Gopal (2017); Sabaratnam (2017); Todd (2018); Chowdhry (2018); Prescod-Weinstein (2017); Mgqwashu (2016); Tuck and Yang (2012); Mignolo and Walsh (2018); Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu (2018); Guesmi (2018).

[5] Thus: for sociology (Connell, 2018; Izharuddin, 2019); anthropology (Radebe, 2016; Todd, 2016; Todd, 2018; Goldstein, 2016); geography (Craib, 2017; Radcliffe, 2017; Jazeel, 2017; Legg, 2017; Noxolo, 2017); history (AHR, 2018; Atkinson et al., 2018; Natarajan, 2019); linguistics (Shaikjee and Stroud, 2017); medieval studies (Whitaker, 2015), philosophy (Maldonado-Torres et al., 2018); museum studies (Wintle, 2013; Kassim, 2017; Dees, 2015a; Dees, 2016); computing studies (Ali, 2016); and science (Prescod-Weinstein, 2015). This list is not comprehensive, but gives some indication of the extent of this issue. There are also a number of works that call for higher education to be subject to decolonization (for example, Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu, 2018 and Arday and Mirza, 2017).

process of decolonization. In the Scottish universities where I have recently been teaching, the student body is predominantly racialized as white, and so attempting to understand the legacies of colonialism and white identity is akin to trying to teach a goldfish about water (Morrison, 1992). It is there: around everything, but rarely noticed. Living within such whiteness is having the privilege of not having to experience the low key and/or life-threatening forces of structural racism that are premised on the exclusion of people of colour from the centres of power and academic life, or at least to prevent those who are racialized as not white from being allowed in too far.

Thus, decolonization is in itself a threat to such political structures; it is a challenge to dominant forms of hegemony – within European and North American societies and within particular universities. I write this from the perspective that the challenges are for all involved in the process, not only for those racialized as people of colour. I wish to participate in these processes of change from my position of being 'within' (as well as outside) those structures of power. For me, there is no neutral ground as a scholar: I see my scholarship and teaching as largely about encouraging others (particularly those who are racialized similarly to me) to think about issues of race and gender, rather than the usual processes of obfuscation of these core issues. In doing so, however, my aim is also to engage with, learn from, and amplify those who are racialized as people of colour and hence to centralize and mainstream theories, approaches, and methodologies that are largely marginalized within the contemporary study of religion.

From a historical perspective, decolonization is an old term, which references the process at the end of European colonialism[6] around the mid-20th century — when

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[6] 'European colonialism' can be defined as follows:

> "Colonialism" refers to the processes, policies and ideologies used by metropoles to establish, conquer, settle, govern, and economically exploit colonies. In the age of Western colonization, as well as before, colonization meant not only ruling other peoples but also sending one's own people to settle a foreign territory, or colony (Benjamin, 2007: xv).

countries that had been subjected to British, French, Dutch, and other colonial rule became independent (White, 2014; Davis, 2013; Duara, 2004; Smith and Jeppesen, 2017). Thus, we can talk of the decolonization of India, South Asia, South East Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and so on. Such immediate decolonization was often traumatic, such as the extreme violence deriving from British policies and mismanagement in colonial India that spilled out in 1947 in the first few months of independence based on Partition (Khan, 2007).

As important writers on decolonization from this time noted, such as Frantz Fanon (2004; Fanon, 2008; Hwami, 2016; Rabaka, 2009) and Albert Memmi (2003), although the process of political decolonization and independence may have removed the colonizers from the direct context, there was also a process of internal colonization of the ruling classes of the colonized. That is, colonization did not necessarily end with political independence. Furthermore, Aníbal Quijano (2007: 169) argued that colonization should be seen as a continuing process in the 21st century:

> In the same way, in spite of the fact that political colonialism has been eliminated, the relationship between the European – also called 'Western' – culture, and the others, continues to be one of colonial domination, […] a colonization of the other cultures, albeit in differing intensities and depths. This relationship consists, in the first place, of a colonization of the imagination of the dominated; that is, it acts in the interior of that imagination, in a sense, it is a part of it.

He goes on to say:

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In this respect, colonialism is not solely about the 'facts on the ground' of colonial occupation and rule, it is also about the ideologies that maintain such power relations. In addition, considerable recent scholarship has focused on settler colonialism (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Wolfe, 2006; Veracini, 2013; Barker, 2012), that is the forms of colonialism which involved the permanent settlement of Europeans in places such as Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, the USA, and Canada – that is, forms of colonialism which did not end with the political decolonization of the 20th century.

Coloniality, then, is still the most general form of domination in the world today, once colonialism as an explicit political order was destroyed. It doesn't exhaust, obviously, the conditions nor the modes of exploitation and domination between peoples. But it hasn't ceased to be, for 500 years, their main framework (Quijano, 2007: 170).

Thus, decolonization was previously about challenging the European empires of the 20th century; it remains a challenge to the settler colonialism that created much of north America and Australia. In this sense, decolonization is about land issues: it is pragmatic and political, aiming to redress profound inequalities of history. It is about recognizing the many forms of cultural and political Indigeneity. As Tuck and Yang point out, *decolonization is not a metaphor*:

Decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. The easy adoption of decolonizing discourse by educational advocacy and scholarship, evidenced by the increasing number of calls to 'decolonize our schools', or use 'decolonizing methods', or, 'decolonize student thinking', turns decolonization into a metaphor (2012: 1).

Such decolonization is a political program (Rizvi, 2017) that has the potential to challenge and largely transform many of the political, social, and legal assumptions of contemporary western society. At its most basic level it is a recognition that the injustices are not only historic — and that there is continuing violence caused by the legacies of colonialism.

Decolonization is about a *political agenda* that challenges power structures and global inequalities. It is also about a *decolonization of knowledge*.[7] That is, both before

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[7] It is worth quoting here Quijano's discussion of coloniality and modernity, where he outlines his understanding of decolonization in the following way:

First of all, epistemological decolonization, as decoloniality, is needed to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings, as the basis of another rationality which may legitimately pretend to some

and after the processes of decolonization and independence, such power was exerted through the 'colonization of the imagination' and knowledge (Maldonado-Torres discusses this as the 'coloniality of being', 2004, 2007). Much of what I am addressing here is the latter — an attempt to explore the processes of decolonization of knowledge and education (which also includes the structures of the university and departmental/disciplinary units as well as the content of courses that are taught). But to explore such a decolonization of knowledge also requires an engagement in some form with the much larger and even more difficult political challenges of decolonization. And so, although formal decolonization of empires and independent nations happened over fifty years ago, and the study of religion is no longer overtly a branch of colonial rule, there remain questions about what that legacy means and how this discipline can become more critically aware of its past and more rigorously able to define itself beyond the structures of power and exploitation which gave rise to it.

Decolonization is not simply about adding one or two alternative readings to a syllabus. Decolonization of the curriculum is a starting point, and the inevitable result of a much wider programme of change.[8] So, how can the study of religion (and a number of related academic fields of study) move further from its origins as a tool of European colonialism to being a space in which contemporary power structures of inequality (including race, gender, sexualities, class, and ability) are challenged and disrupted?

Some of the ways in which the discipline can begin to explore this are as follows: the historical development of the study of religion, such as its formation as a

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universality. Nothing is less rational, finally, than the pretension that the specific cosmic vision of a particular ethnie should be taken as universal rationality, even if such an ethnie is called Western Europe because this is actually pretend to impose a provincialism as universalism (2007: 177).

[8] Thus, I take a lot of inspiration (and challenge) from Sara Ahmed (2014), who wrote on her *feministkilljoys* blog:

White men cite other white men: it is what they have always done; it is what they will do; what they teach each other to do when they teach each other. They cite; how bright he is; what a big theory he has. He's the next such-and-such male philosopher: don't you think; see him think. The relation is often paternal: the father brings up the son who will eventually take his place. Patriarchy: it's quite a system. It works.

discipline; the historical processes by which assumptions and ideas (and terminology) were formed; the discipline's canon of theory and methodologies; and the way in which the discipline is written. I discuss each of these below.

The historical development of the study of religion

Western universities are the products of a long history of colonialism, and the ways in which that history has led to the construction of the contemporary university system in Britain and North America have been largely obfuscated within popular and academic discussions. The development of the study of religion is one small part of this process.[9] Edward Said's (2003) classical critique of the imperial discourses of orientalism has been a very significant influence for scholars attempting to pick apart this process. Thus, scholars working in the study of religion have had to confront questions about whether the 19th-century focus on the religious texts and particular histories of Hindus, Buddhists, and others within the colonial context did in fact help to create (or construct) these contexts as singular religions. As Chidester (2014) and Pennington (2005) have argued, this should not be seen as a one-way street, with white 19th-century scholars (and colonial agents) dictating to colonial 'natives' the existence of new religions (Bloch, Keppens, and Hegde, 2010). The agency of those living under colonial rule (and under the gaze of western scholars) was equally important – in particular with intellectual and political leaders becoming involved in reinterpretations and reconstructions of traditions within the fast changing colonial world of modernity.

Thus, the study of religion — like much of the humanities — is a disciplinary area with roots in the high period of European colonialism. The disciplinary formation of religious studies is a product of empire (Nye 2017d), and so the questions it asks, its key concepts, and its presence within universities reflects this origin. It is now largely taken for granted that universities arrange research and teaching (especially within humanities subjects, including English, history, sociology, and, to a more contested

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[9] Sharpe's (1985) meticulous research on the discipline's formation up to the 1970s remains a useful resource, even though it omits to explore both the colonial and gendered issues of the history he tells.

extent, the study of religion) according to certain departmental and disciplinary frameworks/structures. These divisions became manifest and institutionalized in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Of course, the world has changed considerably in the last century, and the end of formal empires in the mid-20th century led to a reformulation of academic disciplines such as religious studies. This occurred alongside the continuing and new forms of informal colonialism in the contemporary era (Quijano, 2007). However, there has been only limited reflection within the discipline on how such colonial history initially shaped — and continues to shape — the main functions and outputs of the scholarship that it nurtures.

In the early decades of the 20th century those who studied religion (in western universities) largely focused on issues of what they assumed to be social evolution and questions of how so-called 'primitive religion' (of non-western cultures) were distinct from their own ('civilized' or 'advanced') practices of religion (Sharpe, 1985). These questions have largely disappeared from the study of religion, but the apparatus that delivered such racialized science became the basis for the emergence of chairs and departments of religious studies.

Likewise, there is a parallel to be drawn with Gurminder Bhambra's (2009, 2013) discussion of the emergence of anthropology and sociology, which she argues were developed into distinct disciplines as a result of the framing of 'modernity' within British and American colonialism. Thus, 'the history of modernity as commonly told […] rests, as Homi Bhabha argues, on "the writing out of the colonial and post-colonial moment"' (1994: 250; see also Chakrabarty, 2000). The rest of the world is assumed to be external to the world-historical processes selected for consideration and, concretely, colonial connections significant to the processes under discussion are erased or rendered silent. This is not an error of individual scholarship but something that is made possible by the disciplinary structure of knowledge production that separates the modern (sociology) from the traditional and colonial (anthropology) thereby leaving no space for consideration of what could be termed the 'postcolonial modern' (Bhambra, 2013: 300). To paraphrase this, sociology was developed as a

means to produce knowledge of modernity for colonial powers, whilst anthropology was formed to separate out the 'other', the colonized, and the issues that do not fit easily into the paradigm of modernity. Of course, this is not an absolute distinction between the two disciplines, but it is a useful account of the formation of the two separate forms of social science.

That is, the discipline of anthropology — which emerged at the same time as the study of religion — came about through the 'writing out' of postcolonial (non-western) modernities by a Europe-centred modernity (Nye, 2017b). This growth was not particular to anthropology: much of the humanities emerged through this process, that is through the definition of how the values of modernity related to the subject matter of the discipline. Thus, modern philosophy[10], sociology, and (to a large extent) theology are focused on the modern and the European, whilst disciplines such as anthropology and religious studies focus on the traditional, the pre-modern, and the non-European. And so, although the study of religion serves an important function in exploring and transmitting ancient sources and philosophies from Asia, Africa, and elsewhere (and is not so 'obviously' white as some humanities disciplines such as philosophy, classics, and medieval history[11]), at the same time the discipline does so within a framework of colonially structured modernity.

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[10] It does not take much effort to discover the racialized assumptions of Kant and other enlightenment philosophers about non-Europeans, particularly Africans (Hesse, 2007; Vial, 2016; Curran, 2013; Eze, 1997; Zambrana, 2017), nor to link that to the brutal European systems of industrialized enslavement of that era. Nor does it take much effort to 'discover' that there are powerful traditions of philosophical study within a number of non-European contexts, including China, South Asia, and Africa, as well as in a number of Arab and Muslim traditions. Indeed, what we now think of as (western) philosophy is born out of Arab Muslim philosophy as much as — if not more so — from Greeks. The convenient exclusion of this legacy is not in any way an accident or omission: it is primarily about the process by which the boundaries of Europe (and rational thought) are drawn.

[11] To a large extent, it is safe to say that philosophy, classics, and medieval studies are all presumed to be about predominantly white subjects – that is white European philosophers and white European pre-modern history. In the case of philosophy, there are challenging disciplinary questions to be asked about how much western philosophy is itself derived from beyond (Christian) Europe, in particular from the rich traditions of the Arab-Muslim world. In classics, there is an emerging debate about both the 'European-ness' of the Greek world, and in particular the embedded-ness of ancient Greek

As an example of how this colonially rooted structure works in practice, I suggest a question: if we teach a course on 'Asian religions', what is it exactly that we are expected to teach? In most cases, it is likely to be the historical and the textual — the teachings of the Buddha, the Vedas and Upanishads, the rich canon of the classical Chinese philosophical schools deriving from figures such as Kongzi (Confucius) and Laozi (Lao-tzu), and/or perhaps the sources for Zen and Shinto in Japan. If the colonial or the contemporary are included, they are often as an add-on — that is, they are presented as an anthropological exploration of the perplexing disparity between the past and the present. What this indicates is that the subjects are taught in a way to *exclude* modernity or at the very least to exoticize and problematize modernity when it gets in the way of our understanding of (what is expected to be) the 'religion'.

My suggestion is that the subject matter of such courses would best be taught through an approach that does not remove (what we assume to be) modernity, but instead uses it as the entry into our engagement with the material. That is, to teach from the present backwards — through looking at the postcolonial present and how that has been created by the forces of the past. The organizations and traditions of the postcolonial world that are now classified as religions have been formed into their contemporary structures and practices by the legacies of colonialism, even when they draw on rich and diverse pre-colonial histories and sources. That is, it is not only scholars and students who read and interpret the classics of China, India,

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culture within the wider influences of what is now west Asia and north Africa. Medieval studies is often framed in terms of the homogenous whiteness of the peoples of Europe before the invasion of America and the development of global European empires, whereas much of Europe during this time was significantly engaged with people from beyond Europe. In all three cases, there are strong public perceptions that the subject matter of philosophy, classics, and medieval history are representative of core issues of whiteness — for example civilization and enlightenment, and the role of white imaginations of the Middle Ages in contemporary popular fantasy is in itself significant. These are all in contrast with the religions and cultures of those beyond Europe, who are seen as primitive, exotic, and 'world religions'. For discussions of these issues in medieval studies, see Kim (2015, 2016); Hsy and Orlemanski (2017); Heng (2011a); TPM (2017); Cohen (2013); Heng (2011b), and in Classics see Kennedy (2018a, 2018b); Sundaram and McMaster (2018); Peralta (2019); Zuckerberg (2016); and Hanink (2017).

and elsewhere[12] through a lens largely formed by the modernity of the postcolonial world.[13]

In short, one starting point for decolonizing the study of religion is to recognize and explore the discipline's historical contingency. It did not emerge out of nowhere: it was made by a particular social and historical context, and its current structures, main assumptions, and reasons for being still rely on that context. One part of exploring and understanding this is to question and contextualize some of the terms and ideas that are 'taken for granted' within the discipline.

Key assumptions: religion and religions

There are many terms that have been debated and contested within the history of the study of religion. Terms such as 'spirituality', 'magic', 'ritual', 'animism', 'belief', and 'god' are all recognized as having specific cultural and historical legacies, both prior to the emergence of the discipline and within its operation as a discourse of empire (and subsequently). Indeed, any term used within the study of religion needs to be put into 'scare quotes', to indicate that these can never be 'neutral' ideas and that discourses exist beyond the level of a particular society, culture, or political context. Thus, the study of religion is — like much else in the humanities and social sciences — a study of translation and interpretation, especially of how all knowledge and discourse is located within the particular, not the universal. Although English is the dominant language of contemporary scholarly studies of religion, the

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[12] A very good example of this can be found in the above referenced discussions of the colonial/modern constructions of 'Hinduism' (see note 2 above) along with the growth of the right-wing Hindutva movement in India and among diasporic Hindus (Hirst and Zavos 2005; Bhatt 1997; Anderson and Jaffrelot 2018; Zavos 2008; Altman 2017); there are similar discussions of the 'colonial construction of Buddhism' (Bretfeld 2012; Abeysekara 2012); and also Arvind Mandair (2009, 2013) provides an incisive analysis of the formation of Sikhi traditions during the colonial and postcolonial eras.

[13] Folded into this argument is the issue of modernity (and the western colonial gaze) being premised on a temporal exclusion of the non-west. That is, those outside of Europe, largely racialized as other, are seen as not only separate geographically, but are also put into the past – as 'primitive', or 'backward', or 'medieval'. In the study of religion, this can be reified in particular ways, with the term 'tradition' doing much of this work – as though a traditional religion, untouched by modernity, is worthy of respect, in contrast to the messiness of contemporary experiences. On issues of race, time, and otherness see Fabian (1983) and Hesse (2007).

English-language terminology that its scholars often use to engage with each other across the world does not necessarily homogenize or flatten out the historical and political legacies of those terms.[14]

 This discussion has extended as far the term 'religion'. The critiques made of the word by W. C. Smith (1991), J. Z. Smith (1982), and Talal Asad (1993) have become a central part of contemporary theoretical debates within the discipline, (Fitzgerald 2000a, 2000b, 2007, 2015; McCutcheon, 1997; Arnal and McCutcheon, 2012). In short, 'religion' is not only a particular English language term, it is one with a specific history, having emerged within colonial histories of white European Protestant Christian traditions (Nongbri, 2013). Kathryn Lofton (2012: 384) puts this point extremely well: 'Religion as a description of human behavior was created through colonialism and its governments, its sciences, and its theologies. To be trained as a scholar of religious studies is then to practice a postcolonial methodology of a profoundly colonial subject.'

 Thus, to study 'religion' is not to study a 'thing' in itself, which exists across humanity as a universal. It is instead a study of how particular ideas (and discourses) of 'religion' are practiced and operationalized in various contexts (Taira, 2010; Taira, 2016). This becomes very challenging in contexts beyond the English language, where the discourses on 'religion' may be quite different from what is understood by the English language term. At present, this historicization and particularization of the concept of 'religion' is contested by a number of scholars working in 'theory and method', particularly over whether the 'deconstruction' of the term 'religion' requires (or allows) scholars to retain the term as a tool of analysis (what is called, 'taking religion seriously').[15] In particular, the idea that there is such a thing as religion, with

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[14] Of course, English is not the only language of scholarship in this respect and is itself a language of colonial power (both in the past and in the present). The dominance of English is an issue for decolonization, as recognised for example by Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986).

[15] See Schilbrack (2013) and Pritchard (2010) in particular, along with the various contributors to a debate in *Implicit Religion*, coming out of a podcast discussion by Taira (2017b), with responses by: Hedges (2017); McCutcheon (2017); Newton (2017); Nye (2017a); and Taira (2017a).

a common-sense meaning that can be applied in most (if not all) contexts across the world, is the result of European colonial rule (Nongbri, 2013).

In practice, this suggests that the discipline is not looking at 'religion as an object', and so the study of religion is thus not about studying religion (Nye, 2017a, 2017c; Nye, 2018). Instead, a significant part of the study is the conditions and history that led the scholar and the student to view the specifics of (what they see as) religion in this way. It is about studying theory and approaches that contextualize such assumptions in a global context and a history of colonialism.

The same can also be said for the other central term within the study of religion: 'religions', as a plural rather than singular. If all people have religion, then it is possible to divide up different 'manifestations' of religion into different religions. In doing so, these diverse religions cluster into a number of large groups that have come to be known as 'world religions'. This classification system at the heart of the study of religion has again been critiqued in various ways, for example by Fitzgerald (1990) and Owen (2011) and most recently in Cotter and Robertson (2016). As a typology it does the work of classifying differences which are held to be largely self-evident for many scholars, teachers, and students of religion. It is a paradigm which emerged in a particular time as outlined with meticulous care by Tomoko Masuzawa (2005), and again this history points us back to the colonial era.

The question, of course, is how do we teach the study of religion 'after world religions' (Cotter and Robertson, 2016)? The 'world religions paradigm' has become so naturalized in public discourse that to teach against it is extremely challenging, and must start with an exploration of how the 'traditions' that are taken for granted as 'world religions' are historically derived discourses. In this respect, part of the process of decolonizing the study of religion should be to find ways to teach against the grain of such classification, against or outside the 'world religions paradigm'.

But the challenge goes even further than this. Another question is: how do we decolonize the *idea* of religion, along with the many structures of thought that come out of (and help to sustain) this category? One possibility is to take seriously Patrick Wolfe's (2016) argument that 'race is colonialism speaking'. In which case, there is a

need to engage with how the ideas of religion, race, and racism are connected, as I have explored in another discussion (Nye, 2018).[16]

Alongside this, there is the discussion of how this concept of religion/s relies on what is usually considered to be its antithesis, the secular. The religion-secular relationship has a particular history which emerged through the processes of colonialism (Asad, 2003; Fitzgerald, 2007; Abeysekara, 2010; Mahmood, 2015; McCrary and Wheatley, 2017). Thus, as Mignolo (2007) suggests, coloniality is linked with the processes of rationalization and modernity, and in many respects the idea of religion (being not only separate from but also opposed to these elements) works to construct secularity as a key element of coloniality. Within such structures of thought, the concept of religion requires the concept of secularity (and secularism) to emphasize the irrationality and backwardness of the other (the colonized), who thus become in need of 'civilizing' (for an elaboration of this argument, see Fitzgerald (2007)). And the corollary also occurs, that is the concept of modern rational secularity requires a concept of religion and religions as others, to colonize, civilize, and defeat. This process has primarily been a process of racialization and gendering, relying on concepts such as the 'mystic' Hindu, the contemplative Buddhist, the violent jihadi Muslim, and the noble but ultimately doomed (and landless) Indigenous people.

Reproducing the canon

Most programmes in the study of religion require some consideration of the tools that are required for research and scholarship, what is often called 'theory and methodology'. Often these rely on assumptions and ideas that have not moved very far from the colonial beginnings of the discipline.

One of the most influential textbooks in the discipline is the overview of theories of religion by Daniel Pals, originally published in 1996 as seven theories (Pals, 1996) but which has developed to its current edition as nine (Pals, 2014). Of the ten theorists covered, all are men (the most recent theorist is Clifford Geertz)

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[16] On race and religion, see also: Lloyd (2013); Vial (2016); Lum and Harvey (2018); Olender and Goldhammer (2008); Dees (2015b); and Simmons (2018).

and they are all racialized as white. Indeed, seven of these theorists wrote during the colonial era (that is before 1945). In many respects, the textbooks that are used for undergraduate courses serve to define the discipline and its important canon of sources. The ubiquity of Pals' book tells us much more about the discipline than about its author: it is time (indeed it is long past time) to re-evaluate and revise whatever canon may be accepted at the disciplinary level.

In some respects, this critique of Pals (and the theorists he describes) relates to the decolonizing questions of revising the curriculum, of adding new authors to the long list of white men (Ahmed, 2014; Ahmed, 2017; Gopal, 2017; Sabaratnam, 2017). Although such arguments are usually presented in terms of *adding* diversity and new perspectives to existing curricular, I would argue that it also requires the *removal* of some of the 'founding fathers' from the list. What benefit is there to the discipline to assume that the work of Emile Durkheim on religion is foundational theory? Durkheim's theory is based on his reading of the accounts of missionaries and colonial travellers, in the context of white British settlement of central Australia in the 19th century. The 21st-century reader of Durkheim (hopefully) will be aware of the flaws with such an approach which is premised on discussion of 'primitive' societies that provide an insight into human evolution, as the most elementary of forms of social and religious organization. However, from a present-day perspective, this is not simply anachronistic; it is racist and white supremacist, based on common assumptions of European imperialism during Durkheim's time. There is plenty of scope to think through Durkheim's ideas within the context of the French society that he was familiar with, but that does not make his work any less racist and imperialist. The fact that contemporary students are taught to think of such theory and methodology as acceptable says a great deal about the discipline.

Pals writes on how Durkheim relied on:

the work of Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen, two field anthropologists who had been able to observe closely *certain primitive aborigine tribes in the remote hinterlands of Australia.* Their work—along with that of the German fieldworker Carl von Strehlow and others who had made similar

observations—furnished a detailed portrait of social life *in these extremely simple communities* [...] *One can hardly find anything more basic* than the very categories of human thought and experience; among the aborigines, these are provided by totemism (2006: 97, emphases added).

Durkheim contends that, if his analysis is correct, there is a great deal to be learned from the primitive peoples of Australia. In the totemism of their tribes and clans, one finds on clear display:

> *all of the truly 'elementary forms'* of the religious life [...] *Though harder to detect in the great and dominant religions of the world*, they are as unmistakably present in these complex traditions as they are *in the simplest totemism. East or West, ancient or modern*, beliefs and rituals always express a society's needs [...] (Pals, 2006: 106, emphasis added).

The problem here is not only with Durkheim, whose work was racist and colonialist in 1912 when it was first written and remains so. In the quotation above it is Pals who is writing (in a book published recently) and although he is paraphrasing much of Durkheim, he does so without providing any acknowledgement or analysis of the obvious racial assumptions within the work. In many respects, therefore, Pals is exploring Durkheim's theory whilst also *endorsing* the racializing methodology. Instead, the problem is with scholars, such as Pals, who find it appropriate to write about and teach this scientific racism. In writing in this way, Pals is presenting the canon of scholarship of religion as being unproblematically based in this colonial racialization of difference.

My response to this is to ask the question of what exactly should a decolonized canon for the study of religion look like? What is important for future generations to learn about and take forward? It is a problem that is exercising my mind as I work on a new edition of my own introduction to the field (Nye, 2008), and it is something that every person responsible for teaching 'theory and method' on a religion programme should give serious thought to. If it means dropping Durkheim (and Pals) then I think this is a step in the right direction, not because of the race or gender of these two

individuals, but because they are poor examples of the type of theory and method that should be taught in the study of religion. If they are to be used,[17] they should be taught as historical sources, as examples of the ways in which the academic study of religion has been an institutionalization of racist theory.

What I suggest instead, is that there are many other issues, theories, and approaches that should be at the heart of what is taught within the study of religion. This for me focuses on what can be called an intersectional approach which puts at the centre of any research project (and taught course) questions of race, gender, sexualities, and colonial history.[18] I also consider that *any* discussion of religion must be a discussion of gender (see, for example, Hawthorne 2013 and Joy 2012) and race (Maldonado-Torres, 2014; Lloyd, 2013; Nye, 2017d; Nye, 2017e; Nye, 2018), which do not exist separately from the category of religion but are in fact part of the 'colonial matrix of power' (Mignolo, 2007; Lugones, 2008) that operates within the institutionalization of higher education.

As Megan Goodwin (2011) has argued, 'the study of religion is not merely incomplete but damaged if it fails to meaningfully account for sex and sexuality'. And likewise, of course, *also* race and coloniality.[19] Engaging with each of these issues — and many more — and doing so from more than simply a white male standpoint is a significant part of facing the challenges of decolonization within the discipline of religious studies. These may well not be the only issues of importance, but they are very important.

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[17] There is some merit in certain elements of the theory that Durkheim puts together from his reading of Spencer and Gillen's accounts of their impressions of the Arrernte people in late 19th-century central Australia. Durkheim is not talking about the Arrernte people in particular; he is using the colonial travellers' account of them to think through how he understands the relationship between what he calls religion and society. But Durkheim's use of the Arrernte related material illustrates some of the racialized assumptions built into western academic concepts of both religion and society.

[18] My first organised attempt to do this can be found in an online version of a syllabus for a course that I taught in 2017 at the University of Glasgow, under the title 'Intersections in the Cultural Study of Religion' (https://medium.com/religion-bites/intersections-in-the-cultural-study-of-religion-755ea64de22).

[19] As Goodwin argued in a compelling unpublished paper presented to the NAASR annual meeting in Denver in November 2018.

Method and discipline

It is also important to consider *how* the process of decolonizing could and should happen, and how to prevent such a process from being clawed back into the white normativity that it is challenging. I get very frustrated with the field of religious studies, in particular the slowness with which it engages (in general) with developments occurring elsewhere in the study of culture (Joy, 2014). I also have a foot in another camp, that is the field of social/cultural anthropology, which is where I was trained as both an undergraduate and postgraduate.

In the summer of 2018, as I was drafting this article, certain areas of anthropology faced the trauma of revelations about the online journal *HAU*, which had developed a reputation for the publication of innovative new research in the field (despite the inappropriate and unacknowledged appropriation of the Māori term and concept as its title). The scandal focused in particular on allegations of bullying, harassment, and mismanagement by senior staff at the journal. Discussing this scandal, Zoe Todd (2018) argues that it needs to be understood in relation to 'the structural and systemic factors' that made it possible, and in particular that anthropology 'continues to be a colonial and exclusionary discipline'. Todd's recommendation is for a 'decolonial (re)turn', or more specifically for scholars to embrace a 'Decolonial Turn 2.0'. That is, although there has been a process of reflection by anthropologists about the colonial roots of the field, this has largely been about white men reflecting on what their academic forebears did, whilst still avoiding any real structural (or even theoretical) changes within the curriculum and canon. Thus, she repeats a comment she once heard, that 'Anthropology is a room full of white people sitting around talking about people of colour' (Todd, 2018).

As Todd indicates, this is very much supported by the research and discussion by Brodkin, Morgen, and Hutchinson (2011) on anthropology as 'white public space', that struggles — both institutionally and on the personal level — to make space for scholars of colour. Thus, to use Nirmal Puwar's (2004) terminology, the scholar racialized as non-white becomes a 'space invader' (see also Ahmed, 2014).

Much the same can be said about the study of religion — although it is worth reflecting on how in studies of religion the focus of study is often not so much

people, but 'beliefs', texts, and generic categories of 'religion'. That is, the discipline purports to focus on people's cultural practices and products rather than the people themselves. But nonetheless, it is white men that tend to dominate. So, we could perhaps adapt Todd's comment to the particularities of how religious studies does its work: 'The study of religion is a room full of white people sitting around talking about things that people of colour do'.

The lack of space for Indigineity that Todd describes in anthropology is similarly constructed — in its own particular ways — within the study of religion. Todd's (2018) recommendation, for anthropology, is as follows:

> It is clear to me that anthropology of the 21st century must be reciprocal, open (Pandian 2018), and engage in 'epistemic diversity' (Mbembe 2016). It must open itself up to engagement beyond the narrow canon it jealously guards, Smaug-like, from universities built on white supremacy (and quite literally, through slavery) and enriched by wealth and knowledge pilfered through Imperialism. Anthropology of the 21st century can and must be something altogether different if it wishes to survive.

She concludes with the comment 'we are tasked with making anthropology what it needs to be. Or, maybe, abandoning it all together. And starting something else anew' (Todd, 2018).

As mentioned, I have a foot in both anthropology and the study of religion, and I feel that her comments apply similarly to the latter. What makes the study of religion distinct from anthropology is that in the study of religion there never has been any previous effort to decolonize. The study of religion is still looking for decolonization 1.0, which should be along the lines of Todd's recommendations for anthropology's 2.0 version.

Indeed, it is worth noting here the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) on decolonizing methodologies and on the emergence of the field of indigenous methodologies (Kovach, 2010; Chilisa, 2011). She presents a compelling critique of the ambitions (and often arrogance) of European researchers on issues such as culture and religion:

> It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us. It appalls us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999: 1).

Thus, for Tuhiwai Smith research is not a neutral action carried out by the researcher. It is instead 'a significant site of struggle'. In particular, when it takes place with respect to indigenous peoples, it is necessary for the researcher to engage with an understanding of 'the complex ways in which the pursuit of knowledge is deeply embedded in the multiple layers of imperial and colonial practices' (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999: 2). Tuhiwai Smith's understanding of Indigenous research is complex and very much about plurality, not solely referring to her own context as Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand. Although the term also has particular points of reference with politically marginalized cultures and nations in North America and Australia, it also indicates more broadly the context of what Fanon (2004) and Memmi (2003) designated as 'the colonized'. Indeed, what Tuhiwai Smith is drawing attention to are some of the not so obvious implications of research conducted in and about non-western cultures — that is, the core of the study of religion. Thus, research needs to be conducted on a level of equity, with those being researched as equal partners who have control of the planning, design, and delivery of the outcomes of the research.

Conclusion

In this article, I have aimed to contribute to contemporary debates in the study of religion in two ways: (1) to highlight some of the key areas of the concept of decolonization; and (2) to explore the relevance of this concept (and the methodologies associated with it) to teaching, research, and institutional structures in the field.

The first of these requires recognition of the complexities and challenges of decolonizing and warns against the seemingly simple solutions that the term often

evokes. What I understand by decolonizing is a process, that works in many different ways — not only addressing and changing the 'colonization of knowledge' and ideology (and curriculum), but also the more obviously tangible and political forms of colonialism (particularly contemporary settler colonialism), as articulated by Tuck and Yang (2012).

Despite the fairly recent take up of the term in mainstream academia, decolonization is not the same as 'inclusion' or 'diversification': it is not about a paternalistic offering of inclusion to outsiders. Decolonization is about challenging and changing the sense of white entitlement (and white supremacism) that sets up the structures of power that carefully 'allow' (and control) the inclusion of certain forms of diversity (DiAngelo, 2011; DiAngelo, 2018). The metaphor of the 'seat at the table' (or the space on the syllabus) for such diversity is part of such white paternalism. In contrast,decolonization is a challenge to these assumptions of power and the structures that are formed to maintain them.

Thus, decolonization does not simply happen with the inclusion of a new reading on a syllabus or the holding of a seminar (or staff training event). Decolonization is a process that aims to create large-scale transformation of all levels of the academyincluding the classroom, the discipline, and the institution. Decolonizing is not about a reluctant addition of an extra reading; it requires a wholesale change (perhaps even the 'hard' decolonization of pulling apart the discipline, as Todd suggests). *Who* scholars cite is extremely important (Ahmed, 2014), as is who are in the curriculum (Gopal, 2017), but decolonization is about a much wider programme of engagement across all areas of teaching and research. If the question 'why is my curriculum white?' provokes a response (either of indignation or guilt), then the point is to address this. This is not about finding a particular author of colour to fit into an otherwise unchanged syllabus. It is about asking the questions of how that syllabus needs to be decolonized, decentred, and challenged as a whole. However, it goes beyond the syllabus: there is also the much deeper question of how the research engages with more than the canon of 'white men' (Ahmed, 2014). Indeed, how does teaching and research in the study of religion reflect and challenge the gendered and racialized structures of power that are central to the university?

One question that is worth asking concerns what students may be expecting when they sign up for a religion course. Of course, the teacher is not necessarily required to meet such expectations, but instead their challenge is to find ways (in the classroom and through the syllabus and their writing) to take students from that starting point to a (more?) decolonized perspective. My aim here is to step back and ask some methodological questions: in particular, it is essential to understand how race, gender, colonialism, and whiteness are at the basis of all aspects of the study of religion (Hawthorne, 2013; Hawthorne, 2009; Bilge, 2014; Ahmed, 2007; Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016). This is not purely in terms of 'theory' for its own sake: these issues are defining elements of western European and North American cultural discourse, and so without looking at these issues it is impossible to understand how the study of religion works.

In particular, the discourse and ideology of whiteness is a key part of any cultural research, particularly as it is one of the most invisible elements of the academy. The decolonizing process requires scholars to recognize and make visible concepts of whiteness, in particular how they frame the normative assumptions of the discipline. Very often white normativity (or methodological whiteness, Bhambra, 2017b) relies on assuming and then theorizing the racialized other as subject. The challenge of this requires asking difficult and often awkward questions about the researcher's own individual investment in whiteness, in how that articulates within the institution where they work, and in the students they teach. Alongside this, there is the challenge of finding ways to ground theory, knowledge, and research practice in 'Indigenous methodologies' that challenge and de-centralize this white normativity.

Such decolonizing then requires a much larger and more radical perspective that goes far beyond the disciplinary level. This needs to factor in the continuing institutional racism of universities, which leads to inequalities in hiring and promotion of staff, along with support for teaching and research (Bhopal, 2017; Bhopal, 2018).[20] It also requires not just acknowledgement of but also reflection on

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[20] These issues of whiteness, race, and gender are further exacerbated by the many other intersecting issues currently faced by those working within the system. These problems include: the ever increasing casualization/adjunctification of teaching staff together with ongoing lack of investment in senior

the colonial formation of universities, colleges, and departments, particularly due to the economic and ideological influences of colonialism and slavery.[21]

The process of decolonizing is not only a theoretical exercise or debate; it is not simply about reading and writing works referencing the topic of 'decolonization'. Indeed, given the recent popularization of the term, there is a real threat that a watered-down, deradicalized version of this agenda may disappear into the dominant ideologies of whiteness (of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and neoliberalism). When the concept of decolonization is put to use (particularly by those in management) as a synonym for 'diversity' — as a tool for measurement and quantification — then the radical challenges of decolonization are being set aside (in many respects, this is the 'soft decolonization' that I mentioned at the start of this article). Decolonization is about changing scholarship and the system, not the other way around.

In conclusion, it could be useful to also give a short set of indications of what the decolonizing process in the study of religion may entail. That is, if we take seriously the issues that I have raised above, how could this impact on and change the discipline? I believe there is a strong argument that the discipline's history, together with the history of the terms 'religion' and 'religions' (and the fundamental role of the 'world

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and tenure track scholars; inequalities in pay on the basis of gender and race; bloated administrations with very high salaries for top management; the increasing dominance of neoliberalism in all aspects of university life including the introduction of arbitrary metrics of measurement, such as research and teaching excellence frameworks and research impact goals; and structural issues shared with many other work cultures including institutional racism and the lack of willingness to address predatory male sexual harassment.

[21] For example, many universities in Britain have historical legacies of material enrichment from slave trading and colonial plunder. See Draper (2018) and Jones (2018), and in particular a project that is currently ongoing (in 2018) at the University of Glasgow (Garavelli 2017; Belam 2018). In spring 2019, St John's College Oxford have also launched a research project to explore the college's links with (and benefits from) the colonial past (Adams 2019) and the University of Cambridge have announced a similar project (Weale 2019). The relationship between colonialism and colleges and universities in North America is further complicated by both their (usually unacknowledged) location on land traditionally held by Indigenous nations and also – particularly in older universities – with their own history as corporate slave holders. See, for example: Carp (2018); Harris, Campbell, and Brophy (2019); Beckert and Stevens (2011) on Harvard; and Swarns (2016) on Georgetown University. A list of various US universities' preliminary attempts to address their histories of enslavement can be found on the MIT website [https://libraries.mit.edu/mit-and-slavery/universities-and-slavery/]).

religions paradigm'), suggests that Todd's argument for anthropology could and should apply to the study of religion. That is, the present disciplinary structures are based on problems that are hard-baked into the system: the expectations of studying 'religion/s' reproduce and perpetuate so many of the colonial discourses that need decolonizing, and this is always going to be a means by which white epistemologies are reproduced and maintained. In short, the term 'religion' creates a white public academic space (Brodkin, Morgen, and Hutchinson, 2011) that is resistant to change.[22]

The question then becomes: how can there be the study of religion *without* 'religion'? This may sound contradictory (and even self-defeating); another way of expressing this is whether the study of religion can be possible without an examination of the legacies of colonialism. As with race, colonialism (and the contemporary colonial matrix of power, discussed by Mignolo, 2007 and Quijano, 2007) speaks through the concept of religion and religious difference. Or, to extend Wolfe's phrasing of 'race is colonialism speaking' (2016), we can equally say that 'religion is colonialism speaking'?

In summary, therefore, a process of attempting to decolonize the study of religion should require a methodological awareness of the historical and academic legacies of colonialism within the discipline, in terms of the ways in which it is taught and researched, along with key assumptions about the subject matter (such as the concepts of religion and world religions). Much of the extant discourse and structure of the discipline is the product of European colonial history. Decolonizing this is not an optional add-on: the discipline came into being through empire and

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[22] The term is also used in other ways, often as a challenge by scholars of colour against the hegemonic theoretical whiteness of the category. See, for example: Long (1999); Beliso-De Jesús (2018); Deloria (2003); Carter (2008); Cone (1990); and Anidjar (2014). It is noticeable, however, that such challenges often use methodologies that could be considered as theological (in as much as they are often faith based and focused in some way). This is not to say that such counter-hegemonic uses of the concept of religion (against its use as creating a white public space) are theological by necessity. Driscoll and Miller's (2019) recent book on 'method as identity' explores similar ground from a different angle. They point out that in much academic discussion of religion, the idea of 'white religion' is very usually taken to be 'just religion' (in distinction to the racialization and resistance of the category of 'black religion').

colonialism, and the contemporary 'colonial matrix of power' is very often how the study of religion continues to justify itself.

Although much of the discussion of decolonization has been focused on the curriculum, this process is much more than either celebrating the discipline's general endorsement of Said's critique of orientalism or otherwise including a few more scholars of colour within the accepted canon. These are simply the beginning of a complex and challenging process that is as much about the structures of universities and the means by which scholars engage with (and perhaps lead) wider popular discourses. In addition, decolonizing requires a rethinking of the canons of both theory and methodology, and in particular the processes by which scholars engage with and frame their research.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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