

○ REVIEW OF LAURA DONALDSON AND KWOK PUI-LAN (EDS.), *POSTCOLONIALISM, FEMINISM AND RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE*

(NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE, 2002)

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This collection of essays aims at unpacking the relationship between postcolonial and feminist theories in the context of religious discourses, and as such, it promises to shed light on the tangled relationship between these three factors, the degree to which women, for example, are both subjects and objects of fundamentalist discourses. The editors are right to emphasise the relatively minor role gender has played in recent postcolonial work on biblical and religious studies. For the most part, however, the volume consists of postcolonial critiques of Western, notably feminist perceptions of non-western religious cultures, and tends to polarise these terms rather than treating the tangled inter-articulations of colonising and colonised cultures and economies in a manner that has become normative in trans-national feminist studies. The introduction highlights the heterogeneous cultural perspectives of the contributors: Native American, (Cherokee), Chinese, Batswana, Turkish, Jewish, African-American. This diversity is refreshing indeed, but the relationship between the categories of identity used, from nationality, to geography and to religious culture is not made clear. Each of these categories is often essentialised rather than defined, or analyzed as part of a greater complex. The introduction claims that the anthology breaks new ground, and is critical notably of a previous anthology by Rita Gross, while failing to mention for example, the important anthology edited by Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader* which creates important dialogues and juxtapositions between and among diverse multicultural and religious perspectives. In general, though the volume focuses on the intersection of analytic discourses, it generally tends to dismiss or underplay the important work that has been done in feminist studies, work that has extensively engaged postcolonial perspectives in critiquing racial and cultural hegemonies. While the introduction and specific essays note the Christian missionary involvement in European imperialism, and racist expansionism, for the most part the latter is bracketed off or avoided. The hegemony of Christianity in religious studies in general is not tackled. Though the editors mention the hegemony of Christian perspectives in religious-feminist scholarship, they devote the first part of the volume, 'Challenging Feminist Religious Discourse', to critiques of *post-Christian* and *non-Christian* feminist theorists. The enemy seems to be Western feminism on its own, not necessarily its link with or indebtedness to religious foundations. The second part of the volume, 'Rethinking Texts and Traditions, focuses on the positive uses women made of non-Western traditions. At times, it seems that the issue of religious identity and culture is lost altogether as the apparent focus of this volume, but this is not always the case. I will therefore try in what follows to highlight what I consider to be relevant, and compelling in the essays that make up the book.

Part One opens with Laura E. Donaldson's essay, 'The Breasts of Columbus: A Political Anatomy of Postcolonialism and Feminist Religious Discourse'. Donaldson identifies what she presents rather generally as Euro-American anti Indian-American racism with the Roman-Catholic definition of all non-Christians as *infidels*. I wish Donaldson could dwell on this connection

and elaborate its history and implications. Instead, the specifically religious connection is lost in her discussion of colonial bias in feminist theory. While highlighting religion as a shaping influence is a contribution, I would have expected Donaldson to make more of what feminist theory has already produced in the last two decades on postcolonial and anti-colonialism, including her specific concern with American-Indian culture. Instead, Donaldson chooses to critique what she frames as colonial ignorance in feminist classic publications. Her case in point is Catherine Keller's interpretation of Muscogee culture and history in her book, *Apocalypse Then and Now*. Donaldson criticises Keller's failure to recognise the agency of American Indian women, and turns to Cherokee history and oral tradition in her effort to re-evaluate their roles and 'voice-consciousness' a concept she borrows from Gayatri C. Spivak. Donaldson does not clarify the specific relevance of the political history she describes to the book's focus of inquiry – namely, religion. In a similar fashion Kwok Pui-Lan in 'Unbinding Our Feet: Saving Brown Women and Feminist Religious Discourse' takes to task Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Here as well there is almost no attempt to recall previous feminist work on East Asian women, but instead we are offered an all out attack – no longer an original gesture – on the post-Christian theologian, Mary Daly. What is new here, perhaps, is the linkage between colonialism and Christian missionary efforts: 'The condescending attitude toward women of other parts of the world and the missionary impulse to save them remains deeply lodged in Western women's minds even to the present' (67). Pui-Lan follows Audre Lorde's earlier critique of Daly, and does not clarify in what manner the Chinese custom of foot binding is related to particular religious traditions. If the point of the volume was to add religion to feminist post-colonial scholarship, and to question specifically the role Christianity played in promoting colonial bias, it would have been appropriate to select Christian (missionary, historical) publications on Chinese and American-Indian women, rather than to critique post-Christian or non-Christian work. If the point was to note how and to what extent Christian religious bias animates even contemporary feminist work, it should have been made more clearly and forcefully.

By contrast, Meyda Yegenoglu tries to analyse rather than attack Western bias against the place of women in 'other' religious cultures – in her case, Islam. 'Sartorial Fabric-ations: Enlightenment and Western Feminism' argues that the European Enlightenment tends to generalise, antiquate and homogenise Islam in general and links modern Western suspicion of veiling customs to the legacy of the Enlightenment. Unlike the previous articles, this piece is clearly focused on a gender identified religious custom, and makes original and creative use of feminist theories of the body as it reverses the terms of the argument, questioning the naturalness and of the unveiled body, and other no less barbaric instruments of control from bras to stiletto heels. (In this sense, this piece invokes comparisons already made by Mary Daly between Western and non-Western practices of sexist disciplining). The final piece in this section, 'Postcoloniality, Feminist Spaces and Religion' also avoids a blanket indictment of Western feminism in favor of a critical examination of sexism in pre-colonial cultures, in this case, African traditions. The author of the article, Musa W. Dube focuses her critique on Christian missionary efforts to colonise and further patriarchalise indigenous religion in Batswana. Dube resists the temptation to romanticise national 'pre-colonial' culture, and the nationalist call for indigenous women to preserve tradition at all costs. Instead she offers a reading of African women's use of hybrid strategies in their attempt to combine cultural practices that work for them. This piece is the only attempt to consider gender as a problem in both colonial and indigenous cultures, and to consider the colonised

woman, or the subaltern as a complex and diverse agency that defies simple identifications between national culture, 'original' religious traditions and women's stories and histories.

Most of the essays in Part Two, 'Rethinking Texts and Traditions,' highlight the ways in which women in colonised contexts find liberation and empowerment in their rejection of Western legacies and preference for 'their own' religious and cultural traditions. The last two essays, while critical of cultural colonisation, avoid glorifying or exonerating the colonised culture as possibly more congenial to women as historical subjects and agents. Laurie L. Patton, for example, in 'The Prostitute's Gold: Women, Religion, and Sanskrit in One Corner of India,' describes the dramatic appropriation by women of a traditionally male dominated religious scholarship – the linguistic and literary knowledge of Sanskrit in India; its learning, teaching and dissemination. The women Sanskritists she interviews and follows are fast becoming the cultural custodians of their country's most precious religious legacy. Patton concludes that this offers empowerment for the women involved, many of whom come from lower castes and classes where knowledge and teaching of Sanskrit (notably for women) was unimaginable in previous generations. Miriam Cooke's 'Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies,' offers an Islamic interpretation and appropriation of feminism. She argues that in the context of Islam, where separatism is impossible, women choose to work within systems that are trying to marginalise them by assuming multiple identities and working with a contingent subject position. Cooke interprets the veil worn by Islamic feminists as a contradictory symbol signifying both piety and resistance to Western secularism as well as the means that facilitates women's participation in the professional and public sphere – and thus a critique of Muslim traditionalism. While it may be seen as constricting, the veil is also a mechanism and symbol of liberation, permitting those who wear it to pursue the feminist dream of justice wherever it can be found. Laura Levitt's 'Letting Go of Liberalism: Feminism and the Emancipation of the Jews' is unusual in its avoidance of glorifying traditional religious culture – in this case, Judaism – and focuses instead on the subtle colonial disciplining it had to endure in the most unlikely of contexts: that of post-Enlightenment Europe. Jews in France in the 18th century were made to accept the discursive framework of the Christian majority in the name of a putative European egalitarian legacy. On the one hand Napoleonic ideals of equal citizenship promised non-discrimination but in reality these ideals stipulated that such privileges and rights be conferred on Jews only as individuals, not as a community. Jews were made to apologise for, re-interpret and represent the religious constraints on exogamy, for example, in such a way as to please the great colonial French liberator. To the extent that 'feminism' was achieved through such liberation, it was achieved at the price of cultural integrity. The last essay in this section, M. Shawn Copeland's 'Body, Representation and Black Religious Discourse' argues that Black women have been colonised by both white and black communities. The enslaved black woman's body was held in contempt, raped and abused. Contemporary Rap popular culture exploits and extends this legacy. Copeland finds in the Black religious sermon and in womanist criticism a rhetorical space that challenges and contests such representations and a new healing aesthetic that has the potential to transform a cultural collective imagination.

I offer the above summaries in the hope of doing justice to each of the essays included in this volume, despite my above reservations. I believe that these summaries are necessary because the specific concerns they discuss are significant. The essays by Yegenoglu and Cooke deal with the controversial and timely issue of female veiling practices and challenge us to consider the issue

from the point of view of the women who endorse and promote these practices. These are also the only essays that unpack the problematic interrelations between Western colonialism, gender and religion. Other essays, notably by Donaldson and Pui-Lan, offer more critique than analysis and explanation of gendered religious spaces and practices. This lack of focus characterises the volume as a whole, though in their specificity, as I have tried to show, individual essays offer intelligent insights into their subject matter. In general the volume tends to dichotomise East and West, Colonial and Postcolonial culture in ways that have already been deconstructed by scholars from Gayatri Spivak to Chandra T. Mohanty, from Trinh T. Minh-ha to Gloria Anzaldua. The minimal discussion of class as a criterion of analysis is also puzzling in view of the important impact of trans-national perspectives in feminist studies. Nevertheless, for religious studies scholars who are not aware of the postcolonial turn in the field, this volume is valuable. It adds a layer to what I expect is yet to come.