

The Exclusion of (the Study of) Religion in Latin American Gender Studies

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Much of contemporary scholarship on women and gender in Latin America has been guided by a twofold relationship to religion: on the one hand, religion is not seen or, even less, analyzed as a factor in women's lives. I have called this a *feminist blindness* to the importance of religion, especially in its aspects that women might experience as positive and life-sustaining. On the other hand, when feminist scholars do take religion into account, they often do so through something that I have called a *religious paradigm* or *religion-as-a-lens* type of theorizing, in which religion is seen as the main explanatory factor of women's lives in a given culture, but mainly as a monolithically negative, misogynist, and immutable force over people's lives. Such a depiction does not necessarily take women's own interpretations into account, nor does it interpret "religion" as lived religion, shaped by people, but rather as an institution.

There is a strong tendency in feminist Latin American studies to see all established religion, including popular Catholicism, as harmful and alienating for women. The favorite woman of the Catholic Church, the Virgin Mary, is a case in point. Women's love of her and devotion to her is seen as the worst sort of alienation: the well-known *marianismo* thesis, in spite of having been questioned by various scholars, is being reproduced in social scientific Latin American gender studies. Hardly any differentiation is made between institutional, official religion, on the one hand, and lived religious practices, on the other.

The exclusion of religion and its interdisciplinary study (anthropology, religious studies, theology) in Latin American studies is especially accentuated in gender studies. It is problematic, because issues related to gender, women, family, and

sexual ethics are at the heart of religion's interaction with the secular world, globally and in Latin America, specifically.

Among social scientists, the lack of knowledge of research done in fields such as religious studies and theology is a result of understanding religion narrowly, on the one hand, and in the case of Latin America, of a specific institutional academic situation in which religion is studied either in seminaries, institutions and universities of different churches, or as a theme among others in fields such as anthropology, history, and political science. The academic field of the study of religion in Latin America thus differs from the United States and Western European countries, in which the study of religion, including theology, is part of secular universities. The exclusion of religion—understood critically, broadly, and from the perspective of various disciplines—is thus partly a result of the meagerness of scientific study of religion in Latin America.

At the same time, from the perspective of theology, it is Latin America that has produced one of the globally most significant theological currents—liberation theology and its feminist, Afro-Latin American, indigenous, and ecological variants. The work of Latin American feminist theologians is usually best known and discussed by feminist theologians from other latitudes, like myself, not by Latin American male liberation theologians or feminist theorists. The lack of dialogue between (liberation) theologians and secular gender theorists leads to a situation in which religion is understood not only narrowly and stereotypically but often simply wrongly. Again, the figure of the Virgin Mary is instructive.

The cult of the Virgin Mary was embedded in Latin America at the very beginning of

the conquest in the early sixteenth century. Often, she replaced pre-Columbian female deities, whose attributes were fused into a syncretistic Latin American Mary. Later, with the import of African slaves to American lands, the same happened in relation to African deities and beliefs. Thus the various representations of Mary in Latin America are a fusion of European, African, and indigenous American elements. This is clearly discernible in popular religiosity even today. The "official" and the "popular"—which should not be too sharply separated—live side by side, blended into each other. Popular practices and beliefs can live half-officially as part of the more recognized devotion, sometimes creating a distance between what is formally (doctrinally) accepted by the Church and what are seen as customs of the common people. From the perspective of ordinary religious women, Mary represents not only continuity with pre-Columbian goddesses but also a source of empowerment in concrete life situations, including economic uncertainty. The feminist overthrow and dislike of Mary may thus look like not only inadequate scholarship but also class privilege.

Further, feminist theological understanding of the relationship between gender and religion is also about women gaining authority and positions of power (both within academic theology and religious institutions) and creating new sexual ethics from within the respective religious tradition. Feminist theology has from its very beginning been interreligious, ecumenical, and global. This has meant that the voices and critiques of women from the global South were very early included in feminist theology. Ecumenical and interfaith organizations offered a concrete network of collaboration and mutual critique between feminist

theologians from different parts of the world already in the 1960s and 1970s.

This narrative of global, ecumenical, and interfaith feminist theology is largely untold, which is why scholars in other fields can maintain somewhat narrow and stereotypical views of theology and feminist theology.

One concrete example of this somewhat different history and development of feminist theology is the early inclusion of what today is called intersectionality. For example, the Catholic feminist theologian Rosemary Ruether wrote already in 1975: “Any women’s movement which is *only* concerned about sexism and no other form of oppression, must remain a women’s movement of the white upper class, for it is *only* this group of women whose *only* problem is the problem of being women, since, in every other way, they belong to the ruling class. . . . Thus it seems to me essential that the women’s movement reach out and include in its struggle the interstructuring of sexism with all other kinds of oppression, and recognize a pluralism of women’s movements” (Ruether 1975, 125, emphasis in the original).

Ruether and other first-generation feminist theologians stated already in the 1970s that gender should always be analyzed in relation to class and race. Ruether uses the term “interstructuring,” not “intersectionality.” She is an example of a feminist theologian who was practically and conceptually linked to liberation theology, which was both a theoretical and practical—even political—movement mainly in the global South. The emphasis on the “interstructuring of oppression” in feminist theology, since its very beginning, was an outcome of its connections to the global movement of liberation theologies,

especially as they were practiced and theorized in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), founded in 1976. This was a forum for liberation theology-minded Christian theologians from all over the world, focusing on changes not only in theology but also in churches and society. Besides EATWOT, the ecumenical movement in general, especially the World Council of Churches, has been a key factor in the early development of both feminist theology and liberation theology globally, including black theology in the United States, Africa, and Latin America.

In the case of feminist theology, this meant an earlier inclusion of the perspective of the global South in feminist theorizing, before any other field of gender studies. Neither liberation theology nor feminist theology is adequately understood without this larger context. Ruether (together with other first-generation feminist theologians active in EATWOT) is an example of how some ideas, such as intersectionality, were present in feminist theology in fact earlier than in other fields of gender studies, as a consequence of this global interaction. This is not recognized in either secular feminist theory or feminist studies of religion.

Feminist theorizing has often been both blind and sometimes openly negative toward any positive synergy between feminism and religion as well as toward the experiences of religious women. Even theories of intersectionality, which explicitly pay (self)-critical attention to the blind spots of feminist theory and the myriad of differences between women, have by and large not been able to see religion as an important factor in women’s lives. Has religion thus remained the last way of “othering” women—especially

those of a different culture or subculture—in feminist theory?

If religion is analyzed as one “difference” between women or as an important social division and producer of power asymmetries, it is possible to take it into account also in intersectional analyses. This may be especially crucial in societies that are strongly marked by religion and, in the case of women, by religious traditions that explicitly foster women’s subordination and wish to expand their constellations of gender and sexuality into national legislation. This is clearly the case of most Latin American societies. However, it is as important to analyze carefully how in fact religion—in the case of Latin America, principally Roman Catholicism—creates and sustains subordination and how people, especially women, interpret that influence. My own research has shown that the single most important female figure in Christianity, the Virgin Mary, can be used and interpreted both in obviously sexist ways and in ways that empower women, often the most disadvantaged women (Vuola 2009, 2012). Thus, no large generalizations about the power of religion in societies and individuals should be made without also paying attention to how women interpret their religious traditions and how their identities are constructed also by religion, spirituality, and faith.

It is central that scholars of religion pay attention to sexist interpretations and practices within religions, but this should be done in relation to women’s religious agency. In intersectional analyses, this means not only seeing religion as a “difference” between women (of different cultures and religions but also within a given religious tradition and society) but also bringing gender as an intersectional category to the study of religion. This

makes it possible to understand religion both as a structure of power (institution) and as a source of empowerment and positive identity (individual, community).

Secularism as the norm in Latin American studies is not neutral either. Careful, contextualized analyses of how religion interacts with gender in different times and cultural contexts are needed. As long as both the religious and the secular are understood narrowly—implying that only “the religious” is the problem—a situation is maintained in which true interdisciplinarity does not inform truth claims about the reality of religion, and especially its interplay with gender.

In order for scholars to understand and analyze the complex and often contradictory relationship between women and their religious traditions, identities, and beliefs, it is important to recognize that women have different ways of opposing cultural stereotypes concerning them, including some of those represented by feminists. The image of women as passive victims of religious indoctrination is one of the most common ones, as in the case of the *marianismo* thesis. It is of utmost importance that feminist scholars do not present a simplistic or flawed view of religious women. In this sense, understanding women’s many-sided, rich, and controversial relationship to their religious traditions is of direct political importance.

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