



Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

Why a Journal Like This?

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Ever wonder what happens when you fry baloney?

Whenever I ask this question in class, I can expect perplexed expressions on the faces of my students. Fried baloney sounds disgusting. Who would fry baloney, and why? Every so often a student knows the answer to my quiz: it bubbles up. What I find interesting is that the students who can provide the correct response are usually persons of color, or whites who have experienced poverty. Only the poor, sick and tired of eating the cheapest meat available as a dietary staple, would employ their imagination and culinary acumen in the hopes of making the food of the poor more palatable.

Knowing what happens when you fry baloney provides an epistemological privilege concerning reality unavailable to those who have no need to know. Not only must those residing on the underside of the dominant culture learn how to function in a world where they lack power and privilege, but they must also know how to survive within the confines of their own world. This double consciousness, and at times triple or quadruple consciousness, provides an insight to the prevailing religious discourse that is usually missed by those whom society customarily privileges. We should not forget that scholarship in the field of religion is a constructed discourse, legitimized and normalized by those who have the ways and means to make their subjectivity objective. Those who have been born within and/or assimilated to an Euroamerican culture are products of a society where white supremacy and class privilege have historically been interwoven with how Americans have been conditioned to see and organize the religious world around them. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the racist and classist underpinning of the dominant culture influences how they develop and participate in the prevailing academic discourse on religion.

The view of the academic landscape from the pedestal of privilege is radically different than the view from the depths of disenfranchisement. The *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* intends to challenge the prevailing assumption that the present scholarly landscape, rooted in Eurocentric thought, is the pinnacle of academic excellence in religious scholarship. Consequently, the particularity of scholarship emanating from non-Eurocentric communities poses the risk and danger (in the minds of scholars of religion from the dominant culture) of negatively impacting the prevailing so-called academic rigor. Voices from communities of color

may be needed to show diversity and political-correctness, but must be kept at bay lest they actually influence the discourse. Even though our postmodern conversations may have convinced us to reject Eurocentric meta-narratives, they are still enforced by the academy because they determine who is “in” (academically rigorous) and who is “out” (interesting perspective, but lacking academic excellence).

The quest for “academic excellence” operates as code-language for fluency in Eurocentric meta-narratives. Perspectives arising from marginalized communities might be interesting, but they always fall short of “academic excellence.” Books and papers written from these perspectives are usually seen as lacking depth or as too “churchy” for academia. Failure to operate from the Eurocentric canon is viewed with suspicion. Excellence continues to mean Eurocentrism, thus explaining why many scholars of color find it difficult to get their articles and manuscripts published or gain tenured employment, regardless of the establishment’s cry for a need to diversify. For many, the hope of diversification is more for the sake of political correctness than intellectual prowess; for after all, if publishing and hiring from communities of color is done for the sake of academic excellence, it would then mean that most publishing houses and schools which lack this presence also lack scholastic rigor.

Eurocentric thought, unconscious to how the discipline of religion has been racialized, exemplifies a so-called “color-blind” excellence in scholarship for all of humanity. By its very nature, Eurocentric-based religious scholarship maintains that universal norms can be achieved independent of place, time, or people group. Such norms created by Euroamericans are usually accepted as being both universal and objective, and thus applicable to all people. To speak from

any Eurocentric perspective is to speak about and for all of humanity. For this reason, Euroamerican scholars can become experts in the particularity of the cultures of Others. When Euroamericans do scholarship, the subjects within marginalized communities upon whom they gaze become the Objects of study – a methodology that can prove to be profitable for the one doing the gazing. Euroamericans can teach the religiosity of communities of color based on the racialized assumption that whiteness historically embodies the attainment of academic excellence and, as such, can become experts in analyzing and speaking with authority about the social locations of Others. In this manner, many Euroamerican scholars are able to build careers - winning awards, promotions, and chairs. Ironically, their interpretations of the particular become definitive within the predominant Euroamerican discourse even though said interpretations are viewed in most cases as simplistic by those within communities of color, usually because they miss the subtle differences between what Gilbert Ryle calls a “blink and a wink.”

Ironically, scholars of color, in their particularity, have their analysis reduced to subjectivity - to interesting perspectives that fall short of rigorous scholarship, regardless of how meticulous said scholarship may actually be. Because whiteness is understood and defined as being universal, anything said by scholars of color is institutionally relegated to a realm lacking any gravitas. The subjectivity of Eurocentric religious thought can be lifted by the academy to universal objectivity because the academy retains the power to define a reality that secures and protects their scholastic privilege. Reduced to a phenotype-based expertise, scholars of color are expected to dwell exclusively in the areas of study bordered by their race or ethnicity.

Still Euroamerican scholars of religion, like the rest of us, read their biases and presuppositions into their academic disciplines. At times, what is defined as prevailing religious norms by the dominant culture are indistinguishable from middle-class Euroamerican respectability and conformity, as well as complicit with the prevailing Empire which provides us with the current *pax americana*. Thus, we should not be surprised when the analyses presented by Euroamerican religion scholars are inherently detrimental to the character and survival of marginalized communities. But what would happen if we were to purposely approach religious studies from the margins? What would happen if we were to give an epistemological preference to the perspectives emanating from the disenfranchised and dispossessed? And, what if we focused our attention on communities of color so as to raise issues concerning which type of engaged praxis should be employed so that muted voices could be heard? No doubt, the emphasis placed on scholarship would differ from what has become a more normative understanding of religious studies. Answering such questions also becomes the hope for the *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion*.

Unfortunately for many scholars of color, since childhood they have been taught to see and interpret reality through the eyes of the dominant culture. For those within the community who pursue scholastic endeavors, success rewarded with a doctorate is determined by mastery of the predominant Eurocentric academic canon. Historically, contributions made by communities of color to the overall discourse have been dismissed as non-essential in demonstrating academic excellence. This is evident by the numerous Euroamerican academicians who have little or no

knowledge of the research taking place among scholars of color. However, the purpose of this journal is not to educate our Euroamerican colleagues.

Edward Said uses the term “rhetoric of blame” to describe the activity of marginalized communities who attack the dominant culture for being white, privileged, and insensitive to the structures of oppression. But solely to attack them for their complicity is not an alternative to blaming the victims for their predicament. Said instead advocates we study oppression as a “network of interdependent histories.” Prescribing to our own form of “nativism” accepts the consequences of Eurocentric dominance and oppression while reinforcing our subservience to the prevailing structures, even while we attempt to reevaluate our own ethos. Regardless of our aggressive stance, we remain trapped within a defensive role.¹ Reduced to and trapped within our race or ethnicity, scholars of color are geared to the particular where they are forced to continuously speak to the Eurocentric center, attempting to always justify its right to exist and the importance of contributions they can make to the overall discourse. Any scholar of color who dares to assess critically the works emanating from the dominant culture would more than likely have such a critique dismissed. Either the scholar would be accused of conducting a “thin” reading of the primary texts, or be caricatured as being angry.

And yet, when reading scholarship produced by the dominant culture, it becomes obvious that such scholarship ignores and makes invisible the scholarship that takes place among scholars of color. This absence is not usually due to any racist or ethnic discrimination harbored by the Euroamerican scholar. Euroamerican scholars simply are not familiar with what is occurring at

¹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994) 14, 96, 228-30.

the margins of their power and privilege. If and when they do find a “token” quote to use in their analysis, it usually comes from a senior established scholar of color. Such token quotes serve the purpose of representing all thought from that particular community. By falling into the trap of essentialism, Euroamerican scholars miss newer emerging voices that both advance and nuance the discourse occurring within the discipline. It is bad enough that scholars of color are physically invisible from scholarly production as made evidence whenever one peruses most academic syllabi; but the situation is further exacerbated by their absence in most religion departments and schools of religion.

Euroamerican scholarship frequently discusses issues of crucial importance to communities of color, about which scholars of color have contributed vital insights, but often these works do not document the voices emerging from scholars and communities of color. The message is loud and clear: contributions of scholars of color are not recognized, accepted, or known. I am baffled how such Euroamerican works can be considered cutting edge when their authors do not engage the relevant literature. Yet, if scholars of color deliberately choose not to quote Euroamerican scholars, their work would be dismissed for lacking scholastic rigor. This journal hopes to move beyond the false assumption that religious perspectives constructed by whites are normative.

According to most demographic studies, Euroamericans will represent less than 50 percent of the U.S. population by 2050, although some studies predict it could occur as soon as the 2030s. In many of our metropolitan cities today, and in several states, Euroamericans already represent the minority population. This means that in most urban and industrial centers, where

communities of color are predominant, the essential religious perspective is of color. But as our American society changes, the whiteness of thought within our academic society is being fortified. Any academic society or academic institute of higher education that continues to ignore the changing demographics does so at its own peril. Why? Because the religious dilemmas, questions, and concerns faced by communities of color are the dilemmas, questions, and concerns that will be faced by the majority of Americans. To continue to ignore the voices that emerge from these communities is to ensure the loss of any cutting edge work in the analysis of religion. Indeed, this is the real danger for the academy. It stands poised to lose relevance for the majority of Americans.

It is not the goal of this journal to raise the consciousness of our Euroamerican colleagues concerning these matters -- although this could very well happen for those who make the effort to read this journal's articles. Instead, our hope for the *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* is to create a space where scholars of color can study the oppression of our communities and ourselves as a network of interdependent histories. To break free is a difficult process fraught with physiological perils. The triumph of the colonizing process is evident when scholars of color define themselves and their disenfranchised communities through academic paradigms that consciously or unconsciously contribute to their marginalization. Unfortunately, few scholars of religion (whether from the dominant culture or scholars of color attempting to assimilate to Euroamerican definitions of academic excellence) recognize how the dominant paradigms and methodologies participate in a social location privileged by economic class and whiteness. We are forced to exhibit academic rigor through the use and application of models and paradigms

that are incapable of liberating oppressed communities. As alluring as Eurocentric thought may appear to scholars of color, what we need is our own space, our own journal where we can find, strengthen, and proclaim from the mountaintops our own voice. As José Martí, who needs no introduction among Latina/os, reminds us: “*Nuestro vino de plátano, y si es agrio, es nuestro vino.*”² We must look within our own communities, traditions and cultures for answers to the religious questions facing us, our communities, and our society.

Another hope for the *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* is to deconstruct the false walls that separate natural allies. Communities of color, specifically African-American, Asian-American, Latina/o, and Native American have constructed impressive cul-de-sacs from which to master our particular disciplines. Like a four-leaf clover, our separate cul-de-sacs operate side-by-side with few of us ever venturing into the adjoining community. Solidarity may occur from time to time, but it usually happens with little intellectual engagement. If we rile against most Euroamericans for not engaging our scholarship, then in all honesty, we must also hold ourselves accountable, for few of us, in our numerous books and articles, actually quote or dialogue with other communities of color. How is that different from what the Euroamerican community does to us? Many of us are content to remain within our own academic niche. How then can we, with any integrity, hold to task the dominant culture for not engaging the scholarly work within our own community when we too seldom engage the works of the adjacent cul-de-sac? More disturbing is when scholars of color are oblivious to how they and their communities are locked into structures that cause oppression to other communities of color. We hope this

²“Let our wine be distilled from our own plantains; however bitter it might be, it is still our wine.”

journal will also explore how our separate marginalized communities are complicit with disenfranchising other groups, whether those groups are marginalized due to darker skin pigmentation, language, gender, sexual orientation, economic class or different religious traditions.

Of course, we can recognize that the discipline has been constructed to force communities of color to compete against each other for the scraps falling from the table. When a department decides it wants to diversify its faculty, it usually asks potential candidates from differing communities of color to interview against each other for the coveted one slot made available, which usually is not tenure-track. When a professor decides for the sake of political correctness to “color” his syllabus, s/he usually picks just one book about one community. When an academic administration decides to use resources to emphasize a racial or ethnic concentration, they pour their money into teaching the perspectives and experiences of one community in the hopes of attracting students from that community, not necessarily for the sake of their white students or in service of a broader contextual awareness. When publishing houses decide to issue or book stores decide to offer publications written from and about communities of color, these books must compete for room on the shelf relegated for them. Is it any wonder that some within communities of color might hold each other at arm’s length? We hope this journal will begin to break down these divisions.

So why launch the *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion*? Why a peer-review journal like this? Why now? Maybe what we should be asking is what took us so long to launch such a journal. For a long time, those of us from communities of color have needed a journal that: 1)

challenges the prevailing assumption that the present religious scholarly landscape, rooted in Eurocentric thought, is the pinnacle of academic excellence; 2) gives an epistemological preference to the perspectives emanating from the disenfranchised and dispossessed to raise issues concerning which type of engaged praxis we should employ; 3) moves beyond the false assumption that religious perspectives constructed by Euroamericans are normative; 4) creates a space where religious scholars of color can study their oppression, and that of their communities, as a network of interdependent histories; 5) deconstructs the false walls that separate natural allies; and 6) explores how our separate marginalized communities are complicit with disenfranchising other groups of people. The *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* will attempt to assemble the best voices and insights from communities of color, promoting interdisciplinary and innovative investigation, and embracing new technologies of dissemination and empowerment. In short, the *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* attempts to discover how the rigorous pursuit of religious scholarship can be done by those who know what happens when you fry baloney.