Studying 'religion' critically and the decolonial turn: Lessons for Critical Terrorism Studies

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DOI: **https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-bja10132**

Abstract

Being 'critical' when studying religion, whilst it does not have to be *limited* to studying religion's discursive (and colonial) employments only, it certainly has to *begin* with it, if we aim to contribute to much-needed decolonial efforts across the social science disciplines. Critically studying religion, as I argue in this article, means starting with a normative and moral responsibility and aspiration towards a more just, equal, and progressive social world that grapples with the coloniality, and structures of white supremacy we are all embedded in. In this article I will reflect on the contributions of Critical Religion (CR) especially to fields like (Critical) Terrorism Studies and related disciplines which regularly discuss 'religion' and religiously-inspired violence but never actually acknowledge 'religion's' colonial and gendered implications, definitional instability, or Euro- and Christian-centric invention. The work Critical Religion does in uncovering and excavating the modern-colonial origins of the term 'religion', I argue, is essential in realising and contributing to the decolonial turn we are currently experiencing and which disciplines like Terrorism Studies can only benefit from.

Key words

Critical Religion, Gender, Race, Critical Terrorism, Decoloniality, Coloniality

1 Introduction

In a recently published article, discussing the merits of the scholarship of Critical Religion (CR), the authors Watts and Mosurinjohn (2022) argue that the work they refer to as the 'Critical Religion school' is contradictory, hypocritical, and claiming the label 'critical' for

itself which implicitly denies it to other scholars within Religious Studies who do not subscribe to the same (overly deconstructive[1]) ideas central to Critical Religion. Previous responses to this article have already pointed out the flaws within their arguments, such as the erroneous designation of Critical Religion as a 'school', the empty accusation of internal contradictions between scholars of Critical Religion, and the surprising (but false) accusation that CR scholars are normative despite claiming not to be (see Fitzgerald 2023; Martin 2022; Goldenberg 2022; McCutcheon 2023). Especially the latter is an unexpected claim. As I argue in this paper, the very reason CR scholars dedicate their research focus to studying 'religion' critically, is precisely *because* of a normative and ethical commitment to contribute to less biased (and I would argue colonial) forms of knowledge production. However, putting these points aside (other CR scholars have already responded to these accusations much more eloquently), the authors of that article do conclude with an interesting claim: '(…) much would be lost were we to limit the critical study of religion to CR' (Watts and Mosurinjohn 2022: 317).

I take this as a starting point for a critical interrogation of what it means to be 'critical' when studying 'religion'. What is 'critical' about the work that scholars identifying with the field of 'Critical Religion' promote and produce? How should or can we study 'religion' critically today? Whilst I would agree that the 'critical study of religion' should not be *limited* to those contents and methodologies promoted by scholars of CR, I argue in this paper, that it should nevertheless *start* with work aligned with the ethos and tenets of CR. Especially if we want to contribute to decolonial efforts that seek to uncover the colonial origins, remnants, and continuations in various disciplines, including that of Religious Studies. Contributing to such decolonial efforts in this and other fields, necessitates and, I argue, *presupposes* an ethical, normative commitment to uncover, excavate, and continually problematise categories, concepts, or ideas that have colonial, racial, and gendered origins or implications.

As should be well-known by now, one of, if not the most, important claim CR scholars make is that 'religion' as a category is not a neutral, value-free, or natural category that can or should be used without critical, historical deconstruction (see the work of Fitzgerald 2015; Horii 2015; Goldenberg 2017 among others).[2] This deconstruction, first pioneered by scholars like Talal Asad (1993), later on further investigated and studied by scholars within the field of CR,

[1] 'deconstructive' here signifies an approach which assumes that categories like 'religion' are first and foremost *constructs* which are not neutral, value-free, or transhistorical. This means they can also be 'deconstructed'.
[2] This is not to say that these claims are new to the tradition that has more recently been described as the field of 'Critical Religion'. Quite the opposite, scholars such as Asad (1993), McCutcheon (1997), Flood (1999), Dubuisson (2003), and more recently Cavanaugh (2009), and Vial (2016) who have not (always) claimed membership to this association, have pioneered these claims and the critical study of religion. CR, indeed, is indebted to these and earlier scholars, upon whom they (we) are building with their own scholarship.

excavates and highlights the Eurocentric, Christian-centric, and colonial as well as gendered invention of the term. It further interrogates its use as a category which was pivotal in aiding the colonial project at the time (see e.g. King 1999; Chidester 2017), and also interrogates the continued gendered-racial implications the category's employment has today (Khan 2022). These implications, as I show in more detail further below, are especially visible when looking at global politics discourses that continue to justify some of the most brutal and inhumane counter-terrorism methods in the name of fighting what is considered to be 'religious' terrorism (see Khan 2023).[3]

In response to Watt's and Mosurinjohn's question and as a starting point for my own reflections in this paper, I pose the (counter-)question: 'what is lost if we do *not* start the study of religion with the acknowledgement of religion as a discursive, Euro- and Christian-centric, colonial invention?'. This paper is an elaborate answer to this question, which can be summed up with the following claim: Not studying religion 'critically' in this way means any potential for decolonial efforts in this and related disciplines would be lost. Studying 'religion', in any way, *without* acknowledging the colonial, Western, and gendered invention, implications, and discursive power risks perpetuating some of the most harmful, unjust and neo-colonial practices today without any accountability. I contend that studying religion 'critically' needs to indeed start with the critical work that scholars who have either identified as 'Critical Religion' scholars or are aligned with its goals and normative commitments, have long argued for.

With this in mind, in the following I first outline what coloniality is and how decolonial efforts can be and should be supported by scholars across the social sciences. As I argue here, studying 'religion' and related categories critically should never be divorced from and should always be intrinsically based on the normative, emancipatory goal of contributing to more reflexive, less colonial knowledge production. For the study of religion this means a normative and ethical commitment to acknowledge and appreciate the problematic, genealogy of 'religion', its continued use and construction as 'common-sensical' and the harmful effects of this construction. In the second part of this article, I introduce my work as a Critical Terrorism scholar. Essentially, Critical Terrorism Studies has done for 'terrorism' what Critical Religion scholars have done for 'religion' by questioning the construction and production of 'terrorism' and the (often Neo-Orientalist) purpose its (discursive) employment has served (see Jackson

[3] At the time of writing, the Israeli government's bombing, starvation, and entrapment of the Gazan population, justified as a response to 'religious' terrorism, constitutes a classical example of this which has been described as genocidal by various scholars and UN special rapporteurs (see https://www.un.org/unispal/document/gaza-un-experts-decry-bombing-of-hospitals-and-schools-as-crimes-against-humanity-call-for-prevention-of-genocide/; https://ccrjustice.org/sites/default/files/attach/2023/10/Israels-Unfolding-Crime_ww.pdf and https://twailr.com/public-statement-scholars-warn-of-potential-genocide-in-gaza/)

2007; Jarvis 2009; Gentry 2020; Sjoberg 2015). I then turn to the so-called Religious Terrorism Thesis, which is the popular idea within Terrorism Studies that 'religious terrorism' constitutes the worst evil, necessitating the harshest counter-terrorism responses. Without a critical, and decolonial commitment to deconstruct 'religion' – the Religious Terrorism Thesis would continue to stand largely unchallenged despite its weak evidential grounding. A commitment to the critical study of religion, however, can shake the foundation of this thesis in Terrorism Studies, and provides one step closer to a decolonial mission across these and related disciplines. I conclude by reflecting on the more radical calls for abolishing the category altogether – a call I consider valid and necessary for upholding criticality within the study of religion.

2 Committing to Decoloniality

Coloniality is a concept which was first introduced by Quijano (1992) and further built upon by Mignolo (2011), both of whom are considered key scholars of the school of decoloniality. Coloniality, according to Mignolo (2011), is the untold and hidden but constitutive 'darker side' of modernity. In other words, there is no modernity without coloniality: Instead, what we think of 'modernity' today is a 'narrative that builds Western civilisation by celebrating its achievements while hiding at the same time its darker side, "coloniality"' (Mignolo 2011: 2-3; see also Cusiqanqui 2012; Lugones 2010). This darker side includes the knowledge production of a hierarchical, racialised conception of the 'human'. Categories of 'race', 'gender', and 'religion' have been pivotal in this conception and set into place global, racial hierarchies and the structures of white supremacy we are still living with today (Wynter 2003). This means that, unlike the event of colonialism, coloniality existed before this event and continues to exist after the official decolonisation of most formerly colonised states in the world. Coloniality, then, is the intellectual and structural foundation of Western civilisation which continues to enable colonial forms of domination, oftentimes concealed as normalised and common-sense practices or ideas today (see Mignolo 2011; Resende 2018; Gani 2017).

From the Renaissance – the period usually considered as having ushered the era of Western modernity - until now, Western modernity has always been a project (see also Glissant 1989). The normative goal of decoloniality, then, is to challenge this ongoing project. This challenge needs to begin by revealing, uncovering, laying bare, that which has been accepted as common-sense, normal, and unquestioned. It therefore needs to start with the challenging of

dominant and colonial forms of knowledge production. One of the categories which has been accepted and produced as common sense is indeed the modern category of 'religion'.

Besides other categories and inventions, such as race, 'religion' has been an enabling factor for the modern-colonial project. As scholars, such as Vial (2016), have demonstrated, 'religion' has been used in tandem with 'race' to sort non-White people around the world onto a religio-racial hierarchy designating more or less civilised status depending on the proximity of the assigned 'religion' to Christianity – the original model for the category 'religion'. Given this modelling on Christianity (which is and was tied to whiteness), Dubuisson (2003: 114) notes how all other belief systems/cultures outside of Europe which have been categorised as a 'religion' consequently remain primitive or less developed forms of religion in the imagination of those European administrators, philosophers and anthropologists who (re)invented it as applicable to non-Christian, non-European peoples and cultures in the first place (114). Thus, even when other communities around the world have now adopted the term 'religion' as a descriptor of their belief systems or cultural practices, it had to first be (re-)invented as such to gain meaning as such (Lynch 2017: 287).[4] More importantly, however, its racial, colonial origin can still be seen in many contemporary assumptions about 'religious people' (see also Fitzgerald 2023: 5), as well as 'religious practices' and 'religious violence'. I return to this further below in my discussion of the dominant discourse and idea about 'religious terrorism'.

How, then, does a commitment to decoloniality manifest when it comes to the (critical) study of religion? Relying on Gani's (2017: 11) and Maldonado-Torres' (2011: 2) understanding of a decolonial approach as one whose main goal is the dismantling of coloniality, I argue that critically studying religion needs to start with an acknowledgement of how 'religion' has been one of the many nodes making up the matrix of coloniality. As Maldonado-Torres (2011: 2) argues, a 'decolonial turn' can encompass many different theoretical schools and diverse positions as long as they 'share a view of coloniality as a fundamental problem in the modern (as well as postmodern and information) age, and of decolonization or decoloniality as a necessary task that remains unfinished.'

The dominant adoption of 'religion' as a commonsense category that is *not* in need of critical historical deconstruction, as well as the pushback against approaches who call for such a deconstruction, are evidence that this task remains unfinished indeed when it comes to the study of religion. It is undeniable that 'religion' is a modern category which did not exist in the

[4] An example of this is how the Arabic term 'deen' has been translated as 'religion' – a translation which many Islamic theologians point out is lacking and limiting (see Wani 2022). Countless other examples around the world for Buddhism, Hinduism, or Shinto have been given by other scholars similarly criticising the limiting nature of the category 'religion' and how it remains a lacking translation (King 1999; Isomae 2017)

same way before the European Enlightenment, and the advent of modernity. Recognising that it is indeed a modern category, however, also means recognising that it is a colonial category given that modernity cannot be abstracted from coloniality. Whilst the category was not only very directly a colonial (re)invention which was used during the era of colonialism for the purposes of dehumanising or racialising indigenous people, it remains colonial in that it continues to carry colonial implications.[5] Thus, and as Lynch (2017) has so aptly noted, 'it is not possible to establish equality of "religion" because the category itself emerged and continues to function for the purposes of maintaining hierarchies' (291). This, then, becomes clear from dominant discourses today which continue to imply the inferiority of those people whose religions are not considered evolved enough to have arrived at the separation of politics from religion the same way that Christianity in Europe has (Cavanaugh 2009: 4).

Religion, of course, is not the only such category which was used for colonial purposes. As other decolonial and postcolonial scholars have pointed out, 'gender', as well as race have been categories which were similarly employed for colonial purposes and which are similarly constructed rather than natural (Lugones 2018; Oyewumi 1997). Indeed, these categories all exist for the purposes of creating and maintaining hierarchies. As Lynch (2017) points out, "[m]en are to gender what whites are to race what Christianity is to religion. Gender indexes the superiority of men, race indexes the superiority of whiteness, and religion indexes the superiority of Christianity" (Lynch 2017: 289). A commitment to decoloniality, then, needs to start with the critical historical deconstruction of religion and related categories which have been invented for and continue to serve colonial purposes. Taking this decolonial commitment further, would mean eventually thinking about abolishing the category, i.e. de-linking from Western-imposed forms of knowledge production, frameworks, and hierarchies.

One of the critiques recently levelled against CR scholarship is that CR scholars have singled out the category 'religion' as 'special' and concentrated disproportionate efforts on deconstructing this category but not other concepts which are also 'constructed' and without agreed-upon definition (see Watts and Mosurinjohn, 2022: 322). However, as should be clear from the discussion above, CR scholars pay particular and critical scholarly attention to 'religion' because it is a *hierarchical* category. It has, together with other hierarchical categories, such as 'race' and 'gender', not only enabled and justified the colonial project (see e.g. Vial 2016), its discursive employment also continues to have colonial, gendered, and racial implications (see Khan 2022). As a scholar committed to the normative goals of decoloniality

[5] Even countries that were not colonised, such as Japan, had to adopt or invent 'religion' to prove their civilisational status (see e.g. Isomae 2017).

it should therefore be clear why ‘religion’ is one category which deserves distinct and critical scholarly attention and should indeed be studied in discourse first and foremost rather than taken for granted as ‘common sense’.

3 Critical Terrorism Studies and the Religious Terrorism Thesis

Much like ‘religion’, the term ‘terrorism’ is notoriously difficult to define. Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) is a field of study that suggests, similar to how CR does for ‘religion’, that the study of its discursive employment is more important than debating a definition that cannot be agreed upon. CTS emerged as a challenge and response to the traditional Terrorism Studies which especially after 9/11 became increasingly popular. In direct challenge to the traditional and established Terrorism Studies, CTS, rather than accepting terrorism as a ‘brute fact’, rests on an understanding of terrorism as a socially and politically constructed threat (Jackson 2007). Much like Critical Religion does for ‘religion’, CTS acknowledges ‘terrorism’ as first and foremost a phenomenon that is produced in discourse and whose employment often serves a specific purpose, such as furthering government interests and upholding the status quo (Breen Smyth et al 2008). Thus, rather than focusing on explaining any form of terrorism it focuses on analysing the so-called ‘productions and constructions of terrorism’ (Jarvis 2009, 12). Thus, what CTS set out to do is to challenge dominant, problematic, forms of knowledge production for ‘terrorism’ and lack of historicity when studying terrorism today (Jackson 2007). CTS, as its founders have specified, is a counterhegemonic project.

CTS is therefore unapologetically founded on an ethical and normative commitment to uncover how the label terrorism is often (and arbitrarily) used by political actors for the delegitimsation of political forms of violence that challenge the status quo or the state’s monopoly on violence. Examples which demonstrates the definitional instability and arbitrary, as well as biased, designation of the terrorist label are the numerous anti-colonial resistance groups, including Nelson Mandela’s ANC as well as Mandela himself, which were labelled as ‘terrorist’ by different political actors before the independence of these former colonies was achieved (Richardson 2006, 27). More contemporary examples can be found in the reluctance to assign the terrorist label to white supremacist actors and the readiness to assign them to racialised, often Muslim, and/or Black actors (see Meier 2022; Micieli-Voutsinas 2023).

However, whilst the label ‘terrorism’ itself is already a loaded, problematic and racialised concept (see e.g. Schotten 2018; Meier 2022; Abu Bakare 2020), the idea of ‘religious

terrorism' is even more problematic and, as I have argued previously, doubly racialised, building on deeply colonial ideas about 'religion' (see Khan 2023). Referred to as the 'Religious Terrorism Thesis', the dominant idea about religiously motivated terrorism within the discipline of Terrorism Studies (and International Relations more broadly) is that it constitutes the most lethal, dangerous, uncompromising, and evil form of terrorism (see Khan 2023; MacDonald et al 2018). Digging a bit deeper, as some CTS scholars have done, reveals that this idea about 'religious terrorism' as the most dangerous, irrational and uncompromising form of terrorism is based on weak evidential grounding, and instead builds on problematic, and most importantly taken-for-granted, assumptions about 'religion' in the first place (Gunning and Jackson 2011; Tellidis 2016). Terrorism and IR scholars writing about, analysing, and discussing religious terrorism base their assumptions on pre-held ideas about 'religion' as a common-sense category. It is also based on the popular, yet unfounded, idea that religion has a natural propensity to violence, war, and chaos if not privatised as has been done by the progressive, modern Europe (see Cavanaugh 2009; Mandair 2022). Taken to its logical conclusion, this then makes the non-Western world more prone to 'religious' violence and non-White people around the world more prone to be 'religious' and turn violent in the name of their religion.

Despite the weak evidence these assumptions are based on, the Religious Terrorism Thesis continues to inform contemporary counter-terrorism practices and policies which, consequently and disproportionately target non-White, oftentimes considered 'religious', people around the world. The War on Terror is one such example which has been argued to constitute a form of neo-colonial governance and intervention (Owens 2015). Other counter-terrorism or prevention policies such as PREVENT in the UK have specifically been designed with a Muslim threat in mind (see Qureshi 2015; Younis 2021) and with pre-held assumptions about religion (in this case Islam) and religious people (in this case Muslims).

Drawing on the scholarship of CR, as well as its predecessors, pioneers, and aligned scholars and thinkers, I have demonstrated in my own work how the Religious Terrorism Thesis is a colonial idea and continues to function for colonial purposes today – for example by justifying counter-terrorism practices that have neo-colonial consequences (Khan 2021; Khan 2023).[6] As I show in my work, David Rapoport (1991), the scholar credited with formulating 'religious terrorism' as a distinct rubric in Terrorism Studies, also drew on colonial administrators' records to evidence his claim about 'religious terrorism' as a distinctly lethal,

[6] I also show in another paper how this assumption is tied to a gendered assumption about religion as inherently irrational, emotional, and supposedly 'private' (see Khan 2022).

enduring, and fanatic phenomenon.[7] His theory about the Jewish Zealots, Muslim Assassins, and Hindu Thugs as some of the earliest, medieval prototypes of 'religious terrorism', are also all 'Oriental' cases, situated geographically in what was considered part of the Orient and representing religions that are not Christian/European. Despite the weak and anecdotal evidence, derived from the biased and racist accounts of colonial administrators, Rapoport's ideas have become the pillar upon which the Religious Terrorism Thesis within Terrorism Studies rests with his work cited by all major terrorism scholars who have promoted and further produced the Religious Terrorism Thesis (see Khan 2023).

In order to dismantle the Religious Terrorism Thesis, then, a critical approach towards 'religion' is essential and needs to be introduced to CTS and other disciplines that discuss or study 'religion' in any capacity. As I have attempted to show in this paper, such a critical approach should have a decolonial aim and begin with the critical historical deconstruction of 'religion' and related categories. As such, Critical Religion has the unique capacity to contribute to a decolonial turn within Critical Terrorism Studies more specifically and other social sciences more broadly.

4 Concluding Remarks – A case for supporting abolitionist calls

Whilst I have argued that the critical study of religion should be a decolonial mission, I also argue that we cannot 'decolonise' Religious Studies, much less the category 'religion' itself. Rather than constituting a contradictory stance, I consider calls for metaphorical 'decolonisation' contradictory to a decolonial mission itself (see Tuck and Yang 2012; Khan 2024). As scholars working in and for the neo-liberal academy and in universities which are very much a part of the global, modern-colonial system, we can also not claim to 'decolonise' in our work even when we aim to contribute towards decolonial efforts and approaches. We can engage with decolonial approaches and contribute to a decolonial mission as I have argued for in this paper, but we cannot 'decolonise' which would imply completely de-linking from the Western academy and canon. This means a category, such as religion, which has clear colonial origins and continues to fulfill colonial functions in discourse, whether intended or not,

[7] More specifically, he uses colonial administrators' accounts of the Hindu Thuggee as religious fanatics to argue that the Thuggee were a prototype of 'religious terrorism'. These accounts were based on Oriental and colonial understandings of Hinduism as a religion and Indian people as predisposed to 'religion' and hence violence (McQuade 2000).

cannot be decolonised, i.e. stripped of its gendered, racial, and/or colonial foundation which was constitutive for the category as it stands today.

This, then, is why calls for abolishing the category need to be taken seriously as the only possible intellectual and radical expression of resistance to the normalisation this category continues to benefit from. Chidester (2014: 312) notes how 'we cannot simply abandon the terms religion and religions because we are stuck with them as a result of colonial, imperial, and global legacy... they must be not objects but occasions for analysis, (...)'. Whilst I agree with this, I also believe that more radical calls for the abolishment of the category are valid and necessary to encourage critical approaches to religion which do indeed take the category as an 'occasion for analysis', rather than a self-explanatory, taken-for-granted term. As such, I would welcome considerations about its abolition as the next step of critical approaches to the study of religion. Whilst these approaches have to begin, as I have argued here, with a critical historical deconstruction, they do not have to end there. Thus, if a truly decolonial approach is envisioned, abolition should be envisioned as its end goal.

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