Introduction to the special issue on racism and religion

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In November 2019 the Centre for Multidisciplinary Studies on Racism at Uppsala University arranged an international conference on the theme of Racism and Religion. It was the first of its kind to be held in Sweden, drawing together the disciplines of Racism Studies and Religious Studies in order to highlight some of today’s most urgent and compelling issues and questions.

For three days scholars, from around the world, came together to explore and discuss how racism and religion, historically and in the present, intermingle in different and complex ways. The aim was to understand how religion in its different constellations continues to produce and uphold, as well as counter, colonial structures, nationalism, and state racism. The aim was also to invite scholars to think about the role of religion, religious practices, and spiritualties within counter movements, such as indigenous rights movements. The goal of the conference was to create a platform for scholars interested in the intersections between racism and religion from which new interdisciplinary collaborations and projects could emanate to establish and further develop this research area, in both Sweden and internationally.

The conference included twenty-three panel sessions offering a wide range of presentations reflecting a great diversity in topics. Some of the central themes presented dealt with experiences of racism and discrimination among religious minorities, the intersections of gender and religion, which in turn opened up important discussions on the meaning of secularism, nationalism, and feminist struggles. Other themes included the development of state racism and fascism in different parts of the world as well as expressions of particular kinds of racism, such as antisemitism and islamophobia.

The themes mentioned above that were included in the conference give us an indication of current research areas where the intersections on racism and religion are being explored. As such, the conference was informed by the deconstructive scholarship of the category of religion brought about by the subfield of religious studies called Critical Religion Theory (CRT).

Drawing mainly on anti-foundational genealogy and discourse analysis, scholars like Talal Asad (1993), Tomoko Mazusawa (2005), Timothy Fitzgerald (2008), and many others, have produced important and influential work on the modern formation of the category of religion and the historical birth of religion as a universal *sui generis* human phenomenon, through a nexus of academic, theological, political, and colonial endeavors. As such, religion has been a central category for the constellation of the discursive frames of how the modern world came to be perceived; it was
classificatory and taxonomic, ordering the temporal and geographical development of human kind. Within CRT one finds both a limited and an extended critique towards academic discourses on religion. The limited critique refers to a deconstructive critique of the category of religion to understand how it relates to other similar modern categories, like politics and culture, but without exploring the co-constitutive relations between the categories themselves. The extended critique attempts to do precisely this. To paraphrase Fitzgerald (2019), if we open up for an analytical approach to religion as a discursive construct and not as a universal and objective phenomenon, why should we hold that politics, culture, economics, society, and so on, are different?

A growing number of scholars have embarked upon the path of this extended approach to the category of religion but with a particular focus on the entangled intersections of race and religion. The aforementioned Masuzawa (2005, 149) has, for example, convincingly demonstrated how the modernist racial categories of “Aryan” and “Semite” have their roots in the philology of the nineteenth century; categories that created scientific and universal discursive boundaries between the Aryans (Christians and Indo-Europeans) and Semites (Jews and Muslims) (Anidjar 2003; 2008). Before the birth of modern sciences, Christian theological discourse in fifteenth and sixteenth century Spain created universal articulations of body, blood, and faith—or race and religion—with the doctrine of pure blood (Carr 2017). It appears that, in the words of Reza Zia-Ebrabimi, “we can argue that biological racism is only one, rather marginal, form of racism; the population targeted by racism is always partly if not wholly defined in cultural, including religious, terms” (2018, 316). In this light, Anya Topolski has picked up on William E. B. Du Bois’s concept of the “race-religion constellation,” which refers to “the practice of classifying people into races according to categories we now associate with the term ‘religion’” (Topolski 2018, 59), to explore their genealogical entanglements. Theodore Vial even argues that the category of religion “is always already a racialized category, even when race is not explicitly under discussion” (2016, 1).

Against this backdrop, and the research of far too many scholars to mention is this short introduction, the ambition with the conference was to bring together scholars and scholarship on the entangled histories and contemporary formations of racism and religion. For this special issue an open call for contributions by the participants of the conference was made. The selected papers highlights different examples of how the intersections between racism and religion can be understood.

In the first theoretically driven article of this special issue Josias Tembo argues that a trans-Atlantic account of the constellations of race and religion demands the need to understand racist thinking as constituted by complex conceptual formations and relations. This is in order to avoid universal and exclusive definitions of racist thinking and the constellations of race and religion. According to Tembo, precisely because the supposed universal definitions of racist thinking are formulated from particular regions of the trans-Atlantic, this leads to the masking and rejection of other formations of racist thinking from other regions of the trans-Atlantic. To avoid this, Tembo proposes a Trans-Atlantic Interactive and Relational Approach (TAIRA) to unmasking and understanding the trans-Atlantic connections between race and religion.

One of the central themes within the conference explored intersections of gender, religion, and racism in different ways. In “Speaking ‘Religion’ through a Gender Code: The Discursive Power and Gendered-Racial Implications of the Religious Label,” Rabea Khan argues for the need to understand religion as a power category always operating and functioning through a gender code and discourse. In doing so she brings together critical religion theory and feminist scholarship and analyzes how religion is a feminized concept, not just historically but also discursively. The racialized consequences of religion are thus deeply intertwined with a process of feminization of religion. With examples from prominent thinkers, the Westphalian production of the “myth of
religious violence,” and how the concept of religion came to be used in different colonial contexts, Khan explores how the gender code upheld the discursive power of religion. This idea, that religion is both gendered and gendering, enables us to understand the process of racialization of religion, especially of religions tied to formerly colonized groups.

In an empirical article dealing with another aspect within the theme of gender, religion, and racism, Edda Manga uses the concept of sexularism: a form of secularism where the secular is construed in relation to sexual emancipation and gender equality in order to show how Swedish legislative provisions against “child marriage,” passed by the Swedish Parliament, reveal that the main juridical effect of these provisions is to restrict family reunification migration. The article investigates the discourse on child marriage as reflected in official investigations and government bills proposing legislative measures against child marriage in Sweden. According to Manga, the legislation against child marriage seems, more than anything, to affect the right to family reunification as well as racializing migrant populations and religious minorities in Sweden.

Presentations concerning the intertwining of racism and religion also highlighted empirical investigation on how this intertwining takes place within different contexts. Some important questions in these presentations were how racism informs religious minority’s identity work, and how representation is experienced in people’s everyday life. Racism based on religious identity has real effects. In “Contesting Religious Boundaries at School: A Case from Norway,” Elise Margrethe Vike Johannessen examines how learning about Islam in religious education (RE) in a Norwegian high school class is experienced by girls with a Muslim background. Through participant observations and interviews, Johannessen shows a potential discrepancy between the Norwegian school policy of promoting equality and providing students with equal opportunities, indicating that Norwegian schools are thought of as, and intended to be, sites for boundary dismantling. However, the article shows that the religious education is an arena where blurred boundaries within the classroom may in fact illuminate difference and the strengthening of boundaries rather than discussing and challenging them.

Another central theme of the conference revolved around understanding different forms of racisms and their articulations in different contexts. One such prominent topic was that of islamophobia. In “Thinking Europe’s “Muslim Question”: On Trojan Horses and the Problematization of Muslims,” Sarah Bracke and Luis Manuel Hernández Aguilar set out to develop a conceptualization of Europe’s “Muslim Question.” They do so along three lines. First, the “Muslim Question” emerges as an accusation of being an “alien body” to the nation, often expressed through the Trojan horse legend. Second, the “Muslim Question” is elaborated through the demands of integration and assimilation, in which the production of difference entangles with calls and measures to regulate Muslims. And third, the “Muslim Question” is brought to life upon the terrain of gender and sexuality, as the imaginary of threat at the heart of the “Muslim Question” is a replacement conspiracy centered on birth-rates.

Showing us how islamophobia and antisemitism intermingles, in his article “‘Give. Them. Hell’: Manifestos of White Nationalist Ethno-Soldiers,” Per-Erik Nilsson provides a detailed analysis of contemporary entanglements of anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim conspirational thought through a close reading of self-acclaimed ethno-soldiers’ manifestos. By analyzing these shooters’ manifestos and broadcasts through the lenses of conspirational racialization and anthropoemic populism, Nilsson shows how race and religion are intertwined and, in a symbolical universe built on white supremacist, national socialist, and neo-fascist tropes, lead to a genocidal logic.
Note

1. See for example the special issue of Patterns of Prejudice titled Genealogies of ‘Jews’ and ‘Muslims’: Social Imaginaries in the Race–Religion Nexus guest edited by Yolande Jansen and Nasar Meer (2020).

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