PERSISTENT BECOMING: WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS THOUGHT AND THE GLOBAL

Abstract: This essay attempts a 'state of the field' examination of a branch of feminist thinking within the global, namely women's religious thought. Variants of religious feminism and women's religious have long been existent and have recently "remerged" across the globe. Some argue for the reinterpretation of religious systems that are consistent with orthodox dogma (Tomalin 2009), while others look for dialogue and intersection with secular feminist thinking. Transnational networks of religious women, both ordained or lay, exist, and have encouraged serious reflection upon and provide significant challenge to unequal and oppressive gender hierarchies within religious traditions and religious societies- as well as suggesting provocations to secular organizing. There is, arguably, a kind of strange revolution here, where traditional hierarchies are challenged, but also "progressive"; "liberal" structures are found wanting. In the urgencies and reflections from women's religious thought in Asia, Latin America and in Africa, both Western imperialism and locality must be reckoned with. Conceptually this is an essay on what or who is silenced, meditating on silence, and, why silences appear. We can argue that the secular bent of theory and study in International Relations can and does silence the interventions of feminist as well as womanist religious activity and women's religious thought. Hence, the question, overall, raised by this essay is what could further study and engagement with such religious thought bring to the study of the international?

In doing so, this essay looks at the 'strangeness' of women's religious thought with celebration, reflecting generally on the parameters of such thought in its global form, particularly in terms of the sub-fields of religion and also feminist theory. It also discusses what challenges and provocations the voices of women religious bring to the study of the international, and what further study and attention to transnational movements of such religious thought could mean for alternative sites for the discussion of the global.

Keywords: feminist, womanist, religious thought, global, nun, Buddhist, Catholic, Global South, gender, race, class

Introduction: Silence and Visibility

On a long street, on a hot day, a Buddhist monk is making his way to his final earthly resting place. He is flanked on all sides by his fellow brethren, government officials, and private mourners. At the back of the funeral procession, in complete silence, walk the *bhikkunis* or *theris*, ordained Buddhist women. Across the same city, a protest against the building of a Port City features Catholic nuns at its frontlines. The protest is silent, but the white, winged habits and the long colourful rosaries speak volumes. Visibility and silence go to the heart of habiting the space of being female and religious.

Consider, for example, *bhikkunis* in Sri Lanka who are not allowed national identity cards as the chief prelates refuse permission for such cards to be issued to their female counterparts. A national identity card is required to sit an exam, pass through a police checkpoint, even open a bank account. These *Bhikkunis* continue to be a visible presence in the communities that they serve, but are refused legal voice and recognition (Pathirana, 2019). Similarly, in Thailand, where female ordination is illegal, and the only choice for women is to be silent, white-clad nuns who clean the temples, women are engaged in a liberation struggle where they go abroad to be ordained (Tankasemptipat 2019). Much of this, as scholars note, is connected to texts and structures, but also patterns of socialisation that have evolved in the communities and cultural groupings that Buddhism exists within.

Another example are Roman Catholic Nuns, who as Derounian (2017) notes, provide a unique example of unpaid labour in the international. Although women religious in the Catholic world work professionally across the globe, in fields such as medicine, academia, social work, education, law and care work, their recognition within the Church and the global labour force remains limited. The subalternity of their situation is, in part, related to traditional views of the religious as a volunteer professional, as well as the fact that nuns do not have access to the

higher echelons of the Catholic Church. Nuns themselves, may often emphasize their calling to serve, the informality of their work, over the skills and expertise that they have acquired (ibid). Yet, the picture is often more complex, and Roman Catholic female congregations are often remarked upon with a level of academic puzzlement, an enigma (Mangion 2019), of social and labour history. At once, they are a religious, occupational and professional identity that varies from many ideals of womanhood, and yet also an idealized type of virtue that seeks to serve the lives of others (ibid, Hurd 2012).

All at once, there is the sensation of what is visible, but made invisible, of womanly Un-Being (Beattie 2006), of "those forms of living gender, for instance, that are misrecognized or remain unrecognizable precisely because they exist at the limits of established norms for thinking embodiment and even personhood" (Butler 2015). There is here, too, an evocation of institutional *invisibilisation* and concealment (Halliday 1988).

In their introduction to the edited volume *Race, Gender and Culture in International Relations: Postcolonial Perspectives*, Alina Sajed and Randolph Persuad reflect on what is obviously visible and what is impactful in our lives. In looking at race, gender and culture as conditions in the international and in our lives, they note that a lack of obvious visibility does not deter the power of certain social forces. These are forces that are "at once personal and shared, sedimented and dynamic, unconscious/conscious" (Persaud and Sajed 2018). There is an aspect of these dualisms that evoke once again the image of the religious woman, both ordained or lay, and the feminist frameworks of religious thought.

Variants of religious feminism and women's religious thought have long been existent and have recently "remerged" across the globe. Some argue for the reinterpretation of religious systems that are consistent with orthodox dogma (Tomalin 2009), while others look for dialogue and intersection with secular feminist thinking. Transnational networks of religious

women, both ordained or lay, exist, and have encouraged serious reflection upon and provide significant challenge to unequal and oppressive gender hierarchies within religious traditions and religious societies – as well as suggesting provocations to secular organizing. There is, arguably, a kind of strange revolution here, where traditional hierarchies are challenged, but also "progressive"; "liberal" structures are found wanting. It is a strange and suspended space, often provoking the question, "*but can you have faith and be a feminist?"*

"For many being a 'feminist' or having feminist values was not in contradiction with faith, or practice of one's faith – but the challenge and contradiction is in how religion has been taken up by the powers to be and been masculinized throughout history. The question and tension becomes how to reconcile organized religion and feminism and if this is even possible or something that as feminists we can or should strive for." (Gokal 2006)

In the urgencies and reflections from feminist religious thought in Asia, Latin America and in Africa, both this strangeness, as well as Western imperialism and locality must be reckoned with.

" but for us in Asia, the perspective in which women's hermeneutics is carried on includes not only what is good and universal in the struggle for democracy, against clericalism and so on, it takes into account also our colonial experience and struggles for independence, and also of people's movements in countryside and cities to move beyond feudal and sexist distortions in the interpretations of religious texts… it leads toward the rediscovery of our indigenous traditions of economy and spirituality which are resources for the future" (EATWOT 1994).

"[Writing on women's religious thought] is a personal and a political activity .... Our personal stories of agony and joy, struggle and liberation are always connected with our socio-political and religio-cultural contexts. Theology, therefore, is a discourse both intimate and public" (Kyung, 1990)

This essay looks at the 'strangeness' of feminist religious thought with celebration, reflecting generally on the parameters of religious feminist thought in its various global forms, particularly in terms of the sub-fields of religion and also feminist theory. It also discusses what challenges and provocations the voices of feminist religious thought bring to the study of the international and what further study and attention to transnational movements of women religious and feminist religious thought are alternative sites for the discussion of the global. It

is important to note here that while women's religious thought and queer religious thought share kinship and epistemic solidarity, I look here primarily at experience and thinking that is rooted in and arises from struggles rooted in particular women's identity and experience, with view to showcase the work of African, Latin American and Asian feminist and womanist work in religious thought. This is not to say that queer women's religious thought does not exist, but merely to note that I see this essay as suggesting a 'first' in a series of many conversations that IR needs to have with religious thought.

Queer theology provides a provocative and broad spectrum of work that should also be part of a necessary conversation within the global. Indeed, Patrick Cheng (2011), in his writing on queer theology has noted that the "queer" in queer theology seeks to erase boundaries and takes on the social scientific understanding of sexuality and gender as being superfluous. Grant Loughlin (2007) extends this, citing Halperin and arguing for a queerness that seeks to 'outwit' identity. Elizabeth Stuart (2003), in her analysis of trans-theology, and thinking from the Catholic tradition, writes of the Eucharist erasing sex altogether, for the Eucharist is, itself transsexual. Perhaps, a suggestion for a further state of the field essay would be one that looks at the conversation between queer International Relations theory and queer theology. There are loud silences here, which need space for further articulation. Women's feminist and womanist religious thought, as with queer theology and all other spaces that speak of/from/within margins are embedded and entangled ones, embroiled in discursive intersections of space, place, self, other, time and timelessness. There are so many complexities of being and belonging, of embodiment and disembodiment, and so I engage only with certain fragments in this essay, for the sake of brevity, and begging also my own lack of expertise in queer religious thought.

To write and to dialogue with religious thought, specifically the voices in religious thought is, inter alia, a meditation on silence, with the understanding that global narratives are framed and

dominated by ways of knowledge-making that create, sustain and entrench silences. As Trouillot has written, "facts are not created equal: the production of traces is also always also the creation of silences." In Silencing the Past, Trouillot (1995) describes the problem at the centre of this, that in fashioning histories, a persistent narrative forms, "even in attenuated form, as long as the history of the West is not retold in ways that bring forward the perspective of the world" (1995: 107). This kind of knowledge-making is so dominant that we almost miss the power that lies at the heart of its logic. In Yaa Gyasi's (2016) beautiful *Homegoing*, a novel that traces slavery in Ghana by scrutinizing the participation of West Africans in the Atlantic slave trade, the narrator pulls back from the scene and reflects,

"We believe the one who has power. He is the one who gets to write the story. So when you study history you must ask yourself, Whose story am I missing?, Whose voice was suppressed so that this voice could come forth? Once you have figured that out, you must find that story too. From there you get a clearer, yet still imperfect, picture. (2016:85)"

In doing so, we can open ourselves to the unexpected moments and questions within the narrative. To quote again from literature, for it often teaches important lessons to students of political science. In her debut novel *The Gypsy Goddess*, that tells the story of Dalit agricultural workers in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, Meena Kandasamy talks about the need to wait, to observe and thereby to learn, because of what you cannot find out from uncritical questions. If we engage in the 'creative critical',

"you will learn to make do without a village map. You will learn that criminal landlords can break civil laws to enforce caste codes. You will learn that handfuls of rice of rice can consume half a village. You will loafer learn that in the eyes of the law, the rich are incapable of soiling their hands with either mud or blood. You will learn to wait for revenge with the patience of a village awaiting rain. (2016: Notes on Storytelling)"

As such, academic work that questions the same, must expose its roots. In taking up religion and religious thought itself within IR, one is engaging immediately with a field that struggles with a spectrum of silences and visibility. In order to engage with this, the researcher is

constantly plagued by these several questions: What or who is silent, and silenced in the International? Why do these silences exist? What do these silences say to us? How do we amplify these silences to continuously argue for a privileging of alternate sites of discussion? Engaging with silences in this way, is also part of the ongoing decolonial work in IR.

For this particular essay, we can ask , within women's (both feminist and womanist) religious thought, how do we see work that builds towards amplifying that which is silenced, meditating on silence, and, suggesting alternative sites of discussion. We can, for example, argue that the secular bent of theory and study in IR can and does silence the interventions of women's religious activity and women's religious thought, and that, indeed, it is possible to argue that in international relations, whilst there is engagement with religion as a site of politics, culture and agency, there is little engagement with religious thought itself, and more could be done to engage with religious thought as a way to elaborate and articulate interpretive categories and analytical frameworks in IR theory. As such, in seeking to amplify the voices of religious womanist and feminist perspectives, question opened by this essay is, what could further study and engagement with women's religious thought bring to the study of the international, in order to engage with decolonial thought and practice, and take up Shani's (2007) ongoing call for questioning the concomitant assumptions of Western epistemology? The essay is not meant as a definitive, but more as a proposition, a further opening up of a critical space.

The essay follows the following outline. It begins by discussing religion as it is studied and understood within the discipline of International Relations, and highlighting how women and religion are studied in IR. It then moves on to defining and discussing women's religious thought, discussing the similarities and differences between feminist IR and women's (both feminist and womanist) religious thought. finally, drawing on these various themes it highlights what possibilities further engagement with such religious thought can mean for IR, specifically from the perspective of attending to a decolonial rendering of IR.

Religion and International Relations: Clear yet imperfect pictures

Since the 2000s, especially, a plethora of work on religion has been building in IR, with a particular concern with Political Islam and other religious fundamentalisms, and the preoccupation with the need to take the global resurgence of religion seriously, to find out if 9/11 was about religion or something else, what is the right question even to ask about religion in international affairs? (Thomas 2005, Haynes 1998). These studies attracted both positivist and reflexive approaches, and a move towards understanding how religious actors navigate complex ethical spaces, the role of religious actors in global conflict, as well as a dialogue between religious thought and global ethics, neo-Weberianism, securitization theory, secularization theory and essentialism, amongst others (Lynch and Schwarz 2016). Shani, for example, (2013) urges that a critical human security paradigm should desecularize in order to understand the individual- or the community- by recognising the 'contested and embedded' nature of human identities that resist neo -liberal globalisation. These resisting identities are those that are embedded in what 'thick' values of cultural or religious communities (Shani 2013, Shani and Pasha 2007). Ashis Nandy (2013, 1988) would agree, pointing us to the search for the sacred, and the loss of ethical values that spurs consumerist anger. Scholars like Daniel Philpott and Cecelia Lynch have been concerned with taking forward theological ideas to discuss world ethics (Lynch 2014) or transitional justice (Philpott 2015). As Kubalkova who argues for the building of an international political theology notes (2003) notes, the importance of religion in IR is precisely to expand spaces of knowledge, and to know what world religions say about global affairs(see also Sheikh (2012).

Feminist and womanist religious thought not only shares kinship with feminist approaches in IR; it also concerns this essay with the study of religion in IR. Here, too, a sense of alternate or externality abides, and until 2001, there had been a kind of silence (Philpott 2000, 2001, 2002) around religion in Western IR, with few journals including religion as an influential

factor. The 'outsiderness' of religious thought in IR itself has rationale in the structure of political science, the preoccupation that the discipline has with the Cold War- which itself was a competition between secular ideologies (Casanova 2007, Fox 2006), and the prevailing post-Enlightenment bias that rejects religion as a condition for peace, order and state stability. This outsiderness of religion is also connected to the discipline being rooted in the West- or a certain idea of the West.

Religion in International Relations is often cited as a 'new turn', or Divine revenge, or some sort of great 'return' and 'resurgence' , a survivor of the long Westphalian exile (Petito and Hatzopoulous 2003). In such articulations, already we see the intellectual assumptions within IR as a discipline, for much scholarship had not paid attention to the living, vibrant, and pivotal role that everyday faith and faith making played in the global, especially in the Global South, where religious communities played important roles in, inter-alia, anti-colonial movements, Marxist uprisings and worker's strikes. As Bettiza (2019) notes, the world refused to follow the path that secularization theory had assigned to it and various forms of religious politics must be contended with. More so than this, many religious actors and communities have, for very long, been at the forefront of battles against social justice, or been part of anti-colonial movements. From the 1992 Ayodhya Hindu nationalist riots, to Zionism, to John Paul II's anti-communist pilgrimages, to Dalit conversion to Buddhism as a way to resist the nationalist Hindu state, to nationalist monks in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, to *minjung* theology, to Caodaoism, to young Muslim women reclaiming the *burqa*, Religions continue to persist and thrive in multiple, complex and powerfully entangled ways (ibid). As Daniel Philpott (2006) has noted, religion's place in social scientific work was vastly underproportioned to its place in newspaper headlines.

Prior to the 'resurgence' of work on religion in the 2000s, which itself is questionably structured around Huntington's (1989) thesis of the clash of civilisations, there had been some

, but little work on religion within the discipline. Johnston and Sampson's 1995 work *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft* is an example of some of this work, particularly calling our attention to the importance of ethnic, racial and religious clashes as sources of violent conflict. Other examples would be *Politics and Culture in International History,* Bozeman's 1960 survey of the traditions, ideas and organizational arrangements employed by high civilizations in structuring foreign affairs. Kubalkova (2009) notes the 1998 Millenium conference on Religions and IR, as well as reviews and special issues on religion focussing on religious work in terms of peace making, faith based diplomacy and reconciliation, but notes that they stop short of formulating a theoretical agenda for religion in IR. There was also work by scholars like Juergensmeyer (1993), Tambiah (1992) Nandy (1997) and Chatterjee (1986), amongst others who looked at religion's role in nationalist movements, and the role that religion and religious activists continued to play in domestic public policy battles.

In the later 90's we also see work on global fundamentalism, especially the role of Islam (Esposito 2001, Esposito and Voll 1996,). These works are not all by social scientists, but, as Philpott notes, are broadly social scientific in method. Indeed, he notes that the major comparative work is found in sociology, notably Jose Casanova's *Public Religion in the Modern World* (1994) with its significant challenge to secularization theory. There is much work on religion in world affairs, and much of it hails from philosophers, sociologists of religion, historians of religion, political theorists, theologians, journalists and anthropologists. As Kubalkova (2003) has noted, it is often helpful pragmatically to think in terms of IR and religion as one category and religion and world affairs as another, although the line between is now becoming more frequently blurred.

In the post-9/11 world, that watershed moment for IR scholars of my generation, there was a renewed interest, however problematically built, on the role religion plays in international relations and a problematising of the ways in which Enlightenment assumptions had treated

religion. Much of this interest was based on the fact that many world tensions were rooted in religious fundamentalism or religious-based tension, specifically a kind of Orientalising of Islam, and a hope to 'explain it', indeed, one could argue that there was some kind of a fetishization of the violence within religion, something that itself is attached to the secular bias within IR. This is what Philpott (2009, 2002) notes as a 'pervasive secularism' in IR's assumptions and methods. This secularist bias is pointed to very often by scholars like Philpott and Shankman-Hurd in order to note the shortcomings of the secularist models of analysis dominant within IR and the problematic triumph of the 'secularization thesis' which dominated the academy. This is especially true in the West, and of Western educated elites in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, as after all, Eurocentrism is not only a geographical problem, but an epistemic one (Bhambra 2007). Sylvester (1994) notes that IR is a series of debates "within the hierarchy of one church", and Shankman Hurd agrees that it is a secular church (2012).

> "The liberal perspective because it insists on the need to confine religion to a private sphere, fearing that public religions must necessarily threaten individual freedoms and secular differentiated structures; the civic-republican perspective because…like the liberal perspective it also conceives of public or civil religions in premodern terms as coextensive with the political or societal community." (Casanova 1994:216)

Secular bases of power, instead of religious ones, would provide legitimacy to the modern state, science would replace religion in (Prasad 2017) providing explanations for the physical universe, scientific rationality would replace religious morality and urbanisation would undermine small communities where religion held sway (Fox 2006).Secularism, therefore, has been an organising principle of modern politics, one that help to diminish and confine the religious sphere (Casanova 1994 and, in terms of the theme of this essay, in creating silences around religion and religious thought. Religion needed to vanish for modern international politics to come in to being (Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003).

Hurd sees forms of secularism as invented traditions as forms of power that are then disciplined into individuals and collectivities. Drawing on Casanova's work in *Public Religions*, she notes the problematic Euro-American prejudices for a Protestant subjective form of religion, a bias for liberal conceptions of politics and the supremacy of the sovereign state as the systemic unit of analysis (2008:5) that affect assumptions and methods in IR scholarship. The main elements that constituted IR as a discipline were established within an early modern Europe that saw religion as a thread to order, security and stability (Kayaoglu 2010). This Eurocentric bias, that seeped in to scholarly work on the global south through its own western educated elite created structures and established a kind of methodological whiteness when it came to the discussion of religious politics- of a kind of 'uncivilized' aspect to faith based approaches. Indeed, as many scholars (Esposito and Voll 2000, Pasha 2005, Capan 2018) have noted, the focus on political Islam, and indeed on violent extremisms in other religions, is rooted in the further construction and retrenching of the modern, rational, western Self, the violent *jihadi* versus the peaceful, rational World Order.

> "Islam's role as the ''hegemonic Other'' against which the contemporary West defines itself has simultaneously enabled, yet occluded from the Western gaze, the articulation of other non-western cosmopolitanisms." (Shani 2008:724)

Shani (2008, 2005, 2007) underlines this further when he notes the secular Eurocentric historicism that is deployed by critical theorists in IR. This, he finds, further limits the degree to which non-Western actors can fully participate in broadening and challenging IR theory, and argues for a genuine interrogation of the "concomitant assumptions" of Western thought, which, this essay would agree, can in some ways occur through further inclusion of religious thought into the study of IR. One particular purpose for this researcher to work on and argue for the study of feminist and womanist religious thought in IR is in order to do this kind of decolonial rendering, to highlight such spaces as locations for the ongoing interrogation of Western thought.

Women, Religion and IR

What do we find when we look at how women's religious thought and activity is studied and discussed in IR?. It is arguable that the overarching discourses and debates of feminist religious thought do not themselves trouble the larger discussions surrounding religion in IR. A survey reveals work on the women 's religious identity, movements, transnational efforts, but not necessarily the taking up of feminist or womanist religious thought and its analytical categories as described above. It is also important to note that not all these interventions come from the main IR corpus itself, but from associated spaces such as international political sociology, international development, peacebuilding and conflict, and humanitarianism. Themes and discussions from feminist and womanist religious thought seep into these scholarly works but it is not necessarily a feminist or womanist religious reckoning with IR theory. For example, how would we discuss the movement towards 'wholeness' in the emancipation of the Therigatha in IR? Perhaps the closest we have come is Lily Ling's discussion of interbeing and epistemic compassion (2017).

> "'interbeing'. It updates the ancient tenet of pratitya samutpada ('co-dependent arising') whereby the duality of Self versus Other fuses into the non-duality of 'you are in me, and I in you'. Reciprocity thus becomes key. The Self cannot violate the Other without also violating itself. Likewise, loving the Other rebounds back to loving the Self. In trialectics, we have an episteme that organically checks against the violence of singularity for the love of multiplicity." (Ling 2017: 476)

There is, as Donahoe (2017) notes, a strong recognition that gender, religion and politics have an intertwined relationship, and, as such, there is a body of literature that is dedicated to studying gender, religion and IR. In noting this, I agree with Donahoe that religion, and gender are both 'unstable' and dynamic categories that are difficult to easily quantify. Indeed, as Donahoe goes on to note, of the three, IR is the least unstable part of the grouping, as, as an academic discipline, IR has fairly well-defined boundaries. Both Donahoe and Tamsin Bradley (2018) affirm that the key thematic areas in which these topics intersect can be listed as- human

rights (Coomaraswamy 2001), the politics of resistance equality, peacebuilding, feminism, agency, culture, body politics and female subordination. The issue here being, of course, that women's rights is a subject of some tension between the west and the developing world, as well as different conceptions of feminism, and the discussion on how women have been subjugated in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. Gillian Youngs (2006) also notes this tension in discussing feminist international relations work on the war on terror, and notes that religious spaces and ideologies often contribute to the absence of women's voices in the mainstream, and thinks through how we can work within these frameworks to assert change not for women but by women. Religion is often the vehicle through which some women are subjugated in various global spaces, in particular with regards to blasphemy laws, abortion and reproductive rights. Hence, we enter into discussions, via a more secular feminist critique of how religions, history and tradition are created, and the embeddedness of race and gender issues in religious traditions. This off contradiction between religious freedom and women's rights provides us with the most prolific work for gender religion, and IR. This is especially the case in terms of thinking through human rights discourse (which privileges the individual), and religious dogma, which privileges the community. The latter legitimizes female subjugation via divine intent, such as land rights in the continent of Africa . The former, however, has an essentialising, universalist tendency that does not take into account localized, context specific issues (Behrouz 2003).

Veiling, for example, attracts significant scholarly attention, in particular the discussion over the feminist or anti-feminist attributes of wearing the veil in Muslim societies (Joppke 2009). Veiling is also a cultural practice adopted by South Asian women and Catholic nuns, and one which allows women to become present and active in the public sphere. It could be argued, however, that this is not necessarily a religious practice, but a cultural one, leading to warnings such as that of Abu-Lughod (2002) of reifying culture. Furthermore, as Shani (2013) notes

in his discussion of human security and emancipation, the 'freeing' of the Muslim women belongs to a Western global discourse that sought to justify certain kinds of interventionism. The fetish with the veil does little to recognise the agency and identity of the Muslim woman herself (Shani, Santo and Pasha 2007, Jackson and Gozdecka 2011). Indeed, ongoing fieldwork I am doing with Catholic and Muslim women who veil, what one finds especially with Muslim women are young women who have chosen the veil as a way of expressing their anger and defiance at an oppressive western secularism. Still others yet, are forced to wear it by community and family. These bodies of women, these corpses caught between global discourses.

"The dichotomy between feminism and the practice of veiling seems to preclude women who veil from being feminist, and yet empirically this is untrue. As Kandiyoti describes with reference to Islamic cultural nationalism, "feminist discourses can legitimately proceed only in one of two directions: either denying that Islamic practices are necessarily oppressive or asserting that oppressive practices are not necessarily Islamic" (Kandiyoti, 1994, p. 380). The concern that the veil is forced upon women has resulted in a modern Orientalism that obscures the agency of women who choose the veil (Afshar, 2008); but Islamic feminists argue against the assumptions that the veil is oppressive (Cooke, 2000; Yegenoglu, 2002). " (Donhahoe 2014: 5)

There is much discussion surrounding, then, the disconnect between scripture and practice, especially in terms of the Abrahamic religions, and the subordination of women's agency in the name of a sacred text. This is especially relevant to texts that examine the human rights and equality aspect of gender and religion, where scholarship is generally torn between criticism of religions that subjugate women's rights, and supporting religion but critiquing its application and cultural practice. A good example of this are the myriad of studies that look at community health issues, in particular the role of woman /women as reproducer (Beit-Hallahmi 1997).

The work of women religious also features significantly in looking at religious efforts at peacebuilding. The 'gender lens' provides further dimensions to the understanding of religion and conflict resolution, in particular how religious spaces both constrain and empower women

in their work for peace. Lee Marsden's (2016) work on Women, Gender and Conflict Resolution is instructive here, specifically in reflecting on the visibility and invisibility of women when it comes to religious peacebuilding. Women's work in peacebuilding from a religious standpoint has always been at the level of the communal, the grassroot, the interpersonal which means that their work has been largely invisible. Marsden's example is the women of Mindanao. Susan Hayward (2015) notes the religious dynamics that propel women into peace work, and how even 'secular' women can connect their peacebuilding work to fait-based foundations. Indeed, Hayward finds a unique opportunity and challenge to studying women of faith who seek to advance peacebuilding. Others looking at women of faith also note the propensity of women to volunteer for international development work. Haynes (2014), for example, notes that religiosity plays a significant role in increasing the likelihood that a woman will volunteer for an organisation, and this too, provides meat for understanding the role women play in international peacebuilding efforts. He discusses the work of Religions for Peace, and notes the significant number of women volunteering transnationally to work for peace.

Another space in which we see discussion of women of faith in the international is in developing contexts and development studies, and much of the work done here is by feminist researchers. Here, the religious worldview becomes of import as,

> "It is sometimes felt that in order to gain legitimacy within conservative religious cultures, the goal of gender equality needs to be pursued from within the religious worldview of women and men in that context. This has the potential to make development interventions more likely to be accepted, and, in the long term, more likely to be successful." (Tomalin 2011:4)

Within this, there is distinct discussion of religious feminism, and the role that it can play in empowerment and emancipation at the local and international level. Emma Tomalin, for example, in her study of the *bhikkuni* movement notes how the styles of religious feminism that have emerged work in practical ways to promote equality and leadership roles. Tomalin

(2009) notes that the transnational networks built between Buddhist nuns fostered dialogue between members across the world and encouraged reflection on how to challenge unequal and oppressive gender hierarchies. This was something already understood by the late Tessa Bartholomeusz (1994) in her study of lay nuns in Sri Lanka, however, it was not a text within the discipline of IR. Fatima Adamu (2011), for example, notes the failure of international donors to incorporate Islam into donor policies, and therefore, Muslim feminists, trapped between conservatism in their society and 'Western critics' have worked towards funding and building Islamic NGOs that can work on these gender issues with a faith-based perspective in mind. Bridget Walker (2011) highlights that while the institutional Church can be oppressive, it is also in Church spaces that women can meet to discuss and develop strategies for emancipation and equality, often building strategies from within faith-based development agendas and spaces. As Sr Noel Christine, a strongwoman of the fight against a Port City in Sri Lanka remarked, "then, the Church has to tolerate me."

There is also work on how on how religion informs different configurations for women's agency as political actors. One of the ways this is charted is through the discussion of transnational women's movements, with some attention to the work of women who are religious or take on religious activity within such movements (Baksh-Soodeen, R., & Harcourt, W. 2015, Marchand 2014, Basu 2000). Rupp (2011), for example, has discussed the first wave of transnational organising through women's peace movements, noting, for example the feminist internationalism built here via elite, white Christian women. Tomalin, as aformentioned (2009) has done significant work in charting the transnational networks created by Buddhist women, particularly those seeking ordination . Moghadam (2001), in theorizing women's movements within the global has noted the importance of religious dynamics, especially in Muslim communities, for collective action. What is interesting and very evident in the discussion of these organising networks and transnational networks highlights how

women have worked within networks and local practices to reclaim political and religious space. As Rinaldo (2013) notes in a study focussed on Indonesia, women's national involvement has shaped their engagement with both feminism and Islam in contradictory ways. It is in thinking of contradiction that I now turn to discussing the parameters of women's religious thought.

Odd and Ends of Things: The parameters of women's religious thought.

In this portion of the essay, I lay out the various concepts and themes within feminist and womanist religious thought, in order to highlight what such work can bring to the discipline of IR, with particular regard to the possibilities for decolonial rendering. This portion of the essay anchors itself to my own ongoing work of that has religious thought in the international as its focus. As a scholar I work at the interstices of both religious studies and international relations. The arc of my major project was, for a long time, unmoored and derivative, seeking something new in Buddhist nationalisms and struggling against the culture/identity dictum of 'doing' religion in IR. In the research for this, this author read through the *Therigatha*, the reflections of the first Buddhist women and found a curated set of writings that could be called an anthology of early Buddhist feminist thought. Curiously, in the *Therigatha*, the writings of the first Buddhist women, there is a disruption of the idea of liberation seen not as one watershed moment but of ongoing confrontation and struggle. The text contains 15 stock phrases of freedom: desire, the ending of rebirth, the destruction of the yoke, the obtaining of knowledge, the destruction of obsession, painlessness, the tearing of darkness, the end of fear, peace, conquest, unburdening, and far shores. Some speak of abstract liberation, others of their own attainment, or of the mediation of another (Hallisey 2015). In the *Therigatha*, the liberated continue to face conflict. Liberation is continued struggle, but what has changed is the response to struggle. Each of these phrases and understandings is tied to a releasing emotion, embedded in a context of conversion or confrontation. As such, in each

'confessional' piece, we find a charting of the emotions of the struggle for political liberation. In the intellectual emotions of the Therigatha, we can find an impact on gender activism, identity, vocation and purpose in contemporary Buddhist political thinking; in particular, how inward grief and wretchedness have been poured out into a violent and inflamed Buddhist nationalism. Liberation, struggle, emancipation. Three key words for understanding feminist and womanist religious thought, from whatever spectrum it is written from. I anchor my understanding of feminist and womanist religious thought to definitions set out by scholars like bell hooks (1984) and Keri Day (2016b), due to the importance of the grassroots activity and collective organizing to the particular strand of religious thought I highlight in this essay. This is a feminism that is not only preoccupied with fighting inequality and sexist oppression, but is also intimately concerned with transforming structures of race, gender, class and imperialism- something that is especially true of the work of religious thought that comes from the Global South (Gnanadason 1988, Carroll 1983). What kind of movement is needed in order to critically transform interlocking webs of oppression, or what the feminist theologians of the EATWOT call the "death creating" structures of global governance?

Feminist IR: The first puzzle

Firstly, there is a need to situate feminist and womanist religious thought in terms of Feminist IR, and in doing so I hope to show the critical solidarity between decolonial feminist work and the womanist and feminist religious thought I aim to highlight in this essay. Although International Relations and its associated disciplines have an understanding that we can no longer think in 'splendid isolation', the distinct perspective of feminist and womanist religious thought has not yet fully engaged our global examinations, or even gone very far within the discussions of religion in IR. It is linked to Tickner's 'puzzle': the seeming inability of conventional IR to engage meaningfully with feminists (Tickner 2001). Feminist approaches in IR are already situated on the critical and marginal side of the discipline's

spectrum, and share kinship with other critical approaches such as historical sociology and postmodernism, using reflective and interpretive epistemologies, and leveraging a strong emancipatory agenda. It could be argued that the secularity of feminist studies themselves make engaging in religious thought and epistemologies a challenging task, and that much of the work that concerns gender, religion and IR that I have discussed above falls into the category of a primarily liberal feminist view. This, I would argue, is especially true due to the liberal focus on the sanctity of the 'self' and the individual, and thereby to look very particular at issues such as rights and privileges, as opposed to religious work that centres more on the community and collective organisation.

'We [who study IR] develop ourselves, our research skills, our capacities to see with less arrogance, by negotiating knowledge at and across experiences, theories, locations and words of insight and relationships' (Sylvester 1993:271)

Yet, there are several commonalities that feminist and womanist religious thought share with feminist IR- especially that which comes from a more radical background- and it is important to sketch these out here briefly. Feminist IR is not a single theory, but a distinct and vibrant discourse made up of competing theories, with work spanning the spectrum from liberalism feminism to Marxist discussions of oppressive socioeconomic structures. What binds these feminist thinkers together is a need to understand and explain the role of gender in IR and global politics, and what ways IR theory can be reconstructed in a gender neutral way (Tickner 2008). Feminist work critiques conventional conceptions of power, in particular the supremacy of the nation state, challenging mainstream understanding of security and opening the conversation up to discussing all forms of physical and structural violence. As Zalewski (, 2018) often argues, the work of feminist scholarship on global politics is largely meant to be powerfully destabilising, an argument that would ring true for feminist and womanist theologians and religious scholars. Griffiths, for example, highlights the tradition of radical

feminist thinking and notes its purpose to show are women are made invisible on the international scene (1999), which brings us back to the theme of silence and visibility that this essay began with.

Where, I would argue, the feminist and womanist religious thought I hope to highlight here has particular alignment is with socialist, decolonial and Marxist feminisms that have a focus on critical transformation. This is on what Rutazibwa (2018) notes is the work to encourage systemic and historical analysis of the organised reproduction of injustice and mass human suffering. In particular, in thinking of much of the work on reclaiming narratives of suffering, of negotiating the crucible of being both faithful and feminist, and in working within pluralistic spaces, I would see similarities between women's religious thought and the work of Lugones (2016) to think from the ground up, to encounter the self that is being oppressed and resisting, the self as multiple (Icaza 2017). In the work by African, Latin American and Asian feminist and womanist religious thought, especially, there are significant moves to work towards dismantling colonial logic and the violences arising from the same, and such moves are key to decolonial thought and practice (Vuola 1997). Further to this, in the rootedness of different feminist and womanist theologies, there to is also the recognition that we also find in decolonial feminist work of knowledge being 'unsituated', of the world seen from different locations, embodiments and particularities that are themselves never innocent (Rose 1997).

But can you be? Faithful thought, silence and emancipatory possibilities.

"Wandering for alms —

weak, leaning on a staff,
with trembling limbs —
I fell down right there on the ground.
Seeing the drawbacks of the body,
my mind was then
set free." (Therigatha 1.17- Dhamma)

What is feminist and womanist religious thought? Keri Day (2016b, 2016) in her discussions of religious resistance to neoliberalism, would position womanist and feminist theological work as central to exploring race and gender within religion, but also to discovering different and often marginalised theological epistemologies and practices so that a "prophetic critique" of race, sex and xenophobia is established, one that seeks to transform society and build "beloved communities". I have used both the words feminist and womanist, but I do not do so interchangeably, noting that though they are symbiotic terms, there are particular contexts for each. Womanist work, to a greater degree that feminist work has a major concern with exposing, resisting and overcoming violence, as outlined by the theologian Delores S Williams,

> "The lived experience of black women under the triple threat of race, class and gender oppression is not articulated by womanist theologians to create an attitude of victimisation but rather with the intention to name evil and oppression forces as a step in the process of resisting oppression, overcoming the cadre of challenges black women face, and articulating the unique ways women of African descent experience and articulate their encounter with God "(Williams 1994: 84-85)

Womanist work, while identifying with white feminists in assuming the full humanity of women, also critiques white feminist participation in the perpetuation of white supremacy, which continues to dehumanise black women (Peiris 2019, Day 2018).

For many feminist and liberation feminist theologians, theology is primarily a critical reflection on historical praxis- the point from which they consider the foundation for liberation and the restoration of the dignity of persons. The work of theology and engaging in religious thought is inseparable from the praxis. As such, what we have here is what pours out from the life in practice. Such work must always be done "extra-ecclesia" (Peiris 2019). It is always contextual and maintains its rigour in not being focuses solely on some otherworldly conception of the afterlife, but to see virtue and purpose in demanding justice now (Peiris 1988, Ranawana 2020).

Such religious thought takes up the examination of power relations, of gender, of suffering, of domination, and is intimately concerned with the analytical categories of emancipation and struggle. Underpinning all of this is scholarship that is also activist, seeking societal transformation (Zwissler 2018). In sketching out these parameters, the first acknowledgement here is that much of feminist religious thinking is dominated by feminist theological work, particularly that which belongs to the Judeo-Christian tradition. There is emergent work from Muslim female scholars, Eastern feminist thinkers, and much work describing the activity of ordained and lay women, particularly in Labour Studies, Social Movements and Global Development Studies.

Feminism uses gender as a central category of analysis, and feminist religious thought does so also, but here, emancipation and struggle are also analytical categories, as the question of power and domination becomes paramount. There are, as Gebara (2008, 2010) notes, an example in how feminist religious thought, in particular feminist liberation theologies, developed in the 1980s. Women theologians and religious thinkers began to voice 'a marginalised theology' , not because they wished to do so but because feminist theology was left out of educational and ecclesiastical circles. Feminism analyses society from a woman's point of view. Feminist religious thinking defines men and women as created equal and denounces any other stance as inherently sinful (Isherwood 2001:10). As Asma Barlas (2002) argues, "the Qur'an established that God is Unique, hence beyond representation, and also beyond gender" (100). It also is a critical reflection on the lived experience that men and women share in struggling to transform the institutions and structures that impoverish and beget violence. This theme is especially true of feminist religious thought in the Global South. As such, a key development was women seeing a way of expressing their faith outside of traditional boundaries.

> "Many different theologies were born from women depending on the different situations that they faced, for example, the role of indigenous and African traditions within Christian theology as well as the ways in which feminist theology could address different expressions of patriarchal traditions throughout the world. (Gebara 2008:326)"

There are, as Hewitt (1988) notes, and as has been mentioned above, strong resonances between critical theory and feminist religious thought, as each is in a dialogical and dialectical encounter with each other. A living example of this encounter is Dorothy Day, the *doyenne* of the Catholic Worker Movement who was a driving force behind a movement that sought to build a vision that was personalist, anarchist and Catholic through the creation of farming communities and houses of hospitality- a 'third way' between submission and violent revolution (Marsh 2012).

There can be the argument that an implied secularism within feminism itself can make feminist religious thought itself a redundant category, but if we consider the 'radical' basic notion of feminism, that is, of equality, and the denunciation of male domination as sinful/evil in feminist religious thought, the kinship is clear. Feminist religious thought seeks to dismantle patterns of patriarchy and seeks to reconstruct radically different understandings of the key teachings in religions, disrupting notions of a paterfamilial God, of sin, suffering, of Being and UnBeing, submission and worthiness. Feminist religious thought, and feminist theology from the Abrahamic traditions in particular seek to supply the tools (Isherwood 2001) to make the shift from seeing religion as controlling life or the world towards balance, mutuality and radical solidarity.

The importance of the analytical categories of emancipation and struggle in feminist religious thought is because of the commitment to a 'promised land', a utopia, the possibility of a different and more humane future. As Hewitt further notes, it is no wonder that when critical theory sketches out its vision of a different world, its language takes on a kind of religiosity, an understanding of hopeful redemption (1988:112). Linked to these key analytical categories

then, is an understanding of the analysis and deconstruction of domination. In the feminist thought of scholars in Africa, Asia and Latin America, for example, critiquing domination is the first step towards the analysis of struggle. For feminist religious thought, as with its secular sister, the critical analysis of power relations provides a point of entry into the analysis of society and its complex horizontal inequalities, be they social racial, economics, political, ecological, religious. A key feature for feminist religious thought is the ongoing conversations between theologians and feminist movements. An example of such analysis is found in the 1994 Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians paper on the situation of Asian women,

> "Western colonial culture taught us to accept the colonizer's superiority a race and as a culture while denigrating our own as inferior, backward and primitive. Moreover, the colonizer's characterization of Asian women as servile, weak, docile, long-suffering, delicate and charming, and the idealization of these feminine traits to best serve colonial goals cemented the domination of men over women" (EATWOT 1994: 19)

As such, a rethinking of the dynamics of power and hierarchical social relations is, as with feminist theory, indispensable to feminist and womanist religious thought.

Feminist and womanist religious thinking also looks at the huge spectrum of global suffering of women and demands a response. As Namsoon Kang (2011, 2014) notes, when feminist theology, for example, looks at the question "whose globalization?", it is a reminder to recognise the very different social locations that generate and define its issues and dilemmas. The point is that, in order to matter, the work of feminist religious thought must be written out of situations of social marginalization and oppression (Fulkerson & Briggs 2011). The voices of women religious, then, echo in anti-colonial movements, in struggles for the rights of workers, in nationalist movements, in ecological justice movements, in anti-immigration protests and many others. As Ashcroft (2001) further notes, the globalisation conundrum is a key problem for feminist religious thinkers to grapple with, as the free market has not been 'an unadulterated engine of human progress'. The gaps between the rich and the

poor, particularly women in the global South and women of colours in the west are stark ones. The expansive global restructuring of economies that create goods for export rather than for local consumption, and which lower wages and exploit poor families impact women significantly. Women are more keenly disadvantaged by wealth creation as well as global economic crises; hence, taking on global capitalism and its entrapments is a key issue for feminist religious thinking. How, for example, does feminist religious thought respond to the many women from both South and East Asia who travel to Europe and the Middle East as domestic workers and nannies in order to ensure their own family's economic survival?

Akin to this is the question of power, with transnational centres and nation-states competing for power, and very few instances where labour laws and welfare protections can be put in place. What labour, whose labour is valued? Indeed, as many argue, the shift to the 'global' only enmeshed colonial logics of power (Bhambra 2020, 2018). The capitalist-colonialist logic of trapping peoples in a relationship with their own economies in order to ensure a constant flow of human and natural resources. The new 'global' markets have not looked to redress the injustices and imbalances of these legacies. This 'inheritance' (Alexander and Mohanty 2013) is the imbrication of colonial practices within capitalist processes of recolonization and is challenged by feminist religious thinking via a pointing to alternative practices and socioreligious perceptions. As Aquino (1998) argues, the abstract concept of the people and the generic concept of the socioeconomic poor are reductionist and the work of the women's movement in forcing religious thought to adopt a more realistic approach to the complexity of the current social relations of power and to see the multidimensional character of power relations goes a long way to 'educating' out of these enmeshed inheritances. Feminist theologians involved in the work of the EATWOT will note that the only conversation worth having is about the liberation of the oppressed from colonial enmeshments and neo-colonialisms, of how the realm of faith intervenes to challenge a world where death and

destruction define the structures and systems of economic governance. To witness to a Profound Other, there must be a radical intellectual intervention against death-dealing systems (Joseph 2015, Fabella 1993). The feminist critique within religion emphasizes the need to force new intellectual formations and strategies directed toward a new model of society and a 'profound reconceptualization of religions'. Once again, we see the theme of utopia, the promised land, and of total transformation.

Feminist and womanist religious thought also engages in diversity. Some of this is in order to maintain its relevance with disciplines, and to be relevant and accurate to the world we live in, and to maintain the feminist politics of inclusion (Gross 1996). However, feminist religious thought takes up religious pluralism also as a project through which a fresh construction of central feminist questions can also be attempted, noting that it is the amplification of silenced voices that must harness the ethical epistemological impulse of feminist religious thought, as well as the feminist 'mission' of including excluded voices, insights and resources. As Gross notes "it is by looking into the comparative mirror [that] we will undoubtedly find many alternatives that we would unlikely be able to imagine on our own (ibid: 63).

Other modes of being female and religious

Part of this diversity, indeed this struggle within the struggle, is how to communicate another mode of being female (Lazreg 1994), and the work discussed below highlights much more of the womanist work in religious thought. The category of female, as scholars like Mohanty (1991) and Jayawardena (2016), amongst others have noted, is one that privileges Western, liberal and secular notions. For feminist religious thinkers in the non-West, it is about the challenge that Jayewardena poses- placing the picture in a framework that is not Western imposed (Jayawardena, quoted by Srinivasan 2017). It is towards an answer that Kang (2014) discusses a transethnic feminist theology of Asia, one which requires a radical spirit and a

dialectical approach to race, ethnicity and culture, which promotes shared sensibilities, solidarity and coalition in the work towards transforming society.

Consider, for example, the work of Asian feminist theologians who, much like their African counterparts, live within a religiously pluralistic world. Here, religious thought must reckon with issues such as the burdens of poverty, the caste system, the marriage dowry, struggles for democracy, and migrant work. When Asian feminists talk about God, says Kwok Pui-Lan (2000) in her *Introduction to Asian Feminist Theology*, it is not the paternalistic Trinitarian God, but a God as the sustaining power of the universe. A God-Being who provides hope amidst ethnic strife, alienation and oppression (Donaldson and Pui-Lan 2002). Asian women religious thinkers, much like their secular counterparts must question the master narrative of the colonizer, as well as the master narratives of male patriarchy. They must also be sensitive to the diversity and division created by horizontal inequalities. How, for example, does a Sinhala Christian theologian in Sri Lanka respond to the theology of her Tamil Christian counterpart when all that unites them may be the institution of the Church?

For African women theologians, there are other complex and interlocking issues to contend with, as well as the ongoing negotiation of a multiplicitous world. These range from an analysis of the role of ritual to their experiences and destinies as African women. There is here again the analysis of power, whether the lack of access to it, or the need to transform power (Oduyoye 2001). There are also the problems of violence against women, female circumcision, enslavement in the name of religion. There must also be a reckoning with the historical roots and entanglement of violence alongside issues of poverty, racism, colonialism, and sexism. How are all these violences to be overcome and how do theological/ religious analyses provide ways in which to do so?

> "This imperative to develop a platform for action is rooted in the self-understanding of African women's theology as an applied theology, a theology that demands but is not

> satisfied by the mere announcing or denouncing of injustices. The women are challenged from their specific local contexts to devise practical ways of dealing with the injustices they so articulately denounce in their papers and presentations. The challenge to act is also born out of their prior self-naming not merely as objects and victims of injustice" (Hinga 2002: 83)

For Muslim feminist scholars, this also requires actively creating anti-racist spaces of reflection. As Zine (2004) notes, this has been the challenge to write back against feminist scholarship that imposes a gaze upon Muslim women as being invariably oppressed. Responding to such 'imperialist feminism', (Taylor and Zine 2014), Muslim feminist scholarship navigates its way between racialized and gendered politics, continuously resisting the scripting of their bodies and identities as they are narrated either by the secular Western feminist gaze *and* the gaze of the Islamic kyriarchy. Hidyatullah (2009) notes points of convergence between Abrahamic feminist scholarship in her study of Islamic feminist thoughts, in particular the work of reinterpreting foundational texts, rethinking linguistics debates surrounding discipline and re-centering the Profound Other as the focus of worship, rather than a male hierarch. A key work also is Wadud's work towards building a gender-inclusive hermeneutical model for interpreting the Qur'an. These are all attempts to construct an alternative space where Muslim women can articular a new understanding of self through discourses and rhetorics that they themselves have built (Zine 2004).

Hindu women scholars find the label feminism problematic. This is closely linked to the problem that feminism is a Western women's movement and religiously based scholars also find discomfort in the fact that feminism's implicit secularity makes strange bedfellows. On the one hand, feminists in South Asia dismiss religion as oppressive and restrictive, whilst others study issues pertaining to Hindu women but would stop short of referring to themselves as Hindu feminists- instead they are studiers of Hindu women from a specific discipline, whether it be literature, history, philosophy, sociology and so on. There is also here the

challenge that, unlike the Abrahamic religions, Hinduism is not restricted to a singular or a few texts. As Sugirtharajah (2002) notes, what is interesting about Hindu feminist (such as it is) thinking is what is actively negotiated from within, 'in explicit and implicit ways'. As she goes on to note, there are examples of the subversion of gender and caste hierarchy in devotional movements and rituals, allowing men and women to relate to God in a personal way. In Hinduism, at the conceptual level, the male and female are inseparable and the divine feminine exists latent in the masculine- it is the activating power for the masculine. Indeed, unlike the Abrahamic traditions, there is no singular paternal God to resist as Gods and Goddesses exist together. Women poet-saints in the Hindu tradition, such as Mirabai in the 16th century and Mahadevi in the 12th century wrote against traditional notions of femininity but not in a conscious fashion. That being said, others, like Sundarraman, note the urgent need for Hindu 'theology' to reaffirm the 'feminist' narratives already existent in Hinduism as a form of resistance to nationalist Hindutva ideology (Gross 1978). Sundarraman (2018) also notes Vishwananthan's (2010) discussion regarding the transformation that India underwent in the 19th and 20th Century due to nationalist and colonial forces.

> ""The concept of woman symbolized the binary opposition between Indian tradition and British modernity. The nationalists asserted their cultural difference over the British by reforming the one part of their cultural identity they had control over, the spiritual realm and where the metaphorical symbol of the nation — the woman — was placed."

There is evidence, according to Das and Chaudhury, that some attempts were made to alter the role of women in Indian society which is intimately linked with "Indian" theology; that is to say, the prevailing religion in India, Hinduism, was modified by nationalists. As such, the continuing work for Hindu feminist scholars is in the challenging of the nationalist project. Still others within Hinduism also note the resources available from a Hindu standpoint for the development of an ecofeminist theological vision (Das Gupta Sherma 1998). The vision of the earth is a scared hierophany and the material divine is the Goddess- the *Devi Mahatmaya*.

In Buddhist feminist discourse, a key issue surrounds the authority of the teacher (Gross 1992). Although women can be ordained, as Gross notes, the 'acid-test' is whether women are allowed to become dharma teachers. Moving towards this goal requires active work towards reinterpreting the male-dominated cultures in which Buddhism was founded and practiced (De Silva 1988), as well as challenging the rules of Buddhist institutional life (Tsomo 2000). This particular preoccupation is more prevalent in more modern takes on Buddhist life where ordained Buddhist women struggle for recognition and visibility in relation to their male counterparts. Gautam Buddha himself did not initially approve of women taking on arahantship and instituted rules for monasticism that made it difficult for women to achieve higher status. Monastic rules declare that all nuns are junior to even the most recently ordained monk (Gross 2009, 2010). We see this questioning of authority in the work Dhammananda Theri. Dhammananda Theri , the first ordained Buddhist female monk in Thailand, promotes the importance of a grassroots understanding, for her feminist critique, anchoring her work to public pedagogy that seeks to educate women within her society about Buddhism such that they, as lay women have the intellectual tools to resist the hierarchy's oppression of the laity. Her work focusses on the purification of the Sangha and the re-examination of Buddhist texts (2010).

Importantly, in Buddhism, there is no central concept of a paternal God to be taken on. Within the writings of the first *Theris*, emancipation comes from the conversion to Buddhism- that is the complete detachment from material, patriarchal and caste-based society, the 'cooling of the passions'. Indeed, going into a space where there is no male or female but a treasure worth more than gold or silver (Therigatha 13.5). The *Therigatha*, as a foundational text of the Buddhist female experience is the freedom or the right to self-actualize, not only of access to rights but also the ability to be loving, compassionate beings, to flourish. How do we move towards wholeness? Keri Day, a womanist scholar, notes the importance of the *Therigatha* as

a womanist text which privileges the experience of marginalised women, seeking to interpret the problems of human suffering from women's perspectives. She draws a comparison between the Hagar narrative in Genesis 16 which discloses the gender injustice faced by a poor black woman and the *Therigatha's* collected writings that expose and deconstruct forms of gender oppression within a formalised social structure (2016). Dhammananda Samaneri, the first (and only) ordained Buddhist nun in Thailand, argues that we have to recognize that the texts of religion have been recorded by men and it is up to us to rescue the true spirit of all religions, which is ultimately good (quoted in Gokal 2006). As Ingram notes, Buddhism itself is not patriarchal but has been shaped by institutions that are so, and that liberation into the self, into wholeness, comes with the 'full' liberation from political, social and economic oppression (1997). Dhammananda Theri would push this further, calling our attention to the patriarchal biases and the ignorance within such structures that is the root cause of the suffering that Buddhist women face. Here, she uses the Buddhist concept of suffering to critique the myth of progress noting how Thai women have a high economic responsibility but no real economic power. Modernisation then has had severe implications, particularly in terms of low wages, employment discrimination and the prevalence of the sex industry. The full participation of women in society , currently blocked by the Buddhist male institution in Thailand, would open a door towards further and necessary emancipation.

Emancipation, perhaps, is an apt word to end on. Womanist and feminist religious thought seeks to do work that promotes justice, to work towards a kind of dynamic involvement of the minds and hearts of beloved communities to transform the present into a more just world (Gross and Ruether 2010). It is work that is living, contextual, involved, and focused toward challenging and transforming the multiplicative social structures of super ordination and subordination, of ruling and oppression (Fiorenza 1985, 1991,). For the study of IR, it could

provide another space through which alternative frameworks for analysing and demand justice within the global.

Conclusion

This essay has then attempted a 'state of the field' examination of a branch of feminist thinking within the global, namely womanist and feminist religious thought, and has thus discussed the variants of religious feminism and religious feminist and womanist thought that have long been existent and have recently "remerged" across the globe, paying attention to the various discussions surrounding domination, emancipation, struggle, and power. It has discussed also the various ways in which a different understanding of woman and of emancipatory discourses emerge in Buddhist and Hindu discourses, and underlined the complex navigation that the Muslim feminist scholar must make. It has hopefully celebrated the 'strangeness' of being a feminist of faith, showcasing 'strange' revolution here, where traditional hierarchies are challenged, but also highlights how "progressive", "liberal" structures are found wanting. It has briefly noted how, in the urgencies and reflections from feminist religious thought in Asia and in Africa, both Western imperialism and locality must be reckoned with. The essay has also attempted to discuss what challenges and provocations the voices of feminist religious thought bring to the study of the international and what further study and attention to transnational movements of women religious and feminist religious thought are alternative sites for the discussion of the global. Within feminist and womanist religious thought, we do see work towards amplifying that which is silenced, meditating on silence, and, suggesting alternative sites of discussion. In anchoring this essay to silence and silences, there is also the argument here that the secular bent of theory and study in IR can and does silence the interventions of feminist religious activity and feminist religious thought. In asking the question - what could further study and engagement with feminist religious thought bring to the study of the international - this essay has attempted to first lay the ground for what aspects

of feminist thought have been engaged in the study of religion in the international, and has found work on women's religious identity, movements, transnational efforts, but not necessarily the taking up of feminist religious thought and its analytical categories as described above. Themes and discussions from feminist religious thought seep into these scholarly works but it is not necessarily a feminist religious reckoning with IR theory. As such, what I aim to propose, in reviewing the state of the field, is a further engagement of feminist religious thought in IR theory, and a keen discussion of the alternative spaces that an engagement with feminist theologies and religious thinking can bring to spaces of knowledge in IR.

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