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Tazim R. Kassam
Spotlight on Teaching *Editor*

In order to grapple with the question of how to diversify formations of knowledge in the academic study of religions, Zayn Kassam, the guest editor of this issue of *Spotlight*, has brought together a group of scholars to reflect specifically upon the Other within Christianity.

The experiences of the contributors underscore the importance of paying ongoing attention to constructs of the Other (or others) built into the center/periphery discourses of and in academe. The basic premise is that by defining what constitutes knowledge, “Western” academe sustains hegemonic practices that subject and subordinate epistemologies and insights stemming from “other” racial, religious, and gendered identities.

Elizabeth Castelli points out that the concept of “Other” presents a dilemma in as much as it “threatens to reinscribe precisely the terms it seeks to disrupt.” The Other also has many others within itself as illustrated in this issue of *Spotlight*. The concept of “minority” suffers from a similar problem. Such labels tend to reify the dominant structures that estrange, marginalize and dehumanize.

Yet another issue pertaining to the concept of Other(s) is that of representation: who may speak for whom? Expressing the frustration of many racial minority scholars who feel “boxed in,” Kwok Pui Lan calls into question the postmodern claim that one can write and speak only from the position of one’s own racial, sexual, etc., identity.

Skeptics view minority studies as consisting of special interest groups that have given rise to divisive identity politics. They argue that in order to achieve the common good for the nation as a whole, we must transcend the particularities of what we are à la Rorty, who makes a distinction between *what* we are (our race, gender, etc.) and *who* we are (our aspirations as citizens).

The feminist philosopher Linda Alcoff counters reductive readings of identity politics as discourses of special interest groups doomed to politics of confrontation. In her book *Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self* (Oxford, 2006), she argues that identity is not just a concept that can be transcended or waved off with a magic wand. The fact is that people perceive, know, and interact with each other through their physical embodiment which is marked by race, gender, religion, and so forth.

Thus, any paradigm of knowledge that requires a surrender or erasure of embodied identities causes harm—social, economic, political, as well as psychological and spiritual. To quote Charles Taylor, “our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion...misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.” (Amy Gutmann, ed. *Multiculturalism*. Charles Taylor, Princeton: 1994, 25).

This truth is amply illustrated by Miguel A. De La Torre’s agonizing ordeal for “doing scholarship from the margins” and Stacey Floyd-Thomas’s experience of double jeopardy as a turncoat in her African-American religious community and a racialized, discriminated other in her classroom — so blatantly expressed in the question “What can a black woman teach me?”

Andrew Sung Park and Erin Runions expose the logic of the Other as despotic and demonic at another level: the ways that theology gets used by some Christians to signify as Other not only those who are not Christian, but also Christians gone astray. Park rejects the righteous self that is constituted by exclusive claims to an absolute, all-powerful God, and commends instead the spiritual exercise of “dialectical emptying” so as to focus on ethics versus theology.

Querying the dialectic of Christ/antichrist, Runions exposes the racialized and homosexualized Other created by apocalyptic narratives popularized especially by right-wing Christians. Their

antichrist is not only a dark, sinister, violent devil, but also sexually perverse. African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and now all Muslims generalized as terrorists, must be feared and — emboldened by Rumsfeldian strategy and Huntingtonian ideology — converted by force, if necessary, to adopt “rational” norms of Euro-American “civilization.”

Simeon Ilesanmi, Gastón Espinosa, and Andrea Smith address the wider legal, economic, and social structures that impact academic discourses in religious studies. In his analysis of immigration and First Amendment laws, Ilesanmi shows how rules of deference on the one hand make foreigners of immigrants (otherize), and on the other hand require their religious identities be unreflectingly treated as *sui generis* (self-authenticating).

Smith focuses her critical lens on the traditional grading system in higher education. She argues that it mirrors the impervious capitalist credo of meritocracy, a credo that denounces and marginalizes the poor and unsuccessful as lazy and irresponsible, and thus abandons them to their sorry and “deserved” fate.

Espinosa’s historical overview of the long and winding road taken to establish the subdiscipline of Mexican-American religious studies gives hope in terms of diversifying the production and expansion of knowledge in religious studies. And in this vein, Linda Alcoff’s theory of race, ethnicity, and gender as dynamic social identities that function as *interpretive horizons* provides a compelling epistemological basis for extending hospitality to knowledge of and from Other(s). Thanks to Zayn Kassam for bringing together the authors in this issue of

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to illustrate the complex challenges involved in diversifying knowledge production in religious studies.