Calls, Invitations, Summons

'Gender' in the aftermath of *Politics of Piety*

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Da'wa, Saba Mahmood tells us, is 'a Quranic concept associated primarily with God's call to the prophets and to humanity to believe in the "true religion", Islam'. It 'literally means "call, invitation, appeal, or summons"'.[1] Whilst cognisant of the uncompromising specificity of the demand it places on those to whom the call is addressed, I want in this short response to take up the concept as a *spur* to ask what Mahmood's work may summon, invite, call us to *do* in the aftermath of *Politics of Piety*. What praxis does it incite?

Beyond the myriad of responses generated by *Politics of Piety* – some appalled at its apparent cultural relativism, adamant in their refusal to countenance the idea that critique may arrive one fine day from beyond the pale (or veil) of a globalised if not universalised white secular liberalism,[2] others more attuned or ambivalent[3] – what I do not want to do here is to rehearse the well-worn line that poses piety as an alternative model for thinking through agency against the limitations posed by the liberal frame of resistance or collusion. Rather, my intent is to gesture, in general terms, to the metatheoretical implications for feminist praxis and conceptuality of Mahmood's call to see beyond the frameworks of secular liberalism and the commitments these engender and constrain. More specifically I want to suggest that we should attend to the historicality of 'gender'[4] and its constitution within the logics of secular modernity which are also and always colonial and racist. Thus my focus here is on the extent to which, following in the wake of Mahmood's provocative invitation to recognise the ethnocentric limits of 'the feminist subject' within secular liberal thought, we might begin the work of examining the assumptions that underwrite 'gender' as a historical, political, and thus provincial category.

The subtext of such a metatheoretical argument pushes me to extend the critique Mahmood ranges against the impoverished concept of agency that proceeds from a liberal sensibility, in order to ask whether we may need to subject 'gender' to an assessment of its parochial origins such that its various political articulations can be shown to be as embedded in the constraining imaginary of liberalism as 'agency' may be. And further, and by implication, to question whether 'gender' is translatable, by which I mean to ask, is it universalisable and if so, in whose terms?

Of course, in a brief response such as this, it is not possible to undertake what would be a necessarily lengthy and detailed cataloguing of the ways in which 'gender' is tied to the liberal imaginary of secular modernity. Rather, my intention here is to indicate the broader epistemological problematic and opportunity that feminism is left with in the wake of Mahmood's invitation to attend to the mediation of conceptual and political histories in the construction of foundational premises. This concern with the role of conceptual mediation across different social milieux runs through Mahmood's text, stated from the outset as a question:

> If we recognize that the desire for freedom from, or subversion of, norms is not an innate desire that motivates all beings at all times, but is also profoundly mediated by cultural and historical conditions, then the question arises: how do we analyze operations of power that construct different kinds of bodies, knowledges, and subjectivities whose trajectories do not follow the entelechy of liberatory politics?[5]

Given the process by which 'gender' emerges as a category constitutive of secular modernity and its ostensible alignment with liberatory politics via feminism may it not also need to be subjected to an assessment of that which mediates it and which it mediates?

Translations

What if 'gender' *is* untranslatable?[6] The issue of (un)translatability, of the movement of a concept from here to there, of the meanings that travel and those which do not, of the histories that remain in place and those which are displaced, is one that Mahmood's work also addresses. Is 'gender' translatable? What is it that such a question asks? Is it a question of correspondence? A gesture towards the relationship between a universalised genus and a range of differentiated species? If we pose 'gender' in such terms we might suggest that it is the genus – all cultures have a means of categorising humans into one, two or several genders – in relationship to which the various different cultures or societies structure some variant or other of what is recognisable as a gender system. But what does such a circularity reference? What precisely is this original genus that engenders these variations which nonetheless all share something in common? In what does this commonality lie and whence? What is it that we – and who this 'we' is, is the question – think we see when we look out into the world and see the genus translated into species? Is there translation without coloniality?

Although Mahmood only briefly raises the question of (conceptual) translation and its connection to assumptions of universalisability,[7] particularly the ways in which concepts' histories may be marked by a certain intractability if not incommensurability that restricts their transversal mobility, it seems that such a question underlies her call to understand agency otherwise, to extend its lexical range beyond that which has been imagined within secular liberalism. That is, she summons us to see how translation out of the set of liberal commitments to autonomy, liberty, choice, and so on, into a social and political context with a different set of priorities and concepts of a subject who acts intentionally, inevitably constrains, distorts and conceals. Thus, the persistence of assertions of similitude masks a will to universalise which is always a colonial move. As Butler notes, in a passage that Mahmood cites approvingly,

no assertion of universality takes place apart from a cultural norm, and, given the array of contesting norms that constitute the international field, no assertion can be made without at once requiring a cultural translation. Without translation, the very concept of universality cannot cross the linguistic borders it claims, in principle, to be able to cross. Or we might put it another way: without translation, the only way the assertion of universality can cross a border is through colonial and expansionist logic.[8]

So, when 'gender' as produced within (white) liberal feminist thought travels, what does it reference? What political and ideological commitments and histories does it connect to and imply? What histories are neglected or forgotten? Might we need to begin (again) to speak of the 'coloniality of gender'[9] in order to speak of it at all?

Genealogies

By way of seeing how 'gender' may be caught up in a history that limits its capacity to account for social arrangements beyond the purview of its provincial origins, the parallel case of 'religion' can prove instructive. In the last twenty-five years, scholars have drawn attention to how the *taxon* 'religion' is closely tied to the (opaque) ethnocentric creation of public/private, secular/religious, religion/state dichotomies that underpin and sustain the project of European modernity and the nation-state, and are further inevitably embedded in forms of colonialist governmentality, both of which render the continuing use of 'religion' as a category of knowledge or descriptor for anything other than western Protestant Christianity deeply suspect.[10] Scholars have pointed to the ways in which Religious Studies has traded in a series of rhetorical techniques (for example, claims to the uniqueness, universality, irreducibility, etc. of the datum 'religion'), that obscures the manufactured nature of its central category, and moreover demonstrates the myriad ways in which this work of manufacture, and indeed translation, is to a large degree implicated in, supportive of, and served by colonial conceptuality and its universalising logic.

What this scholarship has established, further, is how the contemporary common-sense notion of religion's universality obscures the history of its production and its subsequent violent inscription qua translation on to cultural practices, traditions and conceptual schemas quite alien to the specificity of its European provenance. The translation of non-western traditions and worldviews as 'religions' interpellated them into a highly provincialised debate that not only restricted their possible modes of articulation and signification but also predetermined their reception and dissemination. Thus to use the term 'religion' to refer to non-European lifeways is to subject them to a conceptual regime that always already implies their inferiority and mistakenly assumes a shared referentiality, that of the agonistic dichotomisation of the religious and the secular realms characteristic of post-Enlightenment European history. Europe's struggles to overcome 'religion' were struggles to overcome a particular form of Christianity but at the same time Christianity was the primogenitive model for those traditions we now understand as religious.

If the genealogy I point to here has by now been well rehearsed within Religious Studies, a parallel effort in white feminism[11] regarding the history of 'gender' as a critical category tied to secular liberal and colonial modernity (and the line between these two is paper thin), such that the conceptual scope of 'gender' is tempered, has yet to be undertaken in any systematic manner. Whilst this is not the place to undertake such work,[12] what we might simply note here is what such a task may involve. It would involve tracing the various strands of thought, histories, politics and practices that have informed and produced 'gender' as a category of analysis and critique, as a site of identity, a process of meaning-making (and imposition) and political organising. In tracking this history what would be shown is how these strands enact racial and colonial politics and exclusions even in their most benevolent figurations. It would imply attending to 'gender's' production in several intersecting contexts, namely secular modernity's segregation of women from the bourgeois public sphere alongside the rise of the nation state and the heteronormative nuclear family; Enlightenment discourses of sovereignty and their relationship to the 'self', that is, the 'man of reason'; the legislative connection forged between ownership of property and the basis of citizenry; the liberal emphasis on 'equality, liberty and community' as the markers of toleration and inclusion and which serve as the organising itinerary of early and contemporary feminist thought; European colonialisms, where 'gender', like 'religion', was wielded as a civilising tool and a point of contrast

to the European metropole; and the rise of race 'science' and the slave trade. Each of these contexts should, I would argue, be read not only as the history of the conceptual emergence of 'gender', but also as those in which the conceptualisation of 'gender', whether as a sign of negativity or positivity, operated as a technology of anti-blackness inasmuch as racist anxieties and imaginaries underwrote not only theorisations of both the content and form of 'gender', but also enabled the prioritisation of a privileged, deracinated gender imaginary which was and is able to neglect race and coloniality as central to its construction.

This neglect enables the persistent universalisation of 'gender' as a tool in the pursuit of emancipation – providing both its form and content (all the while compliant with the chimeric quality of liberal governmentality),[13] and enabling the assumption that 'gender' has some privileged, thus necessarily segregated, role to play in the dismantling of patriarchy. There are at least five dominant tendencies that, I have argued,[14] signal the neglect of the racist and colonialist underpinnings of 'gender,' which play out in contemporary white feminism, and which point to the necessity for reconfiguration of its priorities, institutional practices and structures, and organising categories. Briefly, these are: (1) the tendency to employ an ethnocentric model of 'gender' parading as universal but which is informed by predominantly western liberal feminist assumptions and political agendas, and which at the same time selectively appropriates non-western traditions and practices in its service; (2) a propensity to conflate feminist, black, womanist, post- and decolonial feminist interests and experiences as similar if not the same, and to treat misogyny, colonialism, slavery and racism as analogous forms of oppression; (3) relatedly, the habit of predominantly addressing questions of race, ethnicity and colonial histories when considering non-white populations and practices such that whiteness disappears as a significant frame for all and any sociality it nonetheless structures and informs; (4) the adoption and distortion of 'intersectionality' as a mode of transactional analysis that presupposes an unqualified, unmarked subject to whom identity markers accrue and which are interchangeable or brought into play at different times and in different contexts. Such a move fails to reference its origins in Black feminist thought and thus to understand intersectionality as both an analytic

and lived experience of oppression and inequality within matrices of power that persistently cross-cut, one which indicts white feminism as one such matrix; (5) the tendency to attribute to 'religion' and religious allegiance the status of cause of oppression rather than source of solidarity and nourishment, if not emancipatory insight.

To insist on the similitude of oppression across a spectrum of difference whilst prioritising gender as the tie that binds, is to indulge in a form of discursive imperialism that not only weakens the intellectual credibility and political force of feminist work, but also obscures the embeddedness of much feminist thought in white privilege and its persistent, if apparently unwitting, collaboration with racist and colonialist practices of exclusion and universalisation, all in the name of freedom, equality and sisterhood. Moreover, it suggests that an invisibly etiolated feminism is adequate to the task of thinking and writing about, or better listening to, hearing and centring material and persons wholly or partially different historically, philosophically or geographically.[15] Gayatri Spivak's assessment of a broader problem for white feminism, echoing Mahmood's own critique, is pertinent here when she draws attention to how it glosses a significant problem when it attempts to embrace 'multiculturalist or postcolonial marginality' in the articulation of its mission: 'that a concern with women *and* men who have not written in the *same* cultural inscription (a working hypothesis that works well in colonial situations) cannot be mobilised *in the same way* as the investigation of gendering in one's own'.[16] The lesson here is that the conceptual terrain – the categories, histories, methods, and assumptions – of white feminism's conceptualisation of 'gender' and its indebtedness and allegiance to secular liberalism is so ethnocentrically specific that its extension beyond that specificity to co-opt the values, practices and histories of others in the service of its political itineraries should be approached very warily.

Mahmood shows well how such a dynamic operates with regard to the vexed question of women's agency. Demands for women's autonomy and voice, and recognition of even their *religious* agency have animated much feminist scholarship. More often than not – and this is where Mahmood's challenge to 'the feminist subject' and the subject of feminism rings so true – feminist engagement with notions of agency and voice has rubbed against 'traditionalist' understandings of women's piety where

women are then framed as either passive and compliant, or resistant and rebellious. Consonant with the secularising imaginary of the liberalist political structures of western states, agency is thus advanced as an appropriate response and form of resistance to the assumed or mandated passivity of the religious woman. Failure to exert agency as resistance or to exercise one's voice autonomously is routinely read as a failure of the willing subject, a sign of the improperly formed political subject and of her retrogressive subjugation to patriarchal structures of power. But to impose such a frame is silencing and imperialist. Saba Mahmood thus warns against the feminist scholarly co-optation of women's agency in support of 'the goals of progressive politics' because it obscures those 'dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance'.[17]

Calls

What has made it possible for white feminism to fail to see race and postcoloniality as the place from which configurations of centre and periphery must be rethought and even overturned? Part of the answer lies in the collective failure of white feminism to attend to the ethnocentrism of the field's history such that 'gender' is prioritised as the site of origination for critique (because it is assumed in the liberal feminist tradition to be the site of origination for the self), rather than the historical facticity of colonialisms, racisms, enslavement and their afterlives. 'Gender' rendered as a singularly central formation is claimed as both the place of enunciation and as providing the content and analytic framing for that enunciation. It appears to be unimplicated in colonial and racist value codings and the theorisations of embodiment, agency, voice and place, etc. that these assume and invite. These colonial and racist histories have formed the present, for all of us, however differentiated our relations to those histories might be and it thus remains a place from which the necessity or even possibility of the translation of 'gender' and its foregrounding must be tested.

The Indian feminist Uma Narayan, addressing the agonistic encounters between western and non-western feminists, has argued that 'Working together to develop a rich feminist account of this [colonial] history that divides and connects us might well provide Western and Third-World feminists [with] some difficult but interesting common ground, and be a project that is crucial and central to any truly "international" feminist politics'. Narayan here implies that 'western' efforts of self-definition are also therefore profoundly 'political responses to this history'.[18]

Might we not then read the prioritisation of 'gender' within feminist thought as precisely embedded in the neo-imperialist politics of secular liberalism that of necessity invokes a temporally and spatially differential – hierarchical – relation to a series of Others? Must we not try to see how this differential relationship is then (mis)represented as analogous to many forms of marginality, where 'gender' is nonetheless a first amongst equals? Is this not a collusion with the structures of coloniality and racism that insist on, indeed require, the simultaneous homogeneity and non-universalisability of the apparent periphery? When we fail to account for and to the colonial and racist history that is in fact *the* place of common ground for all feminists, is white feminism in particular not indulging in a project of self-definition that repeats the colonial appropriation of the other in order to accrue social and intellectual capital? If we were to take seriously the vexed specificity of white colonial and racist conceptuality as a significant part of the making of 'gender' as a site of critique, might it be that 'gender' will no longer be the site where all the usual intersections 'intersect'?

The most pressing question which I think Mahmood, albeit obliquely, invites us to pursue, is why it is that white feminism has not started from the place of the other with whom it asserts political and intellectual solidarity, from the 'history that divides and connects us', and from the forms of sociality, belonging and responsibility that are other to its imaginary. Mahmood's call, the *da'wa*, with which we began, all the more poignant in the aftermath of her death, invites us to begin again with a work of translation, that now may fracture the certainties of the secular liberal monopolisation of 'freedom': '[W]e can no longer arrogantly assume that secular forms of life and secularism's progressive formulations necessarily exhaust ways of living meaningfully and richly in this world.'[19] The call is to move beyond the constrained commitments of the secular, liberal modern, recall its long history of withholding the promise of freedom, and

seek those ways of living meaningfully that are not captured by its paradoxes. Responding to such a call is, must become, a feminist praxis.

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Notes

1. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 57.

2. Stathis Gourgouris, 'Detranscendentalizing the Secular', *Public Culture* 20:3 (2008), 437–45, and 'Antisecularist Failures: A Counterresponse to Saba Mahmood', *Public Culture* 20:3 (2008), 453–9; Sindre Bangstad, 'Saba Mahmood and Anthropological Feminism After Virtue', *Theory, Culture & Society* 28:3 (2011), 28–54.

3. Sarah Bracke and Nadia Fadil, "'Is the Headscarf Oppressive or Emancipatory?" Field Notes from the Multicultural Debate,' *Religion and Gender* 2:1 (2012), 36–56; Quỳnh N. Phạm, 'Enduring Bonds: Politics and Life Outside Freedom as Autonomy', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 38:1 (February 2013), 29–48; Peter Van der Veer, 'Embodiment, Materiality, and Power: A Review Essay', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50:3 (2008), 809–18.

4. I mark gender in this way to signal its conceptual function in feminist discourse, and thus am not referencing whatever materiality it may be assumed to describe.

5. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14.

6. I paraphrase here a question posed by Jacques Derrida with respect to 'religion' and it is the kind of questioning that he inaugurates with this query that I wish to pursue. See Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 67. Derrida here asks 'And what if *religio* remained untranslatable?' in order to assess the operations of what he names as 'globalatinization' (*mondialatinization*).

7. See Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 16, 39, 163, 190.

8. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), 35; Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 163, n. 9.

9. María Lugones, 'Toward a Decolonial Feminism', *Hypatia* 25:4 (Fall 2010), 742–759.

10. See for example Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, trans. William Sayers (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Despite important differences, these scholars share an interest in the rhetorical, discursive or geo-political operationalisation of the category 'religion' and indeed the constituting roles of coloniality and secularity in its figuration.

11. I use the term 'white feminism' not to indicate feminists who happen to be racialised as white, but rather those whose feminist approaches, politics and priorities are embedded in an epistemological framework where whiteness operates as an invisibilised, unmarked and unnamed normative ground and where non-whiteness, in contrast, is marked as specific, (hyper)visible, non-universalisable and marginal.

12. See Sîan Melvill Hawthorne, *Religion, Gender and Race: A Polemic* (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming 2021).

13. Here I mean what Butler names, after Foucault, the 'ambivalence' at 'the heart of agency,' that is, the paradox of subjectivity within liberal thought: subjectification is both dependent on discursive formations which are not chosen but which nonetheless inaugurate, enable and sustain agentive subjectivity. The promise held out in the liberal imaginary with respect to freedom and autonomy is thus simultaneously constraining and enabling and is what Mahmood diagnoses as one of the problematics involved in representing agency in the constrictive oscillation between repression or resistance. See Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 18.

14. For various examples of these tendencies in the field of religion and gender, and white feminism more generally, see Sîan Melvill Hawthorne, 'Displacements: Religion, Gender, and the Catachrestic Demand of Postcoloniality', *Journal of Religion and Gender* 3:2 (2013), 168–187; 'Entangled Subjects: Feminism, Religion, and the Obligation to Alterity', in *The Sage Handbook of Feminist Theory*, ed. Mary Evans et al., (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2014), 114–130; and 'Inhospitable Landscapes: Disciplinary Territories and the Feminist "Paradigm Shift"', *Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions* 19 (2018), 36–55.

15. Here I would suggest that this difference is itself marked ambiguously because all lives are marked by the universalising impulse of secular liberalism in colonial modernity and its globalising frame. Mahmood's point of course is that compliance with this impulse is neither inevitable nor seamless, that we may choose to see those moments and sites where its totalising affects are neither referenced nor wholly effective.

16. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 176; author's emphasis.

17. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14.

18. Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 80.

19. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, xi-xii.