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Volume Introduction

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Volume Introduction

This volume represents the culmination of over two years of graduate programming¹ which aimed, rather broadly, to think through “religion” – that slippery, messy, and undeniably colonial category – *decolonially*. Across the series we asked, often in tandem, and often without answer: How is the study of religion positioned within matrices of colonial domination, both historically and contemporarily? Conversely, in what ways can religion offer a generative grounding from which decolonial disruptions, thoughts, and practices may emerge? Though organized each year under different names – *Religion and Decoloniality* in 2022, and *Decolonization and the Study of Religion* in 2023 – taken together these projects sought: first, to provide a site of critical reflection for participants, both within and outside the field of Religious Studies, to engage with and meaningfully contribute to extant and emerging decolonial paradigms; second, to think *with* – rather than exclusively *about* – decoloniality as a means of constructing otherwise modes of Religious Studies scholarship; third, to subsequently develop “decolonial options” for the study of religion; that is, sets of ideas, languages, and theoretical frameworks from which future works could utilize, expand upon, or critique.

While these aims are certainly not the exclusive purview of Religious Studies, the rather immediate historical and epistemic imbrications of religion with global imperial, colonial, and settler-

1. Funding for these series were generously provided by the Department of Religions and Cultures at Concordia, the School of Religious Studies at McGill, the Concordia Counsel for Student Life, the Dean’s Special Project Fund, the Institute for Canadian Jewish Studies, the McGill Student Engagement Fund,

colonial dynamics have presented some rather unique and often discomfiting challenges for the formation of an expansive decolonial critique within the field. Indeed, the consequent and often-implicit dichotomization between decolonization on the one hand, and religion on the other, has mostly led to something of an impasse, with one scholar going so far as to wonder whether “the study of religion [is] a rotten fruit in the poisoned tree of colonialism” that should be abandoned *tout court*.² Nevertheless, our series sought to explore and transform the discursive nexus of decolonization and religion to be more than simply a unidirectional castigation of the latter. At its best and most interesting, and as the works in this volume attest, such investigations can be both creative and critical – that is, not only additive and deconstructive, but also generous at the very moment the field’s colonial dimensions are thrown into relief. The challenge, as such, was less about identifying problematics – a now well-trodden site of self-reflective inquiry – and more about figuring out what to *do* with such knowledge; figuring out how to ground our intellectual activities across a range of political ins/urgencies and geographic scales.

The planning for these series began in the summer of 2021 during a moment where, as graduate students, we felt a strong desire to critically engage with the decolonial themes and ideas circulating across popular and academic discourses while also figuring out suitable ways to (safely) interact with our colleagues following a year-long period of social isolation. What emerged, in the end, was the *Religion and Decoloniality* event series, organized across the Winter 2022 semester. Participants convened across two distinct sites: first, a monthly reading group which paired readings from the

and *Arc: The Journal of the School of Religious Studies, McGill University*.

2. Malory Nye, “Decolonizing the Study of Religion,” *Open Library of Humanities* 5, no. 1 (14 June 2019): 2.

co-edited volume *Beyond Man: Race, Coloniality, and Philosophy of Religion*, by An Yountae and Eleanor Craig,³ with seminal works by Franz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, Walter Mignolo, and Catherine Walsh; and second, a monthly lecture series on topics ranging from the institutional history of Concordia University (Colby Gaudet, Concordia), to practical steps to forward decolonization in Religious Studies (Tiawenti:non Canadian [Turtle Clan; Kahnawà:ke], Concordia), to decolonial curatorial practices (Lauren Vigo, Musée des beaux arts de Montréal), to analyzing invocations of the sacred in putatively secular decolonial visions (An Yountae).

The participant response to this first series was overwhelmingly positive, and it became clear to us that there remained a strong desire to continue engaging with and expanding upon the ideas which we had only just begun to solidify in our first iteration. At the same moment, we believed that such a project ought to move away from (though not entirely abandoning) the often-epistemological focus of decolonization within the academy by considering not only theoretical but also practical applications. The *Decolonization and the Study of Religion Workshop* series ran from January to May 2023. Similar to the previous year, this series offered two events per month: first, a more theoretically engaged seminar which built upon the considerations developed within the *Religion and Decoloniality* series, and second, a praxis-oriented workshop that could offer participants a more embodied and experiential opportunity from which to think about and enact decoloniality. Here, topics ranged widely, and touched upon pedagogy (Marcel Parent, Concordia), music games (Miranda Crowdus, Concordia), reconciliation (Colby Gaudet), inter-religious dialogue (Zac Roberts,

3. An Yountae, and Eleanor Craig, eds., *Beyond Man: Race, Coloniality, and Philosophy of Religion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

Macquarie University), as well as “decolonizing the scholar” (Allard Tremblay, McGill) and “decolonizing the secular” (Carlos Colorado, Winnipeg).

The entire series concluded with a graduate colloquium at McGill, where projects were proposed, presented, workshopped, and then finally published in this volume, distilling years of curious inquiry into a momentary crystallization of ideas. We hope that this volume may serve as both a touchstone for future modes of Religious Studies critique (particularly for those working within traditions that fall outside the immediate scope of imperial Christianity) as well a call for scholars to further consider the role and generative potential of religion in the development of global decolonial paradigms.

To put it lightly, we are extraordinarily pleased with the outcomes of this project and are deeply thankful for the energies and encouragement of the many students, faculty, and community members who have joined us on this meandering journey as participants, speakers, workshop leaders, and collaborators. Though we risk leaving out so many names, we would like to specifically acknowledge Isabel Davies and Katrina Kardash, who helped to conceptualize the series during its first iterations, as well as Munit Merid, Amna Jabeen, Samieun Khan, and Firoozeh Ebrahimi for their help in organizing each event and distributing communications across our respective departments. Finally, we wish to thank Elyse MacLeod and Amanda Rosini, whose tireless encouragement and effortless organizational rigour are the principal forces undergirding the development of this volume.

- Jordan Molot & Lucie Robathan