

General Editor's Introduction

SUSAN STRYKER

Religion is important for trans studies, whether one believes in religion or not.

Take, for example, recent events involving Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a self-identified transgender woman as well as a member of the “third gender” *hijra* community in India, a widely known former reality TV star and aspiring politician who is the leader of a religious movement called the Kinnar Akhada, which comprises observant Hindu hijras. In January 2019, Tripathi led her followers to bathe at the confluence of the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers during Kumbh Mela, the “Festival of the Pitcher,” a huge religious celebration that draws upward of 150 million attendees. On the first day of the festival, thirteen different akhadas, or groups of believers traditionally comprising male priests, wade into the Ganges for the Shahi Snan, or “royal bath,” in the belief that bathing in the river’s waters can free them from the cycle of life, death, and reincarnation. When the hijras of Tripathi’s Kinnar group went into the water to bathe on the first day of Kumbh Mela, they were asserting a claim to be newly recognized as a fourteenth akhada officially tasked with inaugurating the festival. The historical significance of their act was to reclaim the traditionally honored role of hijras within the Hindu dharma, or teachings related to the cosmic and social order, after centuries of disparagement and criminalization as a consequence of colonial British rule.

Tripathi’s public career has been part of a broader upsurge of hijra political activism in the wake of a 2014 Indian Supreme Court ruling that legally recognized them as a “third sex,” and another ruling in 2018 that decriminalized homosexuality. Her career cannot be divorced from an even broader upsurge in Hindu nationalism or from the threat—sometimes the reality—of an accompanying ethno-sectarian violence. Tripathi has stirred controversy through her support for rebuilding a temple in Ayodhya devoted to the Hindu deity Rama, an avatar of the god Vishnu, who is considered one of Vishnu’s most popular incarnations along with Krishna and the Buddha Siddhartha Guatama. According to some versions

of the epic *Ramayana* that chronicles Rama's life, it was at his birthplace in Ayodhya that Rama conferred a special dispensation on the hijra that allows them—to this day—to perform blessings during auspicious occasions such as childbirth and weddings. Purportedly—though most scholars doubt the veracity of the claim—the Muslim Mughal emperors who ruled India in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries demolished a Hindu temple to Rama in Ayodhya and replaced it with a mosque; this same mosque was, in retribution for the supposed desecration of the temple, destroyed by Hindu nationalists in 1992, leading to riots in which thousands died. Hard-line factions of the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party have been pushing to (re)build a temple to Rama on the site of the former mosque—a slap in the face to the country's sizeable Muslim minority—and the controversy was expected to play a major role in the general elections, held in May 2019.

Tripathi's support for rebuilding the temple to Rama has become a flash-point, with consequences for how the general election might play out, and for Muslim-Hindu relations in India more broadly. It is on the one hand an expression of her religious belief in the sacred, divinely sanctioned status of individuals traditionally deemed neither men nor women—some of whom, such as herself, now also identify as transgender—and on the other hand an expression of her willingness to use her public profile and her religious following as a chit in a larger political strategy. As one hijra activist recently put it to a Reuters reporter: “There has been an attempt by the right to co-opt trans voices to suit a certain version of history. Our apprehension is also that some are trying to further (their) own personal career moves” (Pal 2019).

Understanding transgender issues in religion, simply put, can be vital for understanding the world more generally.

For this special issue of *TSQ* on the interface of trans studies and religious studies, Max Strassfeld and Robyn Henderson-Espinoza map points of convergence as well as barriers to deeper dialogue between these two interdisciplinary fields. On the one hand, they challenge the secular framework that underpins medico-legal concepts of transgender. They draw on scholarship that interprets “secularism” itself as a particular ideology within Eurocentric modernity that repackages predominantly Christian notions of self and society, and they showcase work that—similarly to Laxmi Tripathi—finds in some trans practices of self a religiously motivated intervention into the supposedly secular order of the world. On the other hand, they challenge how trans issues, and trans people, have been treated transphobically within various religious traditions, and they highlight work by scholars of religion and trans religionists who work within various faiths to develop more trans-affirming practices. They contest and recontextualize, too, canonical interpretations of transness within feminist theology and

religious studies that have historically vilified transgender ways of being—particularly among transfeminine people assigned male at birth—as a pernicious consequence of patriarchal views of women and expressions of male power. In their hands, and in much of the work collected in this special issue, transness is repositioned as something that enables an affirmative relation to being, capable of offering a window onto the ontological depths. Because manifesting transness can have metaphysical, spiritual, or religious significance, it is thus an appropriate topic of interest for religious studies, as a growing body of work—such as a recent transgender studies special issue of *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*—attests.

Conversely, religion and spiritual belief are similarly gaining traction in trans studies. There's been a trace of attention all along. Leslie Feinberg's 1992 *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come*, for example, surveyed what would now be called third-gender and two-spirit traditions—which typically have some religious or spiritual function—and profiled the cross-dressing military career of St. Joan of Arc to marshal evidence for the global ubiquity and persistence of transgender phenomena, and channel the passions attached to religious belief toward the task of political transformation. “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix” (Stryker 1994) trafficked in the religiously freighted language of monsters as “divine portents,” cited Adam's complaint to God in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (“Did I request thee, Maker, to mold me man? Did I solicit thee from darkness to promote me?”) as paradigmatic of a trans person's position vis-à-vis the unchosenness of initial embodiment, and staged an existential encounter with the generative void that could be read theologically as a transformative leap into the biblical *tehom*, the Face of the Deep, the abyss from which all being emerges, whose flowing forth is the content narrativized by all cosmologies.

More recently, a new wave of trans studies scholarship—particularly works with an affinity for affect theory and the so-called new materialisms—increasingly parallels the critique of secularism to be found in religious studies, in that it refuses the secular/religious dichotomy, as well as the science-versus-religion framework. Historical research into the establishment of the medical model of transsexualism in the mid-twentieth century, for example, amply documents how “trancestors” such as Reed Erickson and Virginia Prince, along with cisgender researchers such as John Money and Richard Green, were all immersed in New Age human potential and spirituality movements, psychedelic vision questing, and other esoteric beliefs, even as they couched their trans-advocacy efforts in the language of science and medicine. And even the most cursory review of the primary literature of US transgender social movements from the 1960s to the 1990s would produce similarly ample documentation of their intersection with occult, neopagan, and exoticized non-Western religious and spiritual influences, such as the participation of Cuban

Santeria practitioners in Angela Douglas's Miami-based Transsexual Activist Organization (TAO) or the deep thread of Wicca that runs through Davina Gabriel's interview with Sandy Stone in the proto-transfeminist zine *TransSisters*.

Most fundamentally, both transness and religion can and do function as the basis for a new semiosis—and a new sociality—predicated on nondominant epistemological, ontological, and cosmological premises. Trans studies and studies of religion obviously have a great deal of unfinished work to do in articulating all that is at stake in their encounter. The scholarship collected between the covers of this issue of *TSQ* takes a significant step toward that vast undertaking.

Susan Stryker is associate professor of gender and women's studies and director of the Institute for LGBT Studies at the University of Arizona and general coeditor of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*.

References

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