

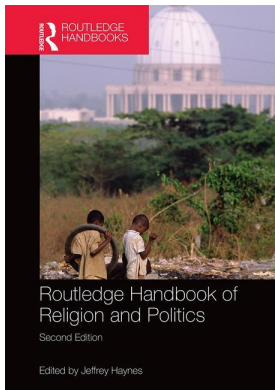
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Jeffrey Haynes

### **Religion, politics and gender**

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Kristin Aune, Line Nyhagen

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## 20

RELIGION, POLITICS  
AND GENDER*Kristin Aune and Line Nyhagen*UNIVERSITY OF COVENTRY, UK AND  
LOUGHBOROUGH UNIVERSITY, UK**Introduction**

Gender is at the heart of religion and politics, yet marginalized within religion and politics as separate academic fields as well as within studies that bring these two fields together. Indeed, gender is rarely mentioned in major books on religion and politics (see, for instance, the Routledge series ‘Studies in Religion and Politics’ and the Palgrave Macmillan series ‘Culture and Religion in International Relations’). The field of religion and politics thus mirrors other fields of study when it comes to the relative marginalization of gender. When gender *is* examined, it is via studies that focus explicitly and often exclusively on the role of gender in religion and politics, such as the edited volume by Bayes and Tohidi, which analyses ‘the politics of women’s rights in Catholic and Muslim contexts’,<sup>1</sup> along with more recent edited volumes by Cady and Fessenden<sup>2</sup> and Reilly and Scriver<sup>3</sup> which both address the religion-secularism-gender equality nexus in different contexts. Other works, including those by Scott,<sup>4</sup> and Rosenberger and Sauer,<sup>5</sup> discuss a single topic such as the politicization of the Muslim headscarf.

New and shifting configurations of gender, religion and politics require us to examine how nation states as well as international and global governance structures (e.g., the European Union; the Organization of Islamic Cooperation; the United Nations) deal with gender equality issues that are highly contested (e.g., abortion, contraception, divorce, prostitution, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, honour killings); how national, international and global government institutions relate to religious stakeholders and actors (e.g., the Catholic Church); how faith-based and secular voluntary organizations mobilize in relation to gender equality issues; how religious communities deal with gender equality and women’s rights issues, and how religious women and men perform and negotiate gender relations in their everyday lives. Highlighting the stable and shifting relationships between religion, politics and gender, this chapter focuses on the relationship between religion, politics and gender at global, national and local levels.

From a feminist point of view, politics is not simply about states, governance and the electorate, but also about communities, civil society groups, families and intimate aspects of individuals’ ‘lived citizenship’.<sup>6</sup> A feminist notion of politics points to the artificial and often imposed distinction between ‘the public’ and ‘the private’ spheres as untenable, as politics are

intertwined with our everyday lives as economic, social, gendered, racial and ethnic, sexual and intimate, religious or secular citizens. Moreover, while status, rights and duties are central aspects of lived citizenship, so are our identities, our sense of belonging, our caring for each other, and our participation in a multitude of social contexts.<sup>7</sup> Politics intersect with gender and religion at all of these levels and also with other forms of difference and inequality such as class, ‘race’ and ethnicity, and sexuality. Women’s political activism that addresses inequalities, discrimination and marginalization is at times primarily based on the mobilization of gender, while at other times it is based on a mixed mobilization of gender together with ‘race’ and ethnicity, sexuality or religion. Furthermore, gender-based political activism may be anti-religious, indifferent to religion, or pro-religion, while religiously based political activism may support conservative or progressive forms of gender relations. The following three sections of this chapter address the issues of religion, secularization and gender politics; multiculturalism, feminism and religion; and women and religious activism.

### **Religion, secularization and gender politics**

The secularization thesis, as forwarded by classical thinkers<sup>8</sup> and by contemporary theorists,<sup>9</sup> predicted that modernization would inevitably lead to secularization. The separation of the church and state, the increasing influence of scientific explanations of human life, a loss of significance of religion in the public sphere, the emergence of religious pluralism in contexts previously dominated by one religion, and the notion that religion is only a private matter for the individual, were pointed to as evidence for the diminished importance of religion and the growth of secular thought and practice. Today, however, the secularization thesis in its strong form<sup>10</sup> has largely been rejected, as modernity continues to be characterized by religion alongside secularism. Moreover, we are witnessing a ‘global resurgence of religion’,<sup>11</sup> with relatively high and also increasing levels of religious belief and practice in the world regions of Latin-America, Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and the Middle East.<sup>12</sup> In the global context, Europe appears as an exception,<sup>13</sup> as it is more secular than other world regions. However, internal differences within Europe give evidence to the continued importance of religious belief and practice<sup>14</sup> as well as the increasing influence of secularism.<sup>15</sup> The increasing visibility of religion in Europe has led scholars to acknowledge that religious citizens should be able to legitimately voice their political views in the public sphere and have a say in policy processes.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, cash-strapped European governments are turning to faith-based organizations to deliver more public welfare services.<sup>17</sup> While women do a large share of the voluntary work performed by contemporary faith-based organizations, we know very little about the political, cultural and emotional significance of their work, as gender is also marginalized in studies of such organizations.<sup>18</sup>

The ‘post-secular’ term ‘recognizes the relevance of religion and of religious ideas in informing civic discourse’,<sup>19</sup> but this shift in thinking about the legitimacy of religion in the public sphere has also been critiqued by those who see the political influence of religion as detrimental to gender equality and women’s rights. Jeffreys, for example, argues that because ‘religions are usually discriminatory with respect to gender and sexuality’,<sup>20</sup> they should not be included in government consultations and awarded contracts for public service delivery. There are several problems with such a universal rejection of religion’s role in the public sphere. First, it generalizes across all religions and all historical, political and socio-economic contexts, thus overlooking instances where religion plays a progressive role in relation to gender politics. Many religious women’s groups and feminists work in different ways to change religions from within, supporting gender equality both within and outside their own religious

communities. The spectrum ranges from those seeking reform, such as Evangelical Christian feminists<sup>21</sup> and conservative Muslim reformist feminists,<sup>22</sup> to those seeking radical upheaval, such as the *Women-Church* movement<sup>23</sup> which seeks to dismantle religious institutions, and the *Goddess* movement which honours the Divine Feminine.<sup>24</sup> Research has also found that women in gender-conservative religious contexts are able to circumvent patriarchal gender relations by carving out their own female spaces of autonomy and support.<sup>25</sup> Second, the view that religion is always in opposition to women's rights is also problematic because it privileges gender as a lens through which inequality is studied. Giving primacy to gender and refusing an intersectional lens on inequality has been forcefully critiqued by Black and post-colonial feminists.<sup>26</sup> While 'race' and ethnicity, class and religion are also linked to different forms of inequality, they, like gender, are also intertwined with people's identities and sense of self. For some, their religious faith and belonging to a religious community is simply more important than formal gender equality.<sup>27</sup> This poses a particular challenge for liberal feminists and others who insist on equal rights and opportunities for women and men.<sup>28</sup>

Confounding the issue of religion and gender is the fact that women are consistently found to be more religious than men, whether measured via belief, membership or attendance.<sup>29</sup> However, because studies of women and men's religiosity are often confined to Christianity in Western contexts, it has been argued that a general conclusion that women are more religious than men is unwarranted.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the measurement of individuals' religious beliefs and practice via quantitative surveys with pre-defined questions and answer categories (which inform most studies on religion and secularization) can only give a limited view of people's everyday religious beliefs and practices. While quantitative studies are needed to support the claim that women tend to believe in God and participate in organized religion more than men, measures such as belief, membership and attendance are insufficient in understanding religion outside of institutional contexts. The perspective of 'lived religion', proposed by Hall, Orsi, Ammerman, McGuire and Neitz,<sup>31</sup> recognizes that everyday forms of religion are mostly lived outside organized religious groups. Lived religion is practised in the 'private' realms of households, families and friends, but also in 'public' realms of work, sport, travel and politics broadly conceived.<sup>32</sup> Gender practices and normative perceptions about women and men's roles are highly salient for religion as lived.<sup>33</sup>

The relationship between gender and secularization is a relatively new theme of scholarly investigation. The sexual revolution of the 1960s, women's and feminist movements of the 1970s and 80s, and women's increasing participation in the labour market, have been identified as factors explaining women's defection from Christian churches in the West.<sup>34</sup> There are very few studies of gender and secularization within Islam and other religions.<sup>35</sup> The fact that Muslim women are not required to pray at the mosque demonstrates the difficulty in using membership and attendance as indicators of religiosity (and secularity). Moreover, Hussain has argued that, rather than becoming less religious, Muslim women who participate in the public sphere, as well as Muslims in Britain more generally, are becoming *more* religious.<sup>36</sup>

While modernity has been associated (wrongly) with *inevitable* secularization and (rightly) with increasing gender equality, the relationship between religion and gender equality is also receiving scholarly attention. In their study of 'Gender Equality and Cultural Change around the World', based on data from the World Values Survey and the European Values Survey, Inglehart and Norris mapped attitudes to gender equality by religion and nation and found that post-industrial countries show much stronger support for gender equality than agrarian societies.<sup>37</sup> The post-industrial nations with highest support for gender equality are those in which Christianity and Judaism are the predominant religions, while the agrarian societies with the least support for gender equality are predominantly Muslim. Industrial societies (mid-way

between post-industrial and agrarian countries) most committed to gender equality are those with Catholic and Hindu majorities. Inglehart and Norris conclude that religion has a negative effect on gender equality, and highlight Islam as a particular impediment to gender equality.<sup>38</sup> Their work suggests that the best way to bring about gender equality politically is via secular democracies. However, as Scott has argued, secularism is not a guarantee for gender equality.<sup>39</sup> The relationship between religion, secularism and gender equality has to be studied in specific contexts. Understanding of what constitutes ‘gender equality’ varies in different settings including religious communities, and gender equality may clash with the right to religious freedom.<sup>40</sup> While some scholars argue that gender equality should always trump religious freedom,<sup>41</sup> we assert that such a generalization is at best a result of ignorance and at worst a result of a particular Western, liberal or radical prejudice against religion more broadly and against religious women in particular.

Contrary to Inglehart and Norris’s claim that Islam is ‘the worst offender’ in terms of its negative effect on gender equality in the world’s nations, Seguino and Lovinsky, and Seguino, have found that ‘no one religion stands out as consistently more gender inequitable in its effects than all the others’.<sup>42</sup> Instead, their study, which analysed World Values Survey data, found that ‘dominant religions – and not exclusively Islam – have varying effects on gender attitudes and outcomes, some positive, some negative’.<sup>43</sup> However, ‘the intensity of religious belief and the frequency of religious participation’, measured as how important religion is in an individual’s life (intensity), whether the individual belongs to a religious denomination, and how often he or she attends religious services (participation), was found to be ‘consistently negatively correlated with gender attitudes and outcomes’.<sup>44</sup> Religious devotion, membership and collective worship were thus indicators of more conservative views on gender. Regular religious attendance is, however, not a feature of Buddhism,<sup>45</sup> and only Muslim men are required to attend the mosque. These variations illustrate the inherent Christian bias of large-scale surveys such as those used by Seguino and by Inglehart and Norris.

Recent in-depth quantitative and qualitative case studies of the relationship between the state, religion and gender equality reveal more nuanced findings. The project ‘Religion, Politics and Gender Equality’, initiated by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) in 2007, sought precisely to ask how religion and politics are intertwined in specific contexts, and what the consequences are for gender equality.<sup>46</sup> A main finding was that fights for women’s rights and equality are bound up with wider battles for justice and equality relating to class, nationalism, religion, ‘race’ and ethnicity within a global context of inequality, thus lending support for intersectional analyses.<sup>47</sup> Case studies were conducted in eleven countries selected on the basis of variation in religion and type of relationship between politics and religion.<sup>48</sup> These studies revealed a complex intertwining of religious politics with gender politics, where it could not be determined *prima facie* that religious interests would endorse conservative gender politics or that secular interests would support progressive gender politics. For example, Bernstein and Jakobsen found that an unexpected alliance of conservative Christians and secular feminists in the United States had a decisive impact on the US government’s lack of attention to sex workers’ rights and its political framing of all types of prostitution as ‘modern slavery’.<sup>49</sup> However, many of the case studies showed religious stakeholders to have a negative impact on women’s rights and gender equality, including in Poland, where the Catholic Church exerts a strong influence on governmental policies that restrict women’s access to contraception and to abortion.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, the Catholic Church in Chile was found to have a powerful political influence on conservative policies relating to divorce and abortion, as well as representing ‘fierce opposition to the democratization of gender and intergenerational relations in the family’<sup>51</sup> (for other examples of religion as a conservative

force in gender politics, see Drezgi on the influence of the Orthodox church in Serbia; Hasan on the influence of Hindu nationalism and gender conservatism in India; Pereira and Ibrahim on the affinity between views of the Christian and Muslim religious right in Nigeria on women's sexuality as 'immoral').<sup>52</sup> These examples illustrate that even if both the state and religious stakeholders accept the rule of law and democratic rules,<sup>53</sup> the laws and policies they implement or support may be detrimental to women's rights and gender equality,<sup>54</sup> including women's individual right to control their own bodies. Neither a secular nor a religious state *guarantees* gender equality.<sup>55</sup>

An issue of growing concern is that of fundamentalist religious movements which often propagate patriarchal systems of governance and gender relations. Such movements exist within Christianity, Islam, Judaism and other religions,<sup>56</sup> but Islamist forms of fundamentalism are receiving increased attention due to their global incitement of hatred and acts of violence. In this regard, the recruitment of young women, some of whom are born in Europe, to terrorist organizations such as *Islamic State* in Iraq and Syria, which do not accept the rule of parliamentary democracy, demonstrates that women are not immune to propaganda that incites terror and violence while proclaiming to be rooted in religious fervour. Increasing socio-economic inequalities, rooted in post-colonial, global economic forces, together with political-cultural marginalization and individual dispositions, create the basis for such recruitment.<sup>57</sup> Although many religious fundamentalist movements are detrimental to gender equality and women's rights, some women may also achieve a sense of empowerment within them, as respected leaders and teachers of women or as wives and mothers (e.g., British women who have joined ISIS as leaders of other women; women in the Indian Hindu nationalist movement).<sup>58</sup> We return to the issue of religious women's agency in the section on women and religious activism.

### Multiculturalism, feminism and religion

Much of the best-known scholarship on gender and religion has taken place in post-industrial societies that have become more religiously diverse as a result of migration and globalization. How states accommodate religious pluralism is an issue that also has ramifications for gender equality. Governments have the power to aid or restrict both religious freedom and gender equality. From a gender- and religious-equality perspective, states must recognize and give space to religions at group and individual level as well as supporting measures to further women's rights, within and outside religion. This is a complex task, especially when some religious groups do not support gender equality, which requires negotiations (and imperfect settlements) between religions, women and states.

Multiculturalism has been one approach, adopted from the 1970s in countries such as Britain, Canada, Australia, Germany and Sweden. Aiming to support and celebrate ethnic and religious diversity, states sought to accommodate the requests of ethnic and religious groups to be enabled to preserve their cultural differences, including their language, customs and religious practices, and to pass these on to their children. But how advantageous is this situation for women? Some, notably Okin<sup>59</sup> in her essay 'Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?', hit back at multiculturalism for disadvantaging women, since the control of women's sexuality through various 'cultural practices' (such as female genital mutilation, polygamy, forced marriage, unequal inheritance laws or forbidding contraception) was harming their interests. Women's individual rights should not be subordinated to the rights of the cultural or religious group to which they belong, Okin argued.

Confronted with the problem of cultural practices that disadvantage women, there are, Prins and Saharso argue,<sup>60</sup> four possible approaches for liberal multiculturalism. 'Principle-driven'

liberalism considers liberal views universally relevant, so if a practice evidently limits women's capabilities or is not autonomously chosen by the woman, it should be prohibited; this is Nussbaum's<sup>61</sup> approach. The 'democratic approach'<sup>62</sup> requires societies to debate the merits and demerits and reach a compromise, ensuring the voices of those most affected (i.e. women from the cultural group) are heard, and accepting that democratic deliberation may not conclude in a way that suits everyone. The 'institutional approach'<sup>63</sup> recommends dividing the areas the state and the group has sway over by incorporating joint governance systems; for instance, some aspects of family law could be dealt with by the group and other aspects by the state, but both systems would relate to, and have to negotiate with, the other. Finally, the 'contextualist approach', exemplified by Phillips,<sup>64</sup> argues that cultural groups are not homogeneous entities but are comprised of diverse individuals with different views; like the democratic model, this approach requires deliberation, based on a detailed investigation of each specific case rather than on hegemonic liberal assumptions.

But these versions of liberal multiculturalism are rejected by some (feminists and others) who, more pessimistic about the state's ability to achieve gender or racial justice, argue that more radical societal restructuring is necessary, of an anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-patriarchal kind.<sup>65</sup> These critics also believe that multiculturalism homogenizes women in groups instead of accounting for their diverse class or ethnic locations, and leads to legitimacy being given to cultural group leaders who are most often men and who do not represent women's interests.<sup>66</sup> Often political secularists, these critics support the political project of separating religion from the state.

However, critics of multiculturalism do not account adequately, Prins and Saharso argue,<sup>67</sup> for the fact that some women choose to participate in practices that appear to be harmful to them (e.g. polygamous marriages or submitting to discriminatory religious legal systems). Although these choices are often conditioned in the family and therefore not always *purely* choices, some women choose to make them nonetheless. Prins and Saharso conclude that the best options for societies debating how to deal with harmful cultural practices is the 'contextualist approach' of Phillips<sup>68</sup> and the views of Benhabib,<sup>69</sup> a critical multiculturalist who points out the diversity within cultural groups but advocates, like Phillips, deliberation between diverse constituents.

There is another problem with secularist anti-multiculturalism arguments, for they often advocate the exclusion of religion from the public sphere.<sup>70</sup> France, notably, upholds *laïcité* (secularism), meaning that although it grants legal recognition and limited tax exemption to some religious associations, it will not fund religious bodies, and public schools do not deliver religious education. In 2004 the French government brought in a 'visible religious symbol' ban in public schools and in 2011 it banned the 'face veil' in public, with negative consequences for Muslim women who do veil; Belgium followed suit.<sup>71</sup> France's prohibition of veils in public-sector workplaces has meant that women who feel compelled to veil can no longer work in the public sector, and hundreds of women have been fined for flouting the ban. When women who veil have brought discrimination cases to the European Court of Human Rights, the Court has by and large supported the rulings of the country that made them. For instance, the 2014 judgement in the SAS v. France case upheld the face veil ban, stating that it did not violate the European Convention on Human Rights. The court concluded that 'respect for the minimum requirements of life in society' legitimized France's ban.<sup>72</sup> The hostility to veiling evident in France's legislation appears to have had repercussions in the form of Islamophobic attacks; 80 per cent of anti-Muslim attacks in France are against Muslim women.<sup>73</sup> The number of such attacks rose sharply in the wake of the 2015 murder by Islamic extremists of the Charlie Hebdo cartoonists. Few European nations go as far as France, but some advocate restricting public

funding to religious groups, for instance denying funds to faith-based welfare or education services, prohibiting the wearing of religious symbols in public spaces, or forbidding 'religious arguments' in political debates.<sup>74</sup>

Secularism and secularity are slippery concepts.<sup>75</sup> Globally, and in Europe, a range of relationships between religion(s) and state(s) exists, from establishment of religion (where a religion is aligned with, and privileged by, the state) to strict legal, administrative and political separation or secularism, and everything in between, as Bader<sup>76</sup> outlines.<sup>77</sup> Secularism exists in different forms and in 'hard' or 'soft' versions. French secularism shades into anti-religion, while the Indian state keeps a 'principled distance' from religious institutions but supports and respects religious diversity.<sup>78</sup> Soft secularism allows religious organizations and individuals a voice in the public realm and emphasizes neutrality (not prioritizing any voices). Hard secularism wishes to minimize the presence of religious voices; it is anti-religious, not just non-religious. Feminist secularism exists in both 'hard' and 'soft' forms.

Some feminist activists are 'hard secularists' who not only tend to advocate separation between religion and state but also participate in organized anti-religion activism. The AHA Foundation, an organization founded by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the controversial politician and author now working for a right-wing North American think tank, is one example. Having suffered female genital mutilation as a child in Somalia she escaped to the Netherlands and was granted asylum, partly on grounds of having escaped a forced marriage. She became an atheist and spoke out against Islam and the treatment of women in Muslim societies, leading to death threats, especially after her collaboration on the 2004 film *Submission* with Theo van Gogh, who was himself killed by an Islamic extremist. The Dutch government enabled her to live in hiding. On moving to the United States of America she set up the non-profit AHA Foundation in 2007, which tries to counter the impact of political Islam on women's rights and fight against religiously justified forms of violence against women. She has written several books including the autobiography *Infidel: My Life*<sup>79</sup> and *Heretic*,<sup>80</sup> which argues that a Muslim reformation is needed.

*FEMEN* is another controversial anti-religion feminist group. It originated in Ukraine, and with the aim to protest against sex tourism it has gathered recruits across Europe and staged protests around religious and parliamentary buildings since 2008. *FEMEN*'s leader, Inna Shevchenko, was granted asylum in France in 2013. More defiant than the group Pussy Riot in their opposition not just to certain religious institutions but also to religion per se, *FEMEN* are outspoken critics of religion which they consider a manifestation of patriarchy. *FEMEN* have spoken out against an alleged 'Islamisation' of Europe, disrupting religious events in Germany, Sweden, Ukraine, France and Belgium. These actions include linking up in 2012 with Egyptian blogger Aliaa Magda Elmahdy to stage a naked protest against Egypt's planned constitution. Elmahdy had scrawled 'Sharia is not a constitution' on her body and she stood with *FEMEN* activists who held slogans 'Religion is slavery' and 'No religion'.

Anti-religious activism contests sexuality conservatism as well as gender conservatism. Despite growing support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) causes among progressive religious groups, many religious groups continue to oppose homosexuality, transgender and gay marriage, and this has in turn provoked anti-religious activism. Homo-nationalism is a key example of this. Jasbir Puar identifies a post-9/11 'global gay Islamophobia'<sup>81</sup> and writes about the way LGBT activists in the West are uniting against discrimination and hatred and in the process demonizing alleged homophobic Muslim nations, as well as stereotyping Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims as potential terrorists. In doing so they are buttressing Western (especially American) colonialist anti-terror policies and practices in the Middle East while ignoring the voices of queer Muslim activists.



## Women and religious activism

Examination of anti-religion activism in the furtherance of gender or sexuality equality brings us to women, gender and religious activism more broadly. The study of gender, religion and political activism is a relatively new field, notwithstanding scholarship on (secular) feminist activism. Smith suggests reasons for the neglect of religion in social movement scholarship.<sup>82</sup> The rise of social movement scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s coincided with the popularity of secularization theory, so scholars assumed religion was dying. Sociology was dominated (in the 1940s–1970s) by structural-functionalism that saw religion as both reinforcing social integration and harmony *and* becoming compartmentalized and privatized, linked to secularization. Academia was fragmented, so different fields – such as political science, religious studies and gender studies – rarely collaborated. Emphasizing social movements’ political-rational and organized nature, scholars excluded religion from analysis, considering it the epitome of irrationality. Moreover, ‘religion did not seem to play an important role in many of the actual social movements’ being studied, for instance the women’s or student movements (the civil rights movement was an exception); ‘If anything’, Smith remarks, ‘religion appeared to be a conservative force, resisting these movements.’<sup>83</sup> Smith tries to persuade politics scholars to recognize religious activism as important and distinctive because it is grounded in meaning systems that are based on the supernatural. ‘Religion is characterized by sacred transcendence’,<sup>84</sup> he argues. This both sanctifies the status quo – for instance explaining poverty as God’s will – and perceives a reality transcending and challenging the mundane world, which can prompt disruptive activism by religions.

Although Smith rightfully calls for social movement scholars to be attentive to religious activism, his work ignores gender, but since the 1990s scholars working from other perspectives have examined gendered and religion-based activism. Existing studies are mostly qualitative, spanning the religions, but includes a particular focus on Muslim women, reflecting the twenty-first century expansion of Islam research. This body of work addresses how religion acts as a conservative force, inhibiting women’s rights, and as a progressive one, a resource for women’s work for social change.<sup>85</sup>

Generally speaking, studies on gender, religion and activism raise four questions: First, *what is the focus of the activism?* Is it to achieve gender equality in religion, social justice in society, or to improve the representation of religious women in society? Or is it focused on reinforcing gender conservatism? This engenders a related second question: *is religion and gender activism feminist?* Some feminist scholars find it difficult to see conservative activism (e.g. activism that reinforces women’s domesticity or aims to establish a religious state which limits women’s options) as ‘proper’ activism. This provokes questions about the extent to which conservative activism counts as ‘real’ female agency. Why would women choose to support movements that seem contrary to their own interests? Here, the issues raised earlier about gender-conservative and/or fundamentalist religious movements resurface. When women join movements advocating gender traditionalism, are they ‘bargaining with patriarchy’,<sup>86</sup> enacting a limited form of agency which does not challenge traditional gendered structures? The assumption behind these questions is that agency must equate resistance against patriarchy; without resistance (to patriarchy and gender traditionalism) there is no activism, and women are simply suffering from ‘false consciousness’. Mahmood’s work on women in the Egyptian mosque movement contests this assumption,<sup>87</sup> and just as she locates agency within religious piety, other scholars are beginning to argue that women’s conservative religious activism *is* nevertheless legitimate activism, even if some scholars find it objectionable. Scholars therefore debate activists’ relationship to feminism: do activists see themselves as feminists, and should they? Are they enacting a form of sisterhood or oppressing other women?

Third, as gender scholars now consider the intersections of gender with class, 'race' or ethnicity, sexuality, disability and nation, they ask *how far is this activism intersectional?* Fourth, *how does religion and spirituality*<sup>88</sup> *shape activism?* For instance, does religion aid activism through endorsing or divinely sanctioning a human rights framework, through inspiring emotions of love or joy, through practices that create a new world or through adherence to or reinterpretation of religious law or theology? This is a complex question that reflects different understandings of what religion is (is it action, belief, emotion or lived experience?).

Examining case studies enables us to witness these debates and to see the move since the 1990s towards a broader approach to religion and gender activism, notably to see conservative activism *as* activism. In 1998 Jeffrey and Basu published *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*,<sup>89</sup> an edited volume examining women's involvement in Hindu nationalist campaigns, especially Hindu nationalists' 1992 destruction of a mosque built by a Muslim emperor in a town in northern India which was said to have been built on ruins of the birthplace of the deity Ram. The Hindu nationalist movement used gendered imagery of women as wives and mothers and mobilized women, several as leaders in the movement, in demonstrations and election campaigns against Muslims. Jeffrey and Basu are uncomfortable with the gender-conservative and nationalist focus of this activism, and question whether it should be considered as activism. They ask why more women were involved in this movement than in feminist movements, and note that women's agency can strengthen gender segregation, upholding the traditional family. Some women may be empowered but at the cost of disempowering many others: 'appealing to women as mothers might facilitate their mobilization across community (and class) lines . . . Legitimate power embodied in motherhood can frame women's activism. But devotion to duty, self-sacrifice, and ennobling activism on others' behalf cannot easily mesh with feminist activism and demanding women's rights'.<sup>90</sup> They also observe that within conservative movements like this, women can exercise resistance in small ways, such as sabotaging their husbands' meals behind their backs, but they find it difficult to see this as 'acceptable' activism. Women *can* be seen as agents, they conclude, and they gesture towards viewing this agency positively, but nevertheless consider it limited: 'the question is not whether women are victims or agents', they argue, 'but, rather, what sorts of agents women can be despite their subordination'.<sup>91</sup> What of the explicit use of religious imagery, as the Hindu nationalists use when they appeal to women via the goddesses Kali and Durga or by female energy (Shakti)? Such usage should not be ignored by feminists, but it divides women into Hindu v. non-Hindu and should not be used as a basis to unite them, Jeffrey and Basu argue. This may be agency, but it is not feminist agency, they believe, pointing out that the women did not see themselves as feminists. They caution scholars not to be positive about this movement or see elements of female resistance as manifestations of feminist agency, since agency must be used with other women in order to challenge 'systemic gender inequalities'.<sup>92</sup>

Recently, scholars have become more willing to accept a wider variety of activism as legitimately feminist. Rinaldo provides a case study of Indonesian Muslim women activists working within women's NGOs.<sup>93</sup> Their focus is on reforming the law to improve women's rights, particularly reproductive rights (abortion and female genital mutilation) and women's ability to exercise choice over clothing. Their method is engaging in public interpretation of religious texts, emphasizing the importance of bringing religious texts into conversation with the social context and women's experience. Rinaldo's enquiry concerns their agency. She argues that through activism they are expressing 'pious critical agency'. This concept forges a middle way between Mahmood's 'compliant agency' which sees women's subjectivities as formed in relation to dominant Islamic discourses, and liberal feminist instrumental agency. As for whether the

pious critical activism challenges traditional gendered structures, the answer is yes, but within an Islamic context; the women are not advocating political secularism. They combine feminism and Islam, and Rinaldo argues that religious piety and feminism can intersect or overlap. For Rinaldo, religion shapes their activism in positive ways, providing a source of authority for their activism and giving them inspiration. Here she contrasts with Jeffrey and Basu, and she asserts that scholars should recognize that religion *can* support a critique of gender inequality.

Zion-Waldoks's study of the 'Politics of Devoted Resistance' of Orthodox Agunah Activists in Israel also accepts religious women's activism as legitimate.<sup>94</sup> Zion-Waldoks interviewed thirty-three activists working to reform laws and practices surrounding divorce for women whose husbands refuse to grant them a *get*, or divorce decree. The women had been inspired by the 'Torah learning revolution' where, since the 1990s, women had gained new higher standing through education in Jewish law. This had empowered them to challenge legal and religious authorities in the public sphere through educational campaigns, legislation and through influencing the appointment of Rabbinic court judges. Like Rinaldo, Zion-Waldoks steers a path between the liberal feminist version of agency as autonomy and resistance to gender conservatism, and Mahmood's<sup>95</sup> version of agency as subjectification through religious conservatism. Both models, Zion-Waldoks argues, emphasize the individual female agent. Instead, she emphasizes the relational nature of agency, endorsing Rinaldo's interpretation but adding that agency is 'action within relationship'. Agunah activists are expressing 'devoted resistance', Zion-Waldoks argues; resistance through and aided by religion. Religion enables the women's activism; they are devoted to religious structures and want Jewish law through the state-authorized Rabbinic courts to shape their lives. She categorizes these 'devoted resisters' into four types: modest politicians, reluctant activists, religious reformers and visionaries. They are challenging traditionally gendered structures in supporting women to divorce, but within a conservative family-focused context; the activists are devoted wives and mothers and embraced modesty codes in their dress. Some called themselves feminists, others did not. As a way forward, she urges scholars not to ask whether religious women have agency, but instead to look at 'the range of agentive capacities women may employ'.<sup>96</sup>

Most religion, gender and activism studies, such as these, are not fully intersectional as they focus on middle-class women. Doetsch-Kidder's *Social Change and Intersectional Activism: The Spirit of Social Movement*,<sup>97</sup> however, moves beyond gender. It presents oral histories of twenty-five queer, feminist and/or transgender activists (not only women) working at the intersection of 'race', class, gender, sexuality, disability and nation. She does not question whether this activism *is* activism, as her focus is on how attention to spirit informs their activism. She uses 'spirituality' interchangeably with 'metaphysics' to refer to 'practices, experiences, and ideas through which people seek to connect with nature, larger communities, their bodies, or an internal sense of wisdom, values, or principles'.<sup>98</sup> Her ideas come from various sources, but Doetsch-Kidder foregrounds the works of multiracial feminists and Buddhist teachers. The activists' spiritually inspired activism shows itself in the following ways: activists express 'loving criticism' of injustice, they have a strong faith in human dignity, and their work brings them profound joy. She 'argue[s] for the centrality of spirit to struggles for social change'.<sup>99</sup> Prickett's work on women negotiating space in an African American mosque in Chicago is similarly intersectional.<sup>100</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the religious politics of gender is significant all over the world, from global to national to local contexts. As religious pluralism increases,

governmental institutions need to engage even more in debates about religious diversity, religious freedom and sexual and gender equality. The chapter has also shown that the relationship between religion, politics and gender is not uniform and static, but variable, negotiated, challenged and contested. Any generalizations are hard to make, and scholars must pay attention to specific historical, political, social-economic and cultural contexts in order to understand the array of different constellations between conservative and progressive forms of religion, politics and gender. At the center of analyses must be religious women themselves and how they understand and experience their own positioning. Gender inequality is one of the most important challenges facing humankind, and both secular and religious women's voices must be heard.

### Notes

- 1 Bayes and Tohidi, *Globalization, Gender and Religion*.
- 2 Cady and Fessenden, *Religion, the Secular*.
- 3 Reilly and Scriver, *Religion, Gender*.
- 4 Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*.
- 5 Rosenberger and Sauer, *Politics, Religion and Gender*.
- 6 Lister, *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives*, 3.
- 7 Ibid.; Lister et al., *Gendering Citizenship*; Yuval-Davis, 'The Multi-Layered Citizen' and 'Belonging and the Politics of Belonging'; Siim, *The Challenge of Recognizing*; Halsaa, Roseneil and Sümer, *Remaking Citizenship*.
- 8 E.g., Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*; Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*.
- 9 E.g., Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society*; Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*; Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion*; Bruce, *God is Dead and Secularization*.
- 10 See Mellor and Schilling, *Sociology of the Sacred*.
- 11 Berger, *The Desecularization*.
- 12 Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case*; see also Berger, Davie and Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe?*
- 13 Davie, *The Sociology of Religion*.
- 14 Casanova, *Public Religions*; Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case*.
- 15 E.g., in the United Kingdom; see Davie, *Religion in Britain*.
- 16 E.g., Habermas, *Notes on a Postsecular*; Casanova, *Religion, Politics*.
- 17 Dinham and Jackson, 'Religion, Welfare and Education'; Bäckström and Davie, *Welfare and Religion*.
- 18 See, however, Mubarak, *Women's Inter Faith Initiatives*; O'Neill, 'Religion and Women'; and 'Religion, Political Participation'; Nyhagen, *Conceptualizing Lived Religious Citizenship*.
- 19 Dillon, 'Can Post-Secular Society', 142.
- 20 Jeffreys, 'Desecularisation and Sexual Equality', 364.
- 21 Cochran, *Evangelical Feminism*.
- 22 Moghadam, 'Islamic Feminism'.
- 23 Hunt, 'Women-Church'.
- 24 Salomonsen, *Enchanted Feminism*.
- 25 See Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World*; Griffith, *God's Daughters*; Brasher, *Godly Women*; Manning, *God Gave Us the Right*.
- 26 Carby, 'White Woman Listen!'; Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection'.
- 27 See Stuart, 'The Right to Freedom'; Nyhagen, *Conceptualizing Lived Religious Citizenship*.
- 28 See Okin, *Is Multiculturalism Bad*; Loenen and Goldsmith, *Religious Pluralism*; Phillips, *Gender and Culture*.
- 29 Aune, Sharma and Vincett, *Women and Religion*; Trzbieatowska and Bruce, *Why Are Women?*
- 30 Loewenthal, MacLeod and Cinnirella, 'Are Women More Religious?'

- 31 Hall, *Lived Religion in America*; Orsi, 'Everyday Miracles' and 'Is the Study of Lived Religion'; Ammerman, *Everyday Religion*; McGuire, *Lived Religion*; Neitz, 'Lived Religion'.
- 32 See Neitz, 'Lived Religion'.
- 33 See Aune, 'Feminist Spirituality'.
- 34 Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*; Woodhead, 'Gendering Secularization Theory'; Trzebiatowska and Bruce, *Why Are Women?*
- 35 See, however, Aune, Sharma and Vincett, *Women and Religion*.
- 36 Hussain, 'Counting Women with Faith'.
- 37 Inglehart and Norris, *Rising Tide*.
- 38 Ibid., 68.
- 39 Scott, *Sexularism*; see also Reilly and Scriver, *Religion, Gender*; Cady and Fessenden, *Religion, the Secular*.
- 40 See Loenen and Goldschmidt, *Religious Pluralism*.
- 41 E.g., Jeffreys, 'Desecularisation and Sexual Equality'.
- 42 Seguino and Lovinsky, *The Impact of Religiosity*, 41; and Seguino, 'Help or Hindrance?', 1317.
- 43 Seguino, 'Help or Hindrance?', 1317; our emphasis.
- 44 Ibid., 1317.
- 45 Ibid., 1310.
- 46 UNRISD, *Project Reference Document*, 12.
- 47 Razavi and Jenichen, 'The Unhappy Marriage', 845.
- 48 Ibid., 834.
- 49 Bernstein and Jakobsen, 'Sex, Secularism and Religious Influence'.
- 50 Heinen and Portet, 'Reproductive Rights in Poland'.
- 51 Guzmán, Seibert and Staab, 'Democracy in the Country', 973.
- 52 Drezgi, 'Religion, Politics and Gender'; Hasan, 'Gender, Religion and Democratic Politics'; Pereira and Ibrahim, 'On the Bodies of Women'.
- 53 Casanova, *Religion, Politics*.
- 54 Phillips, 'Religion: Ally, Threat'.
- 55 Scott, *Sexularism*.
- 56 See Antoun, *Understanding Fundamentalism*.
- 57 Tohidi and Bayes, 'Women Redefining Modernity', 39–42; Hawley, *Fundamentalism and Gender*.
- 58 Bacchetta, *Gender in the Hindu Nation*.
- 59 Okin, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*
- 60 Prins and Saharso, 'Multiculturalism and Identity'.
- 61 Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*.
- 62 E.g., Deveaux, 'A Deliberative Approach'.
- 63 E.g., Shachar, *Multicultural Jurisdictions*.
- 64 Phillips, *Multiculturalism Without Culture*.
- 65 Berlant and Warner, 'Introduction to Critical Multiculturalism'; Patel 'Multi-Faithism and the Gender Question'.
- 66 Yuval-Davis, 'Fundamentalism, Multiculturalism and Women'.
- 67 Prins and Saharso, 'Multiculturalism and Identity'.
- 68 Phillips, *Multiculturalism Without Culture*.
- 69 Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture*.
- 70 See, e.g., Jeffreys, 'Desecularisation'.
- 71 Brems et al., *The Experiences of Face Veil Wearers*.
- 72 Berry, 'SAS v France'.
- 73 Draper, '80% of Anti-Muslim'.
- 74 See Patel, 'Multi-Faithism and the Gender Question' on the United Kingdom; Badinter, *Fausse Route* on France; see also analyses in Habermas, 'Religion in the Public Sphere'; Reilly, 'Rethinking the Interplay'; Toldy, 'Secularist Dreams'; and Woodhead, 'Liberal Religion'.

- 75 Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Secularisms*.
- 76 Bader, 'Religious Diversity'.
- 77 See also Fox, *A World Survey of Religion and the State* and *An Introduction to Religion and Politics* for detailed overviews of the relationship between states and religion.
- 78 Bhargava, 'States, Religious Diversity'.
- 79 Hirsi Ali, *Infidel*.
- 80 Hirsi Ali, *Heretic*.
- 81 Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 8.
- 82 Smith, *Disruptive Religion*.
- 83 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 84 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 85 See, e.g., Bradley 'Religion as a Bridge'; Hammer, *More than a Prayer*.
- 86 Kandiyoti, 'Bargaining with Patriarchy'.
- 87 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.
- 88 The terms 'religion' and 'spirituality' are sometimes used interchangeably.
- 89 Jeffrey and Basu, *Appropriating Gender*.
- 90 *Ibid.*, 223.
- 91 *Ibid.*, 223.
- 92 *Ibid.*, 222. See Nyhagen Predelli, 'Recognising Place', for a critique of narrow definitions of women's activism.
- 93 Rinaldo, 'Pious and Critical'.
- 94 Zion-Waldoks, 'Politics of Devoted Resistance'.
- 95 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.
- 96 Zion-Waldoks, 'Politics of Devoted Resistance', 93.
- 97 Doetsch-Kidder, *Social Change and Intersectional Activism*.
- 98 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 99 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 100 Prickett, 'Negotiating Gendered Religious Space'.

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