

Introduction

Religion, Gender, and the Public Sphere: Mapping the Terrain¹

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In recent decades, religion has become increasingly visible in political and public life in all parts of the world. This has provoked renewed debate about the role of religion in late modernity. The dominant conception of secularism as a core tenet of a liberal, modernizing paradigm is now in question. That is, the separation of church and state, the progressive “secularization” of modern societies, and the growing acceptance of gender equality, are no longer presumed to be inevitable and interrelated. The notion that religion plays a diminishing role as societies modernize, and that religious freedom is best understood principally as a private matter has been unsettled on many levels. Most graphically, the events of 9/11 (September 11th, 2001) and the ongoing “war on terror” underline the omnipresence of religion in global politics, albeit very narrowly in the form of “radical Islam.” Particularly in the context of Europe, globalization, immigration, and European Union enlargement have fostered the reemergence of religious identities and actors—across all faiths—as significant social, cultural, and political forces in public and private life in an increasingly multicultural Europe. These events have highlighted the need to critically examine established ways of thinking about religion, gender, and the public sphere. In order to locate the essays in this volume in the context of wider debates, this introduction is divided into three parts. The first part highlights four sets of developments that shape investigation of religion, gender, and the public sphere, while also noting areas where different essays in this volume make a particular contribution. These are as follows: the dominance of the “clash of civilizations thesis,” the continuing emergence of politicized autocratic religious movements, the ongoing scrutiny of the “secularization thesis,” and new critiques of the religious–secular binary. The second part offers a brief overview of debates, mainly in political and social theory and religious studies, on religion and the public sphere. By way of conclusion, the final part provides a brief outline of the structure of the book.

**KEY DEVELOPMENTS SHAPING CONTEMPORARY
INVESTIGATION OF RELIGION, GENDER, AND
THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

A number of key developments shape contemporary discussions of the interrelation of religion, gender, and the public sphere. First, there is the hegemonic influence of the “clash of civilizations” thesis. The cataclysmic events of 9/11 in New York City, and subsequent bombings in London and Madrid, have been understood in ways that reinforce the cultural essentialist notion of a “clash of civilizations” between a supposedly rational and free West and an irrational and oppressive Islam. This is marked by the conflation of Islam with the threat of terrorism. Moreover, in Western liberal democracies, the violence of 9/11 has been filtered through a lens of anxiety in relation to the increasingly visible multicultural composition of societies. These developments have pushed to the surface questions about the accommodation (or not) of “other” religions in established practices that regulate existing religions *vis-à-vis* the state and in public life. However, much of the accompanying debate revolves around alarmist constructions of “Islam in the West” as the quintessential “other” religion, even though concerns are often presented as being about religion *per se* in liberal democratic societies and the threats that religious actors pose to the rule of (secular) law. This imagined clash of civilizations has played out most notably in Europe around the role of the state in the regulation of different modes of Muslim women’s dress in public settings (Skjeie 2007). Moreover, safeguarding gender equality and women’s rights, and/or the secular nature of the state or public sphere, have featured prominently in justifications of punitive policies aimed at migrant or minority groups in the West, particularly Muslims.

These developments are a reminder of the centrality of gender power relations in the interrelation of religion, culture, and the public sphere. Tensions between calls for women’s equality and the rights of sexual minorities on one side, and the claims of religions on the other, are well documented across all major religions and regions. It is also well recognized in feminist scholarship that gender identities and ethno-religious identities work together in complex ways that are often exploited by dominant groups. This is evident, for example, in the targeted use of sexual violence in ethno-religious conflicts and, conversely, in justifications to wage war or to prohibit forms of Muslim women’s dress in the name of defending “women’s rights.” Hence, a more comprehensive understanding of the changing role and influence of religion in the public sphere requires complex, multidisciplinary, and comparative gender analyses. Yet, with some exceptions (Phillips 2007; Mahmood 2005; Scott 2007), gender rarely figures as a principal concern or category of analysis in the literature on multicultural politics, religion, and the public sphere (see, for example, Levey and Modood 2009; Parekh 2005; Kymlicka 1996; Taylor and Gutman 1994).

Essays in this volume pay particular attention to the gender and feminist dimensions of these debates. This includes a reappraisal of the tensions between liberal, rights-based understandings of freedom on the one hand and, on the other, what it means to respect women's agency as embedded subjects in different social and cultural contexts (Saharso in this volume). It also entails critical scrutiny of the gendered ways in which hegemonic neoliberal imperatives—such as reducing the scope of state action to underpinning private wealth accumulation and privatizing traditional welfare functions of the state—operate in tandem with reconfigurations in the public role of religious actors, potentially to the detriment of women and marginalized groups (Gray in this volume). At the same time, aspects of globalization potentially offer opportunities for transnational solidarity that can contribute to contesting patriarchal power relations within religious communities, as suggested by Tomalin (in this volume) regarding recent movements for female Buddhist ordination. Other essays explore more closely the complex negotiations that occur between religious authority, religious identity, and personal autonomy among groups of migrants. For example, one essay focuses on women from different Muslim migrant communities in Ireland (Shanneik in this volume) and a second on how class-based differentials shape access to and use of religious capital among Mainland Chinese migrants to Hong Kong (Wong in this volume). In doing so, these essays underline that religious authority and gendered religious identities are never monolithic or fixed but are continually (re)negotiated in context-specific ways, especially evident in processes of migration.

Second, the continuing emergence of politicized autocratic religious movements over the last three decades, across all regions and major religions (Bhargava 2011: 92–93), also underlines the need to scrutinize the interrelation of religion, gender, state, and the public sphere. Whether in the name of Christianity, Islam, or other religions, these movements seek to impose literalist and ultraconservative versions of religious teaching through state law and policy, most often targeting the sexual and reproductive freedom of women and sexual minorities (Shaheed 2004; Othman 2006). Religious minorities are also at risk in contexts where dominant religious communities enjoy privileged or established positions *vis-à-vis* authoritarian states (Mekonnen and Van Reisen in this volume). New approaches are called for that challenge politicized religious authoritarianism in all its guises, without rendering religious individuals and communities susceptible to discrimination, persecution, or cultural violence. Contributions to this collection offer nuanced critiques of politicized religious projects that seek to shape and exercise state power in global perspective (Nira Yuval-Davis in this volume); in the global South (essays by Al-Labadi and Kirmani in this volume); and in Western democracies (essays by Mitchem, Grzywacz and Gray in this volume).

Third, while the sociological evidence is contradictory, it is generally accepted that the secularization thesis—the characterization of secularization

as an inevitable and singular process of modernization—is untenable. Some continue to argue the relevance of the secularization thesis in specific contexts, where secularization is posited as a process of steadily declining public influence and/or privatization of religion. For example, focusing on dropping rates of church attendance and/or membership in the most stable and prosperous countries in Northwest Europe, Steve Bruce (1996) concludes that there is a decisive overall trend toward secularization as modernization occurs. Although, he also finds that participation in traditional religious practices remains high in countries where the formation of national identity and religion have been intertwined historically (e.g., Ireland and Poland). Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2004) draw on World Values Survey data (1981–2001) to argue along similar lines that secularization understood as a “systematic erosion of religious practices, values and beliefs has occurred most clearly among prosperous social sections living in affluent and secure post industrial nations” (Norris and Inglehart 2004: 5).

In contrast, others have argued that societies in different parts of the world (especially beyond Europe) are actively “de-secularizing” in various ways, evidenced by the rise of new religious and spiritual movements and practices (Berger 1999; Davie 2002; Herbert 2003). José Casanova’s comparative study of Brazil, Poland, Spain, and the United States (1994) leads him to conclude that outside of Europe the “de-privatization” of religion is under way. He suggests that enforcing a rigid separation of church and state (e.g., in France) is unique to the European Enlightenment critique of religion, which was driven by a rejection of particular, context-specific links between churches and authoritarian regimes in Europe. Recently, updating his theory of public religion (building on work by Alfred Stepan), Casanova maintains that religion *de facto* has been continually present in public spheres in a majority of contexts, including long-established democracies, despite the rhetoric of the “secular modern state” (Casanova 2008; Stepan 2000). These conclusions are also consistent with the findings of the EU VEIL research project (Values, Equality in Liberal Democracies), which adds a feminist dimension to empirical work that questions a singular secularization thesis. This seven-country European study documents great variation within Europe in state responses to the “Muslim headscarf,” which is linked to significant differences in the model of church–state relations, traditions regarding antidiscrimination, and prevailing cultural and legal concepts of citizenship in each of the countries studied (e.g., Kiliç, Saharso, and Sauer 2008).

Empirical evidence, therefore, shows much variety in how “religion” manifests across and within societies, at micro, meso, and macro levels, and how its influence and authority changes with other social changes, waxing or waning in different times and under different conditions. Recognizing this variation presents new complex challenges for how “the secular” is understood and how secularism is practiced. These challenges encompass epistemological and methodological questions for sociological research (Vesna Malesevic in this volume), as well as far-reaching normative, social-political

theoretical considerations, including rethinking the relationship between religion and the state. In particular, fears about the consequences for human freedom of the fusion of autocratic religious authority and state power (especially in some European contexts) have cultivated a strong, normative commitment to secularism defined as a strict separation of “church and state” and the containment of religion as far as possible to the private sphere of personal and family life. However, recognizing that this vision is more prescriptive than descriptive and, without the presumption that secularization is inevitable, there is a clear onus on proponents of the secular democratic state to acknowledge and defend its status as a normative political-social ideal and to define its parameters and modalities in nonoppressive ways. (I will return to this in the discussion below regarding the evolving notion of the public sphere and the role of religion therein.)

Against this backdrop, the law comes into focus as a key locus in the reconfiguration of normative and analytical accounts of the interrelation of religion, the public sphere, and the state. Several essays in this volume deal with different gendered aspects of these debates. This includes critical discussions of the relationship between regional and national law regimes in “regulating religion,” with a focus on the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights that have upheld state bans of Muslim headscarves and abortion. Loenen (in this volume) argues that by extending a generous “margin of appreciation” to states in the headscarf cases, recent Court judgments risk undermining the very purpose of the European regional human rights regime—that is, to monitor compliance with “universal” human rights standards, including the rights to employment and education of Muslim women, to which all parties to the European Convention on Human Rights are expected to adhere. Demir Gürsel (in this volume) also offers a critique of the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, highlighting its questionable role in legitimating the regulation of women’s bodies. Paradoxically, this has taken the form of deferring to the supposed moral (including religious) sensibilities of the nation in upholding Ireland’s restrictive abortion laws and, conversely, concerning Turkey, upholding bans on wearing Muslim headscarves in the name of guarding against perceived threats posed by religion to the “secular state” or its citizens. Other essays address the prospects for achieving women’s human rights in encounters between (secular) state law and religious law; one in a Western democracy (Mehdi in this volume) and another in conflict-affected Palestine (Al-Labadi in this volume). Also considered by Alison Stuart (in this volume) are less explored questions regarding the obligations that religious communities are under, or not under, to comply internally with state and human rights laws, especially in relation to gender equality.

The fourth development prompting reconsideration of the interrelation of religion, gender, and the public sphere is the extension of influential post-modern critiques of Enlightenment rationality to questions of religion. Feminist Studies in Religion (FSR) by definition has offered a persistent challenge

to the Enlightenment critique of religion (ECR), which has been largely unheeded in “secular” scholarship to date. Elizabeth Castelli, for example, problematizes the operation of the secular-religious divide as follows:

It has been an obstacle to some conversations that many feminists, whether activists or academics, have tended to read “religion” as an abstraction solely in negative terms—reading “religion” only as a constraint ideologically and institutionally, and reading the embrace of religious affiliations or allegiances as a sign of false consciousness. This negative rendering of “religion” is in many respects an ironic holdover from Feminism’s own Enlightenment inheritance. (Castelli 2001: 5)

This critique has gained purchase as poststructuralist thinking has gathered momentum since the 1990s and unsettled the Enlightenment underpinnings of many disciplines across the humanities and social sciences—including the equation of “objective knowledge” with “the rational” and, more recently, with “the secular.” Writings by Joan Scott and Judith Butler exemplify a new, explicit poststructuralist feminist engagement with “religion.” Specifically, their analyses expose the oppressive discursive practices that attend the gendered performance of “secularity as modernity” culminating in, as Judith Butler describes it, “cultural assaults” on religious minorities (Butler 2008: 3). Similarly, in *The Politics of the Veil*, addressing the French doctrine of *laïcité*, Scott argues that our ideas about secularism “structure the way we think about how to deal with religion in general and Islam in particular” (2007: 95). She criticizes normative secularization theory, which conflates “secularism” with forward-looking “modernity” and “democracy,” and the Enlightenment critique of religion, which demands the triumph of reason over superstition, sentiment, and belief. From this perspective, the moral panic around Islam in Europe and the related bans on Muslim women’s dress, come into focus as forms of state violence that are apparently justified through a rigid reading of the religious–secular binary. Deepening poststructuralist critiques of secularism as coercive normative practice, Saba Mahmood further questions the “liberatory” bias of poststructuralist feminist theory. She criticizes its “overwhelming tendency . . . to locate agency within those operations that resist the dominating and subjectivating modes of power” and urges instead a separation of “the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics” (Mahmood 2005: 14). In doing so, Mahmood argues, feminist analysis closes off recognition of “dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance” (14), including certain religious practices.

Several essays in this volume directly address the epistemological effects of established understandings of the religious–secular binary from poststructuralist perspectives. This includes work that deepens understanding of forms of cultural violence that are produced at the intersection of the “clash

of civilizations” and its dominating forms of secular thinking (Bracke in this volume). In contrast, Naomi Goldenberg’s contribution to this volume exposes how the religious–secular binary feeds the “mythologization of religion” in ways that close off scrutiny of its political power and the exercise of political power by religious subjects. At the same time, the challenge to the dominant (secular) presumption that “religion” and “human freedom” are ontologically at odds, brings religious communities into focus as sites where human freedom (and transcendence) are pursued in complex ways (Mahmood 2005). One corollary to this insight is a renewed and widening interest in “contesting religious subjectivities,” including those that reexamine and reformulate interpretations of religious “truths” and interrogate politicized religion, particularly from the point of view of concern for gender justice, variously defined. Toward this end, a number of contributors to this volume offer critical analyses and discussions of examples of contestation *vis-à-vis* the teachings and practices of specific religious communities and, where relevant, in their wider socio-political engagement. In particular, essays by Beattie, Dormor, and Mitchem each address different perspectives and challenges arising in relation to Christian churches, theologies, ideologies, and related politics. Others offer a particular window on contemporary feminist engagement within religious communities—for example, in seeking more equal sharing of temporal power and resources in Buddhist communities (Tomalin in this volume), or in generating new feminist (re)interpretations of Sikh scripture that can underpin positive visions of women’s agency and gendered identities (Singh in this volume).

In summary, in a post-9/11 world, the combination of increasingly globalized and multicultural societies, the unsettling of the secularization thesis, and postmodern critiques of the religious–secular binary all raise profound questions for how liberal democracies respond to more visible and more active religious actors in public life and in politics. The questions raised are especially salient to women and sexual and religious minorities who are often adversely targeted in the exercise of politicized, autocratic religious authority. Because questions of gender and religion are typically constructed as “private” within liberal secular logic, reconsidering the interrelation of state and religious authority through a gender lens necessarily entails rethinking dominant understandings of the public sphere. To begin to address these questions and to locate the contributions to this volume in relation to wider debates on religion and the public sphere, the following section briefly reviews this literature with a focus on gender.

RELIGION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE: ENGENDERING THE DEBATES

Habermas’s conceptualization of the public sphere (Habermas 1989/1962) has featured prominently in normative democratic theory over the past five

decades. For social democrats, his theorization enabled an important distinction to be made between the machinery of the state (formal politics, law, and public administration) and “public arenas of citizen discourse and association” (Fraser 1990: 56) where domination by state or free-market interests is subject to public contestation. At the same time, as a perennial defender of the radical promise of European Enlightenment ideals, Habermas’s work also exemplifies the “Enlightenment critique of religion.” Typically, religion was addressed by Habermas as inherently irrational, absolutist, and authoritarian—that is, as the Enlightenment’s “other.” In recent years, however, reflecting the new/renewed visibility of religion as a significant social and political force and scholarly subject of cross-disciplinary inquiry, Habermas’s perceived intolerant treatment of religion in public and political life has attracted renewed critical attention. In response, he has modified somewhat his argument for a carefully delineated and restricted place for “religion” in the public sphere. Recognizing the relevance of Habermas’s ideas to this volume and to contemporary scholarly analyses of the interrelation of religion and political life more generally, it is useful to review some of the fault lines in contemporary debates around religion and its role in the Habermasian public sphere.

Habermas’s point of departure on matters of religion in public life begins with a commitment to “political liberalism,” which he understands as: “a *nonreligious*, post-metaphysical justification of the normative foundations of constitutional democracy” (2008a: 102, my emphasis). Elaborating this “secular” view of the basis of the constitutional democratic state, Habermas insists that “the democratic process counts as a procedure of legitimate lawmaking” and, crucially, that “democracy and human rights are interrelated in a coeval manner in the process of founding a constitution” (2008a: 103). This legitimating function of the democratic process, therefore, demands continual “inclusive and discursive [processes] of opinion- and will-formation” (103), whereby those affected by norms, laws, and policies can have a meaningful say in their formulation. For Habermas, the legitimating character of such discursive practices requires a commitment on the part of all participants—as “free and equal members of their political community” (Habermas 2008b: 121)—to decide outcomes in a disinterested manner on the basis of “good reasons.” Building on Liberal theorist John Rawls’s prescription for “the public use of reason,” Habermas characterizes and defends his account of the “secular state” as follows:

In a secular state only those political decisions are taken to be legitimate as can be impartially justified in the light of generally accessible reasons, in other words equally justified *vis-à-vis* religious and non-religious citizens, and citizens of different confessions. A rule that cannot be justified in an impartial manner is illegitimate as it reflects the fact that one party forces its will on another. Citizens of a democratic society are obliged to provide reasons for one another, as only thus can political power shed its repressive character. (Habermas 2006: 5)

Hence, for Habermas, the legitimation of norms, policies, and laws implemented by a state requires them to be “rationally acceptable” to all affected, regardless of participants’ religious worldviews.

Critics of Habermas’s public sphere have highlighted various weaknesses, many of which focus on the gap between his ideal of public deliberation and “actually existing democracy” (Fraser 1990). Most frequently, critics are skeptical about Habermas’s central reliance on a supposedly universal communicative reason because, seemingly, it entails an impossible requirement or presumption that all participants are equally “well informed,” equally positioned to access and process information and other resources, and equally disposed to use such information for the purposes of posing and counterposing “good reasons” and “best arguments.” For example, citing feminist research that reveals gender differences in modes of communication and the sidelining of female voices in mixed-gender exchanges, Fraser cautions that “deliberation can serve as a mask for domination . . . beyond gender to other kinds of unequal relation, like those based on class or race and ethnicity” (Fraser 1990: 64). Hence, in contrast to Habermas’s monolithic public sphere where participants are imagined to deliberate in search of the “common good,” Fraser welcomes the contesting and parallel presence of multiple “subaltern counterpublics.” Especially in an unequal society, she argues, such counterpublics allow members of “subordinated social groups [to] invent and circulate counterdiscourses . . . and to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” (67). At the same time, she recognizes that subaltern counterpublics may also be “anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian” but argues that “insofar as [they] emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics, they help expand discursive space” (67). While Fraser does not explicitly include religious communities as potential subaltern counterpublics, clearly, the concept encompasses their inclusion.

Overall, therefore, Habermas’s theorization of the public sphere has been faulted for privileging “Western,” “bourgeois,” and “masculine” perspectives, which he presumes to be “universal.” That is, Habermas’s public sphere fails to comprehend and address the scale and depth of the barriers to equal participation in public discourse and the invisibility and “lack of voice” experienced by sizable minorities, if not a majority of people, in most (democratic) societies. This is especially so, as Fraser underlines, for historically discriminated-against and marginalized groups, including women and minorities. More recently, critiques have highlighted the potentially oppressive nature of the “secular” logic exemplified by the Habermasian public sphere. For some, like Judith Butler and Joan Scott, this is prompted by concern about the politics of secularism in the post-9/11 era, including battles over the regulation of Muslim women’s dress in public spaces. For others, criticism of Habermas’s treatment of religion reflects an extension of long-running critiques of the limits of liberal individualism by communitarian political theorists such as Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel. In the liberal-communitarian divide that has structured much debate

in political theory since the 1990s, the communitarian side has always been more disposed to addressing religion and morality as constitutive features of public life. Sandel notes, “Liberals often worry about religion in politics because they associate religion with intolerance [and the] resolve to avoid wars of religion has shaped much liberal political thought” (2006: 146). Despite the appropriation of communal values by conservatives in the United States and elsewhere, however, he argues that “there is nothing intrinsically conservative about family or neighbourhood or community or religion” (42). Indeed, he cautions a “vision of public reason [that] is too sparse to contain the moral energies of a vital democratic life . . . opens the way [in public life] for the intolerant and the trivial and other misguided moralisms” (246).

As critiques of the secularization thesis have gained momentum, Habermas has conceded greater space to religious language and arguments within his account of rational, democratic dialogic processes. He argues:

[T]he liberal state has an interest in the free expression of religious voices in the public arena. . . . It must not discourage religious persons and communities from also expressing themselves *as such* in the political arena, for it cannot be sure that secular society would not otherwise cut off itself from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity. . . . Religious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life. In corresponding political debates, this potential makes religious speech into a serious vehicle for possible truth contents. . . . However, the institutional thresholds between the “wild” political public sphere and the formal proceedings within political bodies also function as a filter that allows only secular contributions from . . . the informal flows of public communication to pass through. (Habermas 2008b: 131)

Hence, Habermas wishes to confine the role of religion to opinion formation in the “weak” public sphere of civil society as distinct from the strong public of parliamentary policy and lawmaking (Cooke 2007: 227). Moreover, he asserts that while “morally convincing intuitions and reasons” offered by “religious citizens” should be heard, they must be translated into “generally acceptable language” (Habermas 2006: 15) if they are to be incorporated in formal state law and policy. Although Habermas uncritically equates “generally accepted language” with secular language, and remains intent on regulating the presence and role of religion, at the same time, he attempts to denormalize a “narrow secularist” mindset (exemplified, for example, by the French doctrine of *laïcité*). In doing so, his recent work signals a distinct move toward a more tolerant and pluralist stance on the presence of religious discourse in the public sphere of democratic states. For poststructuralist scholars, however, Habermas’s accommodation of religion in the public sphere falls far short of what is required (Bender and Klassen 2010; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008). Specifically, Bender and Klassen argue

that the ideology of pluralism is an inadequate “solution” to religious difference because, in its various manifestations, it “articulates and naturalizes the very boundaries of difference that it seeks to diminish, overcome and mediate” (Bender and Klassen 2010: 15) and is “always directed toward and galvanised by multiple fields of knowledge power” (18).

For different reasons, communitarian critics such as Charles Taylor also consider Habermas’s compromise with “religious citizens” to be deficient in key respects. While not disputing that contemporary democracies should be neutral *vis-à-vis* different religious communities, Taylor takes issue with the liberal preoccupation with religion as “strange and perhaps even threatening” (Taylor 2011: 51). Rebutting Habermasian and Rawlsian understandings of reason as an abstract and universal attribute of all, Taylor considers all reason to be contextual and grounded in culture and experience, including an array of religiously mediated identities and experiences. Rather than conceive of the public sphere as a kind of filtering system based on a required mode of reasoned deliberation, Taylor’s vision of secular democracy is one where “mutual recognition and collaboration in common pursuits” are fostered (Calhoun 2011a: 129) in ways that “maximize the basic goals of liberty and equality between basic beliefs” (Taylor 2011: 56), including, but not limited to, religious beliefs.

As with all communitarian visions, this account raises questions about who speaks for communities. It is not sufficiently concerned about the politics of who formulates and articulates a community’s “beliefs,” and what kinds of tradeoffs are deemed acceptable in balancing “liberty and equality” against “beliefs.” The majority of religious organizations continue to be structured along patriarchal and often hierarchical social class lines; hence it is usually educated, middle-class male leaders who speak for communities and who have the discretion to ignore or actively suppress internal dissent. Feminist critics have long raised concerns about the subordinate status of women in all major religions. While much of this criticism reproduces an unreflective equation of secularism with feminism, some also flows from poststructuralist critiques of identitarian politics. Jakobsen captures the pitfalls involved when she asks:

[H]ow do we fully represent religious differences in the public sphere? Who are the appropriate representatives of religious communities? The Institutional leaders of those communities? Charismatic leaders? Someone else? And if those leaders also happen to be all men or of one race, who represents the racial minorities and women of this group? . . . In other words, crosscutting differences make it difficult if not impossible to use a unit of identity . . . to find a means of representing everyone. (Jakobsen 2010: 33)

Hence, there are major concerns regarding a scenario envisaged by Taylor of flexible negotiation among “religious communities” aimed at arriving at a

settlement between “liberty and equality” on the one side and “beliefs” on the other. It concedes too much to powerful arbiters of community “beliefs” and risks disregarding the will of some members of the community, dissenters, or others adversely affected by the settlement.

Offering another response to the challenge of “accommodating” different and often conflicting worldviews (including religious positions), Judith Butler eschews the totalizing logics of the universal deliberative subject, the communal value-driven “we,” and identitarian religious belonging. Rather, she posits a notion of “cohabitation” in place of aspirations to agreement, integration, or authenticity. Butler elaborates an ontological understanding of cohabitation as “our convergent condition—one of proximity, adjacency, againstness, one of being interrupted by the memory of someone else’s longing and suffering, in spite of oneself” (Butler 2011: 88–89). She continues:

Since there is no home without adjacency, and no way to reside anywhere without the outside defining the space of inhabitation, the *co* of cohabitation cannot be thought simply as spatial neighbourliness. There is dependency and differentiation, proximity and violence. (Butler 2011: 89)

Butler’s idea of cohabitation expresses a more radical break with liberal and communitarian versions of the public sphere than does Nancy Fraser’s embrace of multiple subaltern counterpublics. Subaltern counterpublics, while expressing deep critiques of the dominant, bourgeois, public sphere are nonetheless construed by Fraser as oriented toward the eventual inclusion of subaltern counterpublics in *the* public sphere. This is achieved through the transformative integration of the “needs, perspectives and strategies” of previously excluded groups (Fraser 1990: 66). Fraser suggests that the presence of illiberal counterpublics is an inevitable dimension of discursive richness, which by definition is valued positively within a framework of normative participatory democracy. Ultimately, therefore, Fraser’s response remains rooted in emancipatory critical theory. This entails a continuing commitment to the deliberative ideals at the heart of Habermas’s public sphere and a qualified ontological assumption that “communication across lines of cultural difference is not in principle impossible” (69) as long as participants are not required to “bracket differences” (presumably including religious differences). In contrast, the beginning of a tenable response from Butler’s perspective entails recognition among antagonistic communities (citing the example of Israel and Palestine), that their continued mutual existence relies upon the “reality” that they are constitutionally and simultaneously deeply opposed *and* deeply interdependent.

The differences between Butler’s and Fraser’s analyses reveal basic fault lines between poststructuralist and critical theory positions regarding the prospects and limits of dialogic democratic practices in addressing the

challenges posed by increased visibility and claims of religion in public and political life. Craig Calhoun (2011b), also approaching these questions from a critical theory perspective, concurs that insisting on the privatization or exclusion of religious perspectives and actors from the public sphere is incompatible with the goal of civic solidarity, which deliberation in the public sphere ostensibly seeks to foster. He further questions the rationale for and practicability of translating religious norms into secular forms, noting that “conflicts between worldviews and religious doctrines that lay claim to explaining man’s position in the world cannot be laid to rest at the cognitive level” (Calhoun 2011b: 87). Calhoun cautions against “abandoning norms of fairness or state neutrality among religions” and argues for the normative necessity and practical possibility of building a “uniting bond of a civic solidarity, which cannot be legally enforced” but without which segmentation of communities “along the dividing lines of competing world views” replaces reciprocity and solidarity among citizens (Calhoun 2011b: 88). Read from Calhoun’s perspective, therefore, Butler’s concept of cohabitation appears to offer only an “unsteady *modus vivendi*” and likely political disintegration “into irreconcilable segments” (88).

In contrast to Calhoun, Jakobsen’s poststructuralist critique rejects the notion that the secular state can be viewed as neutral, or as a privileged site in progressive multicultural politics. It is, she argues, inextricably implicated in narratives of modernity that inevitably work to equate nonreligious/antireligious practices with freedom, autonomy, and equality and religious practices with their opposite. She asks, “[W]hy should the secular state expect religious communities to make shifts on their less progressive values regarding gender and sexuality when . . . the way in which the liberal state uses gender and sexuality to normatively construct the nation produces hierarchies organized around gender and sexuality?” (Jakobsen 2010: 48). Jakobsen concludes that if secular norms are retained, they must be viewed as “one set of possible norms advocated by participants to the conflict rather than the norms that claim to frame all possible discussion” (48).

There are a number of problems with Jakobsen’s line of reasoning. First, it asserts as axiomatic that “secularism” is a dominating discourse of modernity and in doing so forecloses discussion of how secularism might be done differently, in nonoppressive ways. This tendency to argue on the basis of presumed discursive logic rather than on contextualized, evidence-based arguments is an ironic weakness of some poststructuralist analysis that stems from the privileged epistemological status accorded to discourse and meaning construction as primary sites of analysis. It is ironic because poststructuralism originates in a rejection of totalizing narratives and calls instead for contextualized knowledge and pluralization. Yet, in articulating her argument in favor of decentering “the secular state” and “secularism,” Jakobsen relies on singular usage of the terms as if the “secular state” is

a single known entity and secularism is only practiced in one (narrowly liberal) way. (This is also at odds with Jakobsen and Pellegrini's work on secularisms [2008]). Second, Jakobsen's observation that the "liberal state" uses "gender and sexuality" in normative ways to produce hierarchies within "the nation" is not a compelling argument against seeking gender equality—only for contesting oppressive uses and appropriations by liberal states of their own norms of justice, including gender equality, freedom, secularism, and so on. Third, Jakobsen's seeming epistemological premise that all normativity must be rejected risks convergence with moral nihilism. Undoubtedly, the normative work done by discursive practices must always be subject to scrutiny and contestation. However, this is different from contesting normativity *per se*. Instead, the problem should be seen as one of political practices that are normative and oppressive (such as banning Muslim women from wearing headscarves in the name of defending a form of secularism), but also on the understanding that such practices are contestable and transformable.

In contrast to poststructuralist positions, critical theorists locate the solution to accommodating diverse and/or conflicting religious claims in the public sphere in political, dialogic practices and in the retention of a commitment to a neutral and inclusive notion of secularism. Liberal-multiculture theorist Anne Phillips offers a similar response, which she roots emphatically in a commitment to individual rights. Phillips recognizes that "[g]ender equality does not depend on a strict separation of religion from politics . . . [and] there may be a range of possible combinations, along an axis from greater to lesser religious engagement in politics, compatible with strong regimes of gender equality" provided "the rights of the individual" remain central (Phillips 2009: 45). Rajeev Bhargava similarly holds with rehabilitating secularism. He offers an account of nonbinary, "critical social secularism," which he places within a framework of moral and ethical reasoning (Bhargava 2011: 110). Among other things, this entails a "principled distance" on the part of the state (rather than separation of state from religion) and a commitment to combating four forms of domination: interreligious, intrareligious, domination of religious by secular, and domination of secular by religious (Bhargava 2011: 111).

The essays in this book address various gendered dimensions of the encounter between religion and the public sphere. In doing so, they express an array of philosophical positions and approaches *vis-à-vis* what the relationship is (or should be) between "religion" and the "public sphere" in particular contexts, in normative theory, and/or in research practices. All, however, share a concern with illuminating oppressive practices in, or misleading accounts of, the nexus of religion, gender, and the public sphere. Notwithstanding the diversity of perspectives and analyses offered by the contributors to this volume, each essay addresses questions of "gender justice" in the broadest sense in this multilayered terrain, with many paying

particular attention to the experiences and perspectives of minority, migrant, and religious women, as well as sexual minorities. Moreover, each essay addresses, in some way, one or more of the key developments highlighted in the first part of this introduction. In particular, the necessity of rethinking dominant accounts of the religious–secular binary, whether as a sociological, political, and/or epistemological construct, is evident throughout the volume. Similarly contesting the gendered implications of the “clash civilization thesis,” and/or of politicized autocratic religious movements, constitutes a point of departure or main focus of several essays in this book. In all cases, each essay makes a unique contribution to timely debates about religion, gender, and the public sphere.

BOOK STRUCTURE

This book is divided into five thematic sections. The sections contain three to five essays and a short introduction highlighting key arguments and debates addressed in the essays and in the section overall. Section I: Identity, Religion, Migration, and Multiculture includes essays examining the role of religion in the gendered construction and articulation of identities within a context of globalization, migration, and religious diversity. Section II: Contesting Religious Subjectivities features contributions that (re)consider the possibilities and limitations of challenging the operation of patriarchal and other forms of gendered power relations from within religious philosophies and communities. Section III: Religion, Law, and Human Rights includes essays that examine the strengths and weaknesses of recent examples of legal reasoning and human rights policy in addressing tensions between religious freedoms, human rights, and gender equality in multicultural societies and in international relations. Section IV: Religion, States, and Civil Society offers a range of context-specific essays that critically examine the interrelated roles of religious and “secular” values, actors, and organizations in shaping different domains of state policy and civil society mobilization, especially relating to gender equality and women’s rights. Finally, Section V: Researching Religion, Constructing Knowledge: Theoretical Revisions and Methodological Challenges includes analyses that grapple with core theoretical and epistemological questions, as well as contributions on methodological challenges and implementation of research on/in religion. This includes work that rebuts pervasive readings of the secular-religious divide that have cast “religion” only as a regressive force, as well as analyses that implicate the binary *per se* in the perpetuation of oppressive power relations. Cumulatively, the essays in this volume, cutting across these five thematic sections and multiple disciplines, significantly enhance knowledge and understanding of ongoing reconfigurations in the nexus of religion, gender, and the public sphere.

NOTE

1. Parts of this essay appear in an earlier article by the author: "Rethinking the Interplay of Feminism and Secularism in a Neo-secular Age," *Feminist Review* 97 (2011): 5–31.

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