

Conclusion: Gender Justice and the “postsecular” Public Sphere: Toward Non-Oppressive Reconfigurations

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This volume makes a substantial contribution to deepening understanding of the gender dimensions of the renewed significance of “religion” as a political, social and cultural force in the 21st century. In particular, it addresses long-standing tensions between the claims of gender equality and human rights on the one side, and the claims of religion and religious identity on the other. In recent years, these issues have played out perhaps most clearly through the “veil debates” prominent in France, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. These form part of a new pattern of religion-inflected ways of expressing conflict evident in relations between dominant cultural groups (e.g., Christian or “secular”) and minority groups (usually Muslim), vis-à-vis the articulation of national identity and belonging. In Europe, arguments for the regulation of the “Muslim headscarf” in public settings have relied on *a priori* assumptions about the subordinate status of Muslim women within their communities in contrast to supposedly empowered European women. These debates are a reminder of the deep interrelation of questions of gender, “race”, identity, human rights and religious freedom more generally. While recognizing the importance of the “veil debates,” a key objective of this collection has been to extend the horizon of enquiry vis-à-vis religion, gender and the public sphere beyond the binary of “Islam versus the West.”

The essays in this collection contribute to this task in two important ways. First, they offer rich contextualized accounts of the distinctive experiences and perspectives of particular groups of Muslim women in different countries and regions. Some address the challenges of contending with the autocratic imposition of traditionalist interpretations of Muslim laws and women’s modes of resistance (e.g., as discussed by Al-Labadi and Kirmani with regard to Palestine and Pakistan respectively); others consider the human rights implications of Muslim headscarf bans in Europe that curtail expressions of gendered Muslim identity in the name of upholding an ethnocentric vision of gender equality or secularism (e.g., as discussed by Loenen and Demir Gürsel, respectively); another explores the complex renegotiation of gendered Muslim identities by Gulf Shii women who have migrated to Ireland (Shanneik in this volume); and Mehdi (also in this volume), using the example of Denmark, considers how parallel legal systems, which allow for the combined use of some Muslim

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laws alongside secular state law, can work in women's interests. The diversity and complexity of the analyses offered in these essays dispel reductionist accounts of Muslim women as victims and the idea that enforcing a particular kind of "western" secularism is the antidote to their supposed oppression. Second, this collection constructively decenters Islam by including several pieces that address the nexus of religion, gender, and the public sphere vis-à-vis a number of other major religions. In this regard, authors offer nuanced critiques both of oppressive gendered practices within religious communities and teachings, as well as incisive explorations of contestations within, and the transformative potential of, religious subjectivity and belonging. This includes critical gender analyses of theological and lived aspects of Sikhism (Singh in this volume); Buddhism (Tomalin in this volume); Catholicism and the Catholic Church (Beattie and Grzywacz in this volume); and protestant Christianities (Duncan Dormor and Stephanie Mitchem in this volume).

In addition to extending the horizon of gender analysis vis-à-vis religion and the public sphere beyond limited treatments of "women and Islam," contributions to this volume also add much to unfolding debates on the philosophical and empirical validity of the secularization thesis and its narrowly cast secular-religious binary, which underpin the bulk of modern political and social scholarship. Migration to Europe and North America, especially from Muslim majority countries has expanded religious and ethnic diversity, which in a post-9/11 context has been accompanied by an upsurge in ethno-nationalism and other identity conflicts. While the ultimate outcomes of these changes in different contexts remain unclear, there is a growing consensus that the old certainties of secularization theory, which had supposed secularization to be unilinear process of modernization, no longer hold. Hence, the European secular state is increasingly acknowledged to be a context-specific outcome of historical struggles between church and state in the region, with some arguing that it is rooted in Christianity, belying the notion that secularism is itself independent of religious beliefs (Hurd 2004: 241). Against this backdrop Habermas has suggested we now live in "postsecular" societies. However, the term "postsecular" does not necessarily entail a process of de-secularization, rather it suggests the need for new ways of looking at the role of religion in the public sphere, which take into account the political importance of religion, religious identity and religious belief in public life (de Vries 2006: 2-3).

Moreover, while the traditional model of secularization and critiques thereof have been most closely associated with Europe, it is important to recognize that varying processes of secularization, re-secularization, and de-secularization are also taking place globally and are subject to contestation from different perspectives. For example, writing about secularism, gender and the state in Egypt, Nadjie Al-Ali (2000) is highly critical of the now hegemonic scholarly literature from "the Islamic perspective" that takes as given the "unequivocal equation of secularism with the 'West' and

Christianity.” Al-Ali problematizes this relatively new orthodoxy in the Muslim world, characterizing it as a perpetuation of ahistorical orientalist thinking and “an essentialist presupposition that has to be challenged” (2000: 131). Or, with regard to Iran, Rahnema and Moghissi anticipate the possibility of the first Islamic State in modern times also being the first in the region to exemplify a new “postsecular” version of the separation of state and religious authority (2011: 1) wherein religious actors are incorporated into a democratic political regime. Hence, in a “postsecular” age, the notion of the secular remains vitally important to social, political, legal, cultural and theological analysis while also being subject to contestation and (re)negotiation in every region of the world. Several contributions in this collection foreground the gender dimensions of such contestations and renegotiations in contexts beyond Europe and the West (see essays by Mekonnen and van Reisen, Kirmani, Al-Labadi, Tomalin, Wong and Yuval-Davis in this volume).

The arrival of the “postsecular” public sphere, therefore, raises many questions about how we understand and engage with religion and secularism. Not least among these is how to envision gender justice in “postsecular” societies, recognizing the limitations of dominant approaches in feminist theory and analysis, which have taken for granted that “secularism” and “feminism” are mutually constitutive worldviews. Ultraconservative religious actors and institutions generally promulgate traditionalist visions of family formation and intimate gender relations that contest human rights-based approaches to human freedom. As highlighted in essays by Goldenberg, Kirmani, Al-Labadi and Yuval-Davis in this volume, such actors often form autocratic political projects that seek to dominate public discourse and determine state policy and practices across a range of domains – from criminal and family law to education, healthcare and employment. In doing so, they impinge on the enjoyment of important human rights, especially in areas of sexual and reproductive autonomy. Conversely, as argued by Loenen and Demir Gürsel (also in this volume), supposedly liberal secular states, with the endorsement of the European Court of Human Rights, have denied some Muslim women and girls human rights to religious expression as well as to education and employment by banning Muslim women’s dress. These essays suggest that vigilance is called for to guard against absolutism in all of its guises – whether through the imposition or prohibition of religiously-informed practices, ostensibly in the name of the common good.

At the same time, while ultraconservative strands are present in every religion, and there remains considerable need to investigate how such patriarchal and other forms of gendered power relations can be challenged, it is misleading to suggest that religions cannot also be sites of empowerment and/or resistance against different forms of inequality. Further, as exemplified by contributions in this volume from Beattie, Dormor, Grzywacz, Mitchem, Tomalin, and Singh, some of the most exacting and eloquent challenges to oppressive interpretations of religions come from within religious

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communities and discourses. Moreover, complex religio-political identities produce multiple interpretations of religious doctrine that belie the simple binaries often supposed, for example, by those who view religion as inevitably conservative. For instance, Catholic lay organizations have lobbied for reproductive rights inclusive of abortion (Grzywacz in this volume). Similarly, religions are often positively associated with advocacy and service delivery around anti-poverty, social justice, and peace agendas, nationally and internationally (see Gray, Tomalin, and Wong in this volume for critical accounts of this aspect of the role of religions). Furthermore, as discussed by Malesevic in her contribution to this collection, sociological evidence confirms significant complexity in contemporary relationships between religious identity and individual freedom, on the one hand, and the role of the state and religious organizations on the other. The essays in this collection respond to the need for more nuanced analyses that recognize the continuing vitality and changing forms of religious and spiritual practices in the 21st century, as well as the multiplicity of the possible outcomes they entail regarding attitudes to gender justice in public and in private life. From this perspective, opposition to gender equality or human rights, justified by ultraconservative religious interpretations of religion, come into focus as a particular political challenge rather than the inevitable outcome of religion in the public sphere.

Further, as many contributions to this volume have underlined, religious and political identities are not enacted in context-less ways. Along with gender, other aspects of identity and experience including “class,” ethnicity and geo-location, are profoundly implicated in unfolding understandings and mediations of religion in the public sphere. Ethno-religious identity, in particular, has been a powerful interlocutor in discursive practices surrounding religion in politics and public life, especially following 9/11. The analysis offered by Bracke (in this volume) of the mobilization of the concept of *mixité* in French political culture, to enforce a gendered and racialized account of secularism that penalizes migrant communities, reveals a compelling example of this dynamic. Further, as examined in detail by Gray (in this volume), pervasive neo-liberal logic and policy imperatives profoundly shape the mode of ongoing reconfigurations between religious and state authority and the specific gender implications in each context. Moreover, Yuval-Davis (in this volume), against the predictions of the secularization thesis, notes that revitalized religious devotion and neo-liberalism go hand in hand in late modernity. At the same time, Tomalin (in this volume) offers a more positive globalist analysis, which highlights the emancipatory potential of transnational networks, which are also an expression of globalization, in challenging gender inequalities within Buddhist communities.

Recognizing these complexities requires approaches to the interrelation of religion and gender, which recognize the intersectionality of diverse identities, experiences and locations. Hence, as Wong’s contribution to this volume underlines, religion works in tandem with “race,” ethnicity, nationality,

socio-economic status, sexuality, and so on, in varying ways that confer cumulative advantage and/or disadvantage depending on the context. Pre-emptive assumptions, therefore, about the nature and role of religion in women's (or anyone's) lives are not compatible with such a multifaceted understanding. Mainstream (liberal) feminist thinking, however, is often faulted for failing to comprehend this insight. Especially in the West, it has tended to occupy a default "secularist" positions, viewing gendered religious practices, especially non-western, with suspicion and inevitably at odds with women's equality. In contrast, multicultural (Young 2000) and poststructural feminist thinkers (e.g., Scott, Butler, and Mahmood discussed in the Introduction to this volume) are more inclined to recognize women's agency in occupying religious identities even if it appears to diminish their enjoyment of certain Western liberal rights. Others, seeking to avoid both top-down, universalizing responses (e.g., banning Muslim headscarves because they are "oppressive"), as well as the dangers of cultural relativist deference to conservative religious community leaders, endeavor to find a space between these positions (for example, arguments offered by Phillips and Fraser discussed in the Introduction, and by Saharso in this volume). That is, they suggest that re-visioning gender justice and feminist politics in a "postsecular" public sphere entails upholding a commitment to contesting all forms of (gendered) inequalities, while also recognizing the disparate and often conflicting identities and positions of different women, including religious ones. Several essays in this volume are sympathetic to this possibility – of locating a space of ongoing (re)negotiation between gender justice and difference in "postsecular" public spheres – with each positing particular strategies and approaches to its realization (e.g., see Beattie, Gray, Kirmani, Al-Labadi, Loenen, Mitchem, Mehdi, Saharso, Stuart, and Yuval-Davis).

In conclusion, gender justice is likely to remain a central concern in unfolding debates and developments surrounding the re-emergence of religion as a significant social, cultural, economic and political force in Europe and beyond. There is an onus on proponents of gender justice to be alert to the intersectional dimensions of these developments and to comprehend the effects of ostensibly secular policies as well as measures aimed at accommodating religious diversity. This requires context-specific analyses to inform "why, when, and how" to accommodate religious perspectives and practices in political and public spheres or otherwise. The essays in this volume elucidate the many challenges involved for those who seek to contest gendered inequalities and uphold religious freedoms and respect for cultural diversity, while also combating related forms of xenophobia, racism, intolerance, and discrimination. In doing so, they have made a major contribution to understanding the gender implications of the re-emergence of religion and the challenges this poses for how we conceptualize and enact democratic politics and human rights in "postsecular" societies.

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