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Editorial

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Editorial

The interconnectedness of religion and politics has perhaps never been clearer. Since 9/11 and the subsequent invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, religion has moved to the centre of the political agenda and the political discourse of both the powerful and the powerless. George Bush's 'war on terror', a war that appears to have no discernible enemy, constitutes a thinly veiled displacement of Ronald Reagan's 'Evil Empire' of Communism by Islam as the Other currently to be feared and reviled, discriminated and attacked. Central to this politics is the instrumentalization of gender: the defence of women's rights was purportedly one of the core motives for both these invasions. If, as Sabrina Ramet (1995: 53) argues, 'political legitimation is one of the oldest functions of religion', the politics of the 'war on terror' uses gender as the tool to legitimize political violence against predominantly Muslim countries, with Islam coded as supposedly inimical to a universalized rhetoric of 'western' democratic values and their accompanying rights-based discourse.

Religious resurgence in many societies worldwide is being read by many as a challenge to the secular state (Bunting, 2008). On the one hand, this demonstrates that secularism was never perhaps as widespread, nor as clear-cut, as commonly believed (Bunting, 2008; Norris and Inglehart, 2004). In fact, the increasing disparities of wealth that result from economic globalization are also being expressed in a growing gap between the secularization of the richer western countries and increasing religious adherence in the world as a whole (Norris and Inglehart, 2004: 217). On the other hand, the expansion of religion as a primary identification for so many has sparked a quest to understand better what drives the interaction of religion and politics. This has led, for example, to the theory that it is low levels of human development in terms of economic and social well-being – in other words it is 'existential insecurity' – that fuels the hunger for religious explanations and beliefs and leads to higher levels of religious practice (Norris and Inglehart, 2004: 4, 13, 19, 53, 217, 220).

It is striking, however, that in this field as in others, interpretation of the role and power of religion in politics is partial. In the case of the 'war on terror', for example, it is not Christian fundamentalism in the West, especially in the US itself, that is seen by American politicians as constituting a threat to western democracy, but rather Islamic fundamentalism that

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provides the justification – or rationalization – for pre-emptive political violence. This externalization of perceived threat is linked to exclusive nationalist – and colonialist – perceptions of the Other. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which religion itself is an ambivalent force: on the one hand containing within itself imperatives – and the potential – for peace, and on the other, historically the instigator – or instrument – of many violent conflicts. There is thus a common association, in discourses favouring secularism, of religion with violence, indeed of religion as inherently violent. However, as Gerrie ter Haar rightly argues,

> . . . religion is a human construct, something that has grown among human communities and serves human interests, which are in many cases conflicting ones. As such it becomes a tool in the hands of human beings that can be used for good or not-so-good purposes, for constructive or for destructive aims and objectives. (Haar, 2005: 8)

Moreover, it is often the case that conflicts, whether historical or current, are not in fact fundamentally religious in nature, but rather political, with religion a mere tool or a mobilizing force in their conduct. The conflicts in Northern Ireland and the former Yugoslavia provide prime examples of this instrumentalization of religion.

Given the way that religion has not only taken centre stage in global geopolitics, but also generated renewed interest from the social sciences, it becomes increasingly salient to analyse the role of gender in both religion and politics, as well as in their intersections. Feminist scholars have addressed themselves to the study of religion for more than 25 years now. In some ways replicating the historical stages of women's and gender studies, this scholarship has moved through, or takes, one of three different approaches. The first is concerned with making visible the contribution of women, both the symbolic significance of female religious figures such as the Virgin Mary (Warner, 1976) and the active participation of women within different religions. The second, more activist engagement seeks to overcome the historical discrimination against women within religious institutions, thus aiming to promote women's ordination in Protestant Christianity, or to enable women as participants and teachers within religious hierarchies (Tohidi and Bayes, 2001: 47). The third approach, the one that has perhaps attracted most scholarship to date, comprises feminist exegeses of religious texts, especially the founding text or Book, whether that be the Bible or the *Qur'an*, in order to establish whether religions are inherently discriminatory on the basis of gender and/or sexuality, or whether such discrimination emanates inexorably from the patriarchal cultures and societies within which the Book has been interpreted and the moral precepts of the religion in question followed.

What there has been far less of, at least until recently (e.g. Hilsdon and Rozario, 2006), are studies of the tensions between religion as an authentic

expression of traditional culture and feminist concerns for gender equitable citizenship rights. While gender is clearly central to the discourses and practices of both politics and religion, many have felt that until recently, most feminist scholarship has been firmly aligned with discursive secularism (see, for example Day, and Longman, this issue), in the process underestimating the role of religion as a key determinant in the lives of many women worldwide, especially in the global south (Afshar, 1996; Donaldson and Kwok, 2001). While social constructionists might argue that religion is of minor importance compared with political, social and economic constraints in their impact on the lives of individuals and collectivities, religion is clearly an influential factor in most cultures, even within those that pride themselves on being secular and characterized by a formal separation of state and religion. The cultural construction of masculinity, femininity and identities – as expressed through religion, among other cultural factors – functions not only at discursive or symbolic level, but leaves a definitive imprint on the bodies, sexualities and material lives of actual men and women. Elizabeth Castelli speaks of

> . . . the complicated role that religion has played in identity formation, social relations, and power structures. 'Religion' as a category often cuts across the other categories by which identities are framed (gender, race, class, etc.) and it often complicates these other categories rather than simply reinscribing them. (Castelli, 2001: 5)

Earlier feminist critiques of religion as fundamentally masculinist and discriminatory have given way to more recent (and postcolonial) interpretations that see women as agents finding space to negotiate their identities and activities even within conservative forms of religion, accepting, contesting or subverting the constraints of these religious forms within different sociopolitical and historical contexts (Tohidi and Bayes, 2001). Even here, however, there are considerable debates. The jury is still out on whether the hotly contested symbol of the veil, to take an example that is omnipresent in public and media discourse, can be seen as oppressive to women or as a liberating space, freeing them both from the dictates of sexualized western popular culture, and from the intrusive gaze of men within their own culture. The evidence of educated young Muslim women 'adopting values and behaviour which they see as more Islamic than that of their parents and grandparents' and that are 'often viewed as backward or oppressive within a Western perspective' (Hilsdon and Rozario, 2006: 331; see also Bunting, 2008) has evoked both consternation and applause. Within the context of Muslim feminism, there are debates between secular and Islamist feminists (see Allabadi, this issue; see also Moghadam, 2002) as to whether women's rights are most appropriately embodied by liberation from such cultural restrictions as the veil, or expressed in voluntary subjection to a patriarchal regime that actively rejects women's

rights as a western invention detrimental to the idea of male and female difference expressed in complementary spheres.

In a special issue of *Women's Studies International Forum* (29(4): 2006) devoted to Islam, gender and human rights, the editors argue that there is a fundamental contradiction between recently emerging Islamist feminisms and both secular and Muslim feminists in Muslim societies, on the basis that the Islamists reject both the arguments of the secular feminists, based on western notions of equal rights, and those of the Muslim feminists, who hoped to achieve a justification for equal rights through 'a critical and constructive engagement with the Qur'an and hadith' (Hilsdon and Rozario, 2006: 332). Nevertheless, they counterpose earlier authors like Leila Ahmed (1992) and Fatima Mernissi (1991), who had aspired to positive change through thus using the fundamental texts to critique the treatment of women in Muslim societies, with some more recent authors, like Haideh Moghissi (1999), who hold that these texts are incompatible with a feminist perspective or the achievement of equal rights for women.

Wearing the veil may therefore feature in some countries as the precondition for entering the public space and thus gaining rights, for example to employment in Iran; in others, it may precisely prevent that access, for example in Bangladesh (Hilsdon and Rozario, 2006: 332). In Turkey, wearing the veil barred access to careers in higher education until the ruling of the Turkish parliament to lift this ban in February 2008. Such a ruling reopens a debate on whether it represents a victory for western-style freedom of expression and human rights, or rather the beginnings of the end of a secular regime, ushering in a theocratic state with potentially damaging consequences for women's rights and inclusive democracy based on gender equality (see Hancock, this issue). Veiling can thus be seen as an instrument of patriarchal control of women's bodies and sexuality, or, paradoxically, as a means of liberation from precisely that control. 'Muslim women, like all other women, are social actors, employing, reforming, and changing existing social institutions, often creatively, to their own ends' (Castelli, 2001: 18).

Similarly, religious institutions and symbols can be seen as both repressive and enabling. Jane Bayes and Nayereh Tohidi refer to what could be described as an 'unholy' alliance between the Vatican and Muslim leaders who united at the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing and since in a Catholic–Islamic commission for interfaith dialogue that opposes equal rights for women, especially in terms of sexuality and reproductive rights (Bayes and Tohidi, 2001: 1–3; see also Tohidi and Bayes, 2001: 25). On the other side of the argument, it is worthy of note that during the Beijing NGO Forum, a joint Catholic–Muslim workshop devoted itself to the symbolic significance of the Virgin Mary for both religions and her potential as a role

model for a disorientated world (Bayes and Tohidi, 2001: 4–5; see also Jansen and Kühl, this issue).

Religion is self-evidently not the sole defining variable in experiences of gender as inequalities of cultural capital or political power. Tohidi and Bayes argue, on the one hand, that 'the position of women in religious systems is often a reflection, however oblique, of women's status in society'. Yet they hasten to relativize this statement with the proviso that 'while a very important factor, religion is only one determinant of women's status and role in society. Political and socioeconomic conditions are equally if not more important' (Tohidi and Bayes, 2001: 45). This gives rise to two interlinked propositions, namely that 'religion is part of the masculinist power structure within which social relations become gendered (and class-stratified, racialized and so on), and religion is a vehicle through which power and hierarchy can be challenged, subverted, overthrown, or modified' (Winter, 2006: 93). Thus, not only does religion form gender relations; it can also be a vehicle for enlarging women's agency. A further argument that has relevance in this context is the idea that increased involvement in religion may encourage greater civic and political engagement (Norris and Inglehart, 2004: 227). From this one might surmise that religion could ultimately serve as the vehicle for political changes including shifts in the gender regime towards greater empowerment of women and enhanced gender equality.

Religion is imbued with and indeed predicated upon fixed notions of femininity and masculinity that in turn imply 'proper' roles for women and men. In this way religion is a codeterminant, applying gender in concert with other factors of class, ethnicity, age, sexuality and able-bodiedness to shape and reinforce, produce and reproduce social relations as relations of unequal power. Thus religion can be seen as deeply political, and in turn the politics of religion are intrinsically gendered. Nevertheless, it would be simplistic to resort to the oft-cited truism that religion is 'bad for women' or incompatible with the realization of women's rights or gender-equitable citizenship. This issue of the *European Journal of Women's Studies* is concerned, rather, with an exploration – through detailed case studies of a variety of religions and cultures in a range of political and country contexts – of religion as part of the fabric of women's lives. The authors present ways in which religion has been used as the justification for political stances and intra-country politics (see article by Das in this issue) and affects – as well as being affected by – migration and diasporic communities (see articles by Jansen and Kühl, Longman, and Predelli). Gender is present in the discourses of cultural, ethnic or religious nationalism of modernizing movements (which often attack religion as backward-looking or traditionalist) as much as of the consolidated political regimes that follow movements of liberation from colonial or invading powers (see articles by Allabadi, Das, and Hancock). Gender is also central to the search for spiritual meaning in largely secularized

societies like the UK, where church attendance has fallen dramatically in recent times (see articles by Aune, and Day).

It is apparent then that religion and politics are intimately intertwined. Religion is centrally involved in the negotiation of differences that is increasingly a necessary feature of the plural societies of the 21st century. It can also be argued that religion predates politics as a form of social organization. Earlier religious identities were translated into ethnic or political identities as part of the historical process of state formation. Shared religious faith was a key component in the construction of collective national identities. Even today, nationalists mobilize – and instrumentalize – religious identities. In Central and Eastern Europe in the past 15 years or so, religion has sometimes provided the only distinguishing feature in the attempt to re-establish national identities in the vacuum that followed the demise of Communist ideology as social glue, even where the galvanizing power of that ideology was frequently long gone. In other words, religion provides a sense of certainty and security, particularly in times of social upheaval and instability.

This special issue explores these processes of social change, focusing on the particular ways in which women function as signifiers of religious or secular identities, often through externalities such as the donning of apparel or the manifestation of behaviour considered 'appropriate' by the relevant (usually male-dominated) religious or secular authorities.

All religions, as well as secular institutions, are worthy of scrutiny in terms of their treatment of women and attitudes to gender equality. Furthermore, this question elicits diverse and often contested views. What does it signify, for example, when a Christian church leader in Britain intervenes in a dispute involving an employee's wish to wear a cross on top of her uniform? Or when the Archbishop of Canterbury wanders into the domain of making special accommodations for religious (in this case *Shari'a*) law? Or when heads of state move to ban students (France) or teachers (Germany) from wearing a headscarf in school, or to ban the *burka* altogether (Netherlands)? Can such actions be seen, as is often claimed, as a bid to support individual women's rights? Is it about the assertion of religious freedom? Or is it rather an expression of the struggle for (secular, political) worldly power and influence between church and state? Madeleine Bunting argues persuasively that secularism does not – and indeed should not – preclude the assertion of religious identities. Rather, what is at stake in Europe in the 21st century is whether secularism 'is hijacked by a racist far right to become a rallying cry' or whether it can accommodate religious identities and differences (Bunting, 2008: 27).

The important issue in these pages is what religion means for the men and especially the women about whom governments and other secular political instances become so heated in the example of veiling. Is religion

for them an expression of the search for meaning in a world that has lost its way with the failures of both Communist and capitalist ideologies in terms of social justice and gender equity? Or is it a manifestation of the longing for some sense of collective belonging in societies where traditional extended family ties and community bonds have loosened? Is wearing a cross a declaration of individual faith, a badge of collective identity, or simply a fashion statement? Is wearing the *hijab* in Europe a form of self-empowerment, liberating women from the invasive scrutiny of the male gaze in a westernized culture seen as decadent and over-sexualized? Or does it signify social subordination to political religions inimical to women's independence from group norms? Both arguments have been passionately defended. Why do questions of women's clothing and comportment so inflame the political debate, particularly when it concerns women's self-determination as opposed to group control of women's bodies, appearance in the public space and sexuality? What do such debates really represent? Is there a moderate position to be taken?

What this issue of *EJWS* focuses on particularly is the role of religion as part of the fabric of women's lives, whether that be in an orthodox religious context (Longman), within a predominantly secular society (Day) or within the context of newly emerging fundamentalist religions (Aune). The articles cover a number of religions (Hinduism; Islam; Judaism; Christianity, including Catholicism, Evangelical and Protestant varieties) and a range of countries (Belgium, France, Germany, India, Norway, Palestine, Portugal, Turkey, the UK). One of the issues the authors address is the extent to which these various religious contexts facilitate or hinder women's agency and empowerment, and operate as an inclusive or a divisive force. Their arguments demonstrate that religion has the capacity for both, although in the politics of most societies and cultures to date it has tended to be a conservative rather than a radical – and hence empowering – force for change; inimical to rather than fostering cross-cultural dialogue (although Jansen and Kühl's research findings suggest that it could be otherwise). We asked authors to question assumptions about secularism as an inevitable outcome of increased development, education and the interconnectedness resulting from economic globalization, and to address the tensions between religions, and between the rise in religious adherence and secular politics.

In the opening article, Claire Hancock compares and contrasts debates about the veil in France and Turkey. Locating her enquiry in an exploration of what she calls 'the spatiality of the secular', she argues that the issue of the veil moves from the scale of individual women's bodies and the religious meanings attributed to the wearing of the veil to the scale of global geopolitical tensions. She concludes that – at least in France – the debate has ultimately less to do with religion than with politics, and in particular with the construction of the Other in French society. This transposition

of a debate ostensibly concerned with the relationship between the secular state and religious practices to the clearly political arena sets the scene for the articles that follow.

Fadwa Allabadi explores tensions between secular and religious conceptions of state formation in the Palestinian context. She examines the political shifts expressed in the change from a Fatah- to a Hamas-led administration and their gender policies. The article identifies the paradoxes in Hamas policy that fosters women's education and employment opportunities, while simultaneously drawing on the authority of the *Qur'an* to insist upon a subordinate status for women. The particular focus of the article is women's involvement in politics, both at the local and national level, and the tensions between the earlier secular feminist organizations and the newly emerging groups that define themselves as 'Islamist feminists'.

Runa Das locates her argument about secular-religious tensions in India squarely in the political arena of nation formation and the projection of political insecurities onto the Other nation, in this case Pakistan. She demonstrates the ways in which gender – specifically the bodies of women – was used in the process of postcolonial nation formation not only to define India in contrast to the former colonizer, but in relation to its neighbouring state. The article compares the secular modernity of the earlier Congress Party-dominated period with the blatant instrumentalization of gender in the service of cultural (religious) right-wing nationalism with the rise of the BJP and its definition of Hinduism as the badge of Indian national identity.

The space for empowerment within Orthodox Judaism is the focus of Chia Longman's study of the small diasporic Jewish community in Antwerp, Belgium. Somewhat paradoxically, her results confirm both the idea that women's agency is possible within traditionalist religious settings, and the contrary notion that religious communities tend to become more closed in the face of perceived threats to their values from the surrounding secular society. While her interviewees were able to study – and in some cases to be professionally active – in institutions outside the Jewish community, it is somewhat ironic that these same women are reluctant to allow their own daughters comparable freedom of movement, fearing the dilution of religious community cohesion and its gender-role expectations through the encroachment of secular gender equality and multicultural social values.

Mosques in Norway are the object of scrutiny for Line Nyhagen Predelli. She examines the extent to which the life of immigrant communities within a largely secular society can offer the possibility of change in terms of gender roles in religious observance. Some concessions have been won by migrant women in terms of prayer observance and leadership roles within women-only groups, and calls have been made by these

migrant women for rereadings of the *Qur'an* to establish whether or not it can be applied to make religious observance more gender-inclusive. Ultimately, though, the article concludes that the participation and indeed the citizenship of women within Islam in this context is totally dependent on men's willingness to open up the necessary spaces to include them.

The contingent nature of such empowerment is further relativized by Abby Day's article, exploring the beliefs of both religious and secular respondents. She contends that in response to a secularized world, people tend to seek solace in some form of religion or spirituality, but that unlike men, women 'wilfully disempower' themselves in relation to what they perceive as a higher (male) form of power.

A slightly different angle is offered by Kristin Aune's study of evangelical Christianity. The article focuses on women as statistically the majority adherents to all forms of Christianity. Aune argues that in fact social and economic changes impact upon religious observance, rather than the other way around. While evangelical Christianity is based upon very traditional gender-role expectations, many women are now deserting their churches as a direct result of their engagement in the secular world. Specifically, women's labour market participation tends to foster more egalitarian gender roles.

Marian pilgrimages provide the focus for Willy Jansen and Meike Kühl's article. They argue that although the institution of the Catholic church has historically been opposed to such forms of idolatry, especially as expressions of women's spirituality, the popularity of Marian pilgrimages is rising. This seems to have particular resonance for migrant women in overcoming isolation and exclusion within the largely secular host societies. Jansen and Kühl assert that the participation of Muslims in such pilgrimages demonstrates the significance of Mary as a symbolic figure for Muslims as well as Catholics, and in the process suggests that interfaith divides may not be as insurmountable as is often supposed.

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