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The Unhappy Marriage of Religion and Politics: Problems and Pitfalls for Gender Equality

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Abstract

This paper explores how religion as a political force shapes and deflects the struggle for gender equality in contexts marked by different histories of nation-building and challenges of ethnic diversity, different state-society relations (from the more authoritarian to the more democratic), and different relations between state power and religion (especially in the domain of marriage, family and personal laws). It shows how 'private' issues, related to the family, sexuality and reproduction, have become sites of intense public contestation between conservative religious actors wishing to regulate them based on some transcendent moral principle, and feminist and other human rights advocates basing their claims on pluralist and time-and-context specific solutions. Not only are claims of 'divine truth' justifying discriminatory practices against women hard to challenge, but the struggle for gender equality is further complicated by the manner in which it is closely tied up, and inseparable from, struggles for social and economic justice, ethnic/racial recognition, and national self-determination vis-à-vis imperial/global domination.

Introduction

The past three decades have witnessed the rising political prominence of religious actors and movements. While religious attachments and practices may have weakened in some countries (most notably, Western Europe), on a worldwide basis they seem to have persisted if not intensified.² Moreover, religious arguments continue to be actively invoked in politics across a wide range of countries, both developed and developing. This alleged 'de-privatisation'³ of religion has raised fundamental questions about the predictions of sweeping secularisation as the inevitable companion to modernisation and development.

The assertiveness of religion has coincided with a number of other transformations. First has been the introduction and rise to hegemony of a highly contested economic model ('neoliberalism'), introduced from the mid-1970s under conditions of harsh stabilisation and structural adjustment. A second, more welcome, development has been the greater emphasis on democracy and rights in the post-Cold War era, which has given particular prominence to women's rights as well as human rights more broadly.⁴ In much of the world, however, the positive developments in political and legal rights have not been matched by improvements in social justice, as income inequalities have increased and poverty remained stubbornly in place. Some argue that the failed promises of the modern, secular state to produce both democracy and development have in many regions prompted the search for alternative discourses of power and authenticity to challenge the dominant Western agenda.⁵ Apart from the dynamics emanating from national and local/grassroots level, the role of transnational networks of finance and the proliferation of diaspora communities over the past three decades have also contributed to the rise and influence of religious actors and movements in many contexts.⁶

Feminists wonder where this leaves gender equality. To put it crudely, has the presence of religion within the political arena made it harder for women to pursue equality with men? This is one of the central questions animating this special issue. The volume brings together eleven papers spanning different regional contexts, from Asia (**India, Pakistan**) to Africa (**Nigeria**) and the Middle East (**Iran, Israel, Turkey**), and from the Americas (**Chile, Mexico, United States**) to Eastern and Central Europe (**Poland, Serbia**), encompassing countries with populations belonging to diverse religious traditions including Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism and Islam. The case studies explore how religion and politics have interfaced in different national settings, and the implications of this nexus for gender equality and feminist politics, that is how women as actors—both individually and collectively—have contested (or reinforced) hegemonic norms and representations that may be inimical to their gender interests.⁷

After the introduction, some of the key conceptual premises informing the volume are elaborated. The following section then looks at how religious precepts have been mobilised for nationalist and ethnic politics, and its implications for gender inequality; particular attention is given to the ways in which the struggle for gender equality can be compromised where it is used (or feared to be used) as a pretext for majoritarian ethnic/religious supremacy. This is followed by an analysis of how religion has been used to reinforce authoritarian state tendencies, especially where the state claims its legitimacy in the name of religion. The article then turns to some of the new democracies where processes of democratisation have empowered both feminist groups seeking reform of the ‘private sphere’ while simultaneously strengthening religious institutions that are opposed to key elements of the feminist agenda. The article draws to a close by reflecting on some of the dilemmas facing feminist action and alliance-building in a context where conservative religious forces are assertive and where the struggle for gender equality coincides with other justice claims.

Questioning the ‘private-public’ divide and re-thinking the political sphere

In rethinking the relevance of secularism and theories of secularisation, José Casanova introduced an early and useful differentiation between secularisation as institutional differentiation, secularisation as the decline of religiosity, and secularisation as the privatisation of religion.⁸ One of the key arguments emerging from his influential analysis was that the ‘de-privatisation’ of modern religion was empirically irrefutable and morally defensible. He further argued that only the presence of religion in the public sphere of civil society, where religious actors engage in open public debate on a range of common public concerns and issues, would be compatible with democratic principles. In his later work, he questions whether ‘the secular separation of religion from political society or even from the state’ are necessary or sufficient conditions for democratic politics as long as both the state and religious institutions adhere to the rule of law and do not violate democratic rules—Alfred Stepan’s concept of ‘twin tolerations’.⁹

To begin with, was religion ever a purely ‘private’ matter, as the term ‘de-privatisation’ implies—cordoned off from the state by a wall of separation, and contained within the private sphere of personal belief? Even in Western Europe, the stronghold of secularism, religions have considerably contributed to the shaping of welfare and abortion regimes.¹⁰ Several of the papers in this volume question whether religion was absent from the actually existing secularisms that took hold in the

twentieth century, themselves highly diverse and developed in relation to particular religious formations (be it Protestantism in the USA, Hinduism in India, or Sunni Islam in Turkey) and shaped by critical historical conditions.¹¹ Modernist and secularist pretensions notwithstanding, few 'secularist' states were willing to risk their political survival by radically interfering in matters of the family, marriage and personal laws which were widely seen as the domain of religious authorities. The price paid for this pragmatic non-interference was state endorsement of gender inequality in family/personal status, and sometimes also criminal, laws.¹² Hence in many nominally secularized states, such as Israel and India, religious precepts continued to hold sway.

Furthermore, is the notion of 'twin separations' sufficient to protect the rights and needs of women and men, believers and non-believers against discrimination? As Anne Phillips rightly argues, viewing the relationship between religion and politics in quasi-corporatist terms—as a relationship between democratic political institutions, on the one hand, and religious communities and authorities, on the other—pays far too little attention to the ways in which each of these may misrepresent or coerce their individual members (women, non-believers, and believers).¹³ Hence the relationship needs to be viewed also through the lens of *individual rights and needs*, rather than assuming that their interests are simply represented by the principles and practices as defined by religious as well as political leaders and spokespersons.

Given the way in which women are positioned as 'bearers of culture' (including religion and tradition), their deportment, dress code, and sexuality are often rendered markers of the 'good society' envisaged by different groups. Religious authorities commonly insist on regulating relationships of the private domain, including sexuality, biological and social reproduction, marriage, gender roles, and definitions of what constitutes a 'proper' family. Such regulations, premised on some transcendent principle, are steeped in patriarchal and heteronormative assumptions, and often work to women's disadvantage. As the contributions to this volume attest, 'private' issues, such as the right to divorce, permissible forms of sexuality, access to contraception and abortion have become sites of intense contestation between conservative religious actors who see religious moral principles as 'natural', absolute and non-negotiable (valid for all times and places), and feminist and other human rights advocates who argue for democratic, pluralist and rights-based alternatives. 'The private' is indeed political, and has become increasingly politicised.

One important prism for analysing the relationship between religion and the state is through the legal framework. Yet religions shape gender (in)equality through multiple channels of state action, not only legal ones, including through public health (Chile, Mexico, Poland, USA), education (Iran, Pakistan, Poland, Turkey), and welfare policies and programmes, even where there is formal legal separation between religion and the state.

Beyond the state an important arena is that of political parties. In some countries political parties are openly religious in name and ideological and policy orientation (e.g. Pakistan, Iran, Israel), while in others religious issues are channelled into political parties through alliances with religious interest groups (e.g. USA, India) or with the Church (e.g. Poland, Serbia, Chile, Mexico). Religion can also have a more

diffuse presence as prospective politicians demonstrate their political legitimacy by demonstrating their personal religiosity (e.g. Nigeria, USA).

Outside of the formal arena of politics lies the arena of civil society and associational life where people organise (in lobby groups, NGOs, trade unions) and mobilise (in social movements, coalitions and campaigns) to pressure and persuade governments and citizens on a wide range of issues. However, seeing the arena of public debate and contestation as a power-free zone where participants deliberate as equal peers is suspect. While in most countries counter-hegemonic discourses and counter-publics are able to articulate new social visions, breaking taboos on gender roles, family forms and sexuality, their voices are often muffled by conservative forces that command greater access to resources and state protection if not assistance. Sometimes the dividing line is not even clear, as many think-tanks and NGOs enjoy state support and patronage. It would be dangerous therefore to rely on civil society exclusively to produce egalitarian visions and projects, as it can easily reproduce existing social hierarchies and exclusions.¹⁴

The interface between politics and religion is frequently examined from a perspective that is exclusively centred on state power dynamics and formal political institutions. However much of the ‘informal power’ of religion lies in the way its ideas and norms are diffused outside of the formal political arena, through everyday effects that shape people’s attitudes and lives.¹⁵ As Farida Shaheed (this volume) argues, the conventional approach is inadequate because of the difficulty of separating out the realms of ‘the social’ from ‘the political’, and ‘the public’ from ‘the private’ everyday life. And as Charmaine Pereira and Jibrin Ibrahim caution, the indirect effects of state laws can be even more pernicious and difficult to challenge than the laws themselves. As several contributions in this volume show (Pakistan, Turkey, Serbia, Poland), some of the more insidious and lasting changes that religious actors introduce are in terms of practices and meanings that reshape people’s minds and become unquestioned social norms—or ‘common sense’ in Gramscian terms.¹⁶ When such norms are discriminatory or reduce women’s opportunities then they are of serious concern. Where such norms are contrary to social practices they can also initiate resistance—day-to-day defiance of the Islamic dress code by young women on the streets of Tehran, or young couples in Chile and Poland defying Catholic dogma on sexual abstinence prior to marriage.

There is unmistakably a recent narrowing of agendas of various (though by no means all) religious actors and movements, not only Islamist, around an exclusive moral, ideological and identity-based politics. Many such movements capitalise on gender issues to demand a greater public role for themselves as moral guardians of the nation promising justice and redress. In this context we pose a set of questions: what is the form and significance of the resurgence of religious forces in different contexts and what has it entailed in terms of gender equality? As we show, the causes/significance of religious assertiveness and the form it takes are context-specific, and therefore defy broad-brush explanations.

Religion, nationalism and ethno-political conflict

Historically, religion has played an important part in the formation of most nation-states.¹⁷ Here we focus on the post-colonial and post-soviet moments, when the ambivalence of nationalist projects has become more apparent. In many such

instances the exclusionary effects of ethnic nationalisms, often leading to the marginalisation of religious or other minorities and even to violent conflict, have prevailed over its liberating effects. By promoting a sense of community and belonging, nationalism often breeds intolerance and hatred towards an ‘alien other’ which is to be excluded. Religion, as a powerful source of identity, is frequently utilised both to promote intra-group cohesion and to mobilise inter-group differences and conflict. It can serve as a source of legitimacy for national leaders who are developing new political institutions, or who are trying to bolster their legitimacy in times of crisis. In addition, dominant religious institutions can also have a strong bearing (often more than political parties) on citizens’ political choices and are therefore important allies in the assertion of—secular—political power.¹⁸

For women there is much at stake in how religion becomes mobilised for nationalist struggles. While nationalism can prompt feminist consciousness and pave the way for the emergence of indigenous feminist movements, feminist agendas have all too often been regarded as secondary, their implementation frequently suspended until after the success of the ‘larger national cause’, and in the end abandoned altogether.¹⁹ Nationalist discourses designate women as ‘bearers of the collective’, assigning men the role of governing the nation and its state, while women are assigned responsibility of its biological and cultural reproduction. Any reform of this gender-based division presents a threat to the nationalist bid for protection and unification of the community, thereby rendering feminist politics a menace to the nationalist project.²⁰ Religion can further amplify these dynamics by providing a ‘divine’ grounding for them.

The case studies on **Serbia, India, Israel and Nigeria** in this volume illustrate the exclusionary dynamics of ethnic nationalisms, and reveal their discriminatory and muting impact on women, their rights and feminist politics. **Rada Drezgić** in her contribution demonstrates how Milošević, himself an atheist, mobilised the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serb religious sentiments to rally support for his various political agendas in the process of Serbian nation-state formation (beginning with the death of Tito in 1980). During the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia and the associated wars of secession in the early 1990s, religious affiliation became a crucial element in ethno-national differentiation, while women’s bodies were appropriated for the biological survival of post-Yugoslav nations and the preservation of their ethnic ‘purity’, resulting in systematic rapes and forced pregnancies as part of the war strategy of ‘ethnic cleansing’. Since then pro-natalist and anti-abortion discourses have flourished, threatening women’s reproductive rights and equality in Serbia, although the presence of a relatively strong feminist movement and socialist ‘pro-choice’ tradition have thus far prevented a radical overturning of abortion legislation. Nevertheless, the continuing nationalist discourse assigning women nurturing and reproductive roles has begun to show its effect, for instance, by gradually reversing the ‘modernisation’ of the domestic division of labour between the sexes. And there is little reason for optimism according to Drezgić: since Milošević was toppled in 2000, the public and political influence of the conservative Serbian Orthodox Church has grown as weak and unstable ruling coalitions and politicians have sought to bolster their position and enhance their legitimacy by allying themselves with it.

Zoya Hasan in her contribution to this volume discusses the rise of the nationalist Hindutva movement in India, which equates the nation with the majority Hindu community, as a result of attempts by political leaders, both secular and religiously-

inclined, to curry favour with religious leaders in order to marshal political support. However, the most important issue, she argues, is not the growth of religious politics per se, but the inordinate play of identity politics (primarily based on caste and religion), to the extent that ordinary Indians no longer have access to public institutions except on the basis of religious and social identities. In Israel, as illustrated by **Ruth Halperin-Kaddari & Yaacov Yagdar**, the Zionist movement started out as a secular ideology intended to emancipate 'its' people from the influence of all oppressions, including religious ones. Yet the state of Israel was officially created as a 'Jewish state' in which religious symbols and discourses, along with the 'right of return', served to unite the Jewish nation, eventually resulting in an ethnic democracy in which non-Jewish citizens can only be granted 'second-class citizenship'.

In several states with religiously diverse populations, such as India, Israel, and Nigeria, the state 'communalises' religion by according religious authorities and institutions semi-autonomy from the otherwise non-religious national legal regime. This mainly concerns the area of personal status laws.²¹ The articles on India and Israel in this volume, therefore, pay particular attention to the exclusive religious jurisdiction over family law and its discriminatory effects on women. They furthermore demonstrate how the conflict between the (Hindu and Jewish, respectively) majority and the (primarily Muslim) minority populations have muted feminist attempts to reform the personal status laws. In India, the Hindu right has instrumentalised efforts to introduce a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) for its own nationalist purposes, fuelling Muslim fears of the imposition of a 'Hindu', officially disguised as 'universal', code. Feminist organisations that were originally supportive of the UCC thus had to distance themselves from it. In Israel, due to the close link between religion and nationalism, as well as the overshadowing reality of the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict, feminists, Jewish and Muslim/Arab alike, who challenge religions' exclusive jurisdiction, face accusations of betraying their 'community' as well as jeopardising its identity and even security. However, while Halperin-Kaddari and Yagdar stress the importance of reform of personal status matters from within religious communities, Hasan cautions that such an approach risks freezing identities within religious boundaries.

The exclusionary nature of religiously buttressed nationalism often leads to violent conflict between ethno-religious groups.²² Competing religious identities can legitimate conflict, and violent conflict in turn can make people more conscious of their religious identity and more committed to it. This has not only been the case in the former Yugoslavia, in Israel and in India, but also in Nigeria where politicians have consistently used (ethno-) religious mobilisation to fuel social exclusion and conflict. Although Islam and Christianity are often represented in terms of a conflictual relationship to one another, **Charmaine Pereira & Jibrin Ibrahim** in their contribution to this volume, draw attention to areas of convergence between the two religions: the common referencing of women's bodies and sexuality and the need to control both. Indicative of this convergence is the proposed Bill on 'Public Nudity, Sexual Intimidation and Other Related Matters' in 2008, which, across religious divides, aims at the 'Restoration of Human Dignity'. However, it primarily targets women's autonomy, while allowing unauthorised individuals to determine for themselves how women should be dressed, resulting in reported assaults on women who, allegedly, are 'indecently' dressed.

Religion at the service of the state: Bolstering authoritarianism

The capacity of civil society to produce contestation and democratic change becomes particularly constrained where religious actors and scripts gain a strong foothold in the political and social arenas. Nowhere is this clearer than in Iran and Pakistan, analysed in the papers by **Homa Hoodfar & Shadi Sadr**, and **Farida Shaheed** respectively in this volume.

In both countries the state defines itself as Islamic, and conservative readings of *Shari'a* inform the legal domain. As Lisa Hajjar observes, where religious law becomes the law of the land, and where state power is exercised in the name of religion, 'defense of religion can be conflated with defense of the state, and critiques or challenges can be regarded and treated as heresy and apostasy'.²³ Authoritarianism is thereby bolstered. Hoodfar and Sadr go even further and argue that in the case of Iran the larger obstacle to gender equality has more to do with the authoritarian nature of the state, rather than the actual or potential compatibility (or lack thereof) of religious traditions or practices with democratic principles. Islamist women's rights activists in Iran have presented 'woman-friendly' readings of Islamic texts which challenge the conservative interpretation of *Shari'a* and which could have been adopted by the Islamic state. Instead, the ruling elite have pursued their ambition of building an Islamic society based on their own gender vision, and this has increasingly meant the relegation of *Shari'a* to a backseat.

The fact that in both Pakistan and Iran it is Islam that has been fused so closely with authoritarian state practices may raise questions about its alleged incompatibility with human rights, democracy and gender equality (bracketing the fact that authoritarian states such as Franco's Spain and Latin American military dictatorships were all Christian and Catholic, rather than Muslim).²⁴ In polemical assertions about the 'civilisational clash' between Islam and Christianity the former is often construed as monolithic and hostile to human rights and oppressive towards women. Tragically, the terrorist attacks of recent years perpetrated by Muslim militants and the barbaric treatment of women by regimes such as the Taliban in Afghanistan have reinforced such readings. The tendency to homogenize Islamic politics, however, conceals a wide diversity of ideas and movements. The Iraqi sociologist, Sami Zubaida, for example, identifies three broad tendencies within political Islam, which include what he calls 'conservative Islam', often associated with authoritarian states, radical and militant variants, typically pursued by militant youth, and the more reformist orientations which seek to Islamise state and society in the context of social reform and democratisation.²⁵

The history and politics of the state—that is their specific experiences and legacies of colonial or imperial domination, nation-building projects and challenges of ethnic and regional diversity, as well as geopolitical factors—have been very different in Iran and Pakistan. This has coloured the manner in which they were Islamicised: through a popular anti-authoritarian revolution in Iran (in 1979), while Pakistan's *raison-d'être* as a state created for Indian Muslims brought religion into politics from its inception, but religion was given a major boost after a military coup brought General Zia ul-Huq to power (also in 1979 and when Pakistan was being used as a conduit for getting Western military assistance to the *Mujahideen* fighting against the USSR in Afghanistan). Their diverse historical and political trajectories have also given the

struggles for democracy and gender equality their distinct characters, strategies, and challenges.

Iran—a country where the ‘prophetic’ role assumed by religious authorities in opposition to a dictatorial regime was transformed into a ‘priestly’²⁶ one as religion was institutionalised within politics and fused with the state—continues to provide important insights into the limits and contradictions of merging religion with the state. Not only is the political role of religious authorities a highly contested one, but the need for ‘separation of religion and state’ is being voiced by both secular forces as well as ‘believers’ from within the heart of the Islamic establishment. These advocates of ‘reform’ (*eslahat*) have included male lay intellectuals, some notable clerical authorities, and a number of feminists with an Islamic orientation.

In both countries Islamisation projects have used the state’s legal, punitive, administrative, and ideological instruments to impose an anti-democratic, discriminatory and misogynistic template on society. They have brutally closed down spaces for contestation and nurtured state-sponsored militias and foot soldiers—some of whom are women (the Al-Hafsa women in Pakistan, the female preachers trained by the Office of the Supreme Leader in Iran)—to ‘guide’, ‘educate’ and proselytise the population. While Islamisation may have been engineered ‘in the pursuit of greater power alignments’ (Shaheed this volume), power is never devoid of ideas, ideology, or culture. Within the current Islamist political sociability and discourse ‘women-as-culture’²⁷ has come to occupy a central position. As the paper on Nigeria rightly observes, in principle, the expansion of *Shari’a* could have addressed a number of areas in economic and social development, such as provisions for the collection and distribution of *zakat* (the charity tithe), or the implementation of regulations prohibiting usury. Instead, the emphasis in Nigeria, as in Iran and Pakistan, has been on punishments for sexual offences and alcohol consumption, accompanied by the stress on public morality, as expressed through the impositions placed on women.

Three salient observations emerge from our contributors’ analyses. First the obsessive preoccupation with sexuality, gender and ‘the family’ and efforts by the state to regulate them has given the ‘woman question’ an immediacy and urgency that has been historically unprecedented. Blatant discrimination has in turn incensed a wide spectrum of women activists and fuelled, at least in Iran, one of the most dynamic and innovative women’s movements in the country’s history—one that has worked both ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ the state, using diverse strategies and discourses and increasingly coalescing around a concrete and pragmatic set of shared objectives.

The second point alluded to in Hoodfar and Sadr’s analysis is the danger that pro-democracy movements run in parallel with the longer-standing struggles of women’s rights for reform and democratisation, rather than making women’s claims for equality a central part of their struggle for democracy. While a great deal of rethinking and realignment has been taking place on women’s issues among women rights activists of diverse outlooks in the preceding decades, gender seems to be all but non-existent as a category of thinking among the emerging group of (male) dissident intellectuals struggling for a more democratic polity. Contributing to this process has been, with few notable exceptions, the absence of women, from the presumably more general democracy debates at the level of leadership (even if

women are present in the body of the movement, on the streets and in protests). The implicit understanding seems to be that democracy is a gender-neutral category, and that struggles for citizenship rights are ‘naturally inclusive of women’.

The third point, underlined by Shaheed, is the need for human rights and women’s rights advocates to utilise a vocabulary and socio-cultural agenda that has greater social resonance by embedding their claims within society’s more liberal and popular traditions and idioms. The international human rights discourse perhaps lacks the resonance that notions of ‘justice’ and fairness have. Moreover, the failure to present a credible agenda for combating economic and social deprivation that responds to popular concerns and anxieties about increasing inequality, unemployment and insecurity cedes the ground to the morally conservative elements who exploit such anxieties with their populist rhetoric of ‘Islamic justice’. We will return to this issue in the final section of the article.

Religion, democratisation and the ‘democratic paradox’

Women’s groups and movements have in recent decades both contributed to national processes of democratisation and benefited from such processes to democratically voice their demands vis-à-vis the state. Yet democracy has complex effects or ‘built-in paradoxes and contradictions’.²⁸ At the same time that it has in some contexts empowered feminist groups seeking reform it has also strengthened religious institutions that are opposed to some elements of the feminist agenda. In the context of electoral competition, contending political parties need allies to defeat their opponents and religious organisations are often good alliance partners as they are able to tap into a sizeable social network.²⁹ A well-known illustration analysed in **Elizabeth Bernstein & Janet Jakobsen’s** contribution to this volume is the political coalition between conservative evangelical groups and secular neoliberals of the Republican Party in the USA. This coalition supported Republican dominance in electoral politics and gave a major boost to conservative policies on issues of gender and sexuality both domestically and internationally.

Even nominally secular political parties and politicians, as several of our contributions suggest, have not hesitated in using religion for political or electoral purposes, and in the process provided the necessary foundations for its continued life and growth. A case in point is India, one of the oldest democracies in the developing world, where as Zoya Hasan shows, the Congress Party’s attempts to play the ‘religious card’—calculated to undercut the popularity of its rivals and please communally minded Muslims and Hindus at different moments—ended up giving a massive boost to the Hindu right in the 1980s.

Where religious groups and institutions have played an important role in contesting authoritarian regimes, this has made it difficult for women’s rights advocates to oppose them in the ‘new’ democracies that replaced the authoritarian system. The country studies on Chile by **Virginia Guzman, Ute Seibert & Silke Staab** and on Poland by **Jacqueline Heinen & Stéphane Portet** show how the Catholic Church has reconfigured its alliances and adopted new strategies and discourses in opposition to policies for sex education in schools (in both countries) and reproductive rights (emergency contraception in Chile, abortion in Poland) seeking to subvert feminist demands for the democratisation of the private sphere. As Blofield observed, the representatives of the Catholic Church in Chile continue to ‘collect the debt’ of their

predecessors by capitalising on its defence of human right during the dictatorship, now (re)defined as the right to life from conception, to privacy and to parental primacy in decisions over a child's education.³⁰

Despite equally strong support from the Vatican and links to political parties, youth movements and think tanks in both contexts, the hegemony of the Church seems to have been more effectively challenged in Chile. The negative association between feminism and the discredited socialist regime has tainted feminist organising in Poland and weakened its capacity to withstand the assault on women's reproductive rights. The relative success of the women's movement in Chile, on the other hand, may be in large part due to the continued support that 'women friendly' policies have enjoyed from two successive left-leaning governments (of Ricardo Lagos and Michele Bachelet between 2000 and 2009) in a presidential system where the executive has ample opportunity to define the political agenda. The fact that political parties are in general more programmatic in Chile, and the left parties more candid in their opposition to the Catholic dogma, seems to have facilitated their capacity to respond to public opinion, which in both countries appears to favour less church involvement in dictating sexual practices. In Poland, however, the political landscape has been very unstable since the fall of socialism marked by short-lived coalition governments and weakly institutionalised political parties; the left-leaning parties, even if they would like to limit the Church's incursions into the public sphere, fearing the electoral consequences, tend to avoid any direct confrontation with it.

In Mexico and Turkey the relation between religion and politics has been historically more conflictive and their secularisms more 'assertive'³¹ as the contributions by **Ana Amuchastegui, Guadalupe Cruz, Evelyn Aldaz & Maria Consuela Mejia** and **Yesim Arat** respectively show. In Mexico state-Church relations were indelibly marked by a revolutionary movement (in 1917) that expropriated property owned by the Church, and denied it legal existence through the Constitution, while outlawing political parties from having any religious or denominational references. In Turkey the shift from an Islamic monarchy to a republican nation-state (in 1923) abolished the caliphate, expropriated the property of pious foundations and brought Sunni Islam under the aegis of the state (in the form of the General Directorate of Religious Affairs), turning clerical figures into state personnel, while banning political parties from using religion as a political platform.³²

In the context of increasing democratisation gathering pace over the past decade, ruling parties have had to share power with political contestants, some of whom have strong religious roots: the ruling National Action Party (PAN) in Mexico, and Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey being prime examples.³³ In this context private sphere issues relating to women's bodily integrity and deportment, and sexual and reproductive rights have become the arena of intense contestation. The dominance of religious parties in government notwithstanding, women's rights advocates and their allies have succeeded in pushing through some landmark pieces of legislation—the Reform of the Penal Code (2002-04) in Turkey,³⁴ the inclusion of emergency contraception in public health services (2004) in Mexico and the decriminalization of abortion in Mexico City (2008)—in great part thanks to their energetic campaigns and effective strategies.

Yet the wave of recriminalisation of abortion across Mexican federal states since 2008 is a stark reminder of the fragility of some of these gains. What is most disconcerting here is the role played by the ‘secularist’ political party, Institutionalised Revolutionary Party (PRI), in promoting recriminsalisation in an effort to win the support of the Catholic Church for short-term electoral purposes (in view of the upcoming local and national elections in 2012). In Turkey meanwhile the return of AKP to power in 2007 with a clear majority and with the prospect of accession to the European Union looking increasingly dim, seems to have bolstered the Party’s incentives for responding to its socially conservative constituencies. While a great deal has been said about the AKP’s efforts to circumvent the (undemocratic) ban on the headscarf through Constitutional amendment, what Arat’s paper highlights are the more insidious ways in which conservative attitudes and discriminatory practices are spreading within both political and civic society.

Regardless of the precise causality, what is disconcerting is the spread of conservative attitudes within both political and civic society, and the boost that this is likely to give to conservative practices that restrict women’s options—an issue that is often left out of the discussions on gender equality in Turkey that are exclusively focused on the headscarf issue. This underlines one of the key themes emerging from this volume: it is not enough to look at developments in the institutionalized public spheres; equally, if not more, pertinent for women’s rights and their real options is what goes on in the social and private spheres of everyday life.

Feminist politics: Creating alliances for justice and democracy

The contributions to this volume demonstrate that there is much at stake for women and their rights to equality, autonomy and bodily integrity in how religion and politics intertwine. There are many instances across the world and across religious traditions, of religious groups and authorities having raised their voice to condemn social injustice and human rights abuses, often in alliance with secular forces; from liberation theologians in Latin America to the Catholic opposition in the USA to nuclear war and economic injustice in the 1980s, to the Iranian clerics who oppose orthodox interpretations of Islam.³⁵ Although religiously influenced social movements have historically been progressive as well as conservative, most of them did not focus on gender equality as their major concern. On the contrary, not infrequently women’s rights advocates have found their demands for greater democracy and equality in the ‘private’ domain of family law, reproduction and sexuality being virulently opposed by those who adopt a religious/moral discourse and claim to be speaking on behalf of religious ‘communities’.

As real as this conflict is, it should not be taken to suggest a dividing line between feminism and religion. As several contributions to this volume have suggested, there is very often opposition and debate within the ‘religious’ camp, as well as diversity of views and positions among feminists as exemplified by the presence of feminists who promote gender-egalitarian interpretations of religion and other feminists who see religion as deeply problematic for gender equality.

Feminist struggles from within religious communities and frameworks

The resurgence of religion in the public sphere represents a particular challenge to feminist struggles. Not only are claims of ‘divine truth’ justifying discriminatory practices against women hard to challenge, but the struggle for women’s rights and

gender equality, as illustrated in the preceding sections, is also often closely tied up, and inseparable from, broader struggles for social and economic justice, ethnic/racial equality and recognition, and national self-determination vis-à-vis imperial/global domination. In the Global South, the effort to advocate for universal human rights norms has often pitted women's rights advocates against those who use religion to resist cultural imperialism and Western-style individualism (which they claim is alien to their societies)³⁶. In multi-religious contexts, mobilisation against women's rights violations often inadvertently involves mobilising sentiments based on religious differences. This politicisation of religion and its entanglement with various other disadvantages and discriminations, makes it hard, if not impossible, to advocate for women's rights without feeding into other struggles and identity conflicts. Therefore, many support an approach of 'internal reform' as the most appropriate, if not the only, way to make religious communities and their political impacts more woman-friendly.³⁷

In contexts where secular spaces are limited, such as in theocracies like Iran, or where ethno-religious conflicts have created tensions between feminist and communal claims, such as in Israel and India, feminists who work from within religious communities and/or who invoke religious precepts and interpretations to advocate gender justice have played a crucial role. They often popularise woman-centred interpretations of religious texts, stimulate public debate and force religious authorities into conversations about the rights of women, and sometimes even pave the way for legal and political reforms. While mainly engaged in 'discursive politics'³⁸, the degree to which these alternative discourses can get a public hearing or even influence state policy is limited. Particularly in authoritarian settings, many governments have acted to repress scholars, activists, and organisations advocating women's rights, even if such advocacy seeks to show compatibility with religion.³⁹ In settings heated by ethno-religious conflicts, women's rights advocates are often played off against the nationalist bid for protection and unification of the community (however defined), as the articles on India and Israel illustrate.

It is therefore questionable whether internal reform movements can offer a more promising avenue for egalitarian change. When we consider the significant social authority of many religions, and the power they can wield against dissident voices, it is too optimistic to rely simply on reform from within. It is also unhelpful to set up an opposition between internally and externally generated change, or represent one avenue as superior to the other.⁴⁰ The dividing line between the two may also be porous as those who work for 'internal reform' very often draw on the ideas/arguments of 'external' advocates for change. Alliances between feminists of different religious and secular communities are therefore imperative. Discrimination and oppression of their alternative voices have incensed many religious and secular women in many contexts to collaborate. In Iran, reformist women have increasingly reached out and joined secularist women in various campaigns, resulting not only in a more 'pragmatic feminism'⁴¹ but also in mutual learning. Clearly, 'reformist or women-centred interpretation of religious laws should be considered not as an alternative to secular and democratic demands but as a component of more holistic social change'.⁴²

In India, for example, an alliance of Muslim women's groups with the Indian women's movement, together with movements for secularism, democracy, and human

rights, has been crucial in broad-basing the struggle for women's rights, which now goes beyond personal laws to promote gender equality. However, given the exclusionary nature of nationalist and identity politics in multi-religious states, such alliances are often not easily built. In Israel, for instance, women's rights activists within the Muslim community have resisted appeals from Jewish women's rights activists to join forces in demanding the promulgation of secular civil family laws as an alternative to communal law because this would give the state more authority over the community without addressing the problem of state discrimination.⁴³ Feminists from the Muslim community have preferred to reform Muslim family laws from within, as accomplished in 2001 when the Family Courts Law was amended, reducing the exclusive jurisdiction of *Shari'a* courts.

Gender justice and economic justice

The connections between economic and social justice, on the one hand, and gender justice, on the other are clear in women's lives: legal rights to abortion and bodily integrity mean very little where quality public health services remain out of reach; and the formal rights to divorce and child custody can remain trapped on paper if women do not have the financial wherewithal to support their dependents.⁴⁴ An enabling environment for women's substantive rights therefore requires both a rights-based agenda that guarantees individual rights and autonomy, as well as an economic agenda that upholds social and economic rights.

Feminist groups and movements, often in alliance with leftist parties, unions and other civil society groups have drawn attention to the un-equalising tendencies of the neoliberal agenda, while demanding redistributive measures to redress the economic/social injustices of unfettered globalisation. However, those who promote issues of social justice (poverty, inequality) are not always supportive of women's rights agendas, especially in the arena of reproduction and sexuality. This complicates feminist efforts at alliance-building.

At the international level such fissures were apparent in the UN conferences of the 1990s: the conservative alliance led by a group of conservative states and largely religious NGOs that virulently opposed the women's rights agenda (especially with respect to reproduction), was also critical of the agenda of economic liberalisation that Northern governments were pursuing. The Vatican in particular voiced concerns about North-South inequality and poverty while opposing women's rights agendas.⁴⁵

At the national level too, those who champion a social justice agenda and are critical of 'globalisation' and 'imperialism' may hold deeply patriarchal views of the family; the Iranian President Ahmadinejad and the Pakistani *ihadists* being clear examples of such a tendency. While there are serious questions about the extent to which these advocates have, or are even able to, turn their 'anti-imperialist' slogan into a redistributive economic agenda, they can clearly not be considered potential allies given their deeply regressive views on gender equality.

An example of feminist alliance-building with religious actors in the USA which has not been able to produce progressive outcomes, if assessed from a critical feminist perspective, is discussed by Janet Jakobsen and Elizabeth Bernstein on anti-trafficking policies. The feminist-evangelical alliance has been enabled by a rightward shift of some feminists towards neo-conservatism and a 'law and order' agenda, and

the leftward sweep of some evangelical Christians away from the divisive issues such as abortion and gay marriage towards a 'new internationalist', social-justice theology. This has considerably shaped the prevailing political framework on trafficking, both in the USA and abroad. It has shifted the debate away from a broad definition of trafficking as inclusive of all forms of labour towards a definition that focuses primarily upon forced prostitution. This shift is intertwined with a move toward a neo-liberal framework for understanding both the problem and its potential solutions, resulting not only in the increased criminalisation of sex workers, but also the deportation of migrant sex workers as well as the funnelling of survivors into dead-end, minimum wage jobs which increases the likelihood that they will pursue similarly risky livelihood strategies in the future.

Transnational alliances

The case studies in this volume also attest to the role of international connections and forces in shaping feminist activism at the national level. The growing size and influence of an international women's movement that is linked through both regional and international networks (e.g. Women Living Under Muslim Laws, Catholics for Choice, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era), and the cluster of UN summits held in the 1990s which provided NGOs and women's movements with a public forum for debate over wide-ranging policy issues relating to women's rights, have informed national debates and advocacy work (on reproductive rights, personal status laws) in many contexts. In addition, in countries where governments have signed on to key UN conventions (such as CEDAW), are subject to the scrutiny of human rights bodies (such as European Court of Human Rights) or seek accession to regional bodies (such as the European Union), women's rights activists can use these processes to bring pressure to bear on their governments to change the national legal or policy frameworks—even if the outcomes are not always as positive as activists hoped (e.g. Poland). This is all the more imperative in a context where conservative religious forces are able to utilise the transnational flows of ideas, influence and finance to consolidate their position within the national contexts where they operate.

Notes

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² P Norris and R Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

³ J Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

⁴ M Molyneux and S Razavi, 'Introduction', in M. Molyneux and S. Razavi, *Gender Justice, Development and Rights*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp 1-42.

⁵ M Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993; D Westerlund, *Questioning the Secular State: The Worldwide Resurgence of Religion in Politics*, London: C Hurst & Co., 1996.

⁶ The role of both United States (under the Presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George W Bush) and Saudi Arabia in funding faith-based organisations (Evangelical and Wahabi respectively) in different parts of the world should not be underestimated. The proliferation of diaspora communities in Western Europe and North America has been another source of support and funding for faith-based groups,

including Hindu fundamentalist groups in India. For useful references see, M Tadros, *Gender Conundrums of Faith-Based Organisations Delivering Welfare Services*, Programme Paper GD No.11, UNRISD, Geneva, 2010

⁷ M Molyneux, 'Mobilisation without emancipation? Women's interests, the state and revolution in Nicaragua', *Feminist Studies*, 11(2), Summer 1985, pp 227-254.

⁸ J Casanova, 1994 *op.cit*, See supra Note 3.

⁹ J Casanova, *Religion, Politics and Gender Equality: Public Religions Revisited*, UNRISD Programme Paper GD No.5, 2009, p 13.

¹⁰ K J Morgan, *Working Mothers and the Welfare State: Religion and the Politics of Work-Family Policies in Western Europe and the United States*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006; M Minkenberg, 'Religion and Public Policy: Institutional, Cultural, and Political Impact on the Shaping of Abortion Policies in Western Democracies', *Comparative Political Studies*, 35(2), pp 221-247.

¹¹ A Kuru, 'Passive and assertive secularism: Historical conditions, ideological struggles, and state policies toward religion', *World Politics*, 59(4), July 2007, pp 568-594; J. Jakobsen and A. Pellegrini (ed.) *Secularisms*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008.

¹² D Kandiyoti (ed), *Women, Islam and the State*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991.

¹³ A Phillips, *Religion: Ally, Threat or Just Religion?*, UNRISD Programme Paper GD No.5, 2009.

¹⁴ A Phillips, 'Does feminism need a conception of civil society?', in S Chambers and W Kymlicka (eds), *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

¹⁵ A Phillips, 2009, *op.cit*, See supra Note 13.

¹⁶ Antonio Gramsci defined 'common sense' as 'the generic form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment'. See A Gramsci, Q Hoare and G N Smith (eds), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, London : Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, p 323.

¹⁷ On the relationship between religion and nationalism, see C Jaffrelot, 'Religion and Nationalism', in P B Clarke (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of The Sociology of Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp 406-417; B-A J Rieffer, 'Religion and nationalism: Understanding the consequences of a complex relationship', *Ethnicities*, 3(2), 2003, pp 215-242.

¹⁸ S Bruce, *Politics and Religion*, Cambridge: Policy Press, 2003; B.-A. J. Rieffer, *op. cit*, See supra Note No 17.

¹⁹ R S Herr, 'The Possibility of Nationalist Feminism', *Hypatia*, 18(3), 2003, pp 135-160.

²⁰ N Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, London: SAGE, 1997; J Nagel, 'Masculinity and nationalism: Gender and sexuality in the making of nations', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21(2), 1998, pp 242-269.

²¹ L Hajjar, 'Religion, state power and domestic violence in Muslim societies: A framework for comparative analysis', *Law and Social Inquiry*, 29(1), 2004, pp 1-38.

²² The influence of religious nationalist groups on violent conflicts, as compared to the influence of non-religious nationalist groups, has increased since the 1980s, J Fox, 'The Rise of Religious Nationalism and Conflict: Ethnic Conflict and Revolutionary Wars, 1945-2001', *Journal of Peace Research*, 41(6), 2004, pp 715-731. Although the total number of armed conflicts about identity is decreasing, those which involve religious differences seem to be more intractable, T Ellingsen, 'Toward a Revival of Religion and Religious Clashes?', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 17(3), 2005, pp 305-332.

²³ L Hajjar, 2004 *op.cit.*, p 27, See supra Note 21.

²⁴ J Casanova, 'Catholic and Muslim politics in comparative perspective', *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*, 1(2), 2005, pp 89-108.

²⁵ S Zubaida, 'Culture, international politics and Islam: debating continuity and change', in W Brown, S Bromley & S Athreya (eds), *A World of Whose Making? Ordering the International: History, Change and Transformation*, London: Pluto Press/Open University, 2004. See also M Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008.

²⁶ The contrast between 'prophetic' (moral critique of the state) and 'priestly' (anti-democratic, reinforcing inequalities) roles of religion is taken from Jelen and Wilcox. T G Jelen & C Wilcox, 'Religion: the one, the few and the many', in T G Jelen & C Wilcox (eds), *Religion and Politics in Comparative Perspective: The One, the Few and the Many*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp 1-24.

²⁷ A Najmabadi, '(Un)veiling feminism', In J.R. Jakobsen and A. Pellegrini (eds) *Secularisms*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008, pp 39-57, p 52.

²⁸ L Diamond, 'Three paradoxes of democracy', *Journal of Democracy*, 1(3), Summer 1990, pp 48-60.

²⁹ M Htun and S L Weldon, *When and Why do Governments Promote Women's Rights ? Toward a Comparative Politics of States and Sex Equality*. Paper prepared for delivery at the American Political Science Association, Chicago, 29 August -2 September 2007.

³⁰ M. Blofield, *The Politics of 'Moral Sin': A Study of Abortion and Divorce in Catholic Chile since 1990*, FLACSO, Santiago de Chile, 2001, p 27

³¹ A Kuru 2007 *op.cit*, See supra Note 11.

³² T Parla and A. Davison, 'Secularism and laicism in Turkey', In J.R. Jakobsen and A. Pellegrini (eds) *Secularisms*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008, pp 58-75. Parla and Davison, however, argue that Kemalism was committed not to secularism, but rather to a partial and limited form of laicism insofar as it supported the official establishment and interpretation of the religious tradition of the majority of the population.

³³ Kandiyoti, however, argues that the military coup of 1980 marks a watershed in the further dilution of state secularism. In January 1980 a major stabilisation and structural adjustment package was put in place under the auspices of the World Bank and IMF, while the military regime abolished trade unions and established tight state control over other institutions. The restructuring of the state by a praetorian elite safeguarding its interests needed a corresponding state ideology. The military leaders who were in alliance with the right-of-centre political spectrum, most particularly with the proponents of Turkish-Islam Synthesis promoted by the Intellectuals' Hearth (founded in 1970), sought to manufacture public consent for the consolidation of military power using Islam. This prompted an official transition from secularism to religion-based nationalism. D Kandiyoti, *Secularism Contested: Debate and Dissent in Turkey*, Lecture delivered at the London School of Economics (LSE), London, 15 February 2010.

³⁴ For a detailed analysis of the campaign on the Penal Code see P Ilkcaracan, 'Re/forming laws to secure women's rights in Turkey: The campaign on the Penal Code', in J Gaventa and R McGee (eds), *Citizen Action and National Policy Reform*, London and New York: Zed Books, 2010, pp 195-216.

³⁵ R S Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000; J Haynes, 'Religion and Democratizations', *Democratization*, Special Issue, 16(6), 2009, pp 1041-1057.

³⁶ L Hajjar, *op. Cit*, See supra Note 21.

³⁷ J Casanova, 2009, *op.cit*, See supra Note 9.

³⁸ 'Discursive politics' seeks to reinterpret, reformulate, rethink, and rewrite the norms and practices of society and the state. It relies heavily, but not exclusively, on language. Its vehicles are speech and print (conversations, debate, conferences, essays, stories, newsletter, and books), M F Katzenstein, 'Discursive Politics and Feminist Activism in the Catholic Church', in M.M. Feree and P.Y. Martin (eds), *Feminist Organizations: Harvest of the New Women's Movement*, Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 1995, pp 35-52.

³⁹ L Hajjar, *op. cit*, See supra Note No 21; S Razavi, 'Islamic politics, human rights and women's claims for equality in Iran' *Third World Quarterly*, 27(7), October 2006, pp 1223-1237.

⁴⁰ A Phillips, 2009, p 53, See supra Note 13.

⁴¹ P Paidar, *Gender of Democracy: The Encounter between Feminism and Reformism in Contemporary Iran*. UNRISD Programme Paper DGHR No. 6, 2001.

⁴² N Tohidi, 1998 p 288 cited in V Moghadam, 'Islamic feminism and its discontents: Towards a resolution of the debate', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 27(4), 2002, pp 1135-1171, p1147.

⁴³ L Hajjar, p 21, See supra Note 21.

⁴⁴ R Petchesky, *Global Prescriptions: Gendering Health and Human Rights*, London and New York: UNRISD/Zed Books, 2003.

⁴⁵ G Sen and S Correa, *Gender Justice and Economic Justice: Reflections on the Five Year Reviews of the UN Conferences of the 1990s*, A paper prepared for UNIFEM in preparation for the five-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action, 1999.

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