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**RELIGION:
ALLY, THREAT, OR JUST RELIGION?**

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Introduction

That religions can threaten gender equality is hardly controversial. Religious leaders through the centuries have preached that it is women's primary duty to obey. They have represented women's sexuality as a dangerously disruptive force, sometimes countenancing the punishment of transgressions by death. On a milder though still troubling note, they have taught men to regard themselves as having custodial responsibility for women, along with other lesser creatures like children. Religions have no monopoly on such representations, and the same things have been repeated endlessly by the non-religious. But pronouncements made in the name of religion carry an additional force that makes their consequences for gender equality especially burdensome. Religiously inspired principles regarding the sanctity of marriage and the sanctity of life have weighed heavily on women, because it is women who are most likely to be trapped in violent or abusive marriages, and women whose bodies bear the consequences of multiple pregnancies. Religious practices regarding marriage, adultery, and divorce are often explicitly discriminatory, as when men are permitted multiple marriage partners, but not so women, or when divorce is permitted to the man, but to the woman only with her husband's consent. Some major religions have segregated the sexes for the purposes of prayer. With few exceptions, religions have signalled their lack of confidence in women's virtues or capacities by excluding them from participation in the clerical class.

It is not surprising, then, that campaigners for gender equality have found themselves at odds with religious authorities, or that feminists have looked to the spread of secular principles and attitudes as a welcome engine of change. The fact that many early feminists drew their inspiration from religion is not, of itself, a contradiction, for neither atheism nor agnosticism was a respectable alternative in the beginnings of organised feminism (in Europe and North America, this dated from the mid nineteenth century). A striking proportion of those nineteenth century feminists belonged, moreover, to religions that positioned themselves outside the mainstream –Quakers or Unitarians, for example - and were known for their more radical views regarding the position of women. In the course of the twentieth century, even that association between feminism and religion largely dropped away. While individual women continued to locate their commitment to gender equality in their religious faith and beliefs, the public discourse regarding the rights of women and equality of the sexes became almost entirely secular, and was more often linked to socialist or communist ideals. It was no longer considered necessary to seek normative justifications for gender equality from within religious doctrines. It was, moreover, widely assumed that the declining public authority of religions, measured in their reduced role in circles of government, and reduced authority over their (also reducing) flock, would produce a more welcoming environment for feminist ideas.

It is clear by now that this narrative of declining faith, diminished public role for religion, and enhanced prospects for gender equality, had only a partial and localised significance; and that neither socialist ideas about the dissipation of religion, nor liberal dreams of a wall of separation between religion and politics are to be realised in the foreseeable future. Jose Casanova's useful differentiation (1994) between secularisation as religious decline, secularisation as institutional differentiation, and secularisation as the privatisation of religion, is part of what has enabled a more rigorous analysis. Contemporary societies do indeed, he argues, exhibit greater institutional differentiation between the spheres of state, market, and science, and religious institutions and norms. But institutional differentiation is not intrinsically linked either to the decline of religious faith and practice, or the withdrawal of religious discourse and practice to a private sphere. Outside Western Europe (plausibly represented by Casanova as exception rather than norm), possibly also China, (this depends on one's understanding of

Confucianism), religious ways of being and thinking continue to exert considerable influence over people's lives. Figures from the World Christian Database indicate that religious attachment has increased, not fallen, over the last century, with the proportion of the world's population attached to one of the four major religions – Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism - rising from 67% in 1900 to 73% in 2005.² It is evident, moreover, that religions are not being confined to a private zone of individual conscience and practice, but are being actively invoked in political life. Religious beliefs furnish the substance for many political interventions, as when they are mobilised in debates about homosexuality or abortion or to justify constraints on women's freedom of movement. In a number of countries, religion provides the basis for state law.

The movement, if any, has been in the opposite direction: not the steady retreat of a diminished religion to a private zone, but a global trend towards the 'de-privatisation' of religion and its increasing salience on the political stage. Does this matter? Casanova argues that de-privatization is both empirically irrefutable *and* normatively defensible. In 1994, he presented the process almost as proto-feminist: 'the deprivatization of religion ...simultaneously introduces publicity, that is, intersubjective norms into the private sphere (analogous to the feminist dictum "the personal is political") and morality into the public sphere of state and economy (the principle of the "common good" as a normative criterion.)' (1994: 217). 'Public' norms of transparency or gender equality thereby spilt over into the religious zone – meaning, among other things, that churches came under pressure to accept women as spiritual leaders – while 'religious' norms helped tame the starker brutalities and inequities of the market. In the current essay (2009), he is more circumspect, acknowledging that both Catholicism and Islam have tended to support versions of 'patriarchal fundamentalism' or 'fundamentalist patriarchy', and that, as 'high religions', they have institutionalised an unequal division of gendered roles. He nonetheless insists that Christianity and Islam alike offer equal access to salvation to both women and men, and that their core ethical norms can be seen as anticipating modern understandings of gender equality.

In representing religion as a possible force for progressive democratic change, Casanova has looked particularly to its role in what he terms 'the undifferentiated public sphere of civil society'. Here, in open debates about the direction of public policy, religious arguments can engage with what is necessary for the common – rather than particular – good, thereby 'enlivening democratic politics' (this is his description of recent US developments, p.3) and challenging the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes. In the earlier version of his argument, he claimed that only this aspect of de-privatisation was ultimately compatible with modern universalistic principles, contrasting it with the more dubious engagement of religion in 'political society' (as when political parties or social movements are based directly on religions), or the official recognition of religion in state institutions (as with an established state church, or when religious leaders are accorded a specific constitutional role). He now describes this preference as reflecting his 'modern Western secular prejudices' (p.14). The better approach, he argues, draws on Alfred Stepan's notion of twin tolerations, which requires religious authorities to 'tolerate' the autonomous decisions of democratically elected governments; and democratic institutions to 'tolerate' the autonomy of religious individuals and groups, and takes this last to include both freedoms of worship and the right to advance religious values in civil and political society, constrained only by the requirements of civil law.

² Reported in John Lloyd *Financial Times Weekend*, October 25/6, 2008: 34.

So far as gender equality is concerned, Casanova continues to stress the public sphere of civil society: ‘What is desirable is to subject religious discourses legitimating patriarchal customs or discriminatory gender practice to open public debate and to political contestation’ (p.20) This focus on civil society is already over-optimistic, for civil society is not a neutral zone, and the movements or associations that constitute civil society can reproduce social hierarchies and exclusions as often as they contest them. We certainly cannot assume that the kinds of religious contestation we might find in civil society will favour gender equality rather than obstructing it. Casanova now wants us to consider even more extensive engagements of religion in politics as potentially compatible with gender equality. He rejects the more conventionally secular thesis about gender equality depending on the separation of religion from politics, or religion from state, offering instead the mutual responsibilities and self-imposed limitations of religious authorities and democratic institutions, combined with reform movements inside each religion, and a principle of minority rights.

The question is whether such mechanisms adequately address what Casanova himself acknowledges to be blatant discrimination against women in the organisation of churches, a ‘very strong misogynist strand in the Christian tradition’, and difficult and heated debates about such matters as abortion, polygamy, and systems of personal religious law. If we are to abandon the idea of a strict separation of religion from politics – as unlikely to happen and anyway not normatively required - what other kind of protections need to be in place to secure the best conditions for gender equality? Are Casanova’s twin tolerations, combined with the vitality of internal reform movements, enough?

Secularism, agency, and respect

Though my answer, in the end, is negative, I want to start with one important area of agreement. Like Casanova, I do not think we can usefully represent religion as the nemesis of gender equality or secularism as the precondition for feminist politics. We need a more nuanced, less oppositional, understanding of religion and secularism. This, indeed, is increasingly the consensus within both mainstream and feminist literature. There remain powerful voices stressing the dangers of religious ‘fundamentalism’ and extolling the virtues of secular reason; and in some quarters, what Saba Mahmood (2008: 448) describes as a ‘shrill polemic’ continues to characterise discussion. Elsewhere, however, there has been a sea change in political and social thinking, with a growing concern about ‘the strains of dogmatism in secularism’ (Connolly, 1999:4); a renewal of interest in the way religious belief has inspired participation in movements for gender, racial, and economic equality; and a greater willingness to conceptualise religion as an ally of progress. A number of theorists have queried the binary rhetoric influential through much of the twentieth century, where it became commonplace to presume a choice between a religious right and a secular left (Asad, 2003; Scott and Hirschkind 2006; Jakobsen and Pellegrini, 2008). Though religious leaders *have* often deployed their authority to resist movements for social change or promote passivity in the face of violence, religiously grounded claims about the fundamental equality of all human beings have also provided important inspiration in challenges to slavery, movements for women’s emancipation, civil rights activism, and mobilisations of the poor and landless. As the narrative of secular modernity came to be associated with globalisation or the arrogance of the West, religion additionally became one of the vehicles for challenging the global distribution of power.

At a philosophical level, secularism has been accused of a false neutrality that employs a language of impartiality to impose inappropriate restrictions on public life. It has been a common theme in discussions of Islam, for example, that the secular separation of religion

from state derives from a Judeo-Christian tradition, disadvantaging those whose religion does not operate in such terms. More generally, it has been argued that restricting religious practices and pronouncements to a private sphere makes life easier for non-believers but harder for believers, thereby introducing an inequity of treatment. In their reflections on this, many political theorists have come to reject what was previously understood as the Rawlsian prohibition on arguments that appeal to religious authority ('arguments not open to argument') in debates about public policy (for example, Spinner Halev, 2000).

We can certainly see why people might want to exclude arguments that threaten to go nowhere: to tell people they must come up with a more compelling line of argument for a particular policy than 'this is what my religion says'. There is also legitimate anxiety about a growing recourse to religious language in the public sphere (notable in the US, for example, over the last twenty years³) that has many politicians adopting a 'prophetic' posture, implying they have privileged access to God's wishes or intentions. But a prohibition on religiously derived arguments wrongly implies that religious people are immune to argument. As Lucas Swaine (2003; 2006) stresses, even the most theocratic devotee has an interest in distinguishing between right or wrong interpretations of her religion, and has to engage in argument and judgment in order to achieve this. The notion that 'secular' arguments are based on evidence and sustained by logic is far too complimentary to the complex ways in which most people develop their political and moral views. The contrasting image of 'religious' arguments as based on authority or faith is equally over-stated. If we are concerned about dogmatism, we should perhaps be most worried about a pre-emptive exclusion of religion from politics, which 'in effect establish(es) secularism as the theory of government' (Nussbaum, 2008: 265).

This re-evaluation has been paralleled in the feminist literature by greater attention to women's engagement with religion, and an emphasis on empowerment, resistance, and reform from within (Moghadam, 2002). These developments are often informed by a post-colonial critique of the modern/traditional dualism that had come to permeate feminist as well as other thinking, generating an image of the 'third world', over-exploited, mostly powerless, woman, and implicitly contrasting her with the secular, liberated, proto-feminist from the West (Mohanty, Russo and Lourdes, 1991). In the literature on multiculturalism, writers have queried exaggerated discourses of cultural difference that represent women from minority or non-Western cultural groups as uniquely in need of protection from their oppressive cultures (Narayan, 1998; Volpp, 2000; Phillips, 2007); or opportunistically deploy principles of gender equality to justify a retreat from multiculturalism. The logic of these arguments is widely applied to religion as well. A previously dominant opposition between religion and equality, with religion cast as a major source of gender oppression, has given way to a focus on the empowerment of women, and consideration of the scope for resistance and reform within the various religions.

Questions of agency have been central here: the need to respect the choices women make, not dismiss those of religious women as evidence of victim status or illustrating their false consciousness; but also the recognition that resistance takes many and subtle forms, and that what looks to an outsider like submission can sometimes be better understood as empowerment or subversion. Put generally, both points are compelling, though in their detailed interpretation, they have provoked extensive debate. For some writers, 'extravagant affirma-

³ According to an analysis by Coe and Dourke, Ronald Reagan and George W Bush adopted the prophetic posture in an unprecedented 47% of inaugural and state of the union addresses. This compared with 0% for pre-Reagan Democrats, and only 5% for pre-Reagan Republicans. Cited in Smith, 2008.

tions' of empowerment and agency (Moghissi, 1999) blind analysts to the often violent force of politicised religion, particularly in Islamic regimes in North Africa and the Middle East, and misrepresent as choice what is self-evidently coercion. For others, the co-option of women's agency in neo-liberal discourses of development focuses attention on the individual rather than the collective, on strategies for survival rather than transformation, and encourages states to withdraw from social provision (Wilson, 2007) For others again, the search for agency looks uncomfortably like another cultural imposition: 'we have to ask what Western liberal values we may be unreflectively validating in proving that "Eastern" women have agency, too' (Abu-Lughod, 2001:105).

In their respective writings on Quaker women in eighteenth century England and women in the mosque movement in late twentieth century Egypt, Phyllis Mack and Saba Mahmood alert us to a tendency - even within the most sympathetic readings - to reframe religious experience in a more comfortably secular register: to translate terms like sacrifice, redemption, ecstasy, or repentance into the categories of modern social science (Mack, 2003: 153); or 'explain the motivations of veiled women in terms of the standard models of sociological causality (such as social protest, economic necessity, anomie or utilitarian strategy) while terms like morality, divinity, and virtue are accorded the status of the phantom imaginings of the hegemonized' (Mahmood, 2005:16). When this happens, women's religious participation is treated primarily in terms of the avenues it opens up for action, the main focus being on the subversion of traditional interpretations of religious doctrine or the challenges women offer to patriarchal norms. Yet for the women themselves, religion may be primarily about virtue and piety, involving submission or 'the desire to be controlled by an authority external to oneself' (Mack: 174). If we are to think seriously about agency, in ways that respect the meanings people themselves give to their practices and beliefs, we may have to 'detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics' (Mahmood: 14), and query that presumed opposition between submission and agency.⁴

These arguments resonate widely in contemporary feminism, partly because they echo an anti-elitism that insists on the integrity of all participants, and distrusts claims to superior understanding when these are employed to differentiate the unenlightened from those in the know. As a corrective to accounts that either represent religion as inherently at odds with agency, or offer to resolve the seeming tension by identifying moments of resistance and subversion, they are, I think, broadly correct. It should go without saying that religious women must be accorded the same respect as those who are non-religious. It should also go without saying that one element in that respect is taking seriously their own self-descriptions, and the meaning they themselves attach to their practices and beliefs. I see this, however, as an ethical rather than political stance. The key point, as I take it, is that we should allow religion to be religion, not endlessly translate its practices into the more comfortable register of empowerment or resistance or subversion, and not require of it that it promotes democracy or egalitarian social movements. Well, certainly, if the question is framed as whether 'we' 'require' or 'allow'. But if the implication is also that we import inappropriate questions when we ask whether women's religious engagement better empowers them to resist oppressive social norms, or imposes those norms more rigidly, this is a more troubling restriction.

⁴ In her discussion of this, Mahmood gives the (secular) example of the virtuoso pianist who submits herself to a rigorous programme of practice, and a hierarchy of power that makes her the apprentice and her teacher the authority, in order to acquire the ability to play: 'her agency is predicated on her ability to be taught, a condition classically referred to as "docility".' (2005:29) Arguably, this does what she warns us against, in that it re-describes submission as empowerment.

Acknowledging that believers may seek self-transcendence is an important challenge to arguments that misrepresent religious commitment or refuse to engage with it seriously. But when a desire for self-transcendence puts religious injunction beyond the realm of negotiation – as it sometimes does - it threatens the scope for gender equality. And when the entanglement of religion with politics authorises the most conservative interpretations of a religion – as appears often to be the case – it can seriously affect women’s opportunities and position. So while we should not *assume* that gender equality is at odds with religion, the political questions remain. Has the explosion of politicised religion made it harder for women to pursue equality with men? What are the possibilities and limits of working through faith-based movements in promoting greater gender equality? What kind of separation of religion from politics is most conducive to gender equality?

Casanova’s answers to these questions do not convince me, mainly because he does not engage sufficiently with the severity of the issues. While he recognizes the problem of gender discrimination within religious regimes, he considers this primarily in terms of differential access to religious power and authority: the refusal, for example, of the Catholic Church to permit the ordination of women priests. He has little to say about more pressing areas of gender discrimination, like the toleration of polygamy in Islam and breakaway Mormon sects, or the greater ease of access to divorce for men than for women in Islam and Orthodox Judaism. He also has little to say about coercion, whether the official coercion practiced in countries that incorporate discriminatory religious principles into law; the unofficial violence against women sometimes countenanced and encouraged by local religious leaders; or the insidious forms of coercion practiced in families and civil society that require women to conform to what are said to be religious principles and norms.

Casanova recognizes that reactive movements in all religious traditions are mobilizing to contest what they see as threatening transformations in gender norms and gender relations; but he is, in my view, too easily reassured by his reading of these as themselves a measure of how far the transformations have gone. In his analysis, everything that has been identified as cause for concern is turned around into evidence of progress. The greater visibility of veiled women in Muslim societies is a sign of increasing gender equality (because the women are attending mosques and making themselves more visible in the public sphere). The greater political visibility of Islam is evidence of energetic internal debates that are fashioning Muslim versions of modernity. The obsessive focus on gender relations in fundamentalist religious movements is evidence that relations between women and men have already undergone enormous change. For secularists threatened by the de-privatization for religion, this offers a reassuringly optimistic vision. I do not think it adequately addresses the problems of religious

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