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## Editorial: Gender and Religiosity in Multicultural Societies

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### Introduction

This second issue of *Religion and Gender* presents the result of a careful selection of papers that were solicited in an open call for papers just over a year ago. As issue editors we envisaged a collection of scholarly contributions from a variety of disciplinary perspectives that engage with multiculturalism and multicultural societies and address the complex and dynamic relationship between religion and gender in contexts of increased cultural diversity characterizing contemporary societies throughout the world today. Each contribution in this issue is concerned with a particular gendered topic situated within various social, cultural, religious and political systems that shape the outcomes of today's multicultural societies. The issue of diversity – or difference – and gender comes to the fore in each article. Although dealing with diverging issues and geographic contexts, all articles are engaged with identifying gendered ways of dealing with cultural and religious differences in contemporary societies – whether on the level of politics, religious leadership, social groups or individual lives.

With this issue we employ the term 'multiculturalism' in a broad sense. Not only do we recognize its descriptive aspect, pointing to the fact that ethnic, cultural and religious diversity is an empirical reality in many

contemporary societies, but we also approach the term multiculturalism as a normative response to the existence of different communities, which welcomes minority groups and makes them part of society.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, we would like to emphasize the manifold forms the accommodation of differences can take. On the level of politics and policy-making, multiculturalism appears as a 'political project that attempts to redefine the relationship between ethno-cultural minorities and the state through the adoption of new laws, policies or institutions.'<sup>2</sup> In this sense, multiculturalism refers to multicultural policies as well as to the debates about (non)accommodating policies towards minorities. Multiculturalism on the (local) policy level, then, may take on the form of procedures, representations, materials and resources in various public institutional areas such as education, health, welfare, arts and leisure.<sup>3</sup> However, we do not approach the term multiculturalism as (merely) being about group rights or recognition,<sup>4</sup> but as an umbrella term for dealing with difference in societies on the various levels of politics, religion and culture. Regarding multiculturalism as the accommodation and recognition of differences rather than cultures has various advantages.<sup>5</sup> For example, it makes it possible to take into account that differences are not just constructed 'inside' but also 'outside' the minority group, by the treatment and representation of this group in public life. This perspective allows focusing not only on marginalized groups but also on dominant positions.

More and more, both gender issues and religion have become the subject matter of theoretical debate and empirical investigation in contemporary scholarship on multiculturalism. However, we feel that much of this work until now has been published in isolation due to disciplinary divides within and between the social sciences and humanities, and between theological and social-scientific perspectives. The current study of women, feminism and religion presents particular challenges as

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<sup>1</sup> B. Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, Hampshire/New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2006.

<sup>2</sup> W. Kymlicka, 'The Rise and Fall of Multiculturalism? New Debates on Inclusion and Accommodation in Diverse Societies' in *International Social Science Journal* 61:199 (2010), 99.

<sup>3</sup> S. Vertovec, 'Traditional Challenges to the 'New' Multiculturalism', paper presented to the ASA Conference at the University of Sussex, 30 March - 2 April 2001, retrieved from <http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk/working%20papers/WPTC-2K-06%20Vertovec.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> C. Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition' in A. Guttman (ed.), *Re-examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1994, 25-73.

<sup>5</sup> T. Modood, *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2007.

historically religion and feminism in the Western world have a strained relationship.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, gender and religion are rarely investigated *together* in relation to multiculturalism. Intersectional theory has taught us that various axes of difference are not only produced and reproduced together, but also influence each other.<sup>7</sup> Our aim in this issue, therefore, is to explicitly analyse religion, culture and gender together employing an intersectional and multi-disciplinary approach.

The seven articles in this issue, we believe, fill this lacuna by representing a variety of disciplines, perspectives, methodologies, religious traditions and geographical areas, each engaging with the issue's theme in a different way. However, some reflections on the make-up of this special issue need to be mentioned here. Perhaps not surprisingly, Islam, which has received a great deal of attention in both scholarly literature and public debate, at least in the Western European context, is also the religion under discussion in three of the papers. Yet their scope is quite divergent and ranges from a study of the narratives of Algerian Muslim women in Ireland by Yafa Shanneik, an auto-ethnographic analysis of feminism and Islam by Sara Ashencaen Crabtree and Fatima Husain, to a study of media usage by Moroccan-Dutch youth in the Netherlands by Koen Leurs, Eva Midden and Sandra Ponzanesi. Two other papers concern Islam more indirectly. Sarah Bracke and Nadia Fadil critically unpack discourses related to the headscarf while Moira Dustin scrutinizes multicultural policies in multi-faith Britain. We are pleased to also include a paper on Judaism from a legal-historical perspective by Lisa Fishbayn Joffe, as well as a sociological analysis of Hindu minority women and men in higher education in Canada by Cathy Holtmann and Nancy Nason-Clark.

It is important to remark, then, that although *Religion and Gender* aims to cover the field of gender beyond the scope of only women's or feminist concerns, some identity categories and inequality issues relating to, for example, sexuality and masculinity, are only minimally addressed. *Religion and Gender*, moreover, aims to discuss the intersections between gender and religion from a wide range of disciplinary approaches and perspectives – from theological and religious studies to social scientific

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<sup>6</sup> K. Aune, 'Much Less Religious, A Little More Spiritual: The Religious and Spiritual Views of Third-Wave Feminists in the U.K.' in *Feminist Review* 97 (2011), 32-35.

<sup>7</sup> G. Wekker and H. Lutz, 'Een hoogvlakte met koude winden: De geschiedenis van het gender- en etniciteitsdenken in Nederland' in M. Botman, N. Jouwe and G. Wekker (eds.), *Caleidoscopische Visies: De Zwarte, Migranten- en Vluchtelingenvrouwenbeweging in Nederland*, Amsterdam: Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen 2001, 25-51.

methodologies. The articles in this issue are grounded in diverging approaches, but mainly springing from the social sciences, notably from qualitative research methodologies. Nevertheless we are delighted to be able to present a varied collection of state-of-the art articles in gender and religion research in accordance with this new journal's goals, as the contributions explore the relation and intersection of gender and religion, and together account for the multiple and changing manifestations of religion in multicultural contexts.

## Contributions

The first paper, *Deference or Interrogation? Contrasting models for Reconciling Religion, Gender and Equality*, by Moira Dustin, in many respects returns to one of the main insights from the debate on the tension between gender equality rights and the question of accommodating cultural and religious diversity, which emerged with the publication of Susan Moller Okin's essay, 'Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?'.<sup>8</sup> Dustin concurs with its call to include women's voices in any negotiation over who represents and what counts as the 'tradition' of any particular group.<sup>9</sup> She describes the role religion has played in the public policy realm in the UK since the late 1990s – or what Nira Yuval-Davis refers to as the shift to a 'multi-faith agenda'.<sup>10</sup> In an increasing degree, religion is being recognized by governments in its legal and 'deferential' aspects, next to or even more so than claims to gender, sexual, racial non-discrimination and equality. This tendency to homogenize religion has resulted in its treatment as 'essentialist' and 'exceptional' rather than as plural and contested among adherents and members of religious communities themselves. Regrettably, Dustin argues, the relationship between religion and public policy in the UK has developed through polarized debates between conservative religious voices on the one hand, and secularist voices hostile to any public role for religion on the other. The state should listen actively to dissenting opinions critical of gender discrimination, Dustin concludes, and evaluate religious claims on the basis of multiple equality principles.

Rather than attempting to provide an answer to the often posed question '*Is the Headscarf Oppressive or Emancipatory?*' sociologists Sarah

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<sup>8</sup> S. M. Okin, 'Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?' in J. Cohen, M. Howard and M. C. Nussbaum (eds.), *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999.

<sup>9</sup> A. Philips, *Gender and Culture*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2010.

<sup>10</sup> N. Yuval-Davis, 'My Travels/Troubles with Religion – Some Autobiographical Reflections' in *Feminist Review* 97 (2011), 130-141.

Bracke and Nadia Fadil reflect in their article on 'the performative effects' of this particular question in the Belgian context. Veiling practices have been high on the political agenda and subject of heated debate in a number of Western-European countries during the past decade.<sup>11</sup> In Belgium, various headscarf and veiling bans have been introduced in education, public offices and, more recently, public space in general.<sup>12</sup> The headscarf issue is situated at the intersection of what Gerd Baumann earlier framed as the 'multicultural riddle' of nation, religion and ethnicity.<sup>13</sup> Yet, as feminist scholars have repeatedly emphasized, it is also heavily invested with gendered meanings.<sup>14</sup> Drawing on Saba Mahmood's analysis of women's piety in the Mosque movement in Egypt,<sup>15</sup> Bracke and Fadil aim to move beyond the limits of a liberal and secular framing of the headscarf towards rethinking the meaning of 'agency'.

In *Preparing for Life: Gender, Religiosity and Education Amongst Second Generation Hindus in Canada*, sociologists Cathy Holtmann and Nancy Nason-Clarck present the results of their qualitative analysis among second generation Hindu women and men in higher education. In line with some of the emerging literature on religion and migration from a gender perspective,<sup>16</sup> the authors show how the experience of migration and integration into the host society can lead to value conflicts, especially among those generations exposed to and negotiating secular environments such as the university. Their analysis shows that second generation Hindu university students face various challenges when negotiating and constructing their identities, as they are caught between the values and

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<sup>11</sup> S. Kilic, S. Saharso and B. Sauer, 'Introduction: The Veil: Debating Citizenship, Gender and Religious Diversity' in *Social Politics* 15:4 (2008), 397-410; Cf. [www.veil-project.eu](http://www.veil-project.eu).

<sup>12</sup> E. Brems and S. Ouald Chaib, 'Gender in de multiculturele samenleving: Het genderdiscourse in de debatten rond een hoofddoekenverbod op Vlaamse scholen en een niqaabverbod op de Belgische straten' in E. Brems and L. Stevens (eds.), *Recht en Gender in België*, Brugge: Die Keure 2011, 181-198; G. Coene and C. Longman, 'Gendering the Diversification of Diversity: The Belgian Hijab (In) Question' in *Ethnicities* 8 (2008), 302-321.

<sup>13</sup> G. Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic and Religious Identities*, London: Routledge 1999.

<sup>14</sup> C. Longman, 'Over Our Heads? Muslim Women as Symbols and Agents in the Headscarf Debate in Flanders, Belgium', in *Social Justice. Anthropology, Peace and Human Rights* 4:3-4 (2003), 300-332.

<sup>15</sup> S. Mahmood, 'Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival', in *Cultural Anthropology* 16:2 (2001), 202-236.

<sup>16</sup> G. T. Bonifacio and V. S. M. Angeles (eds.), *Gender, Religion, and Migration: Pathways of Integration*, Plymouth (UK): Lexington Books 2010.

religiosity of their parents and the implicit secularism of Canadian educational institutions. Interestingly, the authors find that while young women, more than young men, are expected to pass on cultural identity and religious values to the next generation, they exercise religious agency through creatively integrating religious understandings into their daily lives, and are more successful than their male peers in articulating what Hindu rituals and belief mean to them today.

Yafa Shanneik, in *Religion and Diasporic Dwelling: Algerian Muslim Women in Ireland*, similarly focuses on the effects of migration on identity and belonging, in this case by making a comparison between women who share the same national background, but are from very different religious Islamic backgrounds. Shanneik draws on Thomas Tweed's notion of 'crossing and dwelling' in order to analyse the women's identity constructions along the topics of the gendered body, the domestic home, the imagined homeland and the transnational and global cosmos.<sup>17</sup> Shanneik focuses on the women's understanding of home and shows the importance of diversity among women belonging to either *Salafi* or Muslim Brotherhood groups, who differ not only regarding their type of religiosity, but also in respect of age, class and level of education. Algerian female migrants, the author concludes, construct in various ways identities and homes that provide them social and religious positionalities within Irish society in which they feel secure and protected.

Gender and feminist perspectives on the potential conflicts between gender equality and respect for cultural diversity in modern states have drawn attention to the way religious family law may often have unjust outcomes for 'minorities within minorities',<sup>18</sup> including women, children and sexual minorities. Israel is a case of a multicultural state in which there in fact is no possibility of civil marriage and divorce for any of the acknowledged religious communities (Jewish, Muslim, Christian and Druze). Although this is often attributed to the legacy of the Ottoman period and its *millet* system of self-governing religious communities, probably much less is known about the effects of British colonial rule of Mandate Palestine. British rule, Lisa Fishbayn Joffe argues, coalesced with

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<sup>17</sup> T. A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling. A Theory of Religion*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2006.

<sup>18</sup> A. Eisenberg and J. Spinner-Halev (eds.), *Minorities Within Minorities: Equality, Rights and Diversity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005; A. Shachar, 'Privatizing Diversity: A Cautionary Tale from Religious Arbitration in Family Law' in *Theoretical Inquiries in Law* 9:2 (2008); N. Yuval-Davis, 'The Bearers of the Collective: Women and Religious Legislation in Israel' in *Feminist Review* 4 (1980).

the interests of Jewish rabbinic leaders. In *Gender, Colonialism and Rabbinical Courts in Mandate Palestine*, the author shows, from a legal-historical perspective, how the entanglement of very different patriarchies has resulted in legal systems which hold gender inequalities in the realm of marriage and divorce in place in Israel today.

In *Within, Without: Dialogical Perspectives on Feminism and Islam*, Sara Ashencaen Crabtree and Fatima Husain, first review a number of instances of what they view as Muslim faith practices throughout the world, illustrating the differences in these approaches and hence the importance of taking into account various local contexts when speaking about Islam. Employing the method of 'dyadic auto-ethnography', the authors then engage in a dialogue from their respective positions as a Muslim immigrant and a secular British woman, deconstructing notions of identity, religion, gender and feminism. The authors argue that Muslim feminists' search for a non-oppressive religiosity is both problematic and potentially dangerous against the backdrop of a postcolonial landscape ridden by international conflict. It requires Muslim feminists to negotiate contested theological-political terrains. The diversifying of faith, nevertheless, contributes to the emergence of multiple forums representing the interests of Muslim women. An epistemology of Islam and feminism, the authors conclude, cannot be regarded as definitive, but must remain open to political-cultural transformations across the global Muslim community.

Finally, in *Digital Multiculturalism in the Netherlands: Religious, Ethnic, and Gender Positioning by Moroccan-Dutch Youth*, Koen Leurs, Eva Midden and Sandra Ponzanesi analyse the results of a study of the digital practices, including online discussion boards, of Moroccan-Dutch youths in the Netherlands. They show how religious, ethnic and gender identities do not cease to exist in the digital realm, but are continuously reconstructed and renegotiated. Drawing on the work of postcolonial and multicultural theorists, including Paul Gilroy and Tariq Modood,<sup>19</sup> they put forward that this digital activism provides an alternative space for reimagining multicultural 'convivialities' and more affirmative and bottom-up approaches to the concept of multiculturalism.

In its entirety this issue testifies tellingly, we think, to the highly divergent ways in which the relationship between gender, religion and

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<sup>19</sup> P. Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* London/New York: Routledge 2004; T. Modood, *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2007.

multiculturalism is played out. As the different contributions demonstrate, these relationships range from the reproduction or intensification of oppression and inequality to instances of gendered reimagination, agency and creativity.