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 on-going 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 Yadgar 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'etre* 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