Introduction

For many people around the world, religious identification shapes their understanding of the self and of the communities to which they belong. Over the past two decades, at least, research has explored how ‘modern religiosity rarely relies on settled, programmatic religious identities, but instead configurations . . . individuals live out and negotiate religious selves to achieve self-construction and self-governance’ (Gao et al. 2018: 5). Space, boundaries and borders are conceptual tools that enable these negotiations to be better understood; they provide insight into the ways in which differences are (re)produced in and through society and help us to understand how these processes fit into broader socio-cultural transitions. Boundaries and borders are often understood to demarcate conceptual and physical differences respectively, whereas space provides the conceptual medium through which these differences are negotiated and expressed. Empirical research on Muslim women, for example, has explored the ways in which religion and gender are configured by individuals in response to the structuring effects of everyday life and has focussed on the ways in which being Muslim and female intersect (Dwyer 1998, 1999, 2000; Gibb and Rothenberg 2000; Gökariñosel and Sekor 2009). Being Muslim often involves embodying a particularly gendered vision of Muslim identity that may include wearing a headscarf or bunga (for women) and growing a beard (for men). In multicultural societies, racial characteristics overlay such embodiments, serving to reinforce notions of religious difference and division through the intertwining of religion- and gender-based identities. In turn, these understandings have provided insight into broad-based societal shifts, notably modernisation and (post)secularisation (Vincett et al. 2012).

Often, there is a mutual interrelationship between religion and gender, with religion sometimes imposing expectations of the gendered self upon individuals, and gender sometimes defining the ways in which religion is engaged with. There is, however, a particular need to study ‘how religion shapes the formation of subjectivity’ (Gökariñosel 2009: 657) and how religion can impose a prescriptive vision of how the gendered body is expected to be presented, and behave, in space. Indeed, when the boundaries of religious identity—that is, the extent to which religion influences who we are—overlap in a mutually reinforcing (i.e. interlocking) way with other expressions of identity (such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality and so on), this can
lead to the formation of more rigid and inflexible subject positions. Contrariwise, when the boundaries of religion exist in a state of antagonism with other boundaries of identity (i.e. non-interlocking), this can lead to more contingent subject positions that must be negotiated and reconciled. The veiling practices of Muslim women, for example, are implicated in complex ideas surrounding ‘seeing and being seen, with covering and being covered, and hence with sexuality and gender relations, sexual morality, propriety and public virtue’ (Parker 2017: 448). The complexity of these ideas stems from the fact that gender often draws meaning from pre-existing understandings of sex. In this sense, whilst sex often refers to the physiological differences between males and females, gender refers to ‘what societies make of that difference through culture’ (Parker 2017: 443). Religion can take the physiological differences established through the sex of individuals and expand, strengthen and sometimes distort them through the expectations of gender. In this sense, then, as much as religion can shape culture, so too can religion shape the gendered cultures of everyday life.

From here, this chapter is divided into three sections. The first provides an introduction to theoretical ideas concerning space, boundaries and borders. The second takes a scalar perspective to understanding how the boundaries of religion and gender are negotiated in and through space. The discussion focusses on women and considers how the body, public spaces and national(ist) spaces can all intersect with different interpretations of the female religious self. The third adopts a transnational perspective to understanding how identities can be (re)negotiated across borders and offers a case study of Harari Muslim women living in Toronto, Canada, to illustrate these negotiations.

**Theorising space, boundaries and borders**

Space, boundaries and borders are conceptual tools that can provide insight into the workings of the social world. Over decades, each tool has been theorised and applied in various ways. The aims of this chapter are to provide an overview of such developments and to explore how each can serve to guide an understanding of the intersecting relationship between religion and gender. To be clear, these terms are not distinct but overlapping and often mutually reinforcing. For example, space is often bounded and bordered, and boundaries and borders create space. Moreover, the crossing of boundaries and borders can often lead to new experiences of space, whilst the experiences of space can lead to the strengthening or negotiation of boundaries and borders. My intention here is to highlight the multiplicitous interrelationships that serve to link these conceptual tools. As Hecht (1994: 222) puts it, sacred spaces are ‘situational or relational categories’ that emerge through processes of ‘setting boundaries and negotiating relationships’.

Space, boundaries and borders are inflected by each other, irrespective of whether this is explicitly stated in the more empirically focussed sections that follow. As such, they all play a formative role in determining the outcomes that arise from the intersecting experiences of religion and gender.

**The politics and poetics of spatial (re)production**

Starting towards the end of the twentieth century and continuing to the present day, the social sciences have undergone what has been termed a “spatial turn”. In many respects, the spatial turn reflects the impact of French social theorists, such as Michel Foucault (1986), Henri Lefebvre (1991) and Michel de Certeau (1984), who heralded the importance of new forms of spatial analysis. These forms involved moving beyond Cartesian approaches to explaining the areal distribution of phenomena across space, focussing instead on ‘social as well as physical space,
foregrounding spatial practice and representations, and stressing the importance of power and the reproduction of space’ (Knott 2010: 29). From this analytical vantage point, we can begin to understand how space is continually being reproduced by society, and, in the process, society is continually being shaped by the spaces it occupies and navigates on a daily basis. The extent of such inflections is often a function of deeply embedded relations of power, with dominant agencies wielding greater influence over the shape of the resulting socio-spatial formations. With these ideas in mind, Lefebvre’s (1991) theorisation of the production of space provides a useful framework for understanding how space intersects with the construction and contestation of identity and power. His differentiation of spaces of representation and representations of space is particularly useful, as the former is associated with the ways in which minority groups use space to resist or overcome the controlling influence of dominant groups, whilst the latter is associated with ‘hegemonic, ideological spaces that . . . try to exert power and control over a given territory’ (Kong and Woods 2016: 8). On the one hand, majority groups may regulate the use of space for religious purposes, thus making it less accessible for minority groups; on the other hand, minority religious groups may operate through informal spaces (such as Christian house churches in China) to circumvent regulation. The practices of religion and the imagination and performance of identity are thus implicated in and by space.

With the spatial turn came a corresponding shift in how the spatial modalities of religion are researched and understood. Recognition has been given to the fact that space serves to ‘ground religious practices and belief’ (Kong and Woods 2016: 2), and research has explored the ways in which space can be a medium, methodology and outcome of religious activity (Knott 2005). A turning point came in 2001, when Kong (2001; see also Kong 1990, 2010) called for researchers to explore the politics and poetics of spaces of religious meaning and value, and, in doing so, to pave the way for a body of scholarship that has since come to define “new” geographies of religion. Specifically, these “new” geographies have explored how space is used to (re)produce religious tensions (politics) and the affective and therapeutic value of religious spaces (poetics). This body of scholarship underpins the two empirically focussed sections that follow. In terms of politics, scholarship has been guided by Chidester and Linenthal’s (1995: 7–9) four political registers—of position, of property, of exclusion and of exile—that underpin the production of sacred spaces. Many of these politics have since been shown to stem from ongoing negotiations between religious and secular forces and how they play out across various spatial distinctions, such as religious/secular spaces and public/private spaces (Kong and Woods 2016). In terms of poetics, scholarship has explored the idea that ‘place is the most fundamental form of embodied experience—the site of a powerful fusion of self, space and time’ (Feld and Basso 1996: 9) and how spaces and places of religion have shaped the experience and realisation of the (gendered) self. In particular, this has led to closer explorations of how the religious and gendered self/ves intersect in and through space, and how places of religion may create alignment along these axes of identity, and how the spaces of everyday life may create misalignment, negotiation and conflict.

**Boundaries, borders and socio-spatial classification**

Boundaries and borders serve to demarcate difference, and, in doing so, to classify and structure many different aspects of social life. Generally speaking, boundaries are a conceptual tool used to demarcate conceptual differences (e.g. differences in identity, such as those pertaining to gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class and religion), whilst borders are used to demarcate the physical edges and limits of difference (e.g. to distinguish between one country, or other territorially defined jurisdiction, and another). Both boundaries and borders serve to establish and maintain a sense of distinction and of distinctiveness, and both also tend to be imparted by structures of
authority in a top-down way—by governments, by majority religious and social groups, or by parents and teachers, for example. As a result, they are also liable to being negotiated and resisted by individual agencies and actors in a more bottom-up way. Throughout life, we must constantly negotiate not only those boundaries that are imposed on us by others (or by society at large), but also our own self-defined boundaries of sameness and difference. Whilst some people minimise their encounters with difference, others may maximise them through migration and the associated moving out of the socio-cultural context in which they were raised. Crossing borders through international migration is one of the clearest examples of when the boundaries of identity are called into question, causing ‘the construction of identity [to be] increasingly predicated on negotiation and compromise’ (Kong and Woods 2018: 154). These negotiations can give rise to intergroup conflicts, the forging of new understandings of the self and others, and foreground Rumford’s (2012) call for “multiperspectival” understandings of borders that are more sensitive to the workings of cultural encounters in space.

Religion itself is a bounded category of understanding, and religious identification can be understood as an ongoing process of boundary (re)production. Religion is unique in that it often ‘skillfully ignor[es] and circumvent[s] national boundaries’ (Cadge et al. 2011: 440), and therefore fuels paradoxical situations of belonging and unbelonging. In many respects, these understandings are a product of—and a response to—modernity. With modernity, categories of sameness and difference become formalised and reproduced through public discourse. These categories are used to create cohesion and alignment within groups, but in doing so can also create points of division and exclusion. In many respects, religion provides ‘ideological and other resources’ that can serve to ‘not only reproduce but to re-define boundaries’ according to a particular worldview (Ecklund 2005: 134). A critical reading of religion, however, is needed. As Smith (1998: 282) argues, religion itself ‘is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define’. With definition comes formalisation and acceptance; it creates structure and rigidity, which in turn can become problematic when we consider the extent to which knowledge is situated, and one definition of what religion (or, indeed, gender) as category is (and is not) may not necessarily cohere with others. Defining religion-as-category (i.e. “religion” versus “not religion”) can subsequently render specific religious traditions (or subcategories, such as “Muslim”, “Buddhist”, “Hindu”, “Christian” and so on) much more nebulous and contingent constructs than may otherwise be expected. This point is elaborated by Ivakhiv (2006: 169; after Foucault 1973) when he suggests:

postmodernization exacerbates the individualization of religion but also destabilizes the boundary between the sacred and the profane. If religion is, to paraphrase Michel Foucault, a “recent invention” that, with a shift in structural relations, might “be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea,” the elements that have made up this thing called religion will certainly persist in other forms, and it is the task of geographers of religion to trace the changing orchestrations of those significances across space and place.

These “changing orchestrations” of religion are a function of the shifting boundaries of understanding that emerge from the changing ways in which difference is encountered and understood in different contexts and at different points in time. One outcome of these shifts is the realisation that ‘it is no longer possible to take what is meant by religion for granted’ (Gökariiksel 2009: 658), meaning the production of any religiously defined identities and subjectivities—Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian and so on—has become a more negotiated and contingent process. The boundaries that distinguish one religion from another, and from any ostensibly
non-religious form of identification, are not, therefore, fixed, but are always being (re)made. This is particularly true when the boundaries of religion overlay other boundaries of identification and belonging. Religion is unique in that it ‘does not obey political or ethnic boundaries’ (Levitt 2007: 110; see also Lamont and Molnar 2002); it can divide as much as it can unite, and it can be a source of antagonism when the boundaries of religion conflict with those of other markers of identity. This is especially true for more conservative religions—those religions that impose more rigid expectations of how their adherents should understand themselves and their place in the world—or for individuals that privilege their religious identity above other forms of identification. Moreover, the boundaries of religion are often called into question when individuals cross borders, especially when they move from one religious context to another (such as the large-scale migration of Muslims to Western Europe in recent decades). In such instances, the boundaries of religion and gender must be renegotiated in conversation with the new socio-political context in which an individual now lives.

In sum, the conceptual tools of space, boundaries and borders help to unravel the ‘fluidity and instability in social identities’ (Dwyer et al. 2008: 121) and help us to understand how and why people negotiate the intersections of religion and gender, of social conformity and self-realisation, of tradition and modernity, in different contexts around the world. These negotiations are now explored through an examination of how space, boundaries and borders intersect with religion and gender.

Negotiating the boundaries of religion and gender in and through space

Religion can play a determining role in defining the boundaries of gendered identities. Indeed, the intersectionality of subject positions related to religion and gender are often ‘contingent relationships with multiple determinations’ (Brah 1993: 443). The boundaries of religion and gender can be interlocking (that is, when they overlap in a mutually reinforcing way), or non-interlocking (when they exist in a state of antagonism with each other). Interlocking boundaries can lead to more rigid and inflexible subject positions that society must negotiate, whereas non-interlocking boundaries can lead to more contingent subject positions that the individual must negotiate and attempt to reconcile. Accordingly, research has explored the ways in which ‘embodied gendered identities are performed and contested within different spaces’ (Dwyer 1999: 5; after McDowell and Court 1994; McDowell 1995). These performances and contestations can take the form of distinctly gendered proscriptions on dress, sexual relations, family and social position, for example, and are often enacted and negotiated through various spatial scales: from the body, to public spaces, to the national(ist) imagination. These scales form the structure of the three subsections that follow and help to reveal the wide-ranging effects of religion on the understanding and performance of gendered identities.

The body as space; spaces of the body

Space plays an important role in the production of the body, whilst the body also plays an important role in the production of space (see Knott 2010). In other words, bodies create space, but so too are they spaces of inscription and meaning themselves. Religious belief can reproduce a normative understanding of gender through the inscriptions and meanings of the body itself and of the presentation of the body in space. For example, the segregation of male and female worship spaces in mosques or the covering of the body when entering a temple or other sanctified space both reveal the ways in which ‘bodies are marked as different within different
spaces’ (Dwyer 1999: 5). More conservative religious traditions can, over time, serve to reproduce gendered identities as a ‘cultural category of difference that is contextually constructed as essential and natural—as residing within the very body of the individual’ (Silverstein 2005: 364). These constructions are problematic as bodies do not exist in isolation, but, instead, are continually moving through space and interacting with other bodies and ideas. This can lead to a questioning and challenging of religious constructs, on the one hand, or a strengthening and reification of them on the other. I now draw on examples of the embodied practices of Muslim women in the UK and Indonesia to illustrate each of these two standpoints.

In the first case, Dwyer (1998, 1999, 2000) has explored how Muslim women of South Asian descent, living in the UK, forge their identities by challenging dominant representations of Islamic tradition. These representations, which are reproduced through the mainstream media and institutions, are seen to portray them as ‘passive victims of oppressive cultures’ and as the ‘embodiment of a repressive and fundamentalist religion’ (Dwyer 1998: 53). Instead, she demonstrates how they are “caught between two cultures” of the (Islamic) home and the (Western/British) school, with dress being an important manifestation of such cultural divergence. In many respects, dress can reinforce such a divergence, insofar as ‘changing from school uniform to shalwar kameez’ represents a shift ‘from noisy self-expression to more subdued forms of behaviour’ (Brah and Minhas 1985: 18). In order to reconcile these differences, Dwyer (1999: 5) argues that clothing—including the veil—is a ‘powerful and overdetermined marker of difference’ for young Muslim women, and that the alternative femininities that emerge when the antithetical boundaries of “traditional/Islamic” and “modern/Western” styles of dress are overcome can contribute to a more sensitive understanding of the complex negotiations that emerge at the intersection of religion and gender. Such an understanding will, she suggests, contribute to the ‘reworking of meanings to produce alternative identities’ (Dwyer 1999: 5) in the shifting socio-cultural context of Britain.

In the second case, Parker (2017) considers how the embodied practices of minority Muslim girls in Bali, Indonesia (which has a majority Hindu population), reinforce the mapping of gender onto sex. These mappings provide a constant reminder of the linkages between the inner and outer representations of the body:

Because the jilbab restricts neck mobility and head movement, it constantly makes the wearer aware of her own body. Wearing the jilbab encourages girls to be good: to be more careful, more devout, more polite and respectful, less flirtatious. It imposes its own discipline.

(Parker 2017: 451)

According to Parker, the outer covering of the jilbab can be seen to discipline the body underneath in accordance with gendered Muslim values. Indeed, whilst the jilbab can be seen to discipline the body, other Islamic spaces—such as the school—can be seen to enforce the discipline of wearing the jilbab itself. In this vein, Parker (2017: 447) argues that Islamic schools in Bali serve to allay parents’ concerns about their daughters’ socialising in non-Islamic schools, as ‘the school would guarantee that students would dress modestly, covering their aurat with the jilbab, and that students would pray conscientiously’. These choices were shown to restrict the “free” (i.e. mixed-gender) socialising of adolescent Muslim girls, the aim being to protect the girls’ sexual purity and therefore to retain their reputation and marriageability. Parker (2017: 448) concludes with the observation that ‘girls are sent to the Islamic school in expectation that the school will produce modest, sexually innocent young women, an island of virginal morality in a sea of sexual degeneracy’. Besides providing insight into the ways in which the body can be
represented in ways that enforce religious understandings of gender, so too does this example help to situate bodies in space. Developing this idea further, I now explore public spaces of embodied negotiation.

**Public spaces of embodied negotiation**

By locating bodies in space and by recognising that the body itself is a space of negotiation, we can begin to see how bodies intersect with the power dynamics that arise from the multiple and overlapping meanings and uses of space. Public spaces are unique in that they are often sites of surveillance, expectation and conformity. They are, in many respects, spaces in which cultural norms are reproduced. In many contexts they are imbued with secular logics that can challenge religious understandings of the gendered body. Indeed, some of the clearest insights into the negotiations of the gendered body in public space come from scholarship into the changing spatial practices of religious converts. For example, female conversion into Islam can result in a (sometimes radical) shift in how the gendered self engages with day-to-day public spaces. Conversion can lead to restricted mobility, which, in Western contexts in particular, can lead to the need to forge new types of engagement with society and space. As Sultan (1999: 330–1; see also Woods 2012) puts it, ‘at the end of the day, it might not be a ‘minor thing’ to hand over to your husband the right to decide where you are and are not allowed to go’. Restricted autonomy as an outcome of religious conversion can therefore be problematic. In this sense, converting into a religion can also be interpreted as conversion into a clearly defined gender role that needs to be performed to society and in space. Outside the framework of conversion, other scholarship has considered how public spaces can lead to either the marginalisation or the empowerment of the gendered self. These two outcomes are now explored in relation to Muslim men in the UK and Muslim women in Turkey.

In the first case, the public spaces of the UK have been shown to be complex sites of negotiation wherein Muslim men are implicated within a dominant, non-Muslim framework of masculinity. Given that ‘masculinities are negotiated in the context of power relations’ (Dwyer et al. 2008: 118), Muslim men are expected to either conform or compete with ‘hegemonic versions of masculinity’ that emphasise whiteness, yet place ‘less value’ (McDowell 2003: 19) on alternative attributes. The fact that many Muslim men in the UK also embody a South Asian racial identity is a compounding factor that can exacerbate their otherness. This has caused young Muslim men in particular to be ‘marginalised due to the complex masculinities that result at the juncture of age and religion’ (Hopkins 2004: 260). Hopkins (2004) captures the challenges that young men face when representing a Muslim identity in public spaces in Scotland post-9/11. One interviewee explained how:

I’ve got a beard, but if I was clean shaven it would be fine for me, but you do get discriminated against just cause you have a beard, you know and sometimes you don’t get a job and things like that for that reason . . . quite a few times I’ve been walking around at the Highfield area and I’ve been called Osama Bin Laden or the Taliban or things like that . . . yeah . . . but it does seem that a beard is a major deal for some people.

(cited in Hopkins 2004: 262)

Here we can see an othering—and a radicalisation—of identity in and through the public spaces of the street and the job market. The embodiment of Muslim masculinity—articulated here as having a beard, but also including racial differences—highlights ‘the importance of the body as a site of difference and otherness’ (Hopkins 2004: 263), which can in turn lead to discrimination
and marginalisation in public space. In this sense, the boundaries of religion coalesce with those of race to underpin and, therefore, strengthen, a marginal male identity.

In the second case, the veiling practices of Turkish women provide insight into the ways in which religion interacts with the secular in the public spaces of Istanbul. Practices like these underscore the blurring of boundaries that have come to define the postsecular. In this sense, veiling is a strategy through which Muslim women must ‘grapple with the demands of a pluralistic public sphere . . . in ways that traverse and call into question the distinction between public and private spaces’ (Gökariksel and Secor 2015: 21). Bearing this in mind, the modernisation of Turkey is closely intertwined with the politics of veiling. Throughout Turkey’s modern history, ‘unveiling was either forced or encouraged by modernising and Westernising Middle Eastern states’ as ‘veiled women were represented . . . as backwards and oppressed, and this judgement was in turn extended to Islam itself’ (Gökariksel and Secor 2009: 9). Public spaces have become spaces of representation where Muslim women use the veil to exert agency and show their resistance to the secular Turkish state. Veiling has been shown to be most popular amongst educated, upwardly mobile and politically engaged young Turkish women. Accordingly, veiling ‘involves constructing anew not only ideas about femininity, but also of taste, social status and distinction’ (Gökariksel and Secor 2009: 13). As a result, ‘veiling/unveiling is not only a matter of social control but also one of being and becoming a subject of power’ (Gökariksel 2009: 661) as assuming an overtly Muslim identity empowers women to resist the state and to perform a particular vision of Turkish modernity in public space.

National(ist) spaces of embodied negotiation

Public spaces are often a reflection of the broader socio-cultural contexts in which they are found. As such, they tend to be representations of space that are informed by dominant, nationalist-oriented ideologies and visions. By scaling up the analysis of public space, we can therefore understand how religious bodies, and, more specifically, differently gendered bodies, are implicated within broader discourses of national (dis)integration. These implications have been debated particularly strongly in France, where Islamic identities and values have struggled to find accommodation with Republican ideals. As Bowen (2004: 43) puts it, ‘French Muslims face particularly sharp and explicit conflicts because of the simultaneous strength of French Republican ideology and Islamic universalism’. Debates concerning the headscarf in particular—and divergent expectations of Muslim women in public spaces more generally—have fuelled these conflicts, especially when the headscarf is worn as a ‘mark of discovery and self-identification as an individual’ (Bowen 2004: 47). Muslims typically prefer to maintain Islamic orthodoxies, whereas non-Muslims typically prefer such orthodoxies to be adapted to suit the social, cultural, legal and political context of France. Bowen (2004: 44) explains the non-Muslim position:

For many non-Muslim French people it [the phrase “Islam of France”] means cultural “assimilation” to French language and culture or social “integration” into a “mixed” society—to be demonstrated by choosing designer headscarves over the Islamic kind, eating the same food as everyone else, or interacting regularly with non-Muslims.

Here we can see how non-Muslim French views strive to decouple religion from gender. For Muslims to be “integrated”, they need to “choos[e] designer headscarves over the Islamic kind”, and therefore practice a less-gendered form of Islam. For many Muslims, however, Islam is inextricably linked to a gendered understanding of the self, and to forgo one aspect of identity would be to undermine the other. These divergent understandings have been played out most
prominently in schools and workplaces, where Muslim girls had been expelled or fired for such ‘public display[s] of difference’ (Bowen 2004: 46). Bowen (2004: 47) helpfully reframes these debates in broader terms, stating:

Muslims do or do not accept the terms of the Republican social contract; the veil is or is not a sign of dispersion from the common body politic, or of the submission of women to men. In these arguments, Muslims and non-Muslims, social scientists and public actors—and the separation between categories becomes markedly blurred—start from the political culture and cultural boundaries of the Republic and then measure the orientations and actions of individuals with respect to that culture. Yes, French Islam should have borders, and currently Muslims either do or do not behave accordingly.

In this view, the problem stems from the fact that Islamic practices of veiling do not accord with the “political culture and cultural boundaries of the Republic”. Moreover, the view that “French Islam should have borders” focuses attention on the negotiations involved in the crossing of borders, and the subsequent redrawing of the boundaries of religion and gender. In this sense, then, Muslim communities are implicated within two, different yet overlapping, scalar framings of Islam; one is bordered by the territorial extent of the French nation-state, the other is bordered by the imagined global community of Muslims. As a result, they must constantly negotiate the political and cultural norms—founded on the principle of laïcité—that are reproduced in and through French society, whilst similarly negotiating the gendered and religious norms that come from belonging to the Islamic ummah.

Crossing borders and redrawing the boundaries of religion and gender

This final section focusses more explicitly on the recalibrations of identity in general—and religion and gender more specifically—that can arise when people migrate across borders. Migration brings with it the necessary substitution of one socio-cultural context for another and the subsequent redefinition of the boundaries of identity. Accordingly, whilst migration has caused ‘static notions of identity and belonging [to be] massively disrupted’, religion can often play an important role in mediating these disruptions, as ‘belief can provide a source of continuity and strength for spatially dislocated bodies’ (Kong and Woods 2018: 152, 150). Not only can movement bring about disruption, but so too can it lead to a strengthening of pre-existing ties. To this end, the field of transnational studies has emerged over the past two decades and has helped to reconcile the fact that ‘in one moment scholars explore and celebrate new possibilities for movement and communication across [borders] . . . in another they consider how new cultural boundaries may be generated by such movements’ (Bowen 2004: 43). Transnational studies contributes a different perspective to the crossing of borders and the redrawing of boundaries and is considered in more detail in the subsection that follows. After that, I apply these ideas to the study of Harari Muslim women living transnational lives in Toronto, Canada.

Towards a transnational understanding of boundaries

In recent years, the border-crossing practices of migrants have been researched from the perspective of cross-border connectivity and continuity. This focus on “transnationalism” has
underpinned the consideration of how migrants may use religion to both maintain ties to religious communities in their “home” countries and develop new ones in their “host” countries. Cross-border connections like these have resulted in the creation of situations whereby transmigrants are expected to ‘mak[e] seemingly contradictory loyalties and cultural expectations fit, and using religion to do so, is the daily task of increasing numbers’ (Levitt 2007: 104; see also Carnes and Yang 2004). With this in mind, transnational studies advances an optic [that] jettisons the assumption that the nation-state is the natural, logical container where social life takes places and begins instead with a world with no set borders and boundaries. It asks why particular kinds of boundaries arise in particular historical contexts and assumes that these processes happen simultaneously in several settings and at several levels of social experience.

(Levitt 2007: 105)

Whereas migration scholarship once followed an assimilationist logic—that is, it presupposed that migrants would ‘socially construct racial [and other] boundaries based on existing categories in the United States’ (Ecklund 2005: 133), for example—it has recently become more nuanced in its consideration of how migrants may resist assimilation in the pursuit of multicultural alternatives instead. In itself, this reflects the changing power dynamics between migrant and non-migrant communities, as the reassertion of difference has increasingly become a point of strength from which new forms of integration can take root. In some cases, these assertions have been the cause of considerable antagonism, especially where racial differences overlay religious differences. Accordingly, research has sought to explore the ‘connected, interweaving and overlapping nature of race and religion’ (Hopkins 2004: 257) and how such entanglements come to bear on the performance and politics of gender. Thus, it has been shown that the wearing of headscarves by Turkish women in Germany is symbolic in the construction of multifaceted forms of difference and the cultural plurality that underpins many discourses of migrant integration in modernity. Indeed, in this case, the wearing of headscarves goes beyond difference and can be interpreted as a symbolic act of resistance against both the secular Turkish government and the alienation felt by Turkish migrant communities within German society (Mandel 1989).

**Shifting understandings of transnational Muslim women in Canada**

The case of Muslim women from Harari communities in Ethiopia migrating to Toronto, Canada, reveals some of the challenges faced when attempting to reconcile the differences associated with moving between different socio-cultural contexts. In this case, these differences play out through changing understandings of gender and religion when living in a transnational social environment. Rather than migration bring about a liberalisation of gender roles to suit the more secular (or, perhaps, non-Muslim) context of Canada, the reverse was observed, as ‘male and female religious roles and spaces become more prescriptive and polarized’ (Gibb and Rothenberg 2000: 243). As Gibb and Rothenberg (2000: 249) explain:

While women had access to positions of religious authority and influence in Harar, in Toronto, where practices become homogenized and standardized and shrines do not exist, leadership has become more formalized and exclusively male. Here, women have actually lost some of the means to assert autonomy and exercise authority which were available to them in Harar.
Because of these shifts, Harari women in Toronto are expected to adopt a more conservative
gendered positionality across both public and private spaces. This is to mark themselves explictly as Muslim women in an ostensibly non-Muslim context. Gibb and Rothenberg (2000: 250) explain this transition in relationship to the different veiling practices of Harari women in Harar and Toronto:

In Harar, virtually no-one wears the hijab. Girls begin to wear veils before reaching puberty, but these are brightly coloured scarves wrapped loosely around the head like the ones their mothers also wear. In the diasporic setting [in Toronto], however, many Harari men feel threatened by the assumption that women have greater mobility in North America, and many women feel compromised having to live, study and work in non-Muslim settings. This often produces domestic tension in Harari homes because wives and unmarried daughters move about unchaperoned in spaces which are not sex-segregated. The hijab, as a universal symbol, connects young women to the wider ummah and global traditions of Islam, and assures Harari women and their concerned family members that they are properly marked as Muslims in a non-Muslim context.

This “marking” of the Muslim female in a non-Muslim context can be seen to strengthen the interlocking nature of religion and gender beyond what is normally practiced in Harar. Beyond identification, this strengthening also has clear spatial ramifications, as non-Muslim public spaces are viewed as “compromised” by their non-segregated nature. As a result of this view, ‘male and female religious roles and spaces become more prescriptive and polarized’ (Gibb and Rothenberg 2000: 243), which in turn places limitations on the extent to which Harari women are able to become autonomous religious actors in Canada. The hijab, they conclude, is a point of connection to the transnational ummah, which in itself helps to reconcile the tensions that arise from being a Muslim (migrant) woman in an ostensibly non-Muslim setting.

Conclusions

Religion and gender are two axes of identity that intersect, compromise and strengthen each other in complex ways. The boundaries between religion and gender are not predetermined but are constantly being negotiated, made and remade in response to the impositions of religious idea(l)s, socio-cultural norms, and the navigations of daily life. These navigations are often played out through various spaces and can become antagonistic when played out in a cross-border, transnational setting. Most of the empirical examples used to illustrate the points made in this chapter draw on the gendered experiences of Muslims, especially younger Muslims (see Hopkins 2004; Vincett et al. 2012). The significance of this is that the negotiation of identity is often inextricably linked to growing up and defining a sense of the self (Woods 2020a, 2020b). That said, more research is needed to understand the longitudinal nuances of such negotiations. Specifically, there is a need to understand how the interlocking boundaries of both religion and gender evolve over time, and why. Kong and Woods (2018) offer a conceptual framework that can help to organise the insights that emerge from the cross-border movement and settlement of religion, although its relevance applies not just to migrant communities. They propose that two axes—one exploring the interplay between transnational religious agency and the strength of local religious structures, the other exploring the interplay between religion, gender and other aspects of identity—can help to identify the manifold factors that contribute to the religiously informed gendered identities, and vice versa. This framework can, then, be used to explore and understand the hardening or softening of different facets of identity—especially religion.
and gender—that come with the experience of being a migrant. Doing so will provide new empirical insight into the effects of migration on local religious structures, on the expression of individual religious agency, and the implications of such effects and expressions on the realisation of the gendered self.

**Notes**

1. The *jilbab* is a full-length outer garment, worn by some Muslim women in public spaces.
2. *Aurat* loosely translates as “nakedness”, or the associated need to cover the female Muslim body in public.
3. The *hijab* is a head covering that Muslim women may wear in public.
4. The *ummah* is the global Muslim community.

**References**


