Introduction and structure

Understanding the relationship between religion, violence, and peace requires an expansive account of the relation between gender, peacetime violence, and war. In this chapter, I therefore examine discursive and semiotic dimensions of the deployment and mobilization of gender and women’s rights in the service of violence, branded as “progress” and “liberation.” Discursive foci illuminate the global operation of ideological formations, dehumanization, and other-ing in authorizing violence, and a semiotic lens allows us to decipher the complex global systems of meanings and signs as well as their function in informing cultural communication, solidarity, alliance, and violence.

A semiotic and discursive approach, therefore, allows us to tell a more comprehensive story about religion, gender, and conflict than delimiting the discussion to obvious sites where gender plays a role in conflict and peace. One such obvious site revolves around the conversation concerning the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda adopted by the U.N. Security Council (2000) that stressed a concern for vulnerable populations and a requirement to increase the participation of women in peace and security decision-making and the concomitant field of feminist international relations. That these conversations tend to bracket religion does not constitute a simple oversight. The challenge of adding religion to this discussion elucidates the relevance of the semiotic and discursive levels of analysis because of religion’s relation to hetero-patriarchal patterns of domination; cultural, structural, and symbolic violence and civilizational narratives of dispossession, conversion, and exploitation. The links, in other words, between the four terms under examination (gender, religion, violence, and peace) are layered, multidirectional, and cross-fertilizing.

Critically, I use the word “conflict” rather than “war” here to denote continuities between gender as a site of violence in both war and peace. This is the “continuum of violence” for women that Cynthia Cockburn (1998, p. 80) illuminates. Gender is key to understanding conflict and violence because “it provides a central organizing set of metaphoric associations” (Cohn 2013, p. 15) that authorizes, naturalizes, and infuses relational patterns among variedly categorized and valued groups of people and between humans and nature (Cohn 2013, pp. 14–15). Further, the analysis of gender in conflict and peace requires an expansive account of violence that includes an interrogation of discursive, cultural, symbolic, and structural forms.
of violence. It is through such an analysis that our account of religion, violence, and peace opens itself up to a more robust engagement with gender.

I begin by briefly sketching how and why the scholarship on religion, conflict, and the practice of peace eludes gender, even if it has demonstrated some attention to women’s experiences, agency, and roles, primarily in peacebuilding, but also in war and violence. Operating with an expansive account of violence and religion, I focus on the examples of Nobel Peace laureate Leymah Roberta Gbowee of Liberia and her leadership of interfaith women’s mass protest actions and of Musawah, a global Muslim movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family. Each of these examples illustrates an expansion of the scope of religion and peacebuilding, while navigating theological and sociopolitical androcentricity differently. Second, I examine the entanglement of gendered metaphors with multiple relations of domination and violence, illuminating where and how religious meanings, imaginations, symbols, and institutions intersect, consolidate, and authorize violence and domination. Third, and finally, I examine sexual politics as a site of analysis that illuminates the complex relations of gender to religion, conflict, peace.

**Religion, violence, and the practice of peace**

The empirical evidence of the public presence of religion and its entanglement in much-publicized acts of terrorist violence signaled a postsecular turn. It entailed a shift away from a prior modernist and secularist approach to religion in public life and international relations, which interpreted religion as insignificant politically, to a renewed appreciation of religion’s causality in the world. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 often marks the postsecular turn, which only accelerated after September 11, 2001. A plethora of scholarly work as well as various offices and intergovernmental bodies came into being, capitalizing on and mobilizing the postsecular interest in religion and religious actors’ potential instrumentality in development and peacebuilding policies and practices. A scholarly subfield focusing on religion and violence gained momentum because of a primary preoccupation with violent motifs within the histories and scriptures of religious traditions, particularly contemporary manifestations of religious violence, whether in the form of ethnoreligious nationalist movements and conflicts, non-state actors, comparative fundamentalisms, or global movements.

At the same time, in the early 2000s, a subfield of religion, conflict, and peace (RCP) also emerged primarily in the global North, which denoted the dispelling of the secularist myopia. RCP has been focusing on peace-promoting resources within traditions, rituals of peacebuilding, interreligious dialogue, religion and diplomacy, and other forms of religious interventions in peacebuilding and conflict transformation, including studies of exemplary religious actors who drew motivation and strength (including in terms of networks and institutional backing) from their faith. Both of these subfields have, however, been driven by the immediacy of direct forms of violence, in an attempt to decipher the role of religion in those contexts.

The upshot of focusing the analysis of religion, violence, and the practice of peace on direct violence is that the urgencies of realpolitik have shaped the field in ways that bracket, for the most part, considerations of gender, feminist interpretations of tradition, and thus concerns with other forms of violence (e.g., structural, cultural, symbolic, discursive, or epistemic). As a result, the space of RCP tends to focus on male religious actors and exemplars. This androcentricity is primarily driven and reinforced by actors in the peacebuilding and development fields who identify religious leaders, networks, and institutional infrastructure as potentially effective instruments in implementing various objectives, programs, and policies. Beyond the problematic effects of instrumentalizing religion and so-called religious actors, the urgency of
immediate problems demands pragmatic rather than discursive approaches. As a result, questions such as the diminishment of the humanity of women, the confinement of their roles to social reproductive tasks, and the curtailment of their capacity to assume leadership positions within religious communities appear gratuitous, luxurious, and unrelated to the hard realities at hand.\textsuperscript{11}

Yet pressures in the field of policy and development propel practitioners to focus on the “religion factor” while also challenging these practitioners to identify and promote women and girls through programs whose success and effectiveness are measured through particular conceptions of what improvement in women’s quality of life and a capacity to flourish mean.\textsuperscript{12} When one begins to listen to the voices on the ground, a simplistic binary analysis of hegemony diminishes in traction. Indeed, women who lead girls’ literacy programs and focus on cultivating gender sensitivity through imam trainings or other mechanisms, as in the case of Jamila Afghani in Afghanistan, may navigate a landscape controlled by donors’ buzzwords and constraints as well as geopolitical agendas. However, their agency cannot be dismissed as simply symptomatic of neoliberal and orientalist West-centric discourse.\textsuperscript{13} Afghani, for example, stressed in a speech to the U.N. Security Council that her struggle for education in Afghanistan and Pakistan constituted politics and political actions, explicitly rejecting the labeling of Afghan women as “not political” or the classification of her own actions as somehow ventriloquizing the West.\textsuperscript{14} But often, as Susan Hayward and Katherine Marshall (2015) conclude, women’s capacity to act ironically depends on their very marginality and invisibility.\textsuperscript{15} Women’s peace agency, in other words, is often confined to \textit{realfpolitik} and to their capacity to navigate unreconstructed gender norms. The focus on women and peace, unlike the scholarly feminist discourse on women and war (examined later), relies on androcentric accounts of religious traditions, their sociopolitical manifestations, as well as women’s lives and experiences outside a robust analysis of gender.

Empirically, on the ground and often behind the scenes, women occupy all facets of peace-building work.\textsuperscript{16} They are multiple and diverse and include exemplars such as Gbowee, who led the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace in nonviolent actions, which contributed significantly to the conclusion of the second Liberian civil war in 2003. Gbowee’s peace movement was intentionally interfaith, interethnic, and politically diverse. In an interview conducted by Harvard Divinity School, she stressed, “We [Liberian women who formed the mass action] came from different backgrounds, and we just came to that place where we made a commitment that we’re going to move beyond the things that divide us and embrace the things that brought us together” (Harvard Divinity School 2016). What brought them together, she continues, were the consequences of the enduring war and the recognition of their common humanity.

Of course, the resolve to work across identity boundaries and political differences was not automatic but rather indicative of an intentional process involving multiple levels of internal discussion and interrogation of commitments. Initially, Christian women gathered and examined the Bible to illuminate through the stories of Esther, Deborah, and Rahab that “God had a way of using women and that there’s a place for women in turning around the history of their nations” (Harvard Divinity School 2016). Muslim women similarly engaged the Quran, foregrounding verses that revealed the just treatment of women and the leadership of Khadija, Muhammad’s first wife and first female follower, “mother of the believers.” After this initial process, they brought the Muslim and Christian women together to determine their commonality, a process that involved grappling with othering and stereotyping in order to show “that beyond faith there can be a relationship” (Harvard Divinity School 2016).

Prayer constituted critical spiritual sustenance for perseverance in the struggle as well as in Gbowee’s own leadership. She explained, “I started to really develop a more intimate relationship with God as a result . . . I realized that in order for me to walk the walk with the willing, I had to beef up my prayer life and to be able to understand where God was taking me” (Harvard
Divinity School 2016). The women, dressed in plain white and covering their heads to conceal their differences, began to engage in civil disobedience. Eventually the Liberian president heard their pleas for peace. At this point, they refused to step aside and let the men take over. They consequently staged a sit-in, preventing people from leaving the venue of the peace negotiation in Ghana, thereby forcing the representatives to negotiate seriously, a process that eventually resulted in U.N. involvement and the democratic election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a female president with whom (along with Tawakkol Karman from Yemen) Gbowee shared the Nobel Peace Prize.17

Gbowee’s example demonstrates a few common and interrelated characteristics of the linking of faith, women, and peacebuilding. First, it involves a recognition that women’s marginality can enhance their ability to see commonalities, despite ideational differences and boundaries. However, this crosscutting vision is neither self-evident nor instinctive. Second, therefore, intragroup processing becomes pivotal prior to intergroup engagement. This process is familiar in the field of interreligious dialogue of action where cultivating capacity to collaborate across group boundaries requires an intrapersonal and intragroup interrogation of stereotypes, but also a recovery of religious/theological sources prone to “harmony promotion,” based on abstract and apparently self-evident concepts such as the “common good.”18 In this case, they recovered courageous (and prophetically disruptive) female agency. Third, intra- and interfaith dialogue involves mining the tradition for emancipatory stories and themes. Fourth, prayer and spiritual work are often an integral part of mobilization and resistance and thus have profound personal and potentially sociopolitical ramifications.19 Indeed, prayers often function to consecrate spaces for intercommunal collaboration and action.20

Gbowee’s discussion of faith also gestures to other levels of analysis. It is an empirical fact that most people inhabit religious topographies. Notably, women tend to be “more religious” than men, according to meta-statistical measurements (Pew Research Center 2016). This explains partly the importance of prayer for social action, intergroup solidarity, and intrasubjective spiritual strength as well as a recognition that the starting point for women’s action needs to involve intrafaith examination. This examination, however, was not at any point open to interrogation of the patriarchal normativity of the religious sources, the male pronouns associated with God, or the ways that this normativity might inform structural, symbolic, and cultural forms of violence against women and their societal marginality. In this respect, the focus on women’s religiosity poses a problem to conventional feminist assumptions about female agency and religion as a source of subjugation rather than emancipation for women.

This problem deepens with the literature on docile, pious female agency and Saba Mahmood’s challenge to feminist notions such as freedom and autonomy as well as the presumption that female agency can only be identified insofar as it involves disrupting (even if only in an embryonic fashion) hetero-, patriarchal normativity (Mahmood 2011).21 Instead, the cultivated virtuoso piety of the women Mahmood studied in her groundbreaking Politics of Piety (2011), consisting of submissiveness, shyness, and other values deemed most authentically Muslim, poses difficulties for such conventional feminist accounts of female agency. It also, by extension, complicates the scholar’s and practitioner’s capacity to identify women peacebuilders: is their peacebuilding potential relying on their “pious” invisibilizing capacities? Is the field of peace-building (and development) prejudicing more “literal” religiosity over feminist hermeneutics? If it does, then religion and peace operates in juxtaposition to gender justice.

Interestingly, the religion and peacebuilding field—because of its proclivity to be confined to realpolitik and the art of the possible—more easily embraces docile or compliant female agency. On the one hand, religion, women, and peacebuilding as a subfield does not concern itself systematically and discursively with gender normativity as it worries primarily about acute and
obvious forms of violence and war. On the other hand, the subfield of gender and development often uneasily navigates religion as an obstacle, once again producing a secularist teleology of progress not in sync empirically with the lived realities of most people. Nor is it attentive to complex, internally diverse, and reimagining capacities of people self-identifying as people of faith to reconfigure their semiotic terrain.

In reality, however, people (including women) can inhabit multiple variations of these ideal typical (to recall the Weberian heuristics) forms of agency. Self-identified women of faith can be faith-based peacebuilders in their capacity to reduce acute violence and to navigate their environment while inhabiting and upholding spiritual, symbolic, cultural, and other modes of violence and domination. Like Gbowee’s focus on prayer and emancipatory women exemplars, Mahmood’s pious women’s cultivation of Muslim virtues involved hard work on self-formation. However, they saw themselves as rejecting any selective mining of Islam, while nevertheless embracing its androcentricity as expression of authenticity. Both cases of women’s religious agency, not only the explicit political mass mobilization led by Gbowee, threatened male normativity. Curiously, the Egyptian government felt threatened by the mass mobilization of female piety, and pious women became the subject of governmental surveillance, even in the absence of explicit politicization. This points to why female agentic performance in and of itself, in whatever form, unsettles power structures. Many women, such as Sakena Yacoobi in Afghanistan, learn to navigate their ontologically prescribed inferiority in ways that ultimately contribute to enhancing women’s capacity to acquire dignity through literacy and other human rights that the authorities intentionally deny to them through appeals to their interpretations of religious prescription. This is where “conformity” becomes creative, even if not obviously subversive (Bucar 2011).

The space of women, religion, and peacebuilding, however, is not only populated by women such as Gbowee. The latter derives inspiration and strength from retrieving biblical narratives of strong female leaders. Other women, such as those involved with Sisters in Islam and Musawah, work hermeneutically within their traditions to illuminate pathways for legal reform and women’s empowerment. In particular, Musawah (initiated in 2006), as a key provider of scholarships to the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) Committee, offers scholarly reinterpretations of *qiwāma* and *wilaya*. These terms conventionally refer to men’s authority over women and children and, as such, authorize discrimination against women in Muslim family law and sanction wifely obedience.24 Musawah’s focus on working within the tradition and its methodology of legal argumentation illuminate alternative avenues for religiously informed intervention in transforming structural forms of violence (in this case through legal enforcement of gender-based domination and androcentricity).

The question remains whether the kind of work engaged in by Musawah bears any relevance to peace or only to justice and whether these foci are (or should be) interlinked and how.25 In other words, what is the relation between redressing, through religious hermeneutics, sites of structural and cultural violence, institutional reforms, and deepening capacities for political stability and peace? Further, to what degree do the feminist hermeneutics of Musawah and other interpreters of traditions constitute a subset of “religious peacemaking”? Such questions relate deeply to what conceptions of tradition and religion we depend upon. Relatedly, how might international norms and mechanisms that focus on gender justice participate in expanding the scope of the subfield of religion, gender, and peace? Before we ponder this set of questions, let us describe the contours of the consolidation of international norms on gender mainstreaming, a critical “progress” narrative to contend with, in the interrelated field of women, peace, and security.
International gender mainstreaming

CEDAW (ratified in 1981), a U.N. mechanism to ensure countries’ compliance with principles of anti-discrimination against women in political, social, economic, and cultural realms, culminated in the gradual consolidation of women’s rights and gender justice in international and intergovernmental human rights’ instruments. The skeleton of this history has included a gradual disruption of stereotypical conceptions of femininity enshrined in humanitarian conventions, such as in the 1949 Geneva Convention, where the demand for special protection of women in war was rationalized in terms of protecting their honor rather than in terms of human rights.

Gender mainstreaming and a shift away from the honor paradigm unfolded on multiple institutional stages, including the Beijing Platform of Action in 1995, which specifically identified the “effects of armed and other kinds of conflict on women” and consequently critical foci for enhancing a gender perspective in international criminal law. Beijing roughly coincided with the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998), which explicitly broke from the honor paradigm in conjunction with the International Criminal Tribunals for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia in the mid-1990s. U.N. Resolution 1325 (ratified in 2000), as well as U.N. Resolution 1820, which recognizes rape as a weapon of war and a threat to international security, finally denoted the U.N. Security Council’s efforts to mainstream gender and to redefine human security and women’s rights as human rights. U.N. Resolution 1325 reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.


U.N. Resolution 1325 subsequently functions as a critical reference point for the field of women, peace, and security, but its interpretation and implementation requires a complex dislodging from secularist development paradigms that tend to posit tradition or religion as prohibitive of gender mainstreaming. These “progress” narratives share elective affinities with secularist temporalities, as we will see more clearly later, and coalesce in complex ways with orientalism, harmful policies, and even military actions that this discourse enables. For now, it suffices to stress that, critically, the gradual move toward gender mainstreaming is not necessarily unidirectional, and it always reflects internal contestations and trends within national discourses. For example, the U.S. under the Trump presidency has signaled a trend away from gender mainstreaming and a concern with women’s reproductive and health care rights, domestically and internationally.

Still, the history of gender mainstreaming and its institutionalization through international mechanisms is significant and relevant to the discussion of religion, conflict, and peace. Indeed, the institutional development of gender and security paralleled shifts from the “add women and stir” Women in Development paradigm of the 1970s to the Gender and Development paradigm, closely linked to the U.N. Economic and Social Council’s definition of gender mainstreaming (1997) as “the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels . . . The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.”

The shift denotes increased attention to an analysis around gender
Religion, gender justice, violence, peace

relations rather than only women as a site for special security and protection. Additionally, such a focus illuminates the need to interrogate links between wartime and peacetime masculinities as critical for processes of demilitarization. The shift from women to gender, in other words, invites interrogating discursive, symbolic, and cultural violence as a central site of policy engagement, generating further questions pertaining to where “religion” fits in gender mainstreaming: Is it an obstacle? Why or why not? When? Indeed, the one narrative about a shift from the honor paradigm to gender mainstreaming assumes that religion is deeply entangled with appeals to “honor” and assigned gender roles and thus prohibitive as a resource for peacebuilding and emancipation.

The women, peace, and security subfield as well as RCP often exercise intentionality in the inclusion of women. However, this inclusion in and of itself is not sufficient as a mechanism for gender justice or a more robust peace. This “inclusion” assumption once again betrays a delinking of peacetime and wartime concerns with gender and human security, thus bracketing structural, cultural, and symbolic violence. Gender mainstreaming and the postsecular turn coincide uneasily as the actors instrumental for gender indices of development are not necessarily the same actors who could reduce direct violence. Thus, once again, we assign RCP to the confines of realpolitik and “peace,” while assigning religious feminist and queer activism to the normative horizons of luxurious utopian “justice.”

This bifurcation and incapacity to integrate gender, conflict, and peace exposes the degree to which scholarship and practice in RCP is confined to realist and pragmatist concerns. It is one thing for the postsecularist turn of major international and intergovernmental bodies such as the World Bank to instrumentalize religion and religious actors to advance their agenda and objectives, such as the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This instrumentalization signaled the proliferation of multiple “religion” initiatives and bodies that often featured the same people and sets of experts circulating from one convention to another, discussing the “faith” and “religion” factor pertaining to a spectrum of issues. It is altogether another thing to ask how the SDGs’ own synergies of peacebuilding and development allow space for multiple interpretive modes of female religious agency. Notably, such synergies emerge mostly from a deepening recognition of the interrelation between “underdevelopment” and insecurity, thus deploying “development” as a form of “soft power,” where religious actors are instrumentalized in their own securitization and neoliberalization (recall the SDGs’ emphasis in Goal 17 on the private sector and devolutionary policies, for example). This amounts to positing “culture” or “religion” as a cause of marginality rather than engaging in a systemic scrutiny of structural and historical violence. This scrutiny would reveal the ways in which secularist assumptions concerning the relation between religion and progress/development/peace need to be interrogated and situated within deeper historical and epistemological analyses of modernity as coloniality—the legacy of exploitation, dehumanization, genocide, and slavery so central to constituting modernity as a political project.

Women, like young people, are singled out as an especially fruitful demographic for investment, particularly through microfinancing and other livelihood projects. In the Philippines and Kenya, where I recently conducted fieldwork, I also identified a pattern in which such efforts unfold through an interfaith framing where women from different communities (usually Muslims and Christians) are selected for livelihood projects. Their cooperation depends upon dispelling stereotypes, thereby foregrounding a theory of change that burdens individual participants with undergoing an intrasubjective transformation as a precondition for minimal economic survival and cooperation, the protection of which is then interpreted as critical for securitizing against violent interpretations of religious identities. Women are
also targeted in their roles as mothers and religious teachers for intrafaith work on ensuring “correct” interpretations of Islam (a marked category in the subfield of religion and development) and cultivating “resilience” (a buzzword in synergizing peacebuilding and development) against violent radicalization.\textsuperscript{33} What these examples suggest, therefore, is how various localized efforts to frame development efforts in terms of peacebuilding and through interfaith and intrafaith dialogue (including through a focus on the institutions of religious learning) often generate conservative and diminished accounts of faith traditions that may function effectively in securitizing and “deradicalization” efforts. They may, indeed, concurrently yield some measurable dividends related to gender, such as an increased literacy rate, a reduction of child marriage and sexual abuse, and more robust communal leadership roles. Their main objective, however, is to contain “bad” religion through the instrumentalization of “good” religion.

This securitizing approach to women, development, and peacebuilding, however, is different from the hermeneutical mode of Musawah, which also, as noted, links itself to international frameworks such as CEDAW. Musawah’s focus on family law reform allows for cultivating a rights-based conception of tradition that challenges the employment of Islam to condone discriminatory practices against women. It moves the discussion from appeals to authenticity, deploying the bad-versus-good religion/theology paradigm, to an interpretive and hermeneutical mode that reveals historical and contextual—rather than abstract and reified—conceptions of tradition. Musawah activists exemplify the need for religious literacy, mastery of tradition (through recognition of human interpretive fallibility), and the capacity to work from within the tradition to reform it. In the process, they transform the role of women in society as well as effect social and political transformation through legal and other institutions. Their work, in other words, illuminates the insights animating U.N. 1325 concerning the links between wartime and peacetime gender relations and violence.

Notably, Gbowee, to return to her example, may not question the androcentricity of her tradition and will persist in her reference to God as male. Yet she employs the language of human rights and equality to underscore the need for inclusion of women in government and peace processes (reflective of U.N. Resolution 1325). This brings to the fore two additional points. First, religious spaces and intratradition work were crucial for cultivating the possibility of solidarity across identity groups in Liberia during the civil war, but this hermeneutical work was limited to scriptural mining without in-depth theological interrogation and historicization, per se. This may be a pragmatic maneuver and suggestive of the space of religion, women, and peacebuilding in lived women’s experiences as distinct from feminist theological hermeneutics in that it involves responding to an immediate presenting problem rather than root causes, where theological androcentricity is hardwired into epistemic, structural, and cultural forms of violence. The pragmatism of this approach is also authentic to the actors themselves and the ways in which they interpret their own agency and power, based upon both deepening faith and strengthening intergroup alliances.

However, and this is the second point, the scholarly study of religion, women, and war/peace cannot simply confine itself to a form of journalistic reporting on what women (religious or not) do in war and peace. Indeed, such a confinement would subordinate the task of analytic rigor to pragmatics, \textit{realpolitik}, and androcentric accounts of religious traditions. A focus on women is not the same as an analysis of gender. Hence, this chapter seeks to explain why interrogating women and war through a gendered lens opens an interpretive space to understanding religion, conflict, and peacebuilding by examining gendering as pivotal—not peripheral—to violence, war, and structures of domination.
Religion, gender justice, violence, peace

**Metaphors matter**

Carol Cohn’s critical, anti-essentializing scholarly intervention illuminates how general statements about “women and war” can “run the risk of doing conceptual violence to the realities of women’s lives,” which are embedded within and informed by multiple variables. Because gender “encodes power,” it constitutes a critical site of manipulation and disempowerment in war, targeting not only men, but also their manliness, with the rape of “their” women as just one tactic (Cohn 2013, pp. 10–11).

Gender, of course, enters the public discussion of war through the prevalence of rape as a tool of humiliation and communal devastation. This prevalence reveals gender’s function as a meaning system, a semiotics where war and peace themselves are deeply gendered binaries. Rape functions as a metaphor for territorial violation, generating gendered conceptions of land and nation whose purity and honor are violated. The violation of “motherland” normally heralds rhetoric about honor and reflects the “symbolic gender coding of nation-as-woman and woman-as-nation,” underpinning rape as a tool of ethnocide and genocide (Cohn 2013, p. 14). Indeed, gender informs the construction of nationalism in complex ways, from women as the instruments for reproducing the nation (thus foregrounding their biological function) to their role in social reproduction and care to sexual politics, as we will see later.

The shift to a gender paradigm, marking the women, peace, and security field, that also takes seriously the construction of masculinities, militarism, and the role of women in enhancing a now expanded conception of security as human security, opened up paths for women’s inclusion in all facets of demilitarization, peacebuilding, and conflict transformation. Gender mainstreaming, however, resides uncomfortably with religion; the latter, in conventional feminist thought, is rendered an obstacle for transforming gendered dynamics as well as structural, cultural, and symbolic forms of violence against women and other marginalized communities. It is, therefore, no wonder that the emerging field of theory and practice in women and security brackets feminist religious interrogations of traditions because of the intimate relations between religious ontologies and the gendered ordering of the social, political, and religious lives of people. At the same time, the postsecular turn facilitates apparently pragmatic instrumentalizing of religious actors, networks, and institutions in development and peacebuilding practices. However, fruitful pathways and sources that reimagine religiosity as emancipatory converge with feminist and decolonial theologies as well as Indigenous outlooks. These convergences become visible with the demobilization of unreconstructed secularist progress narratives.

Consistent with Cohn’s exposition, decolonial and postcolonial feminist work has long emphasized not only the entanglement, but also the pivotal function of gender hierarchies in authorizing the colonial enterprise of “discovering” apparently “virgin” and “pristine” lands and “redeeming” them through the conquest and conversion of their inhabitants. In the decolonial genre, an analysis of gender immediately intersects with an analysis of race, racialization, genocide, enslavement, and capitalist exploitation. Decolonial feminist theologians likewise stress how this entanglement is critical for understanding the undergirding operation of the gender metaphor in multiple relations of domination and control, asking about the hardwiring of patriarchal norms into religious texts, rituals, and structures. However, the intersection of gender and racialization within the matrix of coloniality not only conveys ways in which missionary infrastructures have been implicated in the consolidation of the West as a political and ideological project. It also conveys how appeals to Christian superiority were reshaped into different discourses: civilizational, developmental, and democratic, depending on the epoch.

Critically, any reductive account of Christianity (i.e., a total identification with coloniality) excludes the emancipatory capacity of liberation, decolonial, anticolonial, and feminist
Atalia Omer

theologies, in particular, to imagine alternative, ethical-political meanings outside the analysis of interlocking oppressions and their global discursive logic. This is precisely where intersectionality’s overemphasis on structures rather than identities reaches a limit that relates to a feminist suspicion of religion as an oppressive system, *par excellence*. Yet feminist theologies from the global South, in particular, destabilize anthropocentric and androcentric accounts of nature and traditions, respectively. For instance, the Brazilian ecofeminist Ivone Gebara (1999) developed a relational conception of God to disrupt the construction of God as a patriarchal father and a ruler of all creatures as well as the binaries on which such a construct relied. Gebara’s, as well as other feminist theologies and Indigenous cosmologies from the global South, cannot bracket the intersectional account of the interlocking matrix of oppression. Yet their struggles also entail reclaiming and reimagining their identities and semiotic landscapes.

Such a critical account of religion, intersectionality, and decolonial meaning making unsettles binary accounts of religion as either bad or good. Instead, I extend my analysis of religion, gender, conflict, and peace to the discursive level in order to identify when and how gender participates in discursive violence. Some of those instances are now shorthanded through patterns of pinkwashing and the promotion of women’s rights.

### In the name of women’s rights and gender justice

Gender mainstreaming, as shown previously, means integrating a gender lens in thinking through all facets of policy and praxis. This integration signals a conscious break from the patriarchal domestication of women and their binarization as the domestic other of men and their (the men’s) public roles. Interestingly, secular modernity is also marked by the apparent privatization of religion, its domestication, and its individualization as a form of personal and autonomous choice. This domestication of religion, of course, is only “apparent” because religiosity pervades, in selective and governed ways, the production and reproduction of secular, public, and political spaces whose own binarization with religion has been the subject of debunking for its enduring Christian- and Eurocentric legacies. This is just to telegraph that the genealogical angle reveals the more subtle ways in which religion participates in constructing, maintaining, and policing political boundaries and thresholds of communal inclusion and exclusion. Those thresholds and mechanisms, as already noted, are also constitutively gendered. Thus, the intersection of religion and gender, as well as its relevance to comprehending the logic of violence, is an important site of analysis often overlooked.

Accordingly, the first semiotic site for analyzing gender, religion, and violence revolves around the deployment of women’s rights in the service of direct violence as well as the gendered dynamics of anti-Muslim racism in Europe in what various theorists call “sexual politics.” The second interrelated site revolves around the deployment of LGBTQI in “pinkwashing” the Israeli occupation of Palestinians. These two cases illuminate the complex gendering of global discourses, how they intersect with religion and political narratives, and why confronting them becomes its own locus for conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

The deployment of women’s rights and emancipatory universalizing secular language and temporality is integral to the Western, Christian, colonial legacies. Famously, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1994) proclaimed in her “Can the Subaltern Speak?” that rhetoric fixated on the abolition of *sati* practices in India as a pretext for colonial control was deployed as tool of empire, indicative of a general discourse about “white men saving brown women from brown men” (p. 93). Relying on orientalist underpinnings, the discourse of “saving” women has become particularly acute in the war on terrorism and the securitization of Muslim men and youth. The securitization discourse, focusing on the containment of “radical” and violent elements of
Islam, is beholden to an orientalist outlook that posits religion, a marked category, as a source of violence to be contained or securitized through a variety of mechanisms, including oversight over madrasa education, thereby suggesting synergies between conventional “development” foci on education and peace as securitization.43

In this context, intrafaith work, including the training of imams and religious teachers, is interpreted through a preventing violent extremism (PVE) lens and involves the deployment of religion and religious actors (like Afghani) as instruments of “soft power.” As critics note, such culturalist and/or civilizational accounts of Islam are reductive and ahistorical, positing “culture” and “religion” as causes of violence without interrogating geopolitics and overlooking historical injustices and structural forms of violence (Mamdani 2002). As a result, peacebuilding and development fixate on cultivating mechanisms such as “counter-messaging” to change “culture” or to correct “religion,” often by focusing on individual self-transformation and by including faith actors “by invitation” in broader decision-making processes and in the implementation of what decolonial scholar Walter Mignolo (2000) calls “global designs.” Not only that, the concept and practice of “counter-messaging” thrives on a discourse of authenticity about what accounts for “true” religion, thereby precluding innovation and hermeneutical agency.

The securitizing discourse, therefore, is gendered and continuous with the colonial deployment of women’s rights as sanctioning the violence of empire. Lila Abu-Lughod’s provocation Do Muslim Women Need Saving? (2013) is to be understood within the broader context of Spivak’s critical engagement with colonial discourse and the deployment of women’s rights as a justification of the invasion of Afghanistan. The latter signaled a curious coalition of militants and feminist activists and with it the weaponization of the language of sexual liberation, women rights, and equality as attributes linked to “Western” societies denoting “progress.”44 This “progress” narrative has deep roots informing paternalistic approaches to women and development theory, which animated the first U.N. Decade of Women (1975–1985) and which detached the analysis of women in the “Third World” from their intersectional embeddedness.45 The turn to gender mainstreaming did not depart much from the paternalistic implications of secular temporality, even if it entailed a deeper examination of the construction of masculinities and femininities. As a result, “Third World” feminists generated an intersectional, epistemological challenge to disembedded and disembodied conceptions of sisterhood and feminist solidarity.46 The epistemological challenge intends to embolden and navigate feminist and queer activism transnationally, engaging in a robust analysis of power and interlocking matrices of control globally, but also illuminating resources for empowerment and networks for cross-fertilization. What came to be known as “Third World feminism,” or feminism from the global South, intends to challenge the “saving women” trope and (white) feminism’s complicity with secular temporality and discursive and imperial violence.

In continuity with the basic insight concerning the deployment of women’s rights as symptomatic of orientalist premises and geopolitical agenda, Sara Farris examines the convergences among feminists, right-wing populist nationalist politicians, and neoliberal discursivity. Developing the concept of “femonationalism,” Farris (2017) shows how Islamophobia, xenophobia, and the neoliberal reduction of citizenship to productive labor coalesce with feminist elements in three case studies of right-wing nationalist discourses in the Netherlands, Italy, and France. While Muslim men are rendered dangerous and a target for securitizing, Muslim women are portrayed as ripe for rescuing from their supposedly oppressive cultures.47 This rescue, according to Farris, is through labor in the domestic care and social reproductive sectors, exposing ironies about feminist involvement in designing explicit (neoliberal and anti-Muslim) policies to this effect. In other words, Farris’s study of femonationalism is not merely an exercise in the critique of ideology; rather, it manifests in concrete so-called integration policies aimed at (mostly
Muslim) migrant women. Hence, the securitizing discourse is deeply gendered and entangled with the other discursive formation of neoliberalism, which, as we saw, also dominates the development sector and its gendered emphasis on livelihood projects. Indeed, as Judith Butler argues, sexual politics interweaves anti-Muslim and orientalist tropes in ways that posit Muslims as sexually unliberated and thus non-modern, reinscribing secularist temporalities that reject the co-evalness of difference.48 This form of sexual politics misdirects potential solidarities and the need to focus on state violence in the formation of coalitions (Butler 2009). Sexual politics, in other words, amounts to a thoroughly gendered symbolic, cultural, and discursive violence, which carries profound implications for people’s lives through exclusionary and marginalizing policies.49

Sexual politics, therefore, exemplifies the intricate links between peacetime and wartime gendered violence and thus points to the potential conceptual cross-fertilization between the study of gender and war, on the one hand, and women, religion, and peacebuilding, on the other. It also deepens the need to interrogate discursive formations as relevant and interrelated sites for the analysis of gender, religion, and violence. The scholarly genre that clarifies the violent implications of the deployment of women’s rights and its embeddedness in colonial, orientalist, and secularist discourses does important work in dispelling the force of “saving women” tropes. Metaphors do matter and gender, as noted, authorizes multiple levels of domination.

Other theorists, such as Jasbir Puar, continue this basic insight about the links between geopolitics, empire, securitization discourse, and the deployment of gender more broadly, with a particular emphasis on LGBTQI rights as likewise reflective of violence. In her Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times (2017), Puar examines the construction of terrorist bodies and how LGBTQI inclusion and queer secularity are deployed in positing Muslim sexualities as a threat, thereby illuminating how feminist and queer discourses participate in reproducing orientalist underpinnings and emboldening empire.

Two key concepts of Puar are of great relevance here. First, Puar’s “homonationalism” conveys processes whereby “inclusion . . . signaled as the annexation of homosexual jargon, is contingent upon the segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others from the national imaginary” (2017, p. 2). Homonationalism subsequently reveals a form of “sexual exceptionalism” and a “regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects” (Puar 2017, p. 2). Homonationalism thus construed participates in emboldening American empire and white supremacy “through the simultaneous engendering and disavowal of populations of sexual-racial others” (Puar 2017, p. 2, emphasis in original). Homonationalism amplifies rather than diminishes U.S. national heteronormativity and is instrumental in the war on terror’s securitizing discourse.50

The second concept, “queer secularity,” locates religiosity, in an orientalist fashion, in Muslim bodies. Accordingly, “the queer agential subject can only ever be fathomed outside the norming constrictions of religion, subjugated and repressed sexuality void of agency [where] the agency of all queer Muslims is invariably evaluated through the regulatory apparatus of queer liberal secularity” (Puar 2017, p. 13). As a result, “secular gay and lesbian human rights framing of Islamic sexual repression mistakes or transposes state repression for sexual repression,” revealing consistency with “colonial fantasies of Orientalist sexual excess, perversity, and pedophilia” (Puar 2017, p. 14). LGBTQI rights, within this framework, can be mobilized—as can women’s rights—in the service of right-wing, anti-immigration, Islamophobic populism, as it did in the case of the gay Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands and his rhetorical positing of Islam versus gay rights, a rhetorical deployment with real-life implications in terms of anti-immigration policies.
Calling out the discursive context of the deployment of women and LGBTQI rights became a tool of activism specifically dedicated to exposing the logic of pinkwashing and how appearances of progressive politics participate in oppression and actual violent policies, such as the occupation of Palestinians.51

Accordingly, the tools of pinkwashing explicitly exploit orientalism to brand Israel as “modern,” “progressive,” and safe for gays, supposedly unlike its Arab Middle Eastern neighbors. According to Puar and Mikdashi (2012), pinkwashing captures a process by which the Israeli state seeks to gloss over the ongoing settler colonialism of historic Palestine by redirecting international attention towards a comparison between the supposedly stellar record of gay rights in Israel and supposedly dismal state of life for LGBTQ Palestinians in Occupied Palestine.

Pinkwashing brands Israel as a gay paradise in “a sea of Arab or Muslim barbarity,” a variation on the “villa in the jungle” motif (Mohamed and Esack 2017). This discourse of empire enhances a narrative about religion as prohibitive of LGBTQI self-determination; this oppressive and invisibilizing discourse ignores queer Muslims or exploits their fears for the purposes of intelligence gathering, a violent practice routinely implemented by the Israeli security and surveillance infrastructure.

Exposing pinkwashing as a calculated policy and branding through the signification of certain groups as prisoners of their “religion” and thus “non-modern,” therefore, became a site for gender-sensitive activism, demanding ethical coherence between a critique of heteronormativity and exclusionary and violent nationalist discourses. The case of anti-pinkwashing by queer persons, groups, and organizations therefore reveals discourse, narrative, and political branding as critical, if overlooked, sites of gender, religion, and conflict transformation or peacebuilding.

The discursive critique of the deployment of gender notwithstanding, one ought to differentiate between the ideological deployment of gender and the agentic and hermeneutical work as well as social navigation of women and others within the logics of heteronormativity, homonationalism, and patriarchy.

Conclusion

This chapter read the relation between the four terms of religion, conflict, gender, and peace through an examination of multiple narratives. One progress narrative focuses on the gradual institutionalization of gender mainstreaming. Another progress narrative, embedded in orientalist tropes, is interwoven with development discourses that, we saw, also intersect with sexual politics. Yet the chapter also illuminated other narratives. One story was hermeneutical, examining the internal interrogation of tradition and cultural practices through learned methodologies and deep religious literacy. Another story is embodied in the daily struggles and actions of women who navigate their complex landscapes in ways that reflect the confinement of peace to the art of the possible, but also open up avenues for transforming structural, cultural, and symbolic forms of violence. Religiosity, including the practice of prayer, constitutes emancipatory, not prohibitive, resources for empowerment. Yet another story offers a deeper challenge. This is the story of the docile agent, the woman who chooses to inhabit submissiveness, shyness, and obedience—all virtues she associates with her androcentric religious tradition. An analytic and activist frame that disabuses itself from secular temporalities could expand to encompass such faith actors into a coalition that resists state violence, which often operates to discourage such crosscutting coalitions through the underpinning logic of sexual politics.52
The focus on gender as well as queer and feminist theologies is, therefore, not a luxury outside of peacebuilding. Indeed, in the case of Gbowee, we identified androcentricity together with a disruptive prophetic agency and an active rescripting of her political landscape. With Musawah, we identified a feminist hermeneutical engagement with tradition, challenging androcentricity and its accompanying political, social, and legal implications and thus its complex operation on multiple levels of violence. The focus on sexual politics, queer secularity, homonationalism, and pinkwashing all foregrounded the metaphorical, semiotic, and discursive operation of gender. Combined, these sites of analysis challenge the myopic confinement of the discussion of religion, gender, conflict, and peace to the terrains of \textit{realpolitik}.

Gender justice is not the opposite of religious tradition and vice versa. Gender justice could operate metaphorically on the level of semiotics and ideologically on the level of discourse to authorize violence and the control of racialized bodies. Hence, understanding gender, violence/conflict, and peace demands the conceptual tools of intersectionality, but also a recognition of intersectionality’s difficult relations with religion, theology, and female religious agency.

Notes

1 For classical points of reference, see Gramsci (1971). For more contemporary statements, see Hill Collins (1986).
2 This semiotic approach connects to a turn in American studies; see, for example, Lubin (2014).
3 For example, see Shepherd (2017).
4 For a groundbreaking push on conventional gendered assumptions in peace research, see Confortini (2006).
5 For example, the World Bank Group’s initiative “Ending Extreme Poverty: A Moral and Spiritual Imperative” (launched 2015), the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (established in 2016), as well as government-specific designated offices for “religious engagement” as in the U.S. Office of Global Engagement with Religion (est. 2013) in the U.S. Department of State. Counterparts were established by other governments, though such offices are always subject to political shifts.
6 For an early definitional works, see Appleby (1999). For later reflections, see Lynch (2014). For examples of the postsecular incorporation of the “religion” factor, see Tomalin, Haustein, and Kidy (2018).
7 For example, Jerryson and Juergensmeyer (2010).
8 For example, Appleby (1999) and Omer, Appleby, and Little (2015).
9 For a critical engagement with the focus of the subfield of religion, conflict, and peacebuilding on direct violence, see Springs (2015).
10 This is a problematic designation for its reduction of the complexities that people inhabit to just one variable.
11 Tomalin (2009) offers an important challenge to this bracketing in arguing for the links between female ordination in Buddhism and development/peace output.
12 The question of women and human flourishing has long been debated in the intersection of philosophy and development; see, for example, Deneulin and Zampini-Davies (2017).
13 For an important intervention on these questions, see Terman (2016).
14 See Tanenbaum Center (n.d.).
15 See also Yacoobi (2015).
16 This empirical fact was especially conveyed to me in personal and formal conversations with Myla Leguro, a long-time peacebuilder in Mindanao, the Philippines, who has been instrumental to Catholic Relief Services’ design and implementation of multiple peacebuilding and development initiatives in Mindanao over decades.
17 The film \textit{Pray the Devil Back to Hell} (2008) documents this process.
18 See Bamat, Leguro, Bolton, and Omer (2017).
19 For the overlooked dimension of prayer in peacebuilding and development, see Schwarz (2018).
20 I observed it multiple times in my encounters with Muslim-Christian intergroup and interfaith dialogue and collaborative action for those involved own understanding of the “common good” or their
Religion, gender justice, violence, peace

strength as a collaborative intergroup economic and communal venture (such as in an interfaith women co-op in a Kenyan town bordering with Somalia). That meetings begin with multiple prayers from multiple faith perspectives is not insignificant, even if their causal output is not necessarily measurable according to conventional quantifiable metrics.

21 For an engagement with how intersectionality frames are challenged by the female religious agency as articulated in Mahmood and others in this genre, see Singh (2015).

22 I employ the category of “faith” underscoring a point about self-identification to signal my acute awareness of the critique of “faith” as a Christian category as per extensive literature in the academic study of religion’s critique of the comparative study of religion.


24 For example, Anwar (2013, p. 121).

25 This is where it is useful to connect to peace studies, particularly its grappling with the relations between social justice and peace. See, for a key document, Lederach and Appleby (2010).

26 For an important analysis of micro-processes in the CEDAW Committee, see Crowe (unpublished).

27 For this discussion, see Crowe (2016).

28 See also PeaceWomen (n.d.); and Office of the Special Adviser on Gender (n.d.).

29 www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/22/us-un-resolution-rape-weapon-of-war-veto?CMP=fb_gu&utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Facebook&fbclid=IwAR3liWt8QBJqC8NPMpaq_OiEYK39S1YJlP6VFLkZOB5kFPqr9CnWFbBddL50#Echobox=1555964845.


31 The “religion factor” is central for this non-comprehensive list of “religion” initiatives that generate multiple conferences and conventions: World Faith Development Dialogue (established in 2000, based at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University in Washington, DC); The Religion and Development Research Programme (2005–2010 funded by DFID); World Bank Faith Initiative (2014); and International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (2016), designed to facilitate Agenda 2030 and the implementation of the SDGs and located in the offices of the German government. All of these and many others reflect the interests of governments and global financial institutions to mobilize effectively and synergistically the “religion factor.”

32 The concept of “soft power” was coined by Nye Jr. (2004). For the explicit deployment of religion as “soft power,” see The Brookings Institution (n.d.).

33 For an examination of some of the problems endemic to PVE, see Abu-Nimer (2018).

34 For example, Yuval Davis (1997).

35 See also Cynthia Enloe (1998) and Skidmore and Lawrence (2007).

36 See, for example, Rivera Rivera (2003); Lugonos (2012); Pui-Lan (2005). See also van der Veer (2007).

37 For example, Lugonos (2012).

38 For example, Smith (2003).


41 See also, for example, Mendez (2018).

42 For critical scholarly interventions on this question, see Asad (2003); Mahmood (2016); Hurd (2008); and Hurd (2015).

43 For the focus on madrasa education, see, for example, Johnston, Hussain, and Cataldi (2008). For a diametrically opposed approach to engaging with madrasa education, see Contending Modernities, Madrasa Discourses Program at the University of Notre Dame (n.d.).

44 See also Hirschkind and Mahmood (2002).

45 For a classical critique of white women’s gaze, see Mohanty (1984).


47 This discourse also manifests in rhetoric around the refugee predicament in Euro-America. See, for example, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2017).

48 For a classical account of Western modernity’s construction of the other as existing in a different time, see Fabian (1983).

49 See also Scott (2017).

50 See also Chow (2006).

51 For further reflection of this, consult Schulman (2012) and Hochberg (2010). For an important critical engagement from a Palestinian queer perspective with Puar’s framing, see Atshan (2020).

52 Butler (2009) gestures in this direction, conceptually.
References


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Contending Modernities (n.d.) Madrasa discourses program at the University of Notre Dame, http://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/about/research-areas/madrasa-discourses/.


Pray the devil back to hell (2008) Directed by G. Rerticker [film].

