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Oppression or liberation? Moving beyond binaries in religion and gender studies

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Introduction

Scholarly feminist analyses of the relationship between religion and gender address the ‘oppression-liberation’ dichotomy in various ways, from structural perspectives portraying religious women as individuals who are inevitably subordinated and oppressed by patriarchy (Jeffreys 2012; Daly 1978) to more agentic approaches insisting that religious women are subjects who exercise some form of agency—also in situations where their behaviour colludes with and reproduces patriarchal norms and gender inequality (Mack 2003; Mahmood 2005; Avishai 2008).

Along a continuum from structural to agentic approaches, other scholars argue that religious women can simultaneously inhabit both submissive-pious and liberal-feminist subjectivities (Jacobsen 2011; Rinaldo 2014; Zion-Waldoks 2015). These latter works demonstrate multiple and intertwined forms of religious women’s agency and complicity that challenge oppositional, categorical understandings of subordination and liberation (Nyhagen & Halsaa 2016). Broadly speaking, structural perspectives focus on how religion as institutional (male) power, authority, resource and discourse imposes, produces and maintains inequalities between women and men. Agentic perspectives, on the other hand, focus on women’s lived experience of religion and religion as embodied, narrated, performed and (co-)constructed by individuals in everyday life.

This chapter critically interrogates key examples of contemporary works on religion and gender by feminist scholars, focusing on the ways in which they address the relationship between structure and agency. How do different approaches conceptualise agency? To what extent do they consider social, material and discursive forms of power and inequalities, as well as individuals’ agentic capabilities? Who are the religious subjects they discuss—do they include privileged and marginalised religious women?

While the oppression-liberation dichotomy is also employed elsewhere in gender studies, its specific application in studies of religion and gender suggests (and at times relies upon), further oppositional relationships between the religious and the secular, and the private and the public, where religion may be deemed irrational, emotional, feminine and private and the secular is associated with rationality, intellect, masculinity and the public sphere (Beattie 2004; Reilly 2011). In this double or even triple binary, men are deemed more capable of enacting agency than women. Moreover, secular individuals are seen as modern, liberated subjects capable of
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Purposeful behaviour, while religious individuals are portrayed as traditional, subjugated people with no or limited agency (Mack 2003: 153; Jakobsen & Pellegrini 2008). ‘The secular’ (and ‘the public sphere’) is thus normalised and valorised over ‘the religious’ (and ‘the private sphere’), which is marked as the inferior ‘other’ (Sands 2008: 309). Furthermore, ‘the secular’ is viewed as the bearer of universal and shared values (e.g., ‘gender equality’ and ‘women’s rights’ are viewed as inherently ‘secular’), while ‘the religious’ is associated with particular (patriarchal and ethnocentric) values held by specific groups (Fessenden 2008; Cady & Fessenden 2013; Reilly & Scriver 2013). Such clear distinctions between the religious and the secular are challenged, however, by the shifting meanings attributed to these terms (Beckford 2003) and by the historical processes of interaction between religious and Enlightenment values (Mack 2003: 153). As Göle and Billaud (2012: 119) remind us, ‘the world is not only guided by liberal ethics but by moral values inspired by religion’. Moreover, both secularism and religion can be deployed to support and/or undermine gender equality (Scott 2018). Studies of religion and gender must therefore pay attention to the specificity of context.

The chapter starts with a critical discussion of structural deterministic perspectives on religion and gender and moves on to a critical engagement with agency-focused approaches. Having discussed limitations of both structure- and agentic-focused perspectives, the chapter outlines examples of more complex analyses of religion and gender that seek to overcome the oppression-liberation dichotomy. The final section suggests that studies of religion and gender can benefit from engaging with critical realist perspectives, theories of intersectionality and the ‘lived religion’ approach within the sociology of religion. Such a move challenges the oppression vs liberation dichotomy and enables more complex analyses of relations between agency and structure.

From structural versus agentic to more complex analyses of religion and gender

A critical lens on structural-deterministic approaches

Structural-deterministic analyses of religion and gender favour a top-down approach, focusing on male-led institutions, male-dominated traditions and male-authored texts, while paying less attention to the voices of religious women themselves and the role of religion in everyday life. Scholars who promote this type of analysis (e.g., Daly 1978; Okin 1999; Jeffreys 2012) assert that religions are patriarchal systems of institutionally prescribed beliefs and practices that benefit men and oppress women. ‘Religion’ is thus constructed as an antithesis to women’s emancipation. This Marxist-inspired analysis suggests that religion ‘is little more than a bag of superstitions’ ultimately aimed at controlling women (Nussbaum 1999: 105) and that women who hold religious beliefs suffer from false consciousness and are victims in need of rescuing. As Sarah Bracke (2008) has argued, empirical research on women and religion has repeatedly refuted the ‘false consciousness’ claim by demonstrating religious women’s agency within patriarchal contexts. Despite an abundance of evidence, however, structural-deterministic analyses of gender and religion are alive and well in Western feminist academic scholarship (see later), in feminist activist circles (Nyhagen 2017) and in broader political debates (van Es 2017). In particular, structural-deterministic approaches are often deployed to portray Muslim women as a unified category and as inferior ‘Others’ in comparison with secular women who are represented as ‘already liberated’ and therefore as the superior and legitimate norm-setting group (Bracke 2008; Nyhagen 2019). A continued critical engagement with this type of analysis is therefore necessary.
Importantly, the application of a critical lens on structural-deterministic approaches to religion and gender does not entail a denial of the fact that male-dominated religious structures (as institutions, leadership and authority) may operate in ways that are detrimental to women’s rights, equality and participation (see, e.g., Tohidi & Bayes 2001; Razavi & Jenichen 2010). We need to retain a structural approach that theorises and investigates the production, endurance and power of male domination within institutionalised forms and everyday practices of religion, in combination with an agentic approach that recognises women as competent subjects for whom religious faith may provide a deep sense of meaning and purpose.

**Religion as oppressive and secularism as liberating**

A key example of the structural-deterministic approach to religion and gender is that of Sheila Jeffreys (2012, 2011), a Western secular feminist scholar who views religion as inevitably patriarchal and proposes a universal and permanent conflict between ‘women’s rights’ and ‘religious rights’. According to Jeffreys, ‘the subordination of all women is the bedrock of all religions’ and ‘all religions are dangerous to women’s rights’ (Jeffreys 2012: 32 and 4). In her analysis, the danger to women comes from the harm caused by a range of practices that she suggests are carried out in the name of religion (in particular, in the name of Islam), including veiling, polygamy, forced marriage and female genital mutilation. It is clear that violence against women causes harm, as evidenced by a wealth of independent research (see, e.g., Heise, Ellsberg & Gottmoeller 2002). It is, however, disputed whether all of the practices listed by Jeffreys constitute violence against women. For example, her assertion that Muslim women’s headscarves constitute ‘a harmful cultural practice’, which is singularly oppressive and an expression of male power and domination over women (Jeffreys 2012: 119–120), runs counter to an abundance of research showing that Muslim women choose to veil for a variety of reasons (see, e.g., Wagner et al. 2012; Bilge 2010). Analysing the headscarf as simply an articulation of submission therefore marks Muslim women as ‘deprived of individual agency’ (Scott 2018: 182). Moreover, the notion that ‘religion’ is the root cause of violence against women is debatable, with scholars suggesting that such violence is ultimately rooted in gender inequality (to which religion can be one contributing factor) and other intersecting forms of inequality, rather than in ‘religion’ or ‘culture’ (Thiara & Gill 2010; Phillips 2007; Narayan 1997). Moreover, in her book *Man’s Dominion* (Jeffreys 2012), which analyses the relationship between religion and women’s rights, Jeffreys offers in-depth discussions of veiling and polygamy, which she associates with Muslims and Islam. She does not address other forms of violence experienced by both secular and religious women (e.g., domestic abuse). By silencing the dominant forms of violence experienced by women in the West (i.e., intimate partner violence, which is typically seen as caused by gender inequality and/or individual pathology, rather than by ‘religion’, ‘Islam’, ‘Christianity’ or ‘secularism’), Jeffreys’ analysis marks Muslim women as victims of ‘religion’ (i.e., Islam) and locates them outside the West.

Within Jeffreys’ structural-deterministic approach, religious traditions including Christianity, Judaism and Islam are portrayed as internally coherent, unitary and powerful systems that exercise power and control over their adherents. In this institutionalist view, religious adherents simply ‘copy’ the beliefs and prescriptions that emerge from religious systems or ‘traditions’, and any self-reflexive engagement (Besecke 2007) with religion goes unrecognized. Because religious women are viewed as forced into patriarchal submission by men and male-dominated religious structures, they are portrayed as lacking any wilful, self-motivated and freely chosen engagement with religion. For Jeffreys, women can only express self-determination through oppositional practices that intentionally and explicitly challenge men’s power and domination.
In this framework, women’s capacity for agency can only be evidenced in open and visible forms of resistance to power, while hidden (Abu-Lughod 1990), tacit (Kościańska 2009) or docile (Mahmood 2001) modalities of agency are overlooked. In Jeffreys’ analysis, moreover, women must reject religion and embrace secularism in order to gain ‘true consciousness’ and become free, as religion is viewed as incompatible with progressive social change towards gender equality. Within this binary, only a secular state is capable of securing women’s equality (Jeffreys 2012: 191).

Jeffreys goes further by suggesting that the inclusion of religious individuals and organisations in democratic deliberation will cause harm, declaring that ‘religions . . . are unsuitable partners for governments that purport to be committed to equal opportunities for women’ (Jeffreys 2011: 370). In effect, the inclusion of only secular interests in democratic deliberation and policymaking, and the universal exclusion of religious or faith-based interests, creates a two-tiered form of (unequal) citizenship and a democratic deficit. While religion can give people a sense of ‘moral direction, of conviction, of belonging’ (Woodhead 2013: 96) that also informs their political outlooks, it is important to recognise that religious citizens have a legitimate right to voice their views in the public sphere on a par with secular citizens (Habermas (2008, 2011). In this regard, Fraser’s (2007) notion of ‘participatory parity’ similarly suggests that religious and secular individuals should enjoy equal respect, recognition and opportunity to partake in democratic deliberation.

The structural-deterministic analysis of the relationship between religion and gender forwarded by Jeffreys constructs a binary between women’s oppression and liberation that is intimately linked with a strict demarcation between the religious (as oppressive) and the secular (as liberating). This strict demarcation is typical of what I call a ‘hard secular feminism’ (Nyhagen 2017). Within this ‘secularism as innocent’ discourse, religious women are portrayed as a homogenous group of victimized, inferior Others, in contrast to individual, liberated and superior secular women (see also Mack 2003: 153). This form of Othering amounts to ‘a denial of [religious women’s] right to name and define themselves’ and ‘a denial of their humanity’ (Pickering 2001: 73). More specifically, Jeffreys’ analysis of Muslim women’s veiling contributes to a continuation of ‘orientalist discourses of male domination and Islamic patriarchy’ (Sehlikoglu 2018: 79) and depicts a ‘colonialist representation’ of veiling that bears similarities with Daly’s analysis of sati (widow immolation) as an ‘Indian tradition’ (Narayan 1997: 43).

As discussed previously, the shortcomings of structural-deterministic approaches to religion and gender as forwarded, for example, in the work of Jeffreys (2012), Daly (1978) and Okin (1999), include its top-down approach based on the assumption that religion is the root cause of gender inequality and a lack of recognition of religious women’s own voices. A more positive contribution, however, lies in their insistence on solidarity with women who may suffer from discrimination and abuse due to their gender. Future studies of religion and gender must continue to pay attention to how male-dominated institutional, material and discursive forms of power and authority interact with groups and individuals in everyday life. For some women, the lived experience of religion may primarily be one of oppression, while for others it may be associated with freedom, joy and ‘ethical self-making’ (Sehlikoglu 2018: 81). ‘Religion’ is a complex issue and, as Nussbaum (2000: 178) argues, we need to recognise that ‘[r]eligious traditions have indeed been powerful sources of oppression for women, but they have also been powerful sources of protection for human rights, commitments to justice, and of energy for social change’. In order to better understand the relationship between gender and religion, we need context-specific studies that foreground women’s (and men’s) own narratives.
A critical lens on agency-focused approaches

Agency-focused analyses of religion and gender favour a bottom-up approach, centring on the lived experiences of religious women as they are situated within specific contexts. They vary in the extent to which they address and afford significance to intra- and extra-religious institutional (material and discursive) forms of power and social structures, but they share the notion that religion is, in some way, constitutive of religious women’s agency. As such, they open up for the idea that women are wilfully or intentionally engaged in religion. Broadly speaking, feminist scholars who work from agentic perspectives are looking to identify and understand women’s agency in diverse contexts, be it within families, religious groups and organisations, local communities, broader social movements or states or globally. Their approaches differ, however, in terms of how agency is conceptualised and theoretically informed (e.g., by social interactionism or post-structuralism) and where agency is located (e.g., in individual self-formation and self-reflexivity or in individual and collective goal-oriented behaviour).

Building on Orit Avishai’s work (2008), Kelsy Burke (2012: 188) reminds us that agency is a complex issue with ‘different modalities’ such as resistance, empowerment, a means to achieve instrumental ends and compliance. Importantly, each modality, in turn, can have different expressions, depending on context. When agency is conceptualised as open resistance to male power, as in Jeffreys’ (2012) analysis of the relationship between religion and gender, it is often tied to liberal, secular understandings of the feminist subject (Yadgar 2006; Reilly 2011). Nevertheless, the notion that resistance is possible renders hope that both secular and religious women are capable of exercising some form of agency.

When agency is primarily understood as purposeful in relation to achieving extra-religious ends, the analysis privileges instrumental concerns over faith commitment, meaning and belonging. On the other hand, if agency is perceived as expressed in conformity, compliance or docility, we may be privileging the role of religious piety in women’s lives at the expense of investigating the multiplicity of women’s identities, material lives, and engagements in broader movements for social justice (Narayan 1997).

More complex analyses of the relationship between religion and gender have the potential to open up for different conceptualisations of women’s agentic capacities, as signalled by terms such as ‘hidden defiances’ (Abu-Lughod 1990); ‘docility’ (Mahmood 2005); ‘religious observance’ (Avishai 2008); ‘silence’ (Kościańska 2009); ‘creative conformity’ (Bucar 2010); ‘pious critical agency’ (Rinaldo 2014); and ‘aspirations, desire, and enjoyment’ (Sehlikoglu 2018). Next, I discuss and critique the development of three strands of agentic-focused approaches to religious women’s agency: (a) the ‘paradox approach’ to agency (Avishai 2008: 410); (b) agency as located in piety and compliance; and (c) agency through religious conduct or the ‘doing’ of religion. While these approaches move beyond structural-deterministic approaches by taking seriously religious women’s own desires, motivations and capacity to act, they risk overlooking the structural factors that may limit women’s ability to pursue their own purpose and exercise choice.

The paradox approach to religious women’s agency

Over the past thirty years, feminist scholars have produced bottom-up empirical studies of religious women’s agency within patriarchal structures in diverse social, religious and geographical contexts around the world. In doing so, they have turned from more top-down institutional-structural perspectives on religion to increasingly individual-agentic approaches focusing on the lived, everyday motivations, beliefs, practices and experiences of religious women in specific,
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male-dominated contexts. An early example is Lila Abu-Lughod (1990: 43), who suggested that Bedouin women in Egypt engage in multiple forms of resistance against male power in their everyday lives, while at the same time accepting the overall dominance of male power (as expressed, e.g., in enforced gender segregation and veiling). One such form of resistance is articulated through ‘minor defiances’ enacted within the boundaries of women’s own spaces (e.g., hidden visits to healers, friends and relatives; smoking in secret). Abu-Lughod also found that Bedouin women engage in a ‘widespread’ form of resistance by refusing marriages proposed by men, and that they express ‘irreverence’ towards men’s masculinities and privilege through jokes, songs and folktales about men’s shortcomings (ibid.: 45). A further and even more significant form of resistance, in Abu-Lughod’s analysis, is that of ‘oral lyric poetry’ which displays sentiments of romantic love that are forbidden by the dominant moral ‘code of honor and modesty’ (ibid.: 47). She concluded that the identified everyday forms of resistance by women ‘signal sites of struggle’ which give insights into power relations in specific contexts.

Another early example of the paradox approach to women’s agency is Lynn Davidman’s (1991) study of Orthodox Jewish women. Davidman showed that young American Jewish women converted to Orthodox Judaism because they were attracted by its clear prescriptions about women’s primary role as caretaker in the family home and men’s primary role as the breadwinner. These religiously informed prescriptions were seen to provide clearer guidance than the more mixed messages from the wider, secular society, which signalled that women are expected to juggle both paid work and family demands. Davidman suggested that the women in her study exercised agency by actively choosing to enter ‘a religious community in which women are placed squarely in the home’ (Davidman 1991: 195).

Furthermore, in a study of two Protestant megachurches in the United States, Brenda Brasher (1998) observed that women who were attracted to strongly gender-differentiated, conservative congregations were able to engage in small women-only groups that had considerable autonomy and empowered the women through a focus on personal and family issues. Similarly, in her study of the evangelical-charismatic ‘Women’s Aglow’ movement in the United States, R. M. Griffith (1997) found that women accepted the ideals of female domesticity and male headship whilst also making use of their own women’s organisation to deal with negative aspects of their subordination. The women Griffith studied gave each other mutual support as wives and mothers on issues such as child-rearing, spousal infidelity and domestic violence. Although they were situated within an overall context of male domination and patriarchal control, the women experienced empowering relationships within women-only groups.

The turn from institutional to lived forms of religion (McGuire 2008) is also visible in Christel Manning’s (1999) study of American conservative Catholic, evangelical Protestant and Orthodox Jewish women’s ‘struggle’ with feminism. Manning found that women converts and returnees to these communities were ‘creatively reconstructing’ religiously endorsed gender norms ‘to incorporate feminist values’ (Manning 1999: 11). While her interviewees endorsed traditional gender roles in the home and in places of worship, they also questioned and suggested limitations to male authority and supported ‘feminist values’ pertaining to gender equality in paid work. In the same vein, studies of Muslim women around the world, such as Leila Ahmed’s (1992) study of Islam and gender in the Middle East, and the numerous case studies on Islam, gender and feminism in diverse Muslim societies presented in Haddad and Esposito (1998), demonstrate how Muslim women are caught up in broader societal changes in gender relations and actively engage with feminist ideas about gender equality and women’s rights. In a study of the Malaysian Muslim women’s group *Sisters in Islam*, for example, Norani Othman (2006) shows that Muslim women are challenging the state, religious authorities and Islamist groups on patriarchal aspects of Islamic family law in Malaysia that are detrimental to women’s rights.
Like the aforementioned studies, my own work on religion and gender has also taken place within what Orit Avishai (2008: 410) labels ‘the paradox approach’, which aims to demonstrate religious women’s agency within patriarchal organisational structures. In a historical-sociological study of the nineteenth-century Norwegian evangelical missionary movement, I examined letters, diaries, minutes of meetings and other written documents produced by missionary women and men (Nyhagen Predelli 2003). I found that, while participating in the patriarchal gender regime of the Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS), either as a result of following their own religious calling or that of their husbands’, Norwegian missionary women stationed in Madagascar were able to carve out independent roles for themselves, for example by preaching, at a time where such roles were limited to men in Norway. Moreover, missionary women ‘at home’ in Norway were pioneers in successfully arguing for democratic voting rights; they were afforded the right to vote at the general assembly meeting of the NMS a decade before Norwegian women were granted the right to vote in parliamentary elections. Some of the missionary women were also engaged in broader feminist work via the Norwegian Council of Women.

According to Avishai (2008: 410), ‘the paradox approach’ is flawed as an analytical perspective because it associates agency with a purposeful conduct that has extra-religious ends. She goes on to suggest ‘a conceptual shift’ to a ‘doing religion’ approach which centres on women’s performance of religious observance (ibid.); a suggestion I later will engage with further. At this point, however, I want to highlight an alternative analytical perspective on agency, that of critical realism, which acknowledges that ‘intentional action is purposive action [and that] purposive action in turn is motivated action’ (Porpora 2015: 137). A critical realist perspective is open to the possibility that agency can be religiously motivated (e.g., as in women missionaries’ religious calling), as well as motivated by extra-religious ends (e.g., as in women missionaries’ desire for adventure). Moreover, a critical realist perspective takes seriously the possibility that agency can be expressed in acts of complicity with (and not only in acts of defiance to) patriarchal structures, norms and practices. In other words, both compliance and resistance can be willed, or purposeful, and they can be motivated by religious and/or extra-religious ends. Next, I discuss feminist scholars’ endeavours to locate religious women’s agency in piety and compliance.

**Locating religious women’s agency in piety and compliance**

A growing number of feminist scholars of religion and gender have engaged in critical discussions of agency expressed via religious piety (e.g., Göle 1996; Mahmood 2001, 2005; Mack 2003; Avishai 2008; Bracke 2008; Rinaldo 2014; Zion-Waldoks 2015). They argue that religiously motivated agency can be expressed in multiple ways, including even suffering and survival, which, Saba Mahmood (2005: 167) suggests, do not follow a ‘logic of resistance and subversion’. In her study of women in the Egyptian mosque movement, Mahmood (2005: 5) proposes that agency is not only expressed via behaviour that questions social norms; it can also reside in behaviour that reproduces dominant norms. She therefore argues, ‘it is crucial to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics’ (ibid.: 14). Mahmood (2001: 211) theorises that a desire for individual freedom is neither universal nor innate, but it is ‘mediated by other capacities and desires’ in specific historical and social contexts. For ‘the pious subject’, Mahmood argues, progressive social change may be of lesser importance than ‘self-fashioning and ethical conduct’ (ibid.: 223) which may involve cultivating the virtues of ‘shyness, modesty, perseverance, and humility’ (ibid.: 205). Furthermore, what appears to outsiders as ‘passivity and docility’ may express agency (ibid.: 212).

Notably, Mahmood’s post-structuralist analysis focuses on discourses and ‘the work that discursive practices perform in making possible particular kinds of subjects’ (Mahmood 2005: 188,
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emphasis in original). She thereby signals that the creation of subjecthood (and subjects’ ability to express agency) may be constrained and/or enabled by extant discourses in specific contexts. Mahmood moves on to locate agency in the interplay between discursive practices and ‘practical engagements and forms of life’ in specific contexts’ (ibid.). She seeks to understand how agency is ‘involved in enacting, transgressing, or inhabiting ethical norms and moral principles’ (ibid.); that is, how religious subjects can articulate agency through pious, moral and ethical self-making. This theoretical lens allows for the analysis of agency in terms of religious subjects’ self-reflexive or intentional compliance with ideas and practices that may even result in their own suffering.

Drawing on Foucauldian analysis, Mahmood also proposes the ‘uncoupling [of] the notion of self-realization from that of the autonomous will’ (2005: 14). This suggests that the articulation of self-realisation via adherence to collective group norms is not necessarily the result of intentional, purposeful and motivated, self-reflexive action by individuals, and that, instead, it can be a result of powerful discursive forces and collective behavioural modes that discipline the individual into behaving in certain ways. In some ways, this can imply a rather deterministic analysis of social behaviour. What we need, therefore, is not an uncoupling of self-realisation from the autonomous will, but a conceptualisation of individual ‘will’ and agency that is embedded in social relationships and structures in specific contexts. I want to argue that if self-realisation can be achieved via self-reflexive adherence to religious group norms, then this form of self-realisation is (at least partly) produced via the conscious, reflexive ‘internal conversation’ (Archer 2002) of a religious subject. Drawing on Mack (2003), I suggest we need to conceptualise the possibility that compliance, and even suffering, can be an intentional and purposeful act (albeit mediated by enabling and constraining aspects of social structures and cultural norms).

Overall, Mahmood’s analysis of pious religious women’s agency offers a powerful critique of Marxist-inspired, structural-deterministic approaches to religion and gender that firmly associate agency with (secular) women’s resistance to religion. Her suggestion that a ‘politics of piety’ may be totally dislocated from liberal, progressive politics (Mahmood 2005: 14) risks, however, overstating the role of religion in women’s lives and denying the possibility that religious piety can be compatible with fights for women’s rights (Rinaldo 2014: 825). Moreover, by focusing primarily on discourse and behaviour within a religious community (i.e., the Egyptian mosque movement), Mahmood’s approach does not sufficiently take into account the significance of wider societal structures and cultural norms that interact with and may enable and/or constrain pious agency (Bangstad 2011). It can also be argued that Mahmood’s framework constructs ‘religious piety’ and ‘secular liberalism’ as fixed, unitary and oppositional categories, and hence that it silences possible intersections between religiosity and secularity in women’s lives (Bangstad 2011: 34).

A similar, yet also different, analysis to that of Mahmood’s is offered by Phyllis Mack (2003), who suggest that acts of individual autonomy (understood as expressing freedom of choice) may be less important to women than willed acts of self-transcendence that involve obedience to God. In her study of eighteenth-century women Quakers, Mack found that ‘submission to God and the religious community enhanced personal integrity and public credibility’ (Mack 2003: 157). Agency thus resided in purposeful actions of self-negation and self-transcendence. In other words, Mack argues that agency does not necessarily express individual autonomy in the form of self-interest. Instead, she introduces the notion of ‘freedom to do what is right’ (ibid.: 156). ‘What is right’ can be understood as ‘determined by God’, and agency can thus be expressed via obedience to God and willed ‘self-negation’ (ibid., pp. 155–156). In Mack’s view, what is needed in studies of devout religious subjects is ‘a conception of agency in which autonomy is less important than self-transcendence and in which the energy to act in the world is generated
and sustained by a prior act of personal surrender’ (ibid.: 156). Mack’s conceptualisation of agency therefore encompasses the notion that self-realisation via purposeful self-negation and surrender can be the outcome of a religious subject’s intentional action. Similarly, in a study of American Catholic women, Robert Orsi has suggested that ‘self-abnegation and surrender’ are forms of religious action that involve agency (Orsi 1996: 197–207, cited in Mack 2003: 157). Agency can thus be expressed in relationships that involve a person’s willed submission of self to others (e.g., to God, to another human being, to a group or a community).

More recent feminist work on religion and gender has built on Mahmood’s theorisation of agency as stemming from piety but moves beyond her framework by demonstrating that women’s religious piety can be coupled with forms of resistance to male domination. Rachel Rinaldo, for example, has introduced the concept of ‘pious critical agency’ as ‘the capacity to engage critically and publically with religious texts’ (Rinaldo 2014: 825). While accepting Mahmood’s notion that pious agency can be expressed in ‘an individual’s attempt to live up to religious norms’, Rinaldo suggest that, additionally, women ‘try to be virtuous religious subjects through a critical approach to religion’ (ibid.: 829; emphasis original). In her study of Muslim women activists in Indonesia, Rinaldo found that critical interpretations of Islam were articulated both within and beyond religious contexts, including through feminist activism in the public sphere. Rinaldo thus develops Mahmood’s analytical framework by suggesting that religious piety can coexist with feminist resistance and subversion, allowing for women’s simultaneous compliance with religious norms and critical articulation of ideas that support gender equality and women’s rights. When Muslim women activists in Indonesia employ critical discourses about Islam to further their own interests, they demonstrate that pious and feminist subjectivities can intersect and overlap. Moreover, Rinaldo (2014) found that Muslim women activists draw upon both religious and secular sources in their advocacy for women’s rights.

Similar analyses that couple religious piety with forms of resistance have been forwarded by other feminist scholars. Based on extensive research among young Muslim women in Norway, Christine Jacobsen (2011) argues that the women in her study draw simultaneously on Islamic discourses of piety and on a liberal ethic of personal authenticity and autonomy. Agency as articulated through religious piety can thus go hand in hand with agency as resistance to and subversion of religious doctrine (ibid.: 78). Similarly, Jeanette Jouili (2015: 95) discusses how religiously pious, European-born young Muslim women forward notions of dignity and empowerment that are ‘partially impacted by’, but also different from and competing with, ‘the language of individual rights and autonomy’. A further study that demonstrates resistance coupled with religious piety is that of Tanya Zion-Waldoks (2015), who applies the term ‘devoted resistance’ (which originated with Hartman & Buckholtz 2014) to describe Modern-Orthodox Agunah activist women in Israel who are religiously devout (in that they are ‘pursuing religious aims’) and who also mobilise politically to improve women’s rights (Zion-Waldoks 2015: 77). Together, these examples illustrate multiple, complex and intertwined forms of resistance and complicity that challenge dichotomous, oppositional understandings of liberation vs subordination and the secular vs the religious.

**Religious women's agency as conduct: 'doing' religion**

A third agency-focused approach to the relationship between religion and gender is suggested by Orvit Avishai (2008: 413) in her study of variations in the observance of *niddah* laws ('laws of menstrual purity that regulate marital sexuality') among Orthodox Jewish Israeli women. Avishai argues that theoretical conceptualisations of ‘subversion, complicity and strategic compliance’ are insufficient in the analysis of the Orthodox Jewish Israeli women’s practices (ibid.:
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Instead, she proposes that agency is located in acts of religious observance or religious conduct (in the ‘doing’ of religion). Drawing on symbolic interactionism (West & Zimmerman 1987) and performance theory (Butler 1990), Avishai defines doing religion (i.e., agency) as ‘a mode of conduct and being, a performance of identity’ (ibid.: 413). At the centre of her analysis is the formation of religious subjectivities and their performance of religion (via observance) within an overall framework of ‘constructed religiosity’ (ibid.: 428). Orthodox Jewish Israeli women’s agency is thus located in the observance (or doing) of the niddah ‘that entails the construction and performance of an orthodox identity’ (ibid.: 428). From this predominantly behavioural perspective on religion and agency, Avishai asserts that religion ‘is a status that is learned, negotiated, and achieved by adhering to or performing prescribed practices’ (ibid.). Moreover, she argues, ‘observance is not necessarily strategic, oppressive, empowering, or an ethical exercise of docility’ (ibid.: 428), thus distinguishing her approach from that of other scholars. Despite this insistence, however, the ‘doing religion’ approach is largely a theory of conformity and conventionality, as Deutsch (2007) has previously argued in relation to West and Zimmerman’s (1987) ‘doing gender’ approach. Although the ‘construction’ of a religious identity signals that change is possible, ‘doing religion’ foregrounds compliance rather than resistance and change (Deutsch 2007). It therefore becomes difficult to envisage how women would be able to effectively challenge and change patterns of male domination. Another weakness of the social interactionist perspective is that it pays insufficient attention to structural inequalities resulting from unequal access to resource, power and authority.

In a further development of Avishai’s (2008) ‘doing religion’ approach that also builds on West and Zimmerman’s (2009) theoretical work on ‘redoing gender’, Darwin (2018: 2) suggests a refocusing of scholarship from ‘doing gendered religion’ via ‘gender-normative religious practices’ to that of ‘redoing gendered religion’ via ‘gender-transgressive religious practices’. Darwin is thus shifting the lens from behaviour that constitutes normative compliance with male domination to behaviour that challenges male power. Darwin’s empirical example of the latter is Jewish women who wear the yarmulke or kippot—‘skullcaps that are traditionally worn by Jewish men’ (ibid.: 2). Although these women are unable to ‘undo’ the Jewish orthodox gendering of religion due to massive resistance from Orthodox Jewish communities, Darwin argues that their challenging of patriarchal traditions amount to an effort to ‘redoing gendered Judaism’ (ibid.: 18). In Darwin’s analysis, agency is therefore tied to behavioural resistance rather than to behavioural compliance. Are we then back to analysing women’s agency as either compliance or resistance, or as both?

In my own research on Muslim women’s agency within male-dominated mosques in Norway and the United Kingdom, I apply Darwin’s (2018) concepts of gender-normative versus gender-transgressive practices and demonstrate the complexity of women’s simultaneous compliance with, and resistance to, hegemonic norms via reflexive engagements with sources of religious knowledge and with male power and authority in the mosque (Nyhagen 2019). For example, by inhabiting their own gendered space and praying in the mosque, the women in my study were claiming religious legitimacy for their own mosque participation (ibid.: 7). Although their spaces were inferior to those of men, the women did not contest the allocation of gendered spaces and thereby accommodated ‘gender-normative religious practices’ (Darwin 2018). In a mosque in Norway, however, some women found that the ‘women’s room’ was too noisy, and in order to better experience the religious service, they began entering the men’s prayer room, taking seats in the back row. Although this practical contestation of strict gender segregation during prayer was accommodated by the mosque’s male leadership, it demonstrates women’s engagement in what Darwin (2018) labels ‘gender-transgressive religious practices’.
The previous discussion of three different strands of agency-focused approaches to religion and gender (the paradox approach, the piety and compliance perspective, and ‘doing religion’) suggests that their main strength lies in the interrogation of religious meaning and agency through a bottom-up foregrounding of religious women’s own articulations. Their attention to the emergence of religious subjectivities, identities and behaviour, and the ways in which these interact with normative religious discourses, provides a corrective to structural-deterministic approaches that favour a top-down analysis of religious traditions and institutions. Yet, it can be argued that agency-focused approaches pay insufficient attention to relations between social and cultural structures (Porpora 2015: 173), including power, material resources and hegemonic norms. Scholars of religion and gender must avoid idealising agency to the extent that we lose sight of the constraining effects of social relations and forms of power that are embedded in patriarchal organisations and ‘norm circles’ (Elder Vass 2010). On the other hand, interactions between social relations, rules and norms can also motivate or enable agency (Porpora 2015: 119).

Conclusion: critical realism, intersectionality and lived religion

The study of religion and gender has hitherto largely focused on the identification of forms of agency (whether as loud protest or quiet piety) among religious women in gender-conservative contexts. This is probably because of an assumption that women in such contexts face very difficult challenges in exercising agency. An unintended consequence is that we know very little about whether women in gender-conservative religions are exercising specific forms of agency that women in other contexts do not. In other words, we know little about whether women in gender-conservative and gender-progressive contexts face similar or different challenges when it comes to exercising agency, and whether the forms of agency they exercise are similar or different. This is important, because gender inequalities remain deeply entrenched in religious as well as in other contexts of social life (e.g., education; paid employment), despite decades of feminist activism. Furthermore, it matters that the deployment of binaries such as oppression vs liberation, religious vs secular and private vs public are challenged, because their usage may lead to oppression, discrimination and ‘Othering’ of religious women. If we are serious about a dismantling of these binaries, we need to extend our analysis of women’s agency from conservative to progressive religious contexts and beyond—including secular contexts.

This chapter has problematised studies of religion and gender that privilege either a structural or an agentic approach and that reproduce binaries between oppression and liberation. Instead, we need conceptions of structure that do not eliminate agency and conceptions of agency that do not eliminate structure. Moving in this direction, scholars of religion and gender can draw on sociological theories that are applicable beyond analyses of religious, gendered subjects and the structural and cultural contexts in which they are located. Critical realism, which argues that ‘[h]uman action may be affected by social causes without being fully determined by them’ (Elder Vass 2010: 87, emphasis in original), is a promising way forward. A critical realist perspective acknowledges the ‘causal powers emerging from structural categories and positions’ whilst also emphasising that ‘agency interacts with, reproduces, and changes these structures’ (Dy, Martin & Marlow 2014: 455).

Scholarly analyses of ‘religious women’ tend to focus specifically on the relationship between religion and gender. This carries a risk of overestimating the causal power of religion in creating patterns of gender inequality (Narayan 1997: 52) and its importance in women’s everyday lives (Sehlikoglu 2018: 83). If intersections with other identities and structural forms of inequalities such as race and class (Crenshaw 1991) are left unarticulated and unexamined in studies of religion and gender, we may not be able to capture the complexities of women’s experiences, challenges and struggles (Appelros 2005; Weber 2015). Analyses of structure and agency in
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studies on religion and gender must therefore also critically engage with multiple forms of identities and inequalities relating to race, ethnicity, class and sexuality, and interactions between them (Crenshaw 1991; see also Bilge 2010). Gendered, racialised, classed and sexual hierarchies of privilege and domination are expressed in religious organisations and also in lived religious experiences. A critical realist approach takes seriously the formation of abstract categories such as ‘gender’, ‘race’ and ‘religion’ as well as their ‘real material and social effects’ (Dy, Martin & Marlow 2014: 458). Moreover, a critical realist approach can be used to analyse how categories intersect in the emergence of structural conditions and the production of political-subjective identities (ibid.; see also Clegg 2016; Elder Vass 2010).

Conversely, intersectionality theory has hitherto largely been silent on religion. This may be due to the relatively marginal position of the study of religion and gender within the social sciences more broadly or, as Singh (2015: 658) suggests, the duality and instability of religion as both ‘an oppressed form of difference’ and as ‘an oppressive force’. Hitherto, only a few scholars have approached the study of religion and gender from the perspective of intersectionality theory (e.g., Singh 2015; Weber 2015; Smiet 2015; Appelros 2005; Collins 1991).

A critical realist approach also resonates with feminist perspectives that centre on women’s lived experience (Dy, Martin & Marlow 2014: 460) and with the sociology of religion perspective on religion as lived (e.g., McGuire 2008). These fields of scholarship are disapproving of studies that make inferences from institutional levels to that of people’s everyday lives. Within the sociology of religion, the ‘lived religion’ approach emphasises that individuals do not simply ‘copy’ religion as it has been prescribed and transmitted to them by religious traditions and authorities (McGuire 2008; see also Ammerman 2007). Instead, lived religion scholars ‘focus on religion as practiced and experienced by ordinary people in the contexts of their everyday lives’ (McGuire 2008: 96). Notably, ‘lived religion’ is not synonymous with ‘private’ religion, as lived religion ‘is often practiced in public or in collective acts of understandings’ (Neitz 2011: 54). It thus encompasses both private and public realms and has the potential to cross and bridge boundaries between what is perceived as ‘private’ and ‘public’, or even to dissolve them (Orsi 2003: 173). The lived religion framework is particularly useful in capturing religious women’s agency due to its foregrounding of the purposeful and reflexive role that people have in shaping, negotiating, maintaining and changing their own religious convictions and practices. It also addresses structural relations, modes of power and contextual factors that may constrain, motivate or enable different forms of agency. Studies of lived religion therefore encompasses individuals’ engagement with institutionalised forms of religion, as well as the constitutive (normative, discursive and material) forms of power that institutionalised religion may have in any given context. As such, it addresses relations between structure and agency whilst also challenging the binary between oppression and liberation.

Notes

1 I wish to thank Dave Elder-Vass, Caroline Starkey and Emma Tomalin for constructive comments on an earlier version of this chapter. The chapter builds in parts on Nyhagen and Halsaa (2016: 48–54).
2 This chapter approaches ‘gender’ and religion via research on women and religion. Social scientific research on men, masculinities and religion is still scarce even though most religious organisations are bastions of male power and domination.
3 For a critical approach to the concept of ‘culture’, see Phillips (2007).
4 See, however, Jeffreys’ book Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West, which offers a structural-deterministic analysis of beauty practices such as make-up, fashion, breast implants and genital waxing (Jeffreys 2015).
5 For similar arguments from other secular feminists, see Nyhagen (2017).
References


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