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Women and Religious Politics in the Contemporary World

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Gender

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The important role of women in the recent global rise of religious politics is evident. Some are baffled as to why women are attracted to movements that are often conservative and non-egalitarian in their gender attitudes. Scholars, however, often give only scant attention to the important role of women and of gender attitudes in religio-political movements – questions concerning veiling or abortion are discussed, but in analysing these movements, attention shifts from women to more male-related questions of political control, terrorism, and the like. The first 1999 issue of the *Journal of Women's History* is a special issue on women in religious politics worldwide. The articles analyse both comparative questions and culture-specific ones.¹

In scholarship on women that has flourished in recent decades, comparisons have usually been either global (e.g. all women have shared in certain kinds of subordination) or within contiguous or culturally similar societies (e.g. women from all over Africa, Europe, or the Middle East). New insights may be gained by comparing women from different cultures. Religious politics is one of several modern global political trends in which women have come to the fore. Nationalism has had a particular resonance and colouring among women, and socialism is often seen as solving their problems, including inequality, through the radical reorganization of society. Fascism, Nazism, and other secular right-wing politics have had many active female devotees. And women's movements have become global in recent decades. The authors in the special issue deal with women in 20th-century religious politics in the Muslim world, from Bangladesh to the Arab world, and in the United States, Latin America, and South Asia.

Why women enter religious politics

The socio-economic conditions that created possibilities for women to enter politics are similar in many parts of the world. These include the rise of capitalism and industrialization, which first separated the domestic and work spheres, but also provided new opportunities for women to work outside the home. Trends affecting women in most societies included: the need for an educated work force, disciplined for regular tasks and hours, which helped create public education; urbanization, which spread new needs and social patterns; and the effect of war which brings women into the labour force. All of these affected women both positively and negatively. Although some women acted, mostly indirectly, in politics in the pre-capitalist past, women's organized political participation is overwhelmingly a phenomenon of modern capitalist societies.

Women's political views and participation have always been diverse, but women have often been associated with movements for reform and for the betterment of their position. In the US, women were involved in abolitionism, welfare programmes, temperance and women-centred causes like female suffrage. A similar pattern is found in the Global South, where women have been involved with welfare, women's education, and legal reforms to benefit their cause. The forces and ideas of modernization, while having important negatives for women, have been mostly favourable to efforts for greater equality and activity in the public sphere: capitalist societies promote the opening of labour and consumer markets to wider groups and to making fewer status differentiations than in the past. Everywhere, modern trends had to contend with centuries-old systems, based originally on the consequences of frequent childbearing,

which placed men in superior positions and claimed women's mental capacity was inferior. Such gender inequality was reinforced by nearly all religions, which retained their appeal to many people even after many of the conditions that gave rise to their views on gender had passed. Recent trends, while giving more women a chance at education and work outside the home, have had more problematic consequences for many women, often encouraging divorce, migration patterns that separate men from women; sweated labour, prostitution, and other trends disrupting the previous functioning of the family, whose role is less central than it once was. The undermining of the older family (which is idealized by religious and conservative authors) had both positive and negative results for women, with some experiencing more negatives than positives.

Given these and other problems, it is not surprising that some men and women seek salvation in what are seen as traditional religious values. What is new is the degree to which religion is tied to strong political movements. Although religious nationalism (the identification of a nation with a religion, as found in South Asia and Israel) goes back at least a century, such religious nationalisms, including religious Zionism and Hindu nationalism, have become much stronger in the past two decades. Similarly, movements that are not nationalist but evince a reaction against one's own national government and culture – considering these as immoral and hostile to true religion – including most Islamist movements and the American Christian Right, have been formed or greatly strengthened since the 1970s.

The rise of religious politics in very different cultures has also been furthered by the perceived failures of secular nationalism, whether in the US since the 1970s, in South Asia, or in a variety of Muslim countries. Many have been disillusioned by varieties of secularism, including secular nationalism, and also varieties of socialism since the fall of the Soviet Union. Religious politics and the role of women in it existed before the 1970s, but it became strong worldwide more recently. Religious politics appeal to women for several reasons. In most countries there are more women than men among religious observants, and this 'religiosity' carries over into religious politics, even where activists are predominantly male. Women active in religious politics mainly come from religious backgrounds, and many are glad to use new partial freedoms to express themselves in ways that include elements incorporating their beliefs and which their families and peers find acceptable.

Also, many religio-political movements are seen as providing protection to women. In the Muslim world, some movements insist on women's inheriting and managing property, as Islamic law says they should, and allow for women's education and work.

Although these forms of protection are fewer than those advocated by secular liberals, this may be seen as less significant than the factors that favour women's participation in these movements. Many women find such protection more important than subordination in the ideologies of their religio-political movements. Protestant movements in Latin America, the US, and elsewhere often ask that men be faithful to their wives and families. This, to many women, is more important than the abstract question of subordination or obedience, which can often be at least partially circumvented. In the Muslim world, 'Islamic dress' is found to protect women against unwanted male advances.

Religious politics also allow women to be activists in their milieu, and to meet and act together. Mutually supportive communities are often created, while more religious or 'traditional' women might not feel comfortable in secular or feminist groupings. Women participate in general social and ideological trends of their times and the current trend in many parts of the world includes a rise in religious politics.

Class is also expressed in religious politics, including the religious politics of women. In many societies the educated elite has been attracted to secular ideas, while various popular class and more traditionally educated or less educated groups have recently tended towards religious politics. On the other hand, in the Muslim world it has often been students of science and technology who have been most sympathetic to these movements – more broadly, however, it has been mainly students from less urban and more religious backgrounds who have been sympathetic. Women as well as men from these groups tend to favour traditional-seeming ideological solutions.

Much religious politics may be seen as backlash to other trends, and such cultural reaction is significant. Everywhere old moralities have been under assault, from films and media, from the increasing market for one gender in labour migration, for sexual services, and so forth. Invoking what are seen as traditional religious moralities and standards is not a surprising reaction to this disruption, nor is the participation of many women in fighting what are seen as trends undermining the family. While the traditional family has been over-idealized in most cultural and religious ideologies, it is also true that current trends have been felt as negative by many women. In many cultures, women have seen in religious values a way to improve male behaviour in the family; this may be seen especially in US and Latin American Protestant movements.

Special features of women in religious politics

Keddie's article in the above-mentioned JWH issue accounts for different approaches to women in two types of New Religious Politics: those trying to control governments,

and those stressing nationalism and territory. The former, which include most Islamist and Christian Right movements, have conservative, scripture-oriented positions on women and the family. The latter, including South Asian movements and territorial Israeli groups like Gush Emunim, are not always conservative with regard to women, and insofar as their main enemies are Muslim, may even contrast their progressivism on women to Muslim views. The article also discusses differences between cultural relativists, who hesitate to criticize other cultures, and universalists, who defend women's rights as global.

Besides common features, the role of women in contemporary religious politics has many special culture-specific aspects that are discussed in the special issue. The authors agree that gender relations are never fixed and can be renegotiated in the context of women's participation and activism, including activism in 'fundamentalist' movements. Women can renegotiate the traditional patriarchal bargain to their advantage and seek empowerment and expanded opportunities within the more socially accepted sphere of religious activism that affirms their domestic roles. While historical and contemporary religio-political movements can offer women avenues of independence and initiative and in some cases help bring about progressive social reform (as with 'Islamic feminists' in Iran), they usually involve major concessions and accommodations to a larger male-dominant, patriarchal order. Re-imagining other alternatives for women's agency and activism in society, and more particularly in politics, is perhaps the next step. ♦

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For further details, see the introduction to the issue, 'Women and Twentieth Century Religious Politics', The Journal of Women's History, 10 (Winter, 1999), ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Jasamin Rostam-Kolay.

Notes

1. The word 'fundamentalism' is rarely used – mainly because it is now considered pejorative and is often misleading.