

---

This item was submitted to [Loughborough's Research Repository](#) by the author.  
Items in Figshare are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated.

## **The lived religion approach in the sociology of religion and its implications for secular feminist analyses of religion**

PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768617727482>

PUBLISHER

© The Authors. Published by Sage

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

This work is made available according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence. Full details of this licence are available at: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

LICENCE

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

REPOSITORY RECORD

Nyhagen, Line. 2019. "The Lived Religion Approach in the Sociology of Religion and Its Implications for Secular Feminist Analyses of Religion". figshare. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/25366>.

# **The Lived Religion Approach in the Sociology of Religion and its Implications for Secular Feminist Analyses of Religion**

Dr Line Nyhagen

Loughborough University

United Kingdom

[L.Nyhagen@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:L.Nyhagen@lboro.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

The sociological ‘lived religion’ approach focuses on the experiences of religious individuals in everyday life, whilst also considering the institutional aspects of religion that they may engage with. It emphasizes that individuals do not simply ‘copy’ institutional religious prescriptions; instead, it posits that people have an active and reflexive role in shaping, negotiating and changing their own beliefs and practices. This article examines the implications of the ‘lived religion’ approach for secular feminist analyses of religion in Western contexts. It starts out by proposing three different secular feminist positions on religion: a hard, a mixed hard and soft, and a soft position. The article then examines the views on women and religion forwarded by some high-profile feminist organisations in Europe, and how these relate to the three proposed secular feminist positions on religion. Finally, the article assesses which secular feminist position is most compatible with a ‘lived religion’ approach.

# **The Lived Religion Approach in the Sociology of Religion and its Implications for Secular Feminist Analyses of Religion**

## **Introduction**

In recent years, the ‘lived religion’ approach has gained momentum within the sociology of religion. This approach developed as a critique of the limitations posed by analyses of religion which foreground institutions and organisations rather than ‘the actual experience of religious persons’ in everyday contexts (McGuire, 2008: 12; see also Hall, 1997; Orsi, 2003; Ammerman, 2007; Neitz, 2011). ‘Lived religion’ opens up a discussion of what religion is: is it a fixed, coherent set of prescriptions about belief and behaviour that are clearly formulated by religious institutions and ‘copied’ by individuals, or do people have an active and reflexive role in shaping, negotiating and changing their own religious convictions and practices? Importantly, a ‘lived religion’ approach does not preclude the analysis of institutional forms of religion and individuals’ engagement with them. As McGuire argues (2008: 98), individuals’ lived religious practice may be ‘closely linked with the teachings and practices of an official religion’. However, the power and meaning of institutional forms of religion in individuals’ lives must be studied empirically and not be taken as given. Furthermore, the lived religion approach does not assume that religion is simply a private or individual phenomenon in modern society. As Neitz states (2011: 54), ‘It [lived religion] is often practiced in public or in collective acts and understandings’. An empirical claim that religion only exists in private or individual forms would deny the power and influence of institutional forms of religion. Moreover, a normative claim that religion ought to be expressed only in the private domain is problematic as it overlooks that religion is at its heart ‘communicative and

public' (Woodhead, 2013: 96). Seemingly 'private' forms of individual prayer express social engagement, as argued by Orsi (2003: 173), and caring for others is at the centre of the lives of many religious people (Nyhagen and Halsaa, 2016). Religion can thus never simply be private; it is always linked to the social contexts in which individuals live and act, and gives adherents a sense 'of moral direction, of conviction, of belonging' that is ultimately social (Woodhead, 2013: 96). The 'lived religion' approach is thus embedded in larger normative debates about the role of religion in the public and private spheres.

What are the implications of the lived religion approach for a feminist analysis of religion? Feminists who work to reform religious traditions from within reject the idea that religions are by necessity patriarchal, and in many religious contexts women have made significant advances towards gender equality despite remaining obstacles and challenges (Gross, 1996). Many feminist studies of religion highlight religion's dual potential to empower and oppress women (e.g. Fournier, 2014; Scott, 2009; Braidotti, 2008; Fessenden, 2008; Sands, 2008; Braude, 2004; see also Burke, 2012 for a useful overview). Some scholars show that women's agency and empowerment is also visible within conservative religious contexts (e.g. Mahmood, 2005; Avishai, 2008; Zion-Waldoks, 2015), thus suggesting that agency can be expressed in submission and religious piety as well as in overt oppositional practices that contest men's power and gender inequalities. In this article, however, the main focus is on implications of the sociological 'lived religion' approach for *secular* feminist analyses of religion in Western contexts. Inspired by a call for sociology to be normatively engaged in people's everyday worlds (Sayer, 2000), this article is primarily a normative intervention in the Western debate about women, religion and secularism. As such, it is a contribution to a feminist sociology of religion that favours an open

rather than a pre-determined view of what 'religion' is and means to women. It is also a call for a feminist sociology of religion that is empirically grounded in women's lives and that adopts an intersectional perspective (Appelros, 2005; Weber, 2015) on religious women's identities and the barriers and opportunities they experience for belonging and participation.

The article starts out by proposing three different Western secular feminist positions on religion; a hard, a mixed hard and soft, and a soft position, before reviewing relevant literature on feminism, secularism and religion and identifying a research gap pertaining to the study of secular women's organisations and religion. The article moves on to examine empirical examples of claims making on women and religion by select high-profile secular feminist women's organisations in Europe; two secular feminist organisations based in London in the United Kingdom, *Women Against Fundamentalism* and *Southall Black Sisters*, which demonstrate mixed and hard secular feminist positions, and the international and Brussels-based secular feminist organisation the *European Women's Lobby*, which also represents a mixed position. The article also refers to a soft secular feminist intervention in the form of a recent policy initiative (the '*Coventry Statement, 2015*') by a collection of gender and religion scholars who met at Coventry University in the UK.<sup>i</sup> The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of a lived religion approach to the three identified secular feminist positions on religion. Ultimately, the article assesses which secular feminist position is most compatible with a 'lived religion' approach that foregrounds the complexity of the actual lives and experiences of religious women.

### **Alternative secular feminisms and religion**

James Beckford (2003: 33) usefully reminds us that what counts as religious and as secular varies in different contexts and that the concepts themselves are ‘highly contestable social construction[s]’. The idea that both religions and secularisms are multiple and must be studied in particular contexts is also the premise of Jacobsen and Pellegrini’s (2008) critique of the binary between religion and secularism, where religion is viewed as backward, irrational, emotional and biased, while secularism is associated with rationality, reason, impartiality and a liberated mind. The binary is also doubly gendered: women are linked with religion and men with secularism, and religious women represent subordination and non-feminism while secular women embody liberation and feminism (see, e.g., Cady and Fessenden, 2013; Reilly and Scriver, 2013). Only secularism can lead to a ‘gender paradise’ (Thistlethwaite, 2014: 193) if we accept the binary. Moving beyond the binary enables us to see that neither religion nor secularism guarantees gender equality (Scott, 2009).

Although the religion-secularism binary is fraught with problems, it is heuristically useful to distinguish between different forms of secularism. In relation to debates about women’s rights, religion and secularism in the UK, Aune (2015) has observed a polarisation between two positions, that of ‘feminist secularism’ (rejecting religion) and that of ‘religious inclusion’ (accommodating religion). Aune rightly notes that not all secularisms are opposed to religion (2015: 170-71), yet employs a categorical opposition between ‘feminist secularism’ and ‘religious inclusion’. A more fluid approach can take inspiration from Kosmin’s (2007) notion of a continuum from hard to soft versions of secularism. Secular feminism can reject or be inclusive of religion in different ways, and it is useful to distinguish between a ‘hard’ secular feminist position that is hostile to all forms of religion in both the public and the private spheres, a mixed ‘hard and soft’ position that is hostile towards religion in the

public sphere but accepts religion in the private sphere, and a 'soft' position which accommodates religion in both the public and private spheres.

A hard secular feminist stance views religion as a patriarchal system of institutionally determined beliefs and practices that are enforced by powerful religious authorities and 'copied' by adherents who suffer from 'false consciousness'. It follows that a hard secular feminist stance denies religion any role in both the public and private spheres. A proponent of this stance is the secular feminist academic Jeffreys (2012), who rejects religion as inevitably patriarchal and proposes a universal and permanent conflict between 'women's rights' and 'religious rights'. In Jeffrey's words, 'the subordination of women is the bedrock of all religions' and 'all religions are dangerous to women's rights' (2012: 32 and 4). Insisting on 'disrespect' for religion (2012: 5), Jeffreys foregrounds an institutional approach where Christianity, Judaism and Islam are viewed as internally coherent, unitary and powerful systems that exercise full power over their believers. For Jeffreys (2012: 16), feminism and gender equality are equated with secularism. There is little, if any, room for empowerment within religious contexts as religious women are viewed as forced into patriarchal submission. They are thus seen as in need of liberation, and Jeffreys calls upon (secular) governments to interfere with religion to secure women's rights.

The mixed 'hard and soft' secular feminist approach also views secularism as necessary for gender equality and rejects the role of religion in the public sphere. In contrast with the hard secular feminist position, it accepts that religious faith provides 'authentic' meaning in the lives of individuals. Because religion is strictly a private issue, religious stakeholders cannot claim a legitimate voice in the public sphere. In agreement with the hard secular feminist approach, the mixed view does not recognise the 'communicative and public' (Woodhead, 2013: 96) aspects of religion and refuses

to endorse religious actors' participation in democratic deliberation or in the delivery of state-funded services (see the 'early' Casanova, 1994, for similar arguments). Due to their belonging in the private sphere, it follows that religious organisations can be exempt from public laws on gender equality and free to operate internally in ways that may discriminate against women. In this view, whether women comply with, resist or contest patriarchal forms of religion can be a matter of debate, but governments are not tasked with interfering in gender unequal practices in religious domains. This contrasts with the hard secular feminist view that the state must intervene to secure gender equality within religious organisations.

The soft secular feminist position accommodates the role of religion in both the public and private spheres. It recognizes the value and meaning of religion in the lives of individuals and groups and acknowledges that individuals have an active role in choosing, shaping and changing their own religious beliefs and practices. It also accepts the intrinsically social and communicative aspects of religion, and sees the futility and unfairness in requiring religious individuals to 'leave their faith behind' when partaking in public contexts. The soft secular feminist stance accommodates what the religious feminist scholar Nussbaum (1999: 197) terms 'the intrinsic value of religious capabilities: the ability to search for the good in a religious way' and affords legitimacy and participatory parity (Fraser, 2007) to both secular and religious stakeholders in democratic deliberation (see, e.g., 'the later' Casanova, 2009, for similar arguments). It supports dialogic negotiations of issues pertaining to religious freedom and gender equality, as advocated by feminist scholars such as Phillips (2009) and Nussbaum (1999).

Importantly, a soft secular feminist stance is not blind to institutional forms of religion that promote gender inequality. Instead, it insists that the power of



institutional religion, including its relations with gender, is not pre-determined and must be studied empirically in specific contexts. In this regard, Phillips writes that, while individuals should be free to adhere to their religious practices and beliefs, ‘individuals should not be forced by religious authorities to accept discriminatory practices’ (2009: 45). State intervention in religious affairs might be called for to protect individuals from discrimination and harm. But when values and rights collide, it is not a given that one set of rights will overrule other another; ‘there is no simple principle, and judgments must be made in a contextual way’ (Phillips, 2009: 46). Before turning to an analysis of different secular feminist stances taken by select women’s organisations in the UK and Europe, the next section discusses relevant scholarly contributions.

### **Feminism, secularism and religion**

It is well known that religious women were prominent in late nineteenth and early twentieth century campaigns for women’s rights around the world (e.g., McFadden, 1999). Much less is known about late twentieth and early twenty-first century feminist and women’s organisations’ views on religion, and whether they mobilise both secular and religious women. These issues are yet to be comprehensively answered by research. At a general level, Reilly (2011) argues that Anglo-American feminist thinkers have paid scant attention to religion because they view secularization as inevitable in modern society. Similarly, Aune (2015) states that religion has a ‘marginal place’ in academic and public feminist debates. In the same vein, Braidotti (2008) claims that most (Western) feminists have been and are secular, and distinguishes between a ‘mainstream secularist line’ and a marginal ‘non-secularist’ line. These scholars’ views are supported by Žarkov (2015: 5), who argues

that 'mainstream Western feminism has to a large extent adopted secularism'. There is a danger, however, in that broad generalisations about recent and contemporary feminisms as largely secular overlook the role of religious faith in women's socio-political activism in different contexts around the world, be they overtly feminist or not (Žarkov, 2015; Smiet, 2015; Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska, 2013). Religious women mobilize in struggles for women's rights and gender equality both within and outside religious contexts.

There is far more research on how religious women engage with gender equality and women's rights *within their own religious contexts* than in alternative spaces (e.g., in feminist and women's movements). However, as noted by Aune and Nyhagen (2016), studies of religious women's political activism emerging since the 1990s demonstrate how religion can both hinder and support women's rights outside of religious contexts. Recent research on religious women's activism focuses in particular on Muslim women in various settings (e.g. Rinaldo, 2014; Aksoy, 2015). Some studies show that contemporary religious and secular women are working together in alliance to strengthen claims about women's rights and gender equality, such as in Turkey, where organized Islamist women collaborated with secular feminist women's groups against the headscarf ban (Aksoy, 2015). Nevertheless, the dearth of studies of intersections between religion (including Christianity and other faiths) and feminist and women's movement activism in Western contexts since the 1960s is striking, as noted also by Braude (2004). The two most obvious explanations for this lacuna are the assumptions that feminism is and should be based on secularism and that religion is antithetical to feminism (Braude, 2004; Sands, 2008; Braidotti, 2008).

There are, however, important exceptions to the broader picture of scholarly neglect. Braude (2004), for example, shows that religious women played important roles in the National Organization of Women, the largest organization of feminist activists in the United States, founded in 1966. Speaking of the United States, Sands (2008: 316) also argues that ‘mainstream feminism has [recently] begun to move in a more accommodationist direction, creating alliances with religious feminists...’. In the British context, a collection of texts by activists in *Women Against Fundamentalism* shows that religious and secular women mobilized together in that organization (Dhaliwal and Yuval-Davis, 2014; also see below).

While further research is needed on religious women’s activism and its links with feminism, there is also a lack of studies of if and how primarily secular feminist organisations engage with religion. In this regard, contributions from three scholars stand out in the European context. Brandt (2014) shows how the Dutch white, secular, middle-class feminist organization *Vrouwen Overleg Komitee* (the Women’s Consultation Committee – VOK) has actively engaged with the issue of women, multiculturalism and religion by mobilizing against the Antwerp headscarf ban and via collaboration with Muslim feminist women; a cooperation which led to the founding of the feminist anti-headscarf ban organization *BOEH!* (Baas Over Eigen Hoofd!, or Boss Over Your Own Head!) (Brandt, 2014: 42). According to Brandt, VOK ‘locates religion not one-sidedly at the side of structural oppression of inequality but regards it as a possible domain of freedom of choice, individual signification and women’s emancipation’ (2014: 42). VOK is thus an example of how a soft secular feminist position allows and nourishes the negotiation of equality and difference in particular contexts. In a further study of feminists crossing religious-secular divides in Belgium, Brandt (2015) discusses how *BOEH!* and a women’s

reading group within the Christian socialist feminist organization *Motief* have provided spaces for dialogue, solidarity and collaboration between religious and secular feminists. Their practices, according to Brandt (2015: 505) ‘deconstruct the religious-secular divide in feminism and the image of religious women as for-ever not emancipated’. As such, they open up for more ‘inclusive European feminisms’ that go beyond ‘normative secularity’ and seek to embrace both secular and religious experiences and claims-making, Brandt argues. Such organisational practices are conducive to a soft secular feminist position that offers recognition, voice and participation to religious and secular women alike. While Brandt (2015: 506; my emphasis) concludes that feminists should avoid imposing ‘normative *white secular models of emancipation* on non-white and/or religious women’, it is important to acknowledge that also some black and ethnic minority secular feminists in Europe promote secular models of democracy in their fight for gender equality and women’s rights.

Examining articles on culture and religion published in the Dutch white feminist magazine *Opzij* in the period 2004-2007, Midden found that writings on Muslim women did not address the issue of feminism, while writings on feminism did not discuss ‘how it could be combined with religion’ (Midden, 2012: 233). As does Brandt (2014, 2015), Midden (2012: 232) calls for a more inclusive feminism that takes seriously the differences in women’s experiences and moves beyond a simplistic ‘framework of subordination versus liberation’. Furthermore, in an analysis of webzine posts published by the until recently white-dominated, feminist editorial collective behind the British on-line magazine *The F Word* (established in 2001), Aune (2015: 180) found that *The F Word* represents four main perspectives on religion: promoting religious feminism; challenging religious oppression; supporting

religious women; and debating religion and feminism. Of these, the ‘challenging religious oppression’ category was the most dominant, with posts in this group most often referring to Christianity. Of the posts that supported religious women, a majority addressed Muslim women. Due to their emphasis on Muslim women’s agency and choice (notably in relation to their clothing), and an explicit stance against Islamophobia, Aune (2015: 181) concludes that the webzine is more aligned with a ‘religious inclusion approach’ than with ‘feminist secularism’. However, as noted above, these two categories fail to capture a third stance, that of a soft version of secular feminism that supports an inclusive view of religion.

The next section examines how select high profile women’s organisations in the UK (Women Against Fundamentalism and Southall Black Sisters) and in Europe (the European Women’s Lobby) have framed the issue of women and religion, with a view to discussing their hard and mixed secular feminist positions. The examples illustrate that secular models of women’s emancipation are being forwarded by organisations led by black and ethnic minority women as well as by white women. The next section also documents a recent soft secular feminist intervention (the ‘*Coventry Statement*’) by European gender and religion scholars, before moving on to discussing the implications of a sociological ‘lived religion’ approach for the identified secular feminist positions on religion.

### **Claims-making on women and religion by secular feminist organisations**

#### *Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF)*

A specific event, the religious *fatwa* issued against Salman Rushdie after the publication of his novel *The Satanic Verses*, spurred the establishment of *Women*

*Against Fundamentalism* in 1989. Although WAF folded in 2012, its work until then was significant (see Dhaliwal and Yuval-Davis, 2014). WAF was dedicated to campaigning against any type of ‘religious fundamentalism’, defining it in broad terms as ‘modern political movements that use religion to gain or consolidate power, whether working within or in opposition to the state’ (Dhaliwal and Yuval-Davis, 2014: 8; see also Connolly and Patel, 2001; Saghal, 1992; Connolly, 1991). As such, WAF positioned itself as a staunch defender of a secular state, arguing against all forms of interference in politics and public affairs by any religious stakeholder. WAF relegated religion strictly to the private sphere, viewing religious observance ‘as a matter of individual choice’ (Dhaliwal and Yuval-Davis, 2014: 9); thus advocating a mixed ‘hard and soft’ secular feminist approach to religion. At the outset, WAF briefly acknowledged that ‘religion can play a progressive, political role’ (WAF, 1996: 1), but it chose to highlight features of religion that were deemed oppressive to women and argued that a feminist politics should be informed by secularism (see Siddiqui, 1991; Dhaliwal and Yuval Davis, 2014). In addition to lobbying for a secular state, WAF aimed to promote women’s rights, ‘oppos[e] institutionalised Christian privilege; and resist [...] ethnic minority parity demands for religious accommodation’ (Dhaliwal and Yuval-Davis, 2014: 9).

Feminists from various backgrounds came together in WAF, including Pragna Patel, Hannana Siddiqui, Gita Sahgal, Shakila Maan, Clara Connolly and Julia Bard. WAF women were also active in organisations such as *Southall Black Sisters*, *Voices for Rushdie*, *Brent Asian Women’s Refuge* and the *Iranian Women’s Organisation in Britain*, with Patel and Siddiqui playing important roles in SBS (see below). WAF collaborated with both UK-based and transnational feminist groups. Among these were *Catholics for Free Choice* and *Women Living Under Muslim Laws*. Patel

explains that WAF was ‘not anti-religion in circumstances where it [religion] aligned itself with secular, feminist and democratic movements’ (Patel, 2014: 61), thus indicating a pragmatic instrumentalist approach which accommodated joint mobilization by secular and religious women if it advanced secular feminist interests.

WAF mobilized white, black and ethnic minority feminist women, some of whom were religious. The initial intent was for secular and religious women to cooperate and mobilize together on the premise that religion was relegated to the private sphere of the individuals involved. However, as personal faith and faith contexts matter to religious women’s public involvement, it became difficult to sustain cooperation based on this premise. Religious WAF activist Ruth Pearson writes that, although WAF was welcoming of ‘women of many religions as well as of none’, some women left the organisation because they were ‘angered by the lack of understanding or support for minority women active in churches in London and elsewhere’ (Pearson, 2014: 110). Pearson notes her concern that, for some, the term ‘secular’ meant both a separation of religion and the state and ‘*the absence of religious beliefs and practices*’ (Pearson, 2014: 110; my italics). Her statement indicates WAF’s move from an initially mixed hard and soft secular feminist position to a hard secular stance. Similarly, Cassandra Balchin, who went on to become the Chair of the *Muslim Women’s Network*, writes about her own identity as a progressive Muslim and how other religious women in WAF viewed her religious identity as unproblematic. But secular women in WAF were, Balchin alleges, ‘definitely uncomfortable with me identifying in any way with any religious identity, because they see religious identity as necessarily being a fundamentalist identity, rather than distinguishing between spirituality and religiosity’ (Balchin, 2014: 220). Balchin’s statement shows that WAF’s initial stance of relegating religious observance to ‘a

matter of individual choice' became problematic for both religious and secular activists within WAF. Patel notes that 'a widely respected Black feminist left WAF, following differences about the role of religion; she felt that religion was a site of empowerment and resistance against racism and slavery for many African and Caribbean people' (Patel, 2014: 61). Patel also writes that some Muslim feminists left WAF as they worried that the organisation's focus on religious fundamentalism would fuel a 'racist backlash' against Muslims (Patel, 2014: 61). In their recent anthology about the history of WAF, Sukhwant Dhaliwal and Nira Yuval-Davis (2014: 19) acknowledge these tensions by stating that 'some WAF members wanted to explore religious frameworks, while others pointed to the dangers of travelling this road within a British context in which secular alternatives could be compromised'.

#### *Southall Black Sisters (SBS)*

*Southall Black Sisters* was established in Southall, London in 1979 to safeguard the rights and interests of women; especially women who experience gender-based violence. From the start, SBS identified as a secular feminist organisation, taking on a hard secular position evident in its policy documents and other writings. For example, in an article for *Feminist Review* in 1991, Siddiqui, who joined SBS in 1987, states that 'all religions are oppressive to women; they regard women as inferior, subject to control of male members of the family' (Siddiqui, 1991: 80). In her 1991 article, Siddiqui is critical of author Rana Kabbani and argues that because Kabbani identifies as a Muslim feminist, 'her version of liberation is compromised by the very religion that she accepts is oppressive' (Siddiqui, 1991: 80). For Siddiqui, the struggle for women's rights and also the fight against racism must be based on a secular platform that denounces the influence of religion.



In a later article, Siddiqui identifies it as a problem that faith-based women's groups and their calls for 'specific services and initiatives for Muslim women' are given political attention by the UK government (Siddiqui, 2008: 49). Siddiqui positions herself against such services, viewing them as 'undermin[ing] the secular, feminist demands of ethnic minority women's groups that recognise common experiences between ethnic minority women across religious divides...' (Siddiqui, 2008: 49). According to Siddiqui, faith-based groups have not offered escape routes to victims of domestic violence, but have argued for mediation and reconciliation, which are said to put women at further risk. She views it as problematic that the state 'continues to give priority to the views and interests of community leaders and/or faith-based organisations, *some of which are led by women*' (2008: 48; my emphasis). Siddiqui favours that the state should only listen to secular ethnic minority women's groups, also in cases where services are used by religious women, as secular women's groups are considered to better represent *all* ethnic minority women's voices. Siddiqui also calls for '[a] united feminist ethnic minority women's movement' that builds alliances 'with white feminists as well as anti-racists and other social equality and human rights movements' (2008: 56), but does not propose that such strategic joint campaigns should include religious women's groups.

A joint submission by WAF and SBS to the UK government's *Commission on Integration and Cohesion* in January 2007 further articulates the views of activists within WAF and SBS on linkages between secularism, religion, feminism and racism. It reiterates that government should refrain from consulting with any faith communities and from using any faith-based organisations to deliver public services (see also Patel, 2011a, 2011b). Religious organisations representing ethnic minorities are highlighted as having mostly 'fundamentalist, conservative and even misogynist

and homophobic agendas' (WAF and SBS, 2007: 25). Religious women's organisations are also viewed with scepticism. The establishment of the *Muslim Women's Network* set up by the Minister of Women in 2002 and supported by the now disbanded *Women's National Commission* is viewed as a negative development which 'gave voice to only Muslim women through a series of closed focus group discussions' (WAF and SBS, 2007: 35). The argument from WAF and SBS is that only 'progressive secular anti-racist and feminist groups' should be consulted about and/or given a role in public service delivery that targets ethnic minority women, regardless of whether the service users are religious or not (WAF and SBS, 2007: 26). The joint submission suggests that both the battle against religious fundamentalism and the fight against racism should be based on a secular political platform (WAF and SBS, 2007: 1).

#### *The European Women's Lobby (EWL)*

The *European Women's Lobby*, a non-governmental feminist umbrella organization founded in 1990 and with a membership of more than two thousand women's organisations from European countries, seeks to promote gender equality and women's rights at the level of the European Union. In 2006 the EWL issued its only statement so far on women and religion, entitled the 'Religion and Women's Human Rights Position Paper of the European Women's Lobby' (hereinafter, the EWL Paper), due to '*concerns expressed by EWL members about the perceived stronger influence on governments of religious argumentation with respect to women's role and gender equality*' [original in italics; EWL, 2006: 1]. The EWL states that it seeks to protect women's 'equal rights to economic independence, including in marriage, divorce and inheritance' and women's right to bodily

autonomy (EWL, 2006: 1). Similarly to the declared position of WAF, the EWL considers religion a private matter. It also recognizes that religions may have a progressive influence ‘when tolerance and equality are part of the teaching’ (EWL, 2006: 2), thus partly signalling a soft secular feminist stance. However, taking a strong rights-based approach to gender equality, the EWL Paper also forwards a hard feminist secular position by imparting a negative view of religion as harmful to women, citing religion’s control of a multitude of aspects of women’s lives: dress codes; their ability to move in the public sphere; their access to education, work and religious positions of authority; their ability to marry and have children by choice; divorce rights; and sexuality. The EWL also frames religions as a threat to women if they are accepting of ‘patriarchal cultures which hold up the role of wife, mother and housewife as the ideal’ (EWL, 2006: 1). Women’s economic independence via labour market participation is presented as the best life model for all women.

Although the EWL declares religious freedom to be ‘an essential human right’, it also explicitly states that this freedom has to yield to the principle of gender equality and women’s rights, *regardless of women’s consent: ‘Freedom of religion cannot be accepted as a pretext to justify violations of women’s rights, be they open, subtle, legal or illegal, practiced with or without the nominal consent of the victims - women’* (EWL, 2006: 3; original in italics). Thus, whether practices are forced upon women or willingly chosen by them, whether they are accepted, embraced or resisted, women are *prima facie* regarded as victims.

The EWL Paper is explicitly linked to and based upon the *Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Resolution 1464* (2005) entitled ‘Women and religion in Europe’ (C of E, 2005a; hereinafter Resolution 1464) which is attached to the EWLs Paper. Resolution 1464 also acknowledges that religion plays an important role in the

lives of women in Europe, but declares that '[t]his influence is seldom benign; women's rights are often curtailed or violated in the name of religion' (C of E, 2005a: 1). As does the EWL Paper, Resolution 1464 accuses religion of upholding 'the role of wife, mother and housewife as the ideal' – practices that allegedly 'can be just as effective in achieving the subjection of women' as can very serious forms of violence (e.g. honour crimes, forced marriages and female genital mutilation) that are also assumed to be rooted in religion (C of E, 2005a: 1)<sup>ii</sup>.

### *The Coventry Statement*

In July 2015, twenty-five scholars with expertise on religion and gender issued the 'Coventry Statement on the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Resolution 1464 'Women and Religion in Europe''. They noted a concern with Resolution 1464 (C of E, 2005a) and its 'many unfounded assertions that encourage an intolerant understanding of secularism and perpetuate retrogressive perceptions of women only as victims of religion,' as well as with its discussion of religion 'as a negative and a threat' and as a bad influence on women in Europe (Coventry Statement, 2015: 1). The Coventry Statement, which can be read as a soft secular feminist intervention, argued that such a framing of women's relationships to religion 'is at odds with much sociological research, which documents the diversity and complexity of women's lived experiences of religion in different contexts and in different religious and spiritual practices' (2015: 1). The signatories also noted that religious women themselves were not recognized 'as subjects and agents in their own lives' (2015: 2). The Coventry Statement further noted that 'Resolution 1464 incorrectly and irresponsibly encourages the misperception that "honour crimes", "forced marriages" and "female genital mutilation" are rooted in religion' rather than

in gender inequality, and that the Report accompanying the Resolution (C of E, 2005 b) furthered a simplistic view of Muslim women's headscarves as a sign of submission (Coventry Statement, 2015: 2). Despite the (limited) evidence<sup>iii</sup> of a more nuanced discourse on the relationship between women and religion in subsequent resolutions and recommendations by the Council of Europe, the experts gathered in Coventry also expressed concern 'that an underlying bias persists, exemplified in Resolution 1464, which construes religion in negative terms and pre-emptively denies women's agency in religion' (Coventry Statement, 2015: 3). Finally, the scholars urged the Council of Europe to seek 'a positive balance between the rights of women to freedom of religion and expression *and* to equality on gender and other grounds, wherein the voices of diverse women and context-specific, evidence-based research are paramount' (Coventry Statement, 2015: 3).

### **Discussion and conclusion**

This section discusses the implications of a sociological 'lived religion' approach for the three identified types of Western feminist secular stances on religion and their representations via the examples of WAF, EWL, SBS and the Coventry Statement. It is my contention that only a soft secular feminist position is compatible with the 'lived religion' perspective.

WAF initially embraced a mixed feminist secular position by refusing the influence of religion in the public sphere whilst also acknowledging the importance of religion in women's lives. Over time, however, religious and secular feminists within WAF found it increasingly difficult to work together, and the organisation gradually moved towards a hard secular feminist position. Prominent secular feminists within WAF did not afford legitimacy to the political importance of faith for religious

feminists, and in practice called for religious feminists to leave their faith at their home front doors. In contrast with a lived approach to religion, secular feminists within WAF foregrounded a patriarchal-institutional view of religion as a fixed, coherent set of prescriptions about belief and behaviour, whilst choosing to ignore how religious women actively seek, reflect on, negotiate, mix, adapt and live religion in their everyday lives, as well as how they may contest and refuse, as well as submit to, institutional forms of religious power. Moreover, secular feminists within WAF insisted that religious women should keep their faith private, thus not accepting that religion is fundamentally ‘communicative and public’ at its core (Woodhead, 2013: 96). A similar institutional approach that refuses to engage with ‘lived religion’ can be found within SBS, where feminists have forwarded a hard secular approach that relegates religion to the private sphere. In difference with WAF, however, secular feminists within SBS have uniformly argued that religion itself is universally harmful for women (e.g. Siddiqui, 1991) and that only a hard secular feminism can offer liberation and empowerment for women. The state has thus been called upon to ally itself with secular feminism only, and to reject the voices of religious women.

The EWL, on the other hand, has taken a mixed feminist secular approach. It has recognised the role of religion in individual women’s lives and religion’s potential for a progressive influence on gender equality. As such, the EWL’s stance resonates with a ‘lived religion’ approach. Fundamentally, however, the EWL also relies on a patriarchal-institutional analysis that views ‘religion’ as institutionally fixed and coherent, as exercising power over women, and as detrimental to ‘women’s rights’. A lived religion approach, on the other hand, proposes to examine whether and how religion is used (mostly by men) to subjugate women in specific contexts. Moreover, the EWL (as well as the Council of Europe) has alleged that a wide range of social

practices are associated with religion (*and not also with secularism*), ranging from women choosing unpaid domestic labour over paid labour market jobs, to women being subjected to different physical forms of violence. Similarly to the SBS, the EWL sees secularism as the only guarantor of gender equality, and calls for state intervention in religion also in cases where religious women do not want such interference. The EWL thus signals disrespect for religious women's right to self-determination.

WAF, SBS and EWL share an assumption that women's emancipation is inevitably linked with secularism, while women's oppression is unavoidably connected with religion. In this framework, religious women (and men) who live gender equal lives, and who mobilize for women's rights and gender equality both within and outside religious contexts, are silenced and ignored. In contrast, a lived religion approach would ask empirical questions about how religious and secular women actually live their lives and whether and how they understand, resist, reject or embrace notions such as 'women's rights' and 'gender equality'.

A stable dichotomy between the secular/women's liberation and the religious/women's oppression is also enforced by the refusal of secular feminist activists within WAF and SBS to accept that faith has a legitimate role to play in democratic deliberation and policy making. Using Fraser's terminology, to deny religious women a legitimate voice in public debate is an act of misrecognition, a form of status subordination, and 'a serious violation of justice' (Fraser, 2007: 31). Together with the claim that religious women are victims and not agents, and the insistence that secular women best represent the interests of all women, the denial of a legitimate role for religion in the public sphere produces a democratic deficit. While feminist sociologists who endorse a 'lived religion' approach have empirically

contested the notion that religious women are devoid of agency, a soft secular feminist stance can normatively address this deficit by affording recognition to both religious and secular women. In this regard, Fraser's (2007) concept of 'participatory parity' invokes equal respect, recognition and opportunity for religious and secular women to partake in democratic deliberation. Participatory parity implies that also women for whom gender equality is not a priority must be listened to.

The Coventry Statement was a feminist scholarly reaction against the perceived simplistic and largely negative views of women and religion represented in policy documents issued by the EWL and the Council of Europe. It emphasises religious women's agency and resonates with the lived religion approach which foregrounds individuals' lived religion in everyday contexts. It also affords recognition and legitimacy to the voices of religious women in the public sphere and supports initiatives for dialogue that includes religious women. The Coventry Statement can also be read as an endorsement of a soft secular feminist position that acknowledges a role for religion in both the public and private spheres. It could, however, be argued that it falls short of acknowledging the need for empirical studies of the production, endurance and power of institutional forms of religion. As such, the Coventry Statement emphasizes religious women's agency whilst downplaying the structural religious forces that are central to a hard secular feminist analysis. A soft secular feminist position grounded in a sociological 'lived religion' approach that centres on everyday life religious experiences must also take into account institutional forms of religion and individuals' engagement with them. As suggested above, only a soft secular feminist stance is capable of overcoming the democratic deficit of the hard and mixed secular feminist positions by recognising religious and secular



women's voices, supporting parity of participation (Fraser, 2007) in democratic deliberations about equality and difference in specific contexts.

### **Acknowledgments**

The author wishes to express sincere thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful and constructive comments.

### **References**

- Aksoy, HA (2015) Invigorating democracy in Turkey: The agency of organized Islamist women. *Politics & Gender* 11(1): 146-170.
- Ammerman, NT (ed) (2007). *Everyday Religion. Observing Modern Religious Lives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Appelros, E (2005) Religion och intersektionalitet. *Kvinnovetenskaplig Tidskrift* 25(2-3): 69-80.
- Aune, K (2015) Representations of Religion on the British Feminist Webzine *The F Word*. *Religion & Gender* 5(2): 165-187.
- Aune, K and Nyhagen L (2016) *Religion, Politics and Gender*. In: Haynes J (ed) *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*. New York: Routledge, pp.335-351.
- Avishai, O (2008) "Doing Religion" in a secular world: Women in conservative religions and the question of agency. *Gender & Society* 22(4): 409-433.
- Balchin, C (2014) Making myself through difference. In: Dhaliwal S and Yuval-Davis N (eds) *Women Against Fundamentalism. Stories of Dissent and Solidarity*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, pp.210-223.

- Beckford, JA (2003) *Social Theory and Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Braidotti, R (2008) In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism. *Theory, Culture & Society* 25(6); 1-24.
- Braude, A (2004) A Religious Feminist – Who Can Find Her? Historiographical Challenges from the national Organization for Women. *The Journal of Religion* 84(4): 555-572.
- Burke, KC (2012) Women's Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions: A Review of Four Approaches. *Sociology Compass* 6/2: 122-133.
- Cady, LE and Fessenden T (2013) *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Casanova, J (1994) *Public Religions in the Modern World*. London: University of Chicago Press.
- Casanova, J (2009) Religion, Politics and Gender Equality: Public Religions Revisited. In: Casanova, J and Phillips, A (eds) *A Debate on the Public Role of Religion and its Social and Gender Implications*. United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, Gender and Development Programme Paper no. 5, pp.1-33.
- C of E (2005a) Council of Europe. *Resolution 1464 (2005) Women and Religion in Europe*. Council of Europe: Parliamentary Assembly.
- C of E (2005b) Council of Europe. *Women and Religion in Europe. Doc. 10670. Report*. Council of Europe: Parliamentary Assembly.
- Connolly, C (1991) Washing our linen: One year of women against fundamentalism. *Feminist Review* 37: 68-77.

Connolly, C and Patel P (2001) Women who walk on water: working across 'race' in *Women Against Fundamentalism*. In: Castelli, EA (ed) *Women, Religion and Gender: A Reader*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, pp.447-464.

*Coventry Statement on the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Resolution 1464 "Women and Religion in Europe"* (2015). Available at:

<https://womenreligionandsecularism.wordpress.com/2016/07/15/coventry-statement/>

[accessed 15 March 2017].

Dhaliwal, S and Yuval-Davis N (eds) (2014) *Women Against Fundamentalism: Stories of Dissent and Solidarity*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

EWL (2006) *Religion and Women's Human Rights: Position Paper of the European Women's Lobby*. Adopted 27 May 2006. Available at:

<http://www.womenlobby.org/Religion-and-Women-s-Human-Rights-May-2006>

[accessed 15 March 2017].

Fessenden, T (2008) Disappearances: Race, Religion and the Progress Narrative of U.S. Feminism. In: Jakobsen JR and Pellegrini A (eds) *Secularisms*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp.139-161.

Fournier, P (2014) Secular Portraits and Religious Shadows: An Empirical Study of Religious Women in France. In: Berlinerblau J, Fainberg S and Nou A (eds) *Secularism on the Edge*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.219-235.

Fraser, N (2007) Feminist politics in the age of recognition: A two-dimensional approach to gender justice. *Studies in Social Justice* 1(1): 23-35.

Gross, RM (1996) *Feminism & Religion: An Introduction*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Hall, DA (ed) (1997). *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Jakobsen, JR and Pellegrini A (eds) *Secularisms*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Jeffreys, S (2012) *Man's Dominion. The Rise of Religion and the Eclipse of Women's Rights*. London: Routledge.

Kosmin, BA (2007) Contemporary Secularity and Secularism. In: Kosmin BA and Keysar A (eds) *Secularism & Secularity: Contemporary International Perspectives*. Hartford, CT: Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, pp.1-13.

Llewellyn, D and Trzebiatowska M (2013) Secular and Religious Feminisms: A Future of Disconnection? *Feminist Theology* 21(3): 244-258.

Mahmood, S (2005) *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McFadden, MH (1999) *Golden Cables of Sympathy: The Transatlantic Sources of Nineteenth-Century Feminism*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky.

McGuire, MB (2008) *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Midden, E (2012) Feminism and cultural and religious diversity in Opzij: An analysis of the discourse of a Dutch feminist magazine. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 19(2): 219-235.

Neitz, MJ (2011) Lived religion: Signposts of where we have been and where we can go from here. In: Giordano G and Swatos WH (eds) *Religion, Spirituality and Everyday Practice*. New York: Springer, pp.45-55.

Nussbaum, MC (1999) A plea for difficulty. In: Cohen, J, Howard M and Nussbaum MC (eds) *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women? Susan Moller Okin with Respondents*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp.105-114.

Nyhagen, L and Halsaa B (2016). *Religion, Gender and Citizenship: Women of Faith, Gender Equality and Feminism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Patel, P (2011a) Cohesion, Multi-faithism and the Erosion of Secular Spaces in the UK: Implications for the Human Rights of Minority Women. *IDS Bulletin* 42(1): 26-40.

Orsi, RA (2003) Is the study of lived religion irrelevant to the world we live in? *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42(2): 169-174.

Patel, P (2011b) Women migrants and faith organisations: changing regimes of gender, religion and race in London. *Feminist Review* 97: 142-150.

Patel, P (2014) Flying the nets of racism, patriarchy and religion. In: Dhaliwal S and Yuval-Davis N (eds) *Women Against Fundamentalism. Stories of Dissent and Solidarity*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, pp.52-66.

Pearson, R (2014) Linking the local with the global: the legacy of migrant grandparents. In: Dhaliwal S and Yuval-Davis N (eds) *Women Against Fundamentalism. Stories of Dissent and Solidarity*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, pp.99-112.

Phillips, A (2009) Religion: Ally, Threat or Just Religion? In: Casanova J and Phillips A (eds) *A Debate on the Public Role of Religion and its Social and Gender Implications*. United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, Gender and Development Programme Paper no. 5, pp. 39-58.

Reilly, N (2011) Rethinking the interplay of feminism and secularism in a neo-secular age. *Feminist Review* 97: 5-31.

- Reilly, N and Scriver S (eds) (2013) *Religion, Gender, and the Public Sphere*. New York: Routledge.
- Rinaldo, R (2014) Pious and Critical: Muslim Women Activists and the Question of Agency. *Gender & Society* 28(6): 824-846.
- Saghal, G (1992) Secular Spaces: The Experience of Asian Women Organizing. In: Saghal G and Yuval-Davis N (eds) *Refusing Holy Orders: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain*. London: Virago Press, pp.163-197.
- Sands, K (2008) Feminisms and Secularisms. In: Jakobsen JR and Pellegrini A (eds) *Secularisms*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp.308-329.
- Sayer, A (2000) *Realism and Social Science*. London: Sage.
- Scott, JW (2009) *Sexularism*. Ursula Hirschmann Annual Lecture on Gender and Europe. Florence, Italy: European University Institute and Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies.
- Siddiqui, H (1991) Review essay: Winning freedoms. *Feminist Review* 37: 78-83.
- Siddiqui, H (2008) Making the Grade? Meeting the Challenge of Tackling Violence Against Ethnic Minority Women. In: Moosa, Z (ed) *Seeing Double. Race and gender in ethnic minority women's lives*. London: Fawcett, pp. 39-62.
- Smiet, K (2015) Post/secular truths: Sojourner Truth and the intersections of gender, race and religion. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 22(1): 7-21.
- Thistlethwaite, S (2014) In the Eyes of Patriarchal Religion, All Women Are Secular: Gender in Religion and Secularism. In: Berlinerblau J, Fainberg S and Nou A (eds) *Secularism on the Edge*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.191-197.

Van den Brandt, N (2014) Secular feminisms and attitudes towards religion in the context of a West-European Society – Flanders, Belgium. *Women's Studies International Forum* 44: 35-45.

Van den Brandt, N (2015) Feminist practice and solidarity in secular societies: Case studies on feminists crossing religious-secular divides in politics and practice in Antwerp, Belgium. *Social Movement Studies* 14(4): 493-508.

WAF (1996) *Women Against Fundamentalism*. Journal No. 8. London: Women Against Fundamentalism.

WAF and SBS (2007) *Commission on Integration and Cohesion: Submission by Women Against Fundamentalisms and Southall Black Sisters*. January 2007. Available at: [http://womenagainstofundamentalism.org/?page\\_id=12](http://womenagainstofundamentalism.org/?page_id=12) [accessed 15 March 2017].

Weber, BM (2015) Gender, race, religion, faith? Rethinking intersectionality in German feminisms. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 22(1): 22-36.

Woodhead, L (2013). Liberal religion and illiberal secularism. In: D'Costa G, Evans M, Modood T and Rivers J (eds) *Religion in a liberal state*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.93-116.

Žarkov, D (2015) Reflecting on faith and feminism. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 22(1): 3–6.

Zion-Waldoks, T (2015) Politics of devoted resistance: Agency, feminism and religion among Orthodox Agunah Activists in Israel. *Gender & Society* 29(1): 73-97.

---

<sup>i</sup> The Coventry conference, 'Women Negotiating Secularism & Multiculturalism through Civil Society Organisations', was funded by the *International Society for the Sociology of Religion* (see <https://womenreligionandsecularism.wordpress.com> [accessed 15 March 2017]).

<sup>ii</sup> Attached to Resolution 1464 is the accompanying 'Report on Women and religion in Europe' (DOC. 10670) and an 'Explanatory Memorandum' (C of E, 2006b), which go further in condemning a wide array of lived practices as rooted in religion.

---

<sup>iii</sup> Subsequent statements from the Council of Europe, including the Committee Recommendation 1839 ‘Empowering women in a modern, multicultural society’ (2008) and Resolution 1743 ‘Islam, Islamism and Islamophobia in Europe’ (2010) indicate a somewhat more nuanced approach to women and religion welcomed by the 2015 Coventry conference. Due to space constraints these statements are outside this article’s remit.