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Religion and gender

Introduction

During the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of the murder by US police forces of Afro-American George Floyd, activists were asking to—alongside Confederate monuments—tear down statues in which Jesus was depicted as a white European. The activists argued that these statues conveyed a bigger political message: If Jesus is imagined as white, and God is white, this then implies that authority is white. Thus, the statues, activists emphasized, symbolized white supremacy (*Washington Post*, June 25, 2020). A popular graffiti slogan that appeared from the 1980s onwards on the walls of European and North American cities in turn reads: 'God is black, yes she is'. The graffiti slogan goes one step further than the activists calling out the whitening of Jesus. The slogan not only questions the idea of authority as white but also the idea of authority as being male. After all, 'God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve' is a popular car bumper sticker in the United States, a country where political positions, in this example, a stance against homosexuality, tend to be exhibited on cars.

These slogans highlight that not only religion itself is deeply gendered and interwoven with power relations, but that religion plays a key role in political debates and contestations about gender and gender relations in contemporary societies. In light of the gendered-ness of religion and its politicization, discussing the theme of gender and religion is highly relevant to understanding past and current political developments, and especially also the current rising polarization of society in which values related to gender (conservative versus liberal) play a key role.

Scholars engaging in the academic study of religion have paid growing attention to gender dimensions, but still, many aspects are either still underexplored or not sufficiently linked (Aune and Nyhagen 2016, Knibbe and Bartelink 2020, McMorris and Glass 2018). In this chapter, I provide an overview of the different themes of this scholarly debate. To contextualize the debate, I first discuss the role religion plays in the life of women. I then proceed to look at the female agency of religious women, and more specifically, at female activism in religious, ideological movements. I then continue to discuss the role of religion and gender ideologies in the contemporary global rise of right-wing populism and/or authoritarianism, which is followed

by a focus on the so-called 'anti-gender ideology' movement, a movement strongly related to religious authorities. The last section of the chapter concerns the current use of gender equality rhetoric in mobilizations against the 'religious other', i.e., Muslim migrants and minorities (see also chapters on populism and nationalism in this handbook). Before proceeding to these main parts of this chapter, as part of this introduction, I will now discuss the interconnections of religion and gender concerning power and define the concept of ideology used in this chapter.

Power

A useful starting point for any scholarly discussion about issues of gender and religion is that both are inherently about power, embodying, distributing, and representing power (Woodhead 2012). As such, they are both structuring society.

Gender orders are intricate socially and historically constructed systems of power relations enacted through institutions, structures, and everyday actions through which relations between women and men are ordered, remade, changed, and/or reified in a society (Connell and Pearse 2015).

Religious ideologies, practices, and institutions are, in turn, a constitutive part of gender orders. They play a key role in ordering gender relations. Religion can confirm and provide grounds of legitimation for the existing societal gender order, or it can also challenge this order and aim to bring about changes or reverse changes concerning gender orders (Woodhead 2012). This also implies the existence of progressive religious movements and ideologies as regards gender equality. The fact that all three monotheistic religions tend to anthropomorphize the divine (Aslan 2017)—including Islam despite its emphasis that the divine has no image, substance, or form—resulting in ideas or representations of God as male, is revealing the centrality of gender orders in religious ideologies and their link to secular sources of gendered power.

Ideology

Religions can be considered comprehensive or thick ideologies. Different—sometimes incompatible—variants of feminism, which at the core are propagating the equality of humans independent from their sex, but also nativism, i.e., the belief that nation-states should be inhabited exclusively by natives and that foreign elements (persons or ideas) are threatening the nation (Mudde 2016), instead can be seen as thin ideologies.

Thick ideologies exhibit the following characteristics: (a) substantive internal integration; (b) a rich core related to a large range of political concepts; (c) the ability to express a large range of concepts and political positions; (d) a large range of answers to socio-political questions; (e)

far-reaching objectives and scope; (f) a sufficient cohesive and intricate 'ideological product'; and (g) unity among those actors producing the ideology (Freeden 1996, cit. after Aslanidis 2016, 64). Thin ideologies, in opposition to thick ideologies, do not provide a comprehensive range of answers to socio-political questions. As Aslanidis (2016) rightly argues, the vagueness of the definition of ideology in social science makes the distinction between thick and thin ideologies arbitrary at times. Despite its shortcomings, these concepts are still helpful in distinguishing between full-fledged ideologies and more fragmented or less comprehensive sets of political thought. The term 'ideology' as used in this chapter is thus not value laden and it includes political thoughts across the political spectrum.

The gender gap of religiosity

One of the most debated issues in the scholarship on religion and gender is the fact that women tend to display greater levels of religiosity. This gender gap has been identified and repeatedly confirmed in surveys going back to the 1930s (Pew 2016). Put differently, men are predominantly in positions of authority; but it is often women who continue to sustain faith through their religious devotion and also through their unpaid voluntary labor in religious community actions (Tolleson-Rinehart and Perkins 1989).

The extent of this gender gap varies across different world regions and different religions. It thus has to be studied and understood in its particular context. Among 84 countries looked at in a recent study by Pew (2016), in two countries (Mozambique and Israel), religion was more important to males than to females. In the rest of the globe, religion is equally or more important to women than to men. In the United States, a country in which religious commitment overall is exceptionally high compared to other similar states in the Global North, the gender gap is particularly pronounced: 60 percent of women, as opposed to 47 percent of men, see religion as very important to their lives, and 64% of women in contrast to 47% of men in the United States say they pray daily (Pew 2016).

Given the restrictive gender perspectives that many religious ideologies are seen to endorse, this gap has been seen as a major puzzle for social scientists, and despite continuous academic studies to explore this gap, empirical findings explaining this phenomenon remain inconclusive.

Two major and competing explanatory approaches exist and are worth mentioning briefly here. The scholarly debate about these two approaches is often summarized with the phrase 'nature

versus nurture', since the first approach sees the gender gap of religiosity rooted in innate differences, whereas the second sees it as a result of socialization.

In a nutshell, the first strand is based on a cost-benefit approach. It states that given the divine punishment for being irreligious that exists in many religions, not being religious poses a greater risk than being so. Men, who are said to be more prone to risk taking, are consequently less religious. Scholars have explained this risk-affine as opposed to risk-averse behavior in different ways. Some research, for instance, suggests that higher androgen levels make men more willing to take risks; thus, according to this approach, the religiosity gender gap comes down to the influence of hormones (Stark 2002, Das 2018, Ellis et al. 2016). However, despite some empirical evidence in its favor, given that this explanatory approach employs rather deterministic ideas about women and men, it has been widely debated and contested (see McMorris and Glass 2018).

The second approach is attempting to explain the gender gap of religiosity through the bigger exposure of women to economic and social vulnerability. Given unequal gender relations, women often find themselves in a more precarious or vulnerable socio-economic status; hence, according to this strand of research, this exposure to vulnerability can explain religious commitment, as faith helps to overcome socio-economic hardships and can provide a sense of safety (Pipper and Inglehart 2008). Faith can indeed play a positive role in providing a sense of safety and stability, and material security has been shown to decrease the gender gap of religiosity (Voas et al. 2013). This approach, however, does not entirely solve either the puzzle of why women would support religious ideologies that are supportive or even constitutive of gender orders that render them vulnerable in the first place.

Many of the shortcomings of these approaches can be understood by their limited perspectives on female agency. Partly, this idea of the gender gap being puzzling is also based on omitting the fact that humans can have multiple identities and different priorities regarding their sense of belonging. Women (just as men) hold different values and some do endorse rather than reject conservative gender norms.

Female agency

Scholarship going beyond this limited perspective has highlighted that religious devotion can offer personal fulfillment and thus increase personal well-being. Some women choose to be religious not despite but because of conservative gender roles that provide women with a clear

role in an ever more complex world. Religion can also be especially appealing for women, given that in many religious ideologies, men's role is as a provider with responsibility for their family (Woodhead 2012).

An interesting example in this regard is the transformative power of Pentecostalism. Pentecostalism has been shown to redefine gender relations considerably to the benefit of women, as conversions can decrease male violence toward women and foster the dedication of men to family life. So, it is not despite but because of its conservative outlook that requires asceticism that Pentecostalism is said to increase the well-being of women, in particular women in settings of poverty, alcohol abuse, and deprivation (Brusco 2010, Thornton 2016). Yet, Pentecostalism is not countering conservative gender orders or patriarchy. On the contrary, it indeed relies on it. Yet, it transforms existing gender relations by proposing a new type of patriarchy, namely, one of taking responsibility for one's family (Mira and Lorentzen 2002).

Belonging to a religious community provides not only an important source of meaning and a structure to live one's life in a purposeful way, but it thus can also serve as a means for (self-) empowerment for women, as well as a way of contesting and changing discriminatory norms from within (Mahmood 2005, Hong Tschalaer 2017).

Activism and/or proactive engagement by women within religious institutions and settings is widespread, and in terms of gender, ranges from consolidating behavior to a tactical and questing type of behavior and also countering forms of activism. Consolidating engagement reinforces and sacralizes existing gender orders and norms and unequal power relations that are underlying these orders, whereas tactical and questing types negotiate and push the boundaries for women's well-being within the existing norms and gender orders. Countering activism, eventually, is an active opposition against existing gender orders (Woodhead 2012).

To cite the feminist theologian Alice Hagemann (1974, 27), religious women have been questioning gender orders 'within the Church if possible, outside the Church if necessary'. Religious feminists used a gender-critical lens to come up with interpretations of sacred texts that deviate from established perspectives provided by male authorities. An important example is the rise of Christian feminism in the Global North from the 1960s onwards. This wave of activism was strongly related to the *Women's Bible* (1895) by the North American suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton. A key writing of this wave of activism then was Mary Daly's book *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968), which exposed the attitude of the Catholic Church toward women across history in an attempt to push reforms.

Certainly, a gender-critical approach by religious women has not been confined to Catholicism. Islamic feminism, for example, started to grow by the late 1980s and early 1990s. The growth of Islamic feminism has been exposed to specific challenges that can be understood from a postcolonial perspective. Feminism in the Global North has been entangled with (neo-)colonial politics. Colonial narratives construed Islam as irreconcilable with 'modernity' and women's emancipation, and calls for women's rights 'saving brown women from brown men by white men' (cf. Spivak 1994 [1984]) were part of the colonial project. As Ahmed (1992) reminds us, those colonialists who were opposing patriarchal gender orders abroad, insisting that Islam inhibited emancipation, tended to be at the same time fierce opponents of women's rights movements at home. More recent political developments such as the 'War on Terror' used similar perspectives and arguments of women's emancipation to argue in favor of interventions (Abu-Lughod 2002). Muslim feminists thus were caught between a rock and a hard place: 'On the one hand, Islamists were denying us equality in the name of Shari'a; on the other, hegemonic global powers were pursuing a neo-colonial agenda in the name of feminism and human rights' (Mir-Hosseini 2019, 113). Despite this challenge, women have been increasingly questioning established ideas by Muslim authorities and have been reinterpreting sacred texts. This includes Muslim feminists who rely on secularist ideas, as well as women who have been pointing to a liberating potential of Islam for women.

Some women, in turn, have also taken up key roles in extremist, religious organizations, i.e., organizations that aim to change established social and/or political systems through violence. This includes women who, for instance, have joined the Islamic State (ISIS) or Hindu nationalist movements in India (Aune and Nyhagen 2016). As fundamentalist organizations not only contradict but aggravate gender inequality and endorse the oppression of women and violent masculinity, women participating in these organizations have been predominantly viewed as victims who have been manipulated and lured into these organizations. As the international relations scholars Gentry and Sjoberg (2016, 44) outline, this denial of agency concerning women's involvement in political and religious violence is in itself an utterly gendered perspective. Men participating in politically violent organizations are viewed as making autonomous decisions, while women are seen as 'controlled, coerced or insane'. Indeed, studies have indicated that it is a variety of considerations, including that of empowerment and conservative gender roles, that drive women to participate in misogynistic, political violence (Lokenz and Selenz 2018, Nuraniyah 2018). Research (Kneip 2016) about women from the West joining ISIS found that such women sought independence from parental

control and freedom from perceived Western oppression while obtaining respect from the ISIS community, as well as power over others. The insights gathered in the past few years about ISIS all point toward the fact that the position women hold within the organization is far beyond the simplistic idea of 'jihadi brides' presented in public debate, with women's tasks ranging from recruitment to radicalization to tax collection (Cook and Vale 2018). Moreover, a study by Nuraniyah (2018) on female Indonesian pro-ISIS supporters also suggests that once women join the organization, they do counter internal gender regimes such as the prohibition of women taking part in combat.

In sum, the role women play in terms of endorsing or challenging religious gender norms, as well as their activism in religious organizations, is complex, multifaceted, and context-dependent. It would appear that religion can indeed be both a source of emancipatory reinterpretations and patriarchal socialization (Glas et al. 2018).

Scholarly debates have also taught us that it is important to go beyond simplistic binary conceptions of the 'secular Global North' and the 'religious Global South' in debates about gender. It is necessary to move beyond the predominant one-sided fixation on non-Western women when discussing the issue, given that there is much controversy about religion and key issues of gender equality, including reproductive rights and sexuality, in various countries, including the United States. Feminist research, moreover, also reminds us that it would be misleading to see secularism as inherently linked to female liberation and gender equality. The development of secular modernity was profoundly based on gender inequality. Both women and religion were pushed to the private sphere 'in order to make way for masculine rationality' (Scott 2018). Women's rights had to be fought for with commitment against male forces, both secular and religious ones (ibid.).

Religion's ideologies about gender and their impact

Concerning gender ideologies that religions entail, we cannot make sweeping, generalizing statements. Across, as well as within, religions, different ideas and practices about gender relations and gender norms prevail, and these shift over time as a result of inner-religious debates (see also the section above on female agency).

Broadly, we have to distinguish between conservative religious groups and those that exhibit more gender-equal stances. Conservative groups have grown in prominence in past decades, often viewed as a response to globalization, including economic restructuring and erosion of

traditional gender roles based on the male breadwinner model (cf. McMorris and Glass 2018, 435).

Notwithstanding differences across religions, conservative religious groups tend to endorse traditional gender norms, dividing the private domain from the public domain, following rigid divisions of roles and responsibilities, and attributing to males the role of *pater familias*. Heterosexuality is seen as the natural, goodly order, and conservative groups hence tend to exhibit open aversion toward homosexuality. Other key characteristics of the gender ideology of conservative religious groups include views of sex for procreative purposes, sexual purity before marriage, idealization of especially female virginity, and an underlying idea of male vulnerability to female temptation linked to modesty of dress and behavior, especially for women (ibid.). To illustrate the widely held idea of female temptation within conservative religious groups, McMorris and Glass (2018) refer to US Vice President Mike Pence. As a conservative evangelical, he has said that he refuses to eat out with women without his wife standing close to him, when alcohol is served, and 'people are being loose' (*New Yorker*, March 31, 2017). This devotion also requires that only male assistants work with the vice president in case he works late (ibid.), which in turn also points toward the influence that religious ideologies can have on female employment in a world still largely dominated by men.

Less conservative and more reformist groups also tend to have strict principles in terms of gender relations and restrictive sexual ethics but tend to be more lenient when it comes to religious practice, with local religious leaderships often having more capacity to deviate from 'official' restrictive positions (ibid., 436).

In addition, we also have to make an important distinction regarding whether religious groups display a textual or a contextual reading of sacred texts. In the first case, sacred texts are seen to have one static literalist meaning, while viewed from a contextualist perspective, they are interpreted as an output of the time when they were written.

For instance, inheritance laws in many sacred texts, including the Bible and the Quran, stipulate literally that women should prefer sons over daughters. For instance, the Quran states: 'Allah instructs you concerning your children: for the male, what is equal to the share of two females' [Quran 4: 11]. The Bible, in turn, proclaims that daughters can only inherit if the deceased had no sons. From a contextual reading, however, such rules of inheritance can be interpreted very differently, namely that women should be allocated more than the status quo is granting them since at the time the texts were written, women often had no right to inherit at all (cf. Glass et

al. 2018). Such distinctions matter greatly since they impact attitudes that religious people hold on gender equality. Recent fine-grained research from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (ibid.) shows that attending religious service, that is, being regularly exposed to institutional perspectives on religion, and a textual approach to sacred texts, as well as devotion, actually tends to decrease support for gender equality. The salience of religion, that is, the feeling that religion specifically guides daily life choices, in turn, does not impact negatively on attitudes to gender equality; for women, it even increases support for gender equality.

So, while many aspects of religion seem to foster patriarchal beliefs, actually using 'religion as a guideline in daily life' (Glass et al. 2018, 705) may help limit the patriarchal influence of religious institutions. This scholarly insight in relation to the MENA region reminds us that religion should be understood in its multi-dimensionality, and it is necessary to distinguish religious authority from religious everyday practice.

In addition, from another starting point, namely numerical indicators regarding women's share of the labor force and maternity leave compensation, research finds that religiosity tends to have a negative impact. According to a study by Seguino (2011), all dominant religions have varying effects on gender attitudes and outcomes, some positive, some negative, albeit with no religion standing out as consistently more gender-inequitable in its effects than others. Overall, her findings (ibid.) suggest that religiosity, at least concerning the major religions, tends to contribute to global hierarchical gender ideologies, norms, and stereotypes.

Scholars interested in gender and religion should, however, be attentive to differences between conservative and less conservative strands of religion, as well as different dimensions of female well-being. Interaction of gender orders and religiosity remains intricate and complex, linked to a multiplicity of variables.

Finally, some religious ideologies are explicitly feminist, such as the Goddess movement, a type of paganism, which substitutes male-centered religious ideas with a spirituality focused on female divinity (see Beavis 2016).

Authoritarian masculinity and religion

Religion has played a key role in the contemporary rise of populist or even authoritarian leaders and ideologies. These leaders often display hyper-masculinity. They use this masculinity as a

resource to display power while strongly relying on references to religion in their strategies to mobilize their followers and to emphasize a moral superiority to their followers and opponents.

A paradigmatic example in that regard is Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who pursues a hardline, right-wing agenda, explicitly endorsing authoritarianism and openly positioning himself against liberal democracy. Bolsonaro ran his 2018 presidential campaign on the slogan 'Brazil above everything, God above everyone'. Throughout his electoral campaign, he presented himself as the savior of traditional Christian values, opposing sexual, reproductive rights, gender equality, and also human rights more broadly. In his mobilization strategy, he used an 'us' versus 'them' rhetoric in which he distinguished between 'us', 'the people of God', and them, the 'leftists', and so-called 'gender ideologists'. In his victory speech, the Brazilian president-elect emphasized that he is seeking answers from the Holy Bible 'to repair the man and the woman' (Gomes da Costa 2020). He also vowed to ban 'gender ideology in schools' and argued his administration would resist 'ideological submission' (Butler 2019, see the section below on anti-gender ideology). Opposition to women's rights and standing for conservative Christian family values were cornerstones of his campaign. Bolsonaro, however, did not one-sidedly instrumentalize religion. The Catholic Church proactively supported Bolsonaro in his run for the highest office, and in return, he increased the former's political influence (Gomes da Costa 2020). A Catholic, Bolsonaro also built a close alliance with Pentecostalist religious and political leaders. In spring 2016, he was baptized by a fellow Congressman, an evangelical pastor, and was consequently openly supported by evangelical and Baptist religious leaders. Although gender has not been a relevant variable in terms of voters before, in the 2018 presidential election, it was statistically significant. Given his outspoken rhetoric against women, Bolsonaro's electoral success relied strongly on the male vote. Moreover, Pentecostal Christians were more likely to vote for Bolsonaro than Catholic voters, in spite of the candidate's self-declared Catholicism (do Amaral 2020). After his

election, he put two ministries in his administration under evangelical leadership: education and family, as well as women and human rights (Gomes da Costa 2020).

Similar alliances and using conservative religious values as an electoral strategy can be observed in other authoritarian-led or populist far-right regimes, including Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary, President Recep Erdogan of Turkey, Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India, and Russia's President, Vladimir Putin. In order to 'rehabilitate Russian masculinity', Putin formed a close alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church. Under him, the Russian government established strict anti-homosexuality laws and legalized forms of domestic abuse. Both the Putin-appointed Minister for Education and the Minister for Children's Rights are closely aligned with the Orthodox Church (Roose 2018). A second example comes from the Hungarian government led by Viktor Orbán, which based its refusal to ratify the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, as well as its decision to remove accreditation from gender studies MA programs in Hungarian universities in 2018 on the claim that they express 'gender ideology' (Kováts 2018, 78). The Church and religious actors play an important role in supporting this approach, providing it with an ideological backbone. Nevertheless, the emergence and resonance of anti-feminist and anti-gender equality positions and rhetoric in the Hungarian case, as Kováts importantly underlines, has to be understood through the intertwinement of feminism with the illiberal restructuring of the country after the collapse of the communist system in 1989, rather than as a result of the strength of society's religious segments. In order to speak to the new liberal elites, feminist movements, according to Kováts (2018), were compliant with neoliberal restructuring. Calls for austerity went hand in hand with calls for women's rights and human rights more broadly. Moreover, Western theories were imported instead of aiming to build upon emancipatory resources that were rooted within the region, and a rhetoric of the 'developed West', to which the country has had to catch up, has been prevalent among human

rights movements (ibid.). This type of 'self-colonizing' rhetoric has been identified as one of the major drivers of the rise of the radical right in Eastern Europe. As regards gender, it gave opponents of gender equality and supporters of a conservative gender order as a basis to legitimatize its claims by framing gender as a form of 'ideological colonization' (Kováts 2018, 82).

These developments are not restricted to non-democratic or illiberal political settings but have also been emerging in liberal democracies, being promoted by illiberal democratic parties and/or leaders, such as the radical right parties *Lega*, *Fuorza Nova*, and *Fratelli di Italia* in Italy (Pavan 2020), as well as President Donald Trump in the United States. Trump significantly benefited from the support of white evangelical Protestant voters, a group, which by a large majority has continuously approved his performance in office. Evangelical Protestantism is strongly correlated with favoring male political leaders, and respectively, a reservation against female ones. Trump secured this support by exhibiting a strong commitment to the anti-abortion movement. On assuming office, he reintroduced the 'global gag' rule first established by President Reagan in 1984. This rule prohibits US funding to nongovernmental organizations abroad if they provide legal abortion services, referrals, or information or promote legal pro-abortion reform (Walton Roberts 2019). Finally, the strong alliance with gender-conservative religious groups also became apparent by the selection of the already-mentioned Mike Pence, an evangelical born-again Christian, as vice president.

'Anti-gender ideology' activism

Commitment to conservative family values and traditional gender roles of the far right allows for broad conservative alliances. We can see an especially strong coalition of the far right with so-called 'anti-gender ideology' movements across the globe, a movement that frames the concept of gender and the underlying idea that gender differences are an outcome of socialization as a dangerous ideology. As with the recent increase in far-right movements and parties, the rise of the anti-gender movement is strongly related to the rise of post-national,

liberal rights regimes, including the achievements of the women's and gay liberation movements that became tangible in international law from the 1990s.

The roots of the anti-gender movement go back to the early 1990s with a reaction to the 1994 UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women. Both conferences were crucial for the advancement of women's human rights and reflected the growing importance of liberal women's movements. The Vatican took a key role in opposing the reproductive rights of women as well as rights linked to homosexuality by challenging key concepts of feminist movements, namely gender and equality. The concept of gender was rejected by the Vatican as the idea of femininity and masculinity being socially constructed contradicts the approach of the Holy See that men and women perform complementary roles. Gender, moreover, was seen as a dangerous concept as it implied alternative and fluid sexualities and the endorsement of homosexuality (Buss 1998). The Vatican, then led by Pope Paul II, opposed especially any notions that would imply endorsing abortion or homosexuality during these conferences (ibid.). The Holy See also promoted the idea of equal dignity in order to avoid the notion of equal rights. In the view of the Vatican, equal dignity can be realized by recognizing the difference between men and women, as opposed to providing equal rights (ibid.). Pope Benedict XVI also repeatedly framed gender as a misguided 'ideology' as it denies the 'pre-ordained duality of man and woman', and thus undermines the divine, natural integrity of the family (Butler 2019, 958). Pope Francis confirmed the line of his predecessors, framing gender as an outright 'diabolical ideology':

> Today children—children!—are taught in school that everyone can choose his or her sex … And this is terrible! … God created man and woman; God created the world in a certain way … and we are doing the exact opposite.

(cit. after Butler 2019, 958)

In Europe, 'anti-gender ideology' protests were taken to the streets from the mid-2000s onwards. The first street protests emerged in Spain in 2004 as the Catholic Church, along with conservative civil society groups and political parties, mobilized against the government's same-sex marriage bill (Patternotte and Kuhar 2018, 7). Other mobilizations in the mid-2000s against same-sex partnership, and/or marriage, and sex education occurred in Italy, Croatia, and Slovenia (ibid.).

From the 2010s onwards, such mobilizations grew significantly and became part of a transnational movement in which slogans and forms of mobilization traveled across borders.

The French *manif pour tous* was able to bring thousands of protesters to the streets while keeping up protests for 2 years to oppose same-sex marriage legislation, which can be regarded as a key tipping point empowering the movement (ibid.).

The movement also strengthened alliances between different religions. It has united different faith groups who have little in common apart from their conviction about the need to fight 'gender ideology' ranging from an opposition to abortion to transgender rights to sexual education (Case 2019).

Research (Patternote and Kuhar 2018) has revealed that an important element for the rise of this movement is the contemporary strength of the far right, which has provided the idea of 'gender ideology' with a major platform.

Gender equality and the othering of the Muslim migrant

At the same time, we can also see a strong emphasis by radical right entrepreneurs on gender equality. This phenomenon emerged with the adoption of Muslims as a major target group in anti-migrant mobilization.

The following quote uttered during the 2015 migration crisis by the leader of the French radical right (then) the National Front (now called the National Rally) illustrates this use of gender equality rhetoric particularly well:

> It is as a political leader, but also as a woman, that I address the French people today. It is as a free French woman, who has been able to enjoy, her whole life, the very precious freedoms fought for long and hard by our mothers and grandmothers, that I want to warn about a new form of social, human and moral regression imposed on us by the migrant crisis …The right to preserve the integrity of one's own body, whatever sex one may be, is one of the most essential rights. Today, for many women, this right is under attack. That barbarity can once again be used against women fills me with horror. I remember these words of Simone de Beauvoir: 'never forget that all it would take is a political, economic or religious crisis for women's rights to be called into question', and I fear that the migratory crisis signals the beginning of the end of women's rights.

(Marine Le Pen cit. after Hadj Abdou 2017, 86)

Given the often-conservative substantive policy agenda of radical right groups and their alliances with conservative religious groups, such gender equality and women's rights rhetoric should be understood as being largely instrumental instead of ideologically based. Put differently, it is a component of nativist ideology as opposed to a substantive commitment to gender equality. Research has shown (Hadj Abdou 2019, Akkerman 2015) that the emphasis

on gender equality is used to establish the idea of a supposedly irreconcilable cultural difference between 'backward (Muslim) migrants' and 'liberal progressive natives' in order to legitimize claims for the restriction of migration. As noted above, similar narratives of women's oppression were also used during colonialism to 'prove' the 'quintessential otherness and inferiority of Islam' (Ahmed 1992, 149). However, it was then used to justify colonial power in the land of the colonized; now, it is about excluding the 'other' in the lands of the former colonizer.

Variants of such a rhetoric about the 'male foreign oppressor', establishing a view on migrants and immigration as the existential threat to the nation, exists in political rhetoric across the globe. One famous example in that regard is the emphasis put by Donald Trump on Mexican migrants during his announcement speech in 2015: 'When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you…They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people' (CNN 2018)..

In that regard, Europe yet differs from developments elsewhere. The gender equality rhetoric takes a more central role for mobilization strategies of nativist political currents in Europe than in other regions. This difference is likely to be understood in terms of the smaller significance of the religious electorate and the role religion plays in European Union countries more broadly, namely as a cultural marker more than a sign of religious devotion, compared to other world regions.

Concluding summary

This chapter has highlighted the key role religion plays in contemporary debates about gender and the politicization of gender in today's polarized environment. Liberal values, such as gender equality and its contestation, are central to rising socio-political divisions that manifest in the rise of authoritarianism and the radical right, along with a reinvigoration of masculinity by those political groups. The radical right and religious conservative actors have strongly opposed substantive gender equality and the conceptualization of gender differences as an outcome of socialization maintained and entrenched through power relations, as opposed to viewing these differences as innate characteristics of humanity. At the same time, the radical right has also employed strong references to gender equality in its rhetoric in order to stigmatize non-white minorities. Both the emphasis on gender equality and the contestation of the concept of 'gender' are populist-style boundary-making mechanisms. While the conservative anti-gender rhetoric divides 'us' and the 'liberal' elite, gender equality references, in turn,

distinguish between 'us' and the (Muslim) 'migrant'. References to gender issues thus can serve a double function in the repertoire of radical right groups to legitimize the exclusion of the 'other'.

Religion in this context is partly used instrumentally by some political players to gain support among conservative segments in society. But, as discussed in this chapter, religious authorities also actively engage in these contestations and are partly benefiting from the rise of illiberal political forces across the globe. Contestations about gender that rely on alliances with conservative religious authorities, moreover, are a global phenomenon. This chapter, consequently, has emphasized that we need to go beyond simplistic binary ideas about the secular Global North and the religious Global South while also underlining that it is inaccurate to see secularism as inherently linked to gender equality. Moreover, this chapter has argued that we should be aware of differences within and across religious strands and also distinguish between religious authorities and religious practice. Finally, the chapter has argued that the impact of religiosity on structuring gender relations is complex and context-dependent, ranging from reinforcing patriarchal gender orders to providing a source of emancipation for women.

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