Post-secular Feminist Research: The Concept of “Lived” Religion and Double Critique

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Abstract

In feminist research on religion, women and gender, the concepts of “lived religion” as well as “agency as doing religion” take a prominent place. Both include an intersubjective and mostly partial perspective. However, against the background of current developments concerning a global religious right, the paper argues for the inclusion of a critical perspective through the methodology of a double critique that includes both an analysis of power relations that marginalize women in religious groups and an analysis of women’s reproduction of gendered as well as racialized power relations. This argument is embedded in the complexity of post-secular feminist research including research on women, gender and religion, feminist critiques of secularism (and of anti-Muslim discourses), feminist, queer and trans theologies, and research on the religious right and their anti-feminist politics. The paper suggests to take feminist theologies and feminist spiritualities/religious practices as reference point for such an analysis.

Keywords

feminism – postsecularity – lived religion – agency – double critique – intersectionality

1 Context

It is widely argued that since the 1990s, religiosities, religious belongings, religious practices and religiously motivated socio-political activities and violence...
have re-gained visibility and created (digital) networks on a global scale.\(^1\) However, despite the historical process of secularization,\(^2\) interests in religions, spirituality or the transcendent more broadly have never ceased – not even in Europe, a core area of secularism, in which also this paper is located. Instead, what might have looked like a scaling down of religious practices, faiths and/or worldviews especially in Western countries was, in part, a de-institutionalization, pluralization and individualization that also brought about the figure of the self-empowered religious subject making individual theological decisions without adhering to religious authorities.\(^3\) Nevertheless, there are new or reappearing phenomena as well: the Islamic veil has seen a global “resurgence”\(^4\) and so-called religious sects and psycho-groups as well as Christian, Islamic and Jewish fundamentalists have drawn increasing attention.\(^5\) This condition of increased religious visibility – or an increased awareness of religious activities – has led to a reconsideration of the secularization hypothesis, according to which religion would fade out with increasing modernization. This reconsideration has found many names for the current condition, one of them being the “post-secular”,\(^6\) or post-secularity, which has been described by Chia Longman as the “paradoxical present-day condition in which currents of on-going secularization and religious revival, or disenchantment and re-enchantment, seem to co-exist”.\(^7\)

As “secularization and religious revival” are “on-going”, post-secularity describes a dynamic process with ups and downs for individual groups and movements. This process is by no means innocent, and neither religion nor

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1. E.g. Braidotti, *In Spite of the Times*.
2. I use the term “secularization” to describe the historical process, “secularity” for the state reached through this historical process and “secularism” for the ideology, cf. van den Brandt, *Secularity and Feminism in a West-European Context*, pp. 792 et seq. The term “religion” is used in this paper as an umbrella term for spirituality, new-metaphysics or any other term that includes the perspective of transcendence.
7. Longman, *Women’s Circles*, p. 2. While I am interested in current negotiations between the religious and the secular on a global scale, I am located in Europe, the “heartland” of secularization, a fact that clearly shapes my perspective. At the same time, I have a longstanding interest in Christian Science. I have never been a member of the related church but am active in a foundation for the Science of Being developed from Christian Science by dissidents. The Science of Being entails a relatively secular and academic, study-based approach to what traditionally has been named “God” and does not include any religious or spiritual rituals. As a result, I feel positioned in between or in the middle of the binary of religion and secularity; cf. Grenz, *Mary Baker Eddy*.
secularity are a-political or politically neutral. For instance, on the one hand, feminist, queer, trans, indigenous and postcolonial theologies\(^8\) and movements as well as research on related religious practices have evolved within different religions,\(^9\) on the other, religious anti-feminist actors have made themselves heard in the public arena. Thus, post-secularity entails power struggles on different levels and constant re-negotiation of the power relation between the secular and the religious as well as power relations within religions, religious communities and religious organizations. This is also reflected in post-secular research within the interdisciplinary field of Gender Studies that can be roughly subsumed under following four areas: a) research on women, gender and religion,\(^10\) b) feminist critiques of secularism (and of anti-Muslim discourses),\(^11\) c) feminist, queer, trans, indigenous and postcolonial theologies,\(^12\) and d) research on the religious right and their anti-feminist politics.\(^13\) What runs through all post-secular research strands, is an engagement with the border between the religious and the secular,\(^14\) a border that is constantly crossed with the effect that both spheres appear to be inseparable from each other. Thus, the “post-secular condition” is also shaped by a simultaneity of the secular and the religious.\(^15\) This circumstance I would like to make use of in order to help create a bridge between feminist religious and secular research interests.

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\(^8\) The term “theology” includes a perspective on a masculine God. When I use the word in a feminist sense I include theologies as well as perspectives on a God that might be genderless or inclusive. Feminist theologians like other academic feminists have been criticized for marginalizing queer, trans and indigenous perspectives, However, such theologies are emerging (cf. Walton, *The History of Feminist Theology in the Academy*). Furthermore, I follow an inclusive feminist approach that does not see feminism as a single-issue feminism but as necessarily intersectional (cf. Tudor, *Decolonizing Trans/Gender Studies*).


\(^10\) Cf. Gemzöe/Keinänen/Maddrell, *Contemporary Encounters*.


\(^12\) E.g. Walton, *The History of Feminist Theology in the Academy*; Ladin, *In the Image of God*. However, feminist theologies have been criticized to exclude non-Western, post-colonial and trans perspectives. Certain streams of religious studies still exclude trans theologies (cf. the discussion on trans and queer theologies in Pritchard/Ott, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*).


\(^14\) E.g. Asad/Brown/Butler/Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular?*

\(^15\) For the simultaneity and ongoing co-constitution of the religious and the secular cf. Bender and Taves, *What Matters*.
These four areas of research share common issues and, hence, are strongly intertwined with each other. For instance, research on women, gender and religion (a) comprises a variety of perspectives and has become more strongly connected to feminist critiques of secularism (b). While some researchers in both fields conduct research about conservative women within religious communities, others focus on feminists with an interest in transcendence. However, the two strands remained separate until very recently, even though a) has been a vivid strand of research since the 1980s and research on the relationship between (Western) secularity and Islam (b) has blossomed at least since Talal Asad’s work on the *Formations of the Secular* and Saba Mahmood’s study on *Pious Women* of the mosque movement in Egypt. Additionally, neither strand of research routinely includes reflections of feminist, queer, trans and/or postcolonial theologies (c). And finally, despite many possible connections, research on anti-feminist activities of the religious right (d) that has evolved around the globe during the last decade remains mostly separate from these other strands of research. Despite the fact that the religious right is a global phenomenon and, as such, part of many religions including Christianity, Islam and Judaism as well as Shintoism and Hinduism, it has not been met with much attention among feminist religious scholars.

One reason for the lack of mutual engagement of these different strands of research might be that the first three are mostly affirmative of religion whereas the fourth is written in a more secularist spirit. As such, it forms part of “the bulk of European feminism [...] justified in claiming to be secular”.

Like other emancipatory philosophies and political practices, the feminist struggle for women’s rights in Europe has historically produced an
agnostic, if not downright atheist position. Historically, it descends from the Enlightenment critique of religious dogma and clerical authority. Confronted, however, with anti-feminist alliances between religious and secular actors on the right, feminist researchers – be they affirmative of religion or secularist – might do well “to recognize the long history of coexistence” but also “contestations between the two” sides of research and to reconsider their relationship. It has often been called for a move of secularist feminists to take on the issue of religion. However, I will argue that also the study of religion side needs to include more and more complex layers of feminist analysis of power relations, especially in their study of women following restrictive, oppressive and/or patriarchal theologies. In this sense, I would like to follow the call for a recognition of an intersectional feminist co-existence in this essay and think about how the concepts of “lived religion” as well the agency of “doing religion” could be complicated through double or even multiple critique that enables us to analyze the entanglement of different levels of power relations such as a) the relationship between the religious and the secular, b) gendered power relations within religious communities and c) between in- and outsiders of religious communities including power relations between different religions.

I will suggest that making women in religion visible is still necessary but that the consideration of women’s lives should go beyond religiosity and include entanglements of religious women in power structures more broadly. My suggestion invokes a double critique in qualitative-empirical research that engages with power relations by which women are oppressed while simultaneously enabling an analysis of religious women's oppressive discourses, attitudes and political activism with which they reach out into wider society and the secular realm. This approach requires an epistemology and methodology that is multi-perspective and intersectional. I suggest to make use of intersectional religious feminist perspectives as reference points for a critical analysis. I believe this is necessary, in order to form a strong feminist alliance

20 Braidotti, In Spite of the Times, p. 3.
21 Mayer/Sauer, Kulturkampf 2.0.
22 V.d. Brandt, Religion, Secularity and Feminism in a West-European Context, p. 68.
23 Research that argues in favor of overcoming the division: Avishai/Jafar/Rinaldo, A Gender Lens on Religion; Braidotti, Postsecular Paradoxes; Evans, Religion, Feminist Theory and Epistemology; Hawthorne, Entangled Subjects; Scott, Sex and Secularism; Schrijvers, Transition and Authority; Winkel/Poferl, Einleitung.
24 And here I mean an inclusive intersectional feminist approach that is informed as well by queer, trans and postcolonial theologies.
and confront the oppressive anti-feminist alliance between the religious and the secular right. By including discourses that reflect intersectional feminist religious and theologian perspectives it becomes clear that religious discourses range on a scale between emancipatory and illiberal and entail very different perspectives on gender, race and sexuality.

Of course, it is impossible that we all become intersectional feminist theologians of different religions, however, while we analyze our qualitative-empirical materials, we could engage with their ideas more generally, create research cooperation with different strands and develop new interdisciplinary approaches. This could be a contribution to overcome the feminist religious/secular binary by acknowledging that “critique of religious dogma and clerical [or other] authority”\(^25\) does not have to be secular as well as the fact that intersectional feminist theologies provide useful tools for an analysis from within religions.\(^26\)

In order to develop my argument, I will examine a) the approach of lived or everyday religion, including the intersubjective empathic methodologies connected to it, b) concepts of agency related to women’s religiosity and c) point to possibilities of a critical assessment from within by an inclusion of feminist theological and religious approaches. This area is vast and in this paper I can only sketch them and probably miss out many important aspects. However, I do hope that my argument that an inclusive feminism needs an analysis of intersecting power relations will become clear. Before I begin my argument proper, I will briefly elaborate on my overview of the above-mentioned strands of research in the area of gender and religion to provide background for a reader unfamiliar with this research. In my overview I focus on discussions in Europe where I am located.\(^27\)

2 Research on Gender and Religion

Feminist scholars have long criticized the secularization thesis as androcentric for historical as well as empirical reasons.\(^28\) For instance, during the 19th century, lay religion was feminized in Europe, and still today, more women identify

\(^25\) Braidotti, *In Spite of the Times*, p. 3.

\(^26\) An important example here is feminist translation and exegesis work in the Christian context as shown, for instance by Fischer, *Die Erzeltern Israels*.

\(^27\) Even here I admit limitations. For instance, I leave out emancipative powers of indigenous approaches to Christianity by Sámi people, a marginalized community in Scandinavia and Finland (e.g. Liinason, *Coloniality and the Sámi Revival*).

\(^28\) E.g. Woodhead, *Wie der Feminismus die Religionsforschung revolutioniert hat*.  

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as religious or spiritual and many of the self-empowered religious subjects mentioned above are women choosing and building their own spiritualities and theologies. However, as traditional religions are based in patriarchal institutions, hierarchical gender orders and androcentric religious histories, women have largely remained invisible. For this reason, during the 1980s and 1990s, feminist researchers turned to religious communities and developed new intersubjective and empathic methodologies for empirical research on religious subjects by focusing on lived experiences and everyday religious practices of women in religious institutions. They found that the dichotomy of subordinated/resistant is insufficient for explaining women’s experiences because it neglects meaningful religious contents and values. The focus on the everyday religious was also part of research on feminist religious communities as well as individualized religious and spiritual interests. This research has a strong focus on women but has also evolved to include gender inclusive and intersectional approaches such research on Islam, spirituality and LGBTIQ* issues in religion.

The second strand of research in the West began as a reaction to post-colonial anti-Muslim discourses that (re-)emerged in Western countries during the 1990s and increased after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on 9 September 2001. In these discourses, Islam is portrayed as backwards, patriarchal and unchangeable. Talal Asad reconstructed the history of the dichotomy between secularism and religiosity as a colonial strategy with which colonial powers could claim progressiveness for themselves by projecting backwardness onto the colonized and, hence, legitimize exploitation. This perspective recognizes religion and secularity as co-constitutive and intertwined in power relations rather than parts of a successive order in which secularity follows religion through modernization. A particularly prominent debate in this context is the one on whether wearing a Muslim headscarf might be oppressive or emancipatory.

29 For a reconstruction of the gendered history of religion in Christianity cf. Blaschke, Religion ist weiblich; for a reconstruction and discussion of the thesis that women are more religious cf. Klein/Keller/Traunmüller, Sind Frauen tatsächlich grundsätzlich religiöser als Männer?; Neitz, Becoming Visible; Voas/McAndrew/Storm, Modernization and the Gender Gap in Religiousity.


31 E.g. Berghammer/Fliegenschnee, Developing a Concept of Muslim Religiosity; Schrijvers, Transition and Authority.

32 Asad, Formations of the Secular.

33 For an overview of this debate and a critical assessment cf. Bracke/Fadil, ‘Is the Headscarf Oppressive or Emancipatory?’.
Feminist theologies are a third strand of research that exists in a number of established religions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism (and potentially outside of religions as approaches to the spiritual). These theologies offer new interpretations of scriptures and theological concepts that can be (and are) taken up by religious feminists. Of particular interest here is a kind of parallel development to gender theory that includes the use of concepts such as intersectionality and the development of queer, trans, indigenous and postcolonial theologies.34

These three strands are all critical of androcentrism and racism within religion and the religious-secular binary. However, they are also fundamentally affirmative of religion. There is a fourth strand of research that informs this paper: research on the anti-feminist populist movement that is critical of religion. Since the UN conferences in 1994 and 1995 in Cairo and Beijing by which sexual and reproductive rights were recognized, ultra conservative religious (and secular) movements have risen and lobbied against gender rights.35 Over the last decade, research on such movements, which exist on a global scale and throughout different religions, has increased.36 This research analyzes the alliances between populist secular and religious actors against women’s reproductive and LGBTIQ* rights as well as their increased political influence in democratic states.37 Despite their anti-feminism, these movements also attract women.38 However, so far, only very prominent figures such as Gabriele Kuby in Germany have drawn significant attention, while ethnographic studies on less prominent women are yet to be conducted.

As I will show in the next section, research on religious women – including on conservative and politically active women – is predominantly based on intersubjective and empathic methodology, seeking to understand and reconstruct their positions as well as gender relations within their communities through ethnographic studies. In contrast, the study of religious-right populist movements is based on public documents, statements and political activism.

34 Cf. Walton, The History of Feminist Theology in the Academy.
35 E.g. Paternotte, Blessing the Crowds; Graff/Korolczuk, Anti-Gender Politics.
36 Kováts, Questioning Consensuses.
37 E.g. Kimura, The Rise of Right-wing Politics; Ben Shitrit, Righteous Transgressions. When I started working on this paper, the Taliban took over Afghanistan, and more recently, the US Supreme Court ruled out the general right for abortion. Moreover, in the US, queer, feminist and anti-racist books are being removed from libraries for moral and religious reasons (Fisher, I'll fight to overturn US ban on my ‘Queer Bible’ and Gabbatt, US conservatives linked to rich donors wage campaign to ban books from school). For the alliance between secular and religious right-wing populists cf. Mayer/Sauer, Kulturkampf 2.0.
38 Cf. Paternotte, Blessing the Crowd; Graff/Korolczuk, Anti-Gender Politics; Ben Shitrit, Righteous Transgressions.
Whereas studies on religious women aim to be non-judgemental in their research, research on populist movements and right-wing extremist women is informed by feminist politics aimed at enhancing pluralism and democracy and, hence, by a slightly different normative frame, though both share emancipative goals. As I will show below, there are already studies that make simultaneous use of both affirmative and critical stances toward religion. What I am interested in is developing how these stances might be linked to each other in a more systematic way and how this might provide a bridge across the religious/secular binary within feminism.

3 A Focus on “Lived Religion”: Intersubjectivity and Empathy

After this brief overview of prominent strands of research within the field of gender and religion, I will now move on to the first part of my main argument: the focus on everyday religion that has been developed by feminist religious scholars in order to make women more visible in Western religious studies. This was necessary because much research concerned church history, organizations and doctrines, in all of which women played a smaller role. In order to challenge the androcentric structure of religious studies, feminist researchers focused on empirical studies in religious communities on the ground and put “an emphasis on faith as a lived experience and the expressive and performative aspects of religious life in which gendered dimensions are crucial”.

The aim of this qualitative body of research has been to grasp lived or everyday religion in contrast to doctrinal religion and to make actual women (rather than religious figures) visible as well as to contribute to the relative power of women within religions: “Out of the focus on women grew an emphasis on women as religious actors, closely related to issues of power, such as the power to express oneself religiously, strivings for religious authority and expertise, as well as the power of formal office.” This approach is a methodology that responds to existing power relations within Western European religious organizations and research. It is easy to recognize parallels to feminist activities in secular areas such as politics and work: women needed to be made visible, and from that increased visibility, they could lobby for positions.

39 Woodhead, *Wie der Feminismus die Religionsforschung revolutioniert hat*.
Furthermore, in a time of individualization and de-institutionalization of religion, a focus on everyday religion showed that “extensive religious blending and within-group religious heterogeneity are the norm”\textsuperscript{43} rather than the exception. In this sense, this approach makes visible that people are theologically self-empowered and build their own theologies by, for instance, merging aspects of different religions.\textsuperscript{44} As a consequence, the concept of lived religion gathers situated religious knowledges instead of theological master narratives and also “challenges the Western image of religion as a unitary, organizationally defined, and relatively stable set of collective beliefs and practices”.\textsuperscript{45} Thus, the concept of lived religion is also a response to apologetic strategies of Christian churches that exclude and/or dominate other religious expressions. As a result, it is impossible to track down a single concept of religion that is important for feminist research.\textsuperscript{46} Instead, there are multiple concepts in use depending on participants and topics. The approach is, however, generally based in a constructivist understanding of religion, which “takes the concepts of religion and the secular historically, culturally and socially as contingent constructs”.\textsuperscript{47}

The epistemological and methodological basis of this body of research is a non-judgmental or empathic attitude on the side of the researcher.\textsuperscript{48} Empathy is based on intersubjectivity and represents one of the major feminist approaches to research participants and their knowledge(s) that has been used in numerous fields (religious as well as secular) in which women’s lived experience has been researched. As Clare Hemmings points out, the approach stresses the importance of the feminist researcher extending her view beyond her own subjective concerns and imagining the world, or knowledge, through the eyes of the other. It contrasts autonomy with intersubjectivity and finds the latter to be both more valuable and more in tune with the collective practices and the epistemological judgments marginalized communities make.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{43} McGuire, \textit{Lived Religion}, p. 186.
\textsuperscript{44} Cf. Gebhardt, \textit{Experte seiner selbst}; McGuire, \textit{Lived Religion}.
\textsuperscript{45} McGuire, \textit{Lived Religion}, p. 188.
\textsuperscript{46} There are several alternative terms for religion such as spirituality and metaphysics that are sometimes preferred by people in the field. As a shortcut, I use religion throughout the article.
\textsuperscript{48} Cf. Woodhead, \textit{Afterword}; Ben Shitrit, \textit{Righteous Transgressions}.
\textsuperscript{49} Hemmings, \textit{Why Stories Matter}, p. 196.
In this sense, feminist researchers on women, gender and religion as well as critical research on secularism have made use of this methodology in order to reconstruct their understanding and practice of religion. Furthermore, these methodologies have not been used exclusively in relation to women's perspectives, but in research about various social groups and issues such as LGBTQ* people and intersectionality, both in terms of the study on the religious and secular topics. What distinguishes the study on women, gender and religion from other feminist research fields is a stronger focus on a reconstruction of religious meanings. Even though the power relation between institutionalized and lived religion plays an important role, there is less of an interest in an analysis of power relations within the everyday religious compared to other fields. However, over the last decade, this attitude has slightly changed. For instance, Kim Knibbe analyzes how the power of the secular works on marginalized Pentecostal communities in the Netherlands. In another example, Kim Knibbe and Anna Fedele examine how “spiritual practices, often described as liberating and empowering, [...] create new gendered hierarchies” by analyzing the gender constructions that underlie these practices. Furthermore, Eline Huuygens and Nella van den Brandt simultaneously point to the invisibility of Christian and the hypervisibility of veiled Muslim women in Western European societies and raise questions about racist comments made by Huuygen’s Catholic women participants, pointing already to the idea of double critique.

As mentioned above, this research attempts to intersubjectively reconstruct these (mostly) women’s perspectives. The question I want to take forward here is, if such perspectives are necessarily and always politically neutral or innocent and in need of protection. In order to make my point clearer, I would like to bring in Donna Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledges” that similarly to the situatedness of theologies and religious practices include a critical perspective on knowledges as embodied. For Haraway, socially positioned not only refers to being situated in individual family or community practices, traditions and perspectives but to an entanglement within a complexity of power relations. On the one hand, this perspective inhibits the view from nowhere

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50 Cf. Gemzöe/Keinänen/Maddrill, Contemporary Encounters.
51 E.g. Schrijvers, Transition and Authority.
52 Biographical research regularly reconstructs how structural power relations also structure individual life accounts.
53 Knibbe, Secularist Understandings of Pentecostal Healing Practices in Amsterdam.
54 Fedele/Knibbe, From Angel in the Home to Sacred Prostitute, p. 195.
56 Haraway, Situated Knowledges.
that (in the context of the natural sciences) Haraway called the “god trick”\textsuperscript{57} and which stands for religious master narratives. On the other, it complicates intersubjective research and, hence, the perspective on the religious subject that empowers itself religiously and defines their own theology. Being situated and entangled in power relations necessitates an ethical perspective on if, and if so, what kinds of powers an individual theology exerts over others. How, for example, could intersectional feminist researchers go about doing fieldwork with anti-feminist women activists and interpreting their data? While intersubjective methodology might be useful for reconstructing their perspectives, an additional layer of critical engagement with their oppressive, anti-feminist, gender-restrictive and racist attitudes would be necessary in order to deconstruct discourses that aim to restrict or even endanger other people’s lives.

4 “Conservative” Religious Women’s Agency and Subjectivity\textsuperscript{58}

The debate on the meaning of agency is strongly connected to the feminist methodology of intersubjectivity and empathy. One understanding of agency frames it in terms of resisting dominant norms or power structures and trying to change them,\textsuperscript{59} which is also the perspective taken in research on “lived religion". At the same time, this form of agency as resistance as well as the feminist focus on the subordination of women and the subversion of norms has been questioned in feminist religious studies. Scholars have argued that the fact that women stay in or move into patriarchal religious communities or practices cannot be investigated in a frame of either subordination or emancipation but requires an engagement with the meanings that women attach to their religion. Saba Mahmood’s study on pious Muslim women in Egypt was groundbreaking here and continues to be influential.\textsuperscript{60} It had a particularly significant impact on feminist debates regarding what post-secular engagement in religion might mean.\textsuperscript{61} For this reason, I would like to engage with some aspects of her critique and her concept of agency.

Mahmood built on a different tradition than Christian-dominated Western religious studies. However, as an anthropologist embedded in feminist political

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{57} Haraway, \textit{Situated Knowledges}, p. 581.
\item\textsuperscript{58} I use inverted commas because terms such as “conservative” or “traditional” usually mark a temporality that is not given, as gender restrictive movements as well are modern and are constantly being re-invented.
\item\textsuperscript{59} Cf. Hemmings, \textit{Why Stories Matter}.
\item\textsuperscript{60} Mahmood, \textit{Pious Women}.
\item\textsuperscript{61} E.g. Braidotti, \textit{Postsecular Paradoxes}.
\end{footnotes}
discourses, she followed the same non-judgmental intersubjective feminist methodology as research on lived religion. In contrast to a feminist concept of agency as resistance, which she criticized as a concept based in Western secular liberalism, Mahmood – “by imagining the world or knowledge through the eyes of the other”62 – developed the concept of “agency as ethical self-formation”63 or “agency as docility”: an agency that is based on religious ethics as taught and learned. Such agency also has the potential to bring about social transformation, but it is not based in women's resistance to patriarchal religious structures but rather in a subtler way of making use of these structures for one’s religious convictions. This notion of agency has been taken up in several studies on religious women in patriarchal religious communities. For instance, Orit Avishai used it as a basis to interpret the religious practices of orthodox Jewish Israeli women in terms of “agency as religious conduct” or “doing religion”.64 Lena Gemzöe, Marja-Liisa Keinänen and Avril Maddrill drew links between Mahmood’s concept and Jill Dubisch's study on Greek women who participate in traditional Christian pilgrimages and interpreted these women’s agency as “doing religion” as well.65 Sarah Bracke and Nadia Fadil used the concept as a way out of the subordinate/resistant dichotomy in terms of which women wearing a veil are often framed.66 And Tanya Zion-Waldok used Mahmood’s concept of agency in her study on orthodox Jewish women waiting for divorce that display different levels of feminism in using their learned religion to challenge religious leadership.67

Mahmood's work has also been inspirational for Andrea Pető’s historical research on women on the far right.68 This connection between Pető’s and Mahmood’s work might open up the debate on whether there might be similarities among women who follow patriarchal and/or illiberal worldviews across different cultural contexts. Indeed, such similarities are implied by the current global alliance of right-wing religious and secular activists. The example also makes it clear that “agency” can be an empty term and needs to be qualified.69 An agency that is directed towards anti-democratic goals needs to be critically engaged with. Furthermore, similarities in religious and secular illiberal

63 Mahmood, Pious Women, p. 32.
64 Avishai, ‘Doing Religion’ in a Secular World.
65 Gemzöe/Keinänen/Maddrill, Contemporary Encounters: Introduction.
66 Bracke/Fadil, ‘Is the Headscarf Oppressive or Emancipatory?’.
67 Zion Waldok, Politics of Devoted Resistance.
69 Zion Waldoks is one example of an analysis of different forms and shades of feminism among Jewish Orthodox women/feminists cf., Politics of Devoted Resistance.
worldviews point to (potential) similarities in values between religious and secular feminists or to feminist values that bridge the religious/secular binary.

Mahmood’s concept of agency is based on a Foucaultian understanding of subjectivity in which individuals develop a relationship with the moral codes of the societies they live in. This also implies a notion of power as something that needs to be negotiated instead of something that is simply being imposed on the women. In this understanding, “the kind of agency”70 Mahmood was concerned with “does not belong to the women themselves, but is a product of the historically contingent discursive traditions in which they are located”.71 Even though Mahmood often thematized her feeling uncomfortable with her participants views, she strictly refrained from questioning or criticizing them and the discourses they follow. Even though I agree with her use of Foucault’s post-structural understanding of subjectivity, there is something here that makes me uncomfortable. The notion that all of us are located in “historically contingent discursive traditions” – as Mahmood articulated it – and that our ethics of the self are a result of this location is somewhat of a truism for post-structuralists. More generally, I cannot shed the impression that this understanding of these women’s location in a non-Western post-colonial context somehow fixes them culturally.72 Even though this perspective goes hand in hand with McGuire’s concept of lived religion and also with Haraway’s situated knowledges, there is something missing here: There is never only one influential strand of discursive traditions, but several contradictory ones. Mahmood herself mentioned the many different discourses on Islam that were present in Cairo while she was conducting her study. She also mentions that women take on different veiling practices within the community. Hence, the particular discourse they follow cannot be interpreted as being determined by ‘a culture’ or their experiences of post-colonial pressure. Clearly, the women of the mosque movement were not forced to follow this particular discursive tradition and they choose different ways of doing it. By becoming part of the mosque movement, they empowered themselves as religious subjects and also tried to direct others, as Mahmood very clearly observed. Thus, even though they made such choices within a certain discursive frame that shaped their subjectivity, it was not their “fate” to follow the mosque movement – simply determined by one set of discourses instead of a God they believed in. As a consequence, it is possible to question what made them do so.

70 Mahmood, *Pious Women*, p. 32.
71 Mahmood, *Pious Women*, p. 32.
72 Sadia Abbas also interprets Mahmood’s way of representing Egyptian culture as monolithic, cf. Abbas, *At Freedom’s Limit*. 

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Post-structural perspectives on subjectivity more generally take into account what is less or un-conscious; ruptures and breaks are focused on in order to elucidate the complexity of the power structures a subject is entangled in and with, even though (or exactly because) accounts of the self are built on fictions of homogenous subjectivities (as is, for instance, well established in biographical research). Post-structural perspectives on subjectivity more generally take into account what is less or un-conscious; ruptures and breaks are focused on in order to elucidate the complexity of the power structures a subject is entangled in and with, even though (or exactly because) accounts of the self are built on fictions of homogenous subjectivities (as is, for instance, well established in biographical research).73 Agency, however, is often understood in terms of an intention to do something, a particular goal one follows. For example, religious women claim an intention to follow their religion or to be docile and, from a partial perspective, this is taken as face value. Mahmood does not dissolve this contradiction. However, Sherine Hafez offers an intriguing solution. Hafez bases her study on Islamic women activists in Cairo on two theoretical aspects: a) an understanding of Islam as discursive and, thus, changing and b) Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of subjectivation as based on desire. Her focus, thus, is on the women’s desire that is per se never complete but in a constant state of becoming and, hence, unstable and not at all unitary and directed toward just one goal. The women do not have just one desire but a mixture of religious and secular desires. This approach allows Hafez to analyze the subjectivities of the women in her study as shaped by both postcolonial and gendered power relations of both spheres, the religious and the secular. This enables her to take a more critical stance on her research participants’ attitudes.

Mahmood refrained from criticizing the women she researched also because she engaged with their perspectives in a frame that is critical of postcolonial power structures that neglect religious non-Western subjectivities. However, as Ina Kerner points out in her article on intersectionality in transnational feminisms, it is not only feminist and gender equality discourses that are instrumentalized in nationalist discourses in the West. Culture and religion can be similarly made use of in order to justify patriarchal, nationalist and even right-wing extremist positions. This can be seen in current populist-right anti-abortion and anti-migration discourses around the globe. Kerner refers to Sadia Abbas and Abdelkebir Kathibi who both argue for a double critique in research on postcolonial subjectivities: a critique of power structures between the formerly colonized and the colonizers as well as a critique of patriarchal discourses in the former colonies. Applied to the relation between the religious and the secular, we need a critique of power structures that render women invisible – and we simultaneously need a critique of their oppressive discourses

73 Cf. Scholz, Männlichkeit erzählen.
74 Hafez, An Islam of Her Own.
75 Kerner, Provinzialismus und Semi-Intersektionalität.
76 Abbas, At Freedom’s Limit; Kathibi, Plural Maghreb.
instead of culturally fixing something like a religious identity that is necessarily anti-feminist because of the assumption that all religion is.\textsuperscript{77}

The issue was also taken up by Lihi Ben Shitrit in her study on women activists in the Israeli and Palestinian religious right.\textsuperscript{78} These women on either “side” of the conflict legitimized their political activity via the exceptional and urgent political situation they lived in. Under different circumstances, such activism would not be appropriate – from their perspective – for women. Trying to follow Mahmood’s methodology, she “struggled with whether or not to offer judgment or critique of frames of exception and women’s activism in the religious-nationalist movements”.\textsuperscript{79} The “frames of exception” are used to justify discourses that by any feminist standard would be deemed unacceptable. To begin with, the women in her study constructed an “Other” (a racialised enemy) in order to explain their need for activism. Secondly, by framing their activism as exceptional, they reinforced oppressive gender constructions. Ben Shitrit is critical of attempting to take a partial perspective that sides with these women (as marginalized subjects within their religion). She concludes that “the question of women’s equality and emancipation as a desired commitment should be raised in a work that upholds a feminist lens”,\textsuperscript{80} which among other aspects includes empathy and intersubjectivity instead of the oppression of other “Others”. Hence, her “feminist lens” makes use of an intersectional perspective.

5 Including Religious Feminisms

Research on religious women in rather patriarchal communities potentially implies a gap between religious women and secular feminists. This is the case, when religious women are criticized from the basis of secular feminist ideas. As Ben Shitrit and Ina Kerner demonstrate, it is convincing to apply double critique from a secular perspective. However, by following such approaches the question arises, whether religious women forever have to remain the “Other” for secular feminist researchers or whether it could be possible at all to find

\textsuperscript{77} One example of such a critical reflection of a feminist religious movement that nevertheless is exclusionary with regard to race is Kavita Maya’s approach to the feminist Goddess movement, in: \textit{Arachne’s Voice}.

\textsuperscript{78} Ben Shitrit, \textit{Righteous Transgressions}.

\textsuperscript{79} Ben Shitrit, \textit{Righteous Transgressions}, p. 227.

\textsuperscript{80} Ben Shitrit, \textit{Righteous Transgressions}, p. 227. This line of thought has also been followed by Sadia Abbas who suggests a double critique of both because “feminist concern – within colonized, postcolonial, decolonized, reimperiled cultures, diasporas, societies, nations – cannot be postponed” (Abbas, \textit{At Freedom’s Limit}, p. 71).
something like a common ground? Let me engage with this question by referring to another example of my reading of Mahmood’s *Pious Women*. What runs through Mahmood’s text is a juxtaposition of her pious participants’ religious attitudes versus liberal secular feminism, whereas other possible voices are not taken into account. For example, Mahmood describes a bus ride on which she encounters a woman who is over thirty, which in Egypt means that she is beyond the regular age for getting married. The woman told a religious teacher about having been proposed to by a man already married to another woman. The teacher’s advice was to have him propose to her parents so that they might evaluate if he would be an appropriate husband. Mahmood was astonished by this answer and inquired further the next day. According to the woman, the teacher talked about the difficulties faced by unmarried women past a certain age and suggested that “you have to have a very strong personality … for all of this not to affect you”.

When asked what that meant in practice, she answered that one “must be patient in the face of difficulty”. Mahmood then recounts that she discussed this issue with a secular friend living in Cairo who agreed that unmarried women faced hardships but opposed the necessity of patience on a feminist basis. Mahmood interprets this as the opposition between religion and liberal feminist secularism. However, I ask myself what a feminist Muslim might have said on this issue. Would she have agreed on the importance of patience in this context of injustice?

There has been an increase in research on religious feminists. For instance, Kristin Aune has researched the spiritual interests of feminists and Nella van den Brandt argued against the assumption of a juxtaposition of religion and feminism by studying religion-based feminist organizations in Belgium.

Subsequently, Chia Longman interrogated the feminist potentials of (spiritual) women’s circles and Tanya Zion-Waldok analyzed different forms of feminism among Jewish orthodox women. As Zion-Waldoks’ study also makes clear, piousness is not necessarily always the same. It can be feminist to different degrees or even anti-feminist.

Mahmood has been criticized before for silencing Muslim feminists, Islamic feminists and secular Muslim feminists who might all have provided different answers to these problems. I take this example up here for two reasons: a) because I believe that at a time at which there is an oppressive anti-feminist

85 E.g. Abbas, *At Freedom’s Limit*. 

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 alliance between the religious and the secular right, we need a strong feminist alliance to counter it; and b) because I am convinced that secular feminists need to include discourses that reflect feminist religious and theologian perspectives in order to make it clear that religious discourses are diverse. They entail very different theological perspectives on gender and, thus, range on a scale between emancipatory and illiberal and effects for women and LGBTIQ* as well as for racialized individuals and communities. As a result, religious women are not forced to stick to one particular interpretation of their religion. There might be completely different desires than religious ones that make them adhere to certain discourses and by holding on to oppressive perspectives they theologically (and potentially politically) empower themselves over others.

Therefore, when women choose a religious community, as the women of the mosque movement in Mahmood’s study did, it is hard not to see that they are accountable for the particular interpretation they follow. It is, therefore, possible to reflect critically on the effects of that interpretation (and their activism) for other women or marginalized groups. This is not entirely new, as I showed with the example of Ben Shitrit’s study on religious right-wing activists in Israel and Palestine. However, taking religious and theological feminist discourses into account means that these women’s narratives can be analyzed and critically reflected on from within their worldview. Religious feminisms and intersectional feminist theologies provide reference points against which individually applied religious discourses can be reflected on.

Including religious and theologian feminist discourses is no easy task, since neither religious nor secular feminisms are monolithic but rather diversified and often contentious. Furthermore, the epistemological gap between an immanent and a transcendent worldview is immense. However, Bender and Taves suggest the possibility of bridging the secular-religious binary via values. Taking this as a starting point, feminists could look for shared discourses of social and political values in order to overcome the epistemological divide between the immanent and the transcendent.86

6 Conclusions

To sum up, we are confronted with a global alliance on the religious right that goes across the secular-religious binary. This alliance also consists of women who might be marginalized within their communities but at the same time

86 Bender/Taves, What Matters.
lobby for illiberal, antifeminist and racist ideas. In this paper, I discussed the two concepts of “lived religion” and “agency” that both operate with an inter-subjective and partial perspective in order to investigate how women manage their marginalization within religious communities and live their religion on a daily basis. Such research might include women who are part of the global antifeminist movements, sympathize with them or are otherwise involved in processes of othering, racialization, exclusion and marginalization. As a consequence, research on religion, women and gender, needs to more clearly analyze a complexity of intersecting power relations, including a) between the religious and the secular, b) within religious communities and c) between insiders and outsiders of religious communities, hence, also power relations between different religions in specific localities as well as the effects of their political activism. Feminist researchers should not only discuss how religious women are subjected to power and marginalized within their (patriarchal) communities but also interrogate how these women and their discourses might reinforce gender and other discriminatory constructions and how they may do so in order to improve their own position. For activists, this could be one step in identifying ethical values that bridge the secular/religious binary within feminism and strengthen the relationship between feminists across the secular/religious binary. For researchers, this is a call for more interdisciplinary studies on the religious including a clear focus on intersectionality in terms of research on intersecting power structures.

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Bio

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