

# Reflections on the Refracted Dynamics of Gender, Politics and Religion

*Key Note Address*

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I would like to thank the organisers for the honour of giving the key note address.

## **Introduction: emerging commonalities**

Although I shall draw upon my own research, I shall not be presenting the Pakistan case study. Instead I will pull out some key threads that emerge from the papers of the collaborative research project of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung and the United Nations Research Institute on Social Development (UNRISD) on *Gender equality, politics and religion*.<sup>1</sup> Commonalities are all the more striking given the fairly diverse countries of study: Chile and Mexico in South America and the USA in North America, Nigeria in Africa, Turkey, Iran and Israel in the Middle East, Poland and Serbia in Europe and India and Pakistan in South Asia. Based on these commonalities, and some divergences, I hope to present issues/areas needing further research and some questions for activists in the women's movement.

I titled this presentation *Refracted Dynamics of Gender, Politics and Religion* because the relationship between religion, gender, political processes and actors is both complex and complicated. The religion-politics-gender nexus defies simplistic equations of the '1 + 1 = 2' kind as well as the 'if you have a, and then add b, this inevitably leads to c' variety. As I noted in my own paper 'The interface of religion, politics and gender illustrates the impossibility of separating out the realms of the social from the political, the public from the private... everyday life is not neatly packaged into self-contained spaces but flows freely, impacting different dimensions simultaneously.' (Shaheed, 2010:851) Conceptual separations of the political from the cultural, social or economic spheres may be helpful for analysis, but blur in real life. 'Public political contestations are often provoked by women's actions in what are defined as social, rather than political spaces' - such as women's apparel, social interactions, and leisure-time activities. Conversely, political discourses and the result of political negotiations directly impact women's everyday life in the shape of legislation, policies, personal status law, development initiatives etc. that exclude or include women and promote, grant or deny them rights.

Using an exclusive political science lens, centered on state power dynamics, is grossly inadequate to study the fusing of politics and religion and its impact on women. It is precisely in the interface of so-called private and public life that gendered politics are most intense and where, adding religion to the mix, poses such a challenge. Sexuality emerges as a leit motif in the studies, a number of which specifically focus on women's sexual and reproductive rights (e.g. abortion, sex education, family law matters, dress codes), and control over women's sexuality is the fulcrum of gender politics. Yet, sexuality is not a subject considered by classical political science as central to political processes.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Unhappy Marriage of Religion and Politics: Problems and Pitfalls for Gender Equality, Special Issue, Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No 6, 2010

The complexities and interweaving of the social, religious and political, of the personal and the public is richly illustrated by the diverse studies undertaken.

### ***Religion vs. the use of religion in the public and political sphere***

It is well to recall, as pointed out by Razavi and Jenichen in their introductory piece,<sup>2</sup> that the backdrop of the studies: the rising hegemony of the neo-liberal economic model and growing transnational networks of finance (and activism) and, I would add, of the nation-state paradigm being challenged by both transnational economic forces and other forces such as the political Islamists, e.g. the Taliban.

The general consensus of the researchers is that religion *per se* is not the issue. As stated in the US study, “‘religion,’ is not in and of itself determinative of the political response to sexual and gender inequalities. ...the political influence of religious actors alone is not determinative of policy’ (Bernstein and Jakobsen, 2010: 1036) The problem is a privileging of *particular* religious institutions within the context of the power dynamics of socio-economic and political contestations located in, and resulting from, specific historical moments. It should be stressed that the preeminence of particular religious institutions and traditions indicates a self-serving selection process influenced by power disparities. The question needing to be addressed is why divergent historical realities have led to a contemporary privileging of religious institutions in both state and society in so many parts of the world. Significantly, with the exception of Iran and possibly Israel, in none of the countries of study is the State controlled by religiously defined elements, or representatives of the official religion. Rather, it is the alliances with those in - or aspiring to - State power that consolidates and extends the power of religious institutions.

It also needs to be said that, with the exception of Hinduism in India, the religions in the studies are Abrahamic traditions: Judaism in Israel, the protestant and Catholic churches of Christianity, Sunni and Shia tendencies in Islam. These are all institutionalized religions, meaning that, contestations notwithstanding, they have specific entities (individuals, offices or positions) that are considered to be authoritative. All the religious traditions examined have strong institutional and material bases which have been inherited (e.g. churches) or acquired a material bases where previously none existed (e.g. the Hindutva in India and Muslim Islamists in Pakistan and Nigeria.) In none of these traditions is leadership elected through a democratic process that involves the polity, or even the faithful, as a whole. This is important for reasons that I return to later. An important feature of institutionalized religions is their ability to be networked amongst themselves. This, and the fact that they are usually not treated as political actors, increases their freedom to operate in a cycle of power: they enjoy legitimacy; they are allowed to continue to function even when other ‘political actors’ are restricted; consequently they are able to provide space for dissent. This cycle further increases their legitimacy in the eyes of the marginalized.

None of the case studies examined situations where differently organized religions with dissimilar cosmovisions exist in which, for example, instead of people choosing their religion, goddesses and gods choose their representatives on earth (e.g. the Condomble religion in Brazil). Studying such religions would perhaps shed a different light on the interrelationship between religion gender and politics. The very absence of these traditions, however, does suggest their marginalization in the political arena.

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<sup>2</sup> S. Razavi, and A. Jenichen. 2010. ‘*The Unhappy Marriage of Religion and Politics: Problems and Pitfalls for Gender Equality*’, pp. 833-850 *The Unhappy Marriage of Religion and Politics: Problems and Pitfalls for Gender Equality, Special Issue, Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No 6, 2010

## Questions of State & society

### *The secular nature and role of the State*

A first question needing to be addressed is what a secular state means. Even agreeing with the Mexico study that the ‘secular state has been a necessary condition for the emergence and growth of modern struggles for women’s human rights in the country’, (Amuchástegui et. al., 2010:990) what it means for a State to be secular remains unclear. The separation of religion and state is not always clear even in States that are officially secular. In India, for example, Zoya Hassan points out that ‘secularism was adapted to suit Indian conditions in ways that enabled it to combine with and respond to the demands of statecraft, while incorporating the religious ideals of Gandhi, on the one hand, and the modernist outlook of Jawaharlal Nehru, on the other.’ In practical terms, she argues, the state reserves the right to interfere in the affairs of the majority religion to eliminate practices considered unacceptable in a modern nation-state and/or at odds with rights under the constitution, but absolves itself of such responsibility with respect to the communities of minority religions. The result is ‘two paradoxes. India is secular and yet ordinary Indians no longer have access to public institutions except on the basis of religious and social identities. The other is the protection of conservatism among Muslims which is the effect of a secularism that envisages state intervention in the affairs of the majority religion but strict non-intervention in that of minority religions, paradoxically, in the name of secularism.’ (Hassan, 2010: 941, 951)

In the USA, the First Amendment to the constitution stipulates the disestablishment of religion from government and protection for the free exercise of religion, stating that ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof’. Bernstein and Jakobsen contend this has never been realized historically; the US Supreme Court has twice ruled that ‘public Christianity is secular rather than religious’, leading to considerable debate about what ‘disestablishment’ and ‘free exercise’ principles mean.<sup>3</sup> The country experiences a Protestant secular hegemony which, at different points in history, has both excluded other religious groups and variously sutured them into hegemonic understandings. The problem the researchers identify is that, ‘Almost everyone in this debate is working with a model of religion that is historically and culturally bound in ways that are rarely fully acknowledged’. Consequently, even those engaged in debates over free exercise ‘sincerely committed to pluralism’ are trapped by the fact that ‘the diverse American religions they celebrate all look a lot like evangelical Protestantism’.

While Poland is a constitutionally secular State, the 1998 *Concordat* signed with the Holy See *de facto* acknowledges the Catholic Church as an essential entity of Polish society and history. Although religion and state are not merged, religion exerts palpable authority through the state and through political parties. (Heinen and Portet, 2010) In Nigeria, section 10 of the Constitution states that: ‘The Government of the Federation or of a state shall not adopt any religion as a State Religion’. Christians have argued that this provision means that the country is secular, a position rejected by political Islamist activists.(Pereira and Ibrahim, 2010) In Turkey, the Constitution forbids even proposing to change republican secularism, and yet there is no full separation since a Directorate of Religious Affairs allows the State to oversee religious matters and shape religious activity. This enables the State to have a say in how religious functionaries interpret

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<sup>3</sup> Lynch v. Donnelly and Allegheny County v. ACLU ‘Court ruled that the display of religious symbols at public expense or on public property at Christmastime was an essentially secular act.’ Cited in Bernstein and Jakobsen op. cit. p. 1025

religion and what the preachers and prayer leaders can or cannot say in Friday sermons. (Arat, 2010) So, separate perhaps, but not entirely divorced. Of course in Iran, Israel and Pakistan, the State is conferred a specific religion although in Israel the majority of its citizens are said to self-identify as secular (Halperin-Kaddari and Yadgar, 2010).

Since the conjoining of politics and religion – to women’s detriment – is being witnessed in all these countries, answers need to be found beyond the official secular or religious nature of the State. The less than full divorce between religion and State in even avowedly secular States suggests the need to further explore and debate exactly what are – or should be - the parameters of the relationship between religion and State power: who, for example, would be entitled to legally intervene, at what point, for what purpose.

*Linkages to nation-state identities:*

Intricate linkages tying Nation-state projects to religion are especially important in times of transformations. Hence, according to Rada Drezgić,(2010) nationalism became the meeting point of religion and secular politics in Serbia: religion serving as a *differentia specifica* among otherwise closely-related ethno-national groups that were ethnically, culturally and linguistically hardly distinguishable. Starting in late 1980s, a de-secularisation in former Yugoslavia transformed society from being highly secularised to high rates of religious identification, peaking during the 1990s Yugoslav wars. Religion gained a privileged position in society and State *not because it offered salvation* but as an inherent marker of culture and national identity. Within the nation-state project, ‘women [were] simultaneously mythologised as the nation’s deepest essence and instrumentalised in their “natural” difference—as the nation’s life/birth saver/producer’. (Drezgić, 2010: 958) <sup>4</sup> The use of religion by politicians seeking to meld the people into one nation-state threw open the space for more specifically defined politico-religious elements. The net result, after 2000, is that society and state underwent a re-traditionalisation and re-patriarchalisation of gender roles within the domestic realm, and a model of ‘religious nationalism’ replaced the earlier ‘instrumental pious nationalism’ of the 1990s.

In Pakistan, I have argued that ‘Had the secular elements [including the military] not used Islam for political ends so consistently, in the process promoting a notion of “Muslim nationhood”, politico-religious groups could not have so steadily inscribed religion into the body text of politics, state and society.’(Shaheed, 2010: 853) The starting ‘uncertain liberalism’ of the elite that assumed power at independence became even shakier when it came to women. The socially liberal General Ayub Khan (1958-1968) had no compunctions about mobilising an anti-woman-head-of-state *fatwa* (religious opinion) in the 1965 presidential elections against his opposing candidate, Fatima Jinnah. Starting with the 1954 closure of the Women’s National Guard and Naval Reserve following an outcry by politically peripheral religious elements that young women being trained for self defence by males was unIslamic, rulers have regularly caved in to the demands of the religious right to curtail women’s rights and spaces,. The Chilean study also notes the ‘left-wing timidity’ on contentious issues, which is attributed to political instability in a nascent democracy. (Guzman, Seibert and Staab, 2010)

In Pakistan a major component of the Nation-state project was constructing a national identity in opposition to a ‘Hindu India,’ while on the other side of the border, minorities in India became

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<sup>4</sup> Ž Papić, ‘Europe after 1989: Ethnic Wars, the Fascitization of Civil Society and Body Politics in Serbia’, in G Griffin, R Braidotti (eds) *Thinking differently: a reader in European women's studies*, (Zed Books, 2002) p 128; cited in Drezgić 2010.

frozen into religious identities and, as a result, ‘Muslims and Muslim women continue to be defined by birth-bound identities.’ In Nigeria, and in much of Africa, a key aspect of national ‘boundary-building’ has been the use of women to map the territory and to delimit the boundaries. Women are ‘constructed as bearers of culture, including religion and tradition, across the African continent... densely laden with meaning and symbolic value,’<sup>5</sup> so that, as pointed out by Mohanram ‘the woman’s body functions as a mediator for the male citizens to experience the ... nation as ... comforting and familiar’. Consequently, as stated by Hoodfar and Sadr: ‘women have been targeted as markers of identity, made the object of social and economic policies and restrictive legal reforms, with major resources directed to their implementation.’ (2010: 886)

### ***The State & its resources:***

The ability of religious institutions to access State resources merits further investigation and documentation. Access sometimes takes the form of subsidies for/underwriting particular activities, but can also consist of privileged treatment and promotion of the conservative religious rhetoric by State institutions. As Drezgić, echoing Bernstein and Jakobsen with reference to the US, says of Serbia: it is ‘power struggles and party politics [that] shape the relationship between the Church and the state. (2010: 965) Hence, the Church was unable to exercise direct influence until it became aligned with state institutional power. Alignment has material consequences and, for instance, the Serbian Ministry of Culture provided financial support for activities of the pro-life movement while the government banned the 8 March demonstration planned by the feminists of Women in Black. This differentiated treatment of conservative and gender equality projects was seen in Pakistan during the standoff around the Red Mosque No action was taken to stop young women of a religious seminary who were not only protesting but had taken over a government building and then kidnapped a woman and her relatives. These ‘young misguided daughters’, the President said, were to be excused. ‘Had “secular” women’s rights activists undertaken similar action, they would have been unceremoniously arrested’. (Shaheed, 2010: 863)

State resources in Nigeria underwrite Muslim activities by, for example, subsidising Muslim pilgrims for *hajj*, and State takeovers of missionary schools. Researchers point out that in Mexico ‘because the Catholic Church legally lacked privileges in the public sphere, as well as a prominent position that could enable it to openly put pressure on politicians’, the ‘State did not need to legitimate its power before religious institutions, nor negotiate citizens’ rights...However, the constitutional changes of 1992 granted it an increasing public presence’. (Amuchástegui et. al., 2010:998) In Turkey, the Directorate of Religious Affairs which is part of the secular state apparatus and the highest religious authority in the country has started to ‘exhort women not to use perfume outside their homes, not to remain alone with men who were not relatives, and not to flirt.’ (Arat, 2010:875) In the USA, as ‘domestic trafficking’ became equated with ‘sex trafficking’ the federal government provided US \$5 Million worth of grants to support weekly patrols. ‘These new provisions became federal law through the intimate collaborations of devoted evangelical and feminist anti-trafficking activists and neo-conservative Washington think tanks’. (Bernstein and Jakobsen, 2010:1035) As Hoodfar and Sadr (2010) argue, the combined use of the instruments of the state and of particular, conservative religious ideologies to suppress dissent and/or advance political agendas is hugely problematic.

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<sup>5</sup> A Mama, ‘Shedding the Masks and Tearing the Veils: Cultural Studies for a Post-Colonial Africa’, in A Imam, F Sow and A Mama (eds), *Engendering African Social Sciences*, Dakar, CODESRIA, 1997, cited in Pereira and Ibrahim, 2010.

It is important to document and interrogate State spending and decision-making regarding religious institutions and groups, including those who, regardless of activities, may be religiously labeled, not least because at the end of the day, this is tax-payers' money.

*What is left and right politics in today's world?*

A second important question raised by a reading of the studies is the need to reconsider classical thinking about progressive and conservative forces, about 'Right-wing' and 'Left-wing' politics in the contemporary world. If politico-religious groups and institutions find their natural allies in Right-wing political parties, the left-right divide does not follow similar fault-lines in all situations; it also shifts with time and changed circumstances. In Iran, for instance, between 1979-1997, distinctions of right and left politics were primarily based on the positions adopted on economic policies: the 'Left' was defined as those favouring nationalisation and a greater regulation of the economy by the state; the 'Right' as those favouring a more liberal economy and more privatisation. Where the 'Left' tended to be more progressive on issues of democracy and women's rights, the economic liberals, particularly under Rafsanjani (1989-1997), more strongly advocated improving women's legal status and access to education. In 1997, following Khatami's unexpected success, the categorisation of political parties/factions shifted from positionality on economic policies to that on social and political issues, in which gender became a more central issue. (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010) Poland 'does not fit neatly into the basic left-right dichotomy' either since the left coalition supported progressive agrarian reforms and economic policies but held traditionalist views with respect to women (Heinen and Portet, 2010: 1010) In Israel, the left focuses on the peace movement, leaving out issues of gender related to personal freedoms and democratic rights, while 'feminist endeavours...have taken place on the socio-economic sphere (i.e. issues of redistribution, welfare, class divisions etc.)..., or what could be termed as the Israeli class divide'. (Halperin-Kaddari and Yadgar, 2010:913) Women activists have not engaged in what are usually considered to be the 'real' ideological-political schisms in Israel: the right-left divide (which in Israel denotes the national conflict), and the religious-secular divide. In Mexico, which disinvested the Church of its assets in the 1920s, the church has re-emerged today as a force and 'the character and nature of the Mexican (secular) state has become an arena of intense struggle'. (Amuchástegui et. al., 2010: 989)

The 'new Right' in the USA emerged thanks to an alliance of predominantly religious 'social conservatives' and predominantly secular 'fiscal conservatives' within the Republican Party, despite class interests that were often at odds. Fiscal conservatives, understood as free-marketeters, the authors argue, resist government regulation, even while encouraging forms of regulation that meet their own interests. For their part, the social conservatives, whose class position suggests that they might stand to benefit from a more economically interventionist welfare state, embrace the free market and urge government regulation in private life and other areas, like broadcasting. (Bernstein and Jakobsen, 2010: 1028). In Pakistan, the mainstream political parties are known to regularly ally themselves with politico-religious parties and groups or to adopt their language and agenda points even if they are nominally 'secular'.

### **Alliances: ends, means and outcomes:**

*Politics and moral authority*

Religion plays into power politics regardless of whether the aim is to justify illegitimate regimes, such as General Zia-ul-Haq's usurpation of power in Pakistan, or to bolster new democratically

elected governments, underlining the need to marshal new conceptual understandings of the dynamics that allow and support the increased presence of religion in the political sphere. An important factor in the politics-religion nexus may be the real or imagined legitimacy enjoyed by religious institutions, especially amongst socially disadvantaged segments of society such as the poor and rural populations.

The studies reveal that religious institutions enjoy a strong moral authority in certain States because of the historical role they played in defiance of and in opposition to a repressive authoritarian regime, providing people with much-needed sanctuaries and spaces for discussion and dissent forbidden in the public sphere. This is notably the case of Chile and Poland, where the church became the only safe space to congregate, not just for the faithful but for citizens as a whole. (Guzmán, Seibert and Staab, 2010; Heinen and Portet, 2010) Mosques and religious institutions in Iran played a similar role during the Shah's autocratic rule where the Shah's regime was 'careful not to tinker with [religious institutions] them too much. Therefore mosques were the only space that remained relatively open to the public.' (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010: 889) The ability to offer a relatively safe stand-in for the public sphere allows religious institutions to exercise considerable influence at a particular point of time, a reputation they and their successors 'continue to collect the debt' for as Guzman, Seibert and Staab put it in their study on Chile. But the opposite can also happen. Religious institutions may be associated with oppressive regimes, such as in Pakistan especially under Zia's military dictatorship, or may play either a conflicted or insignificant role as in the case of India or Mexico.

It is crucial to underline that the rhetoric of religion is widely used by *all sides*, not only actors defined as religious. Moreover, the alliances formed between religious elements and those considered to be, or technically, 'secular' are frequent and almost inevitably have negative repercussions for women. In Mexico, for example, analysts noted how the 'Bartering away women's rights in exchange for the Church's support' became especially visible in the run up to the 2012 elections. In Poland, by 2005, right wing parties were not only echoing 'the Church's expectations but also started to independently use religious doctrine as one of their main arguments in the name of the defense of the Polish nation and the Nature created by God.' (Heinen and Portet, 2010: 1013) Worldwide, feminists have consistently pointed out the bartering away - or sacrificing of - women's rights for political expediency. What is new, perhaps, and of concern, is that several studies noted that decisions favouring the religious authorities were taken *despite surveys indicating the opposite view of the citizenry* that governments are supposed to represent – at least in democratic setups. These decisions seem to derive, in part at least, from State policy-makers presuming a level of conservatism in the citizenry that is unconfirmed by any survey. The result is a 'silencing of the voice of the majority population', as noted in the studies on Chile and Poland and Pakistan. This should give us pause to consider the intentions and aims of those in State power – that are usually not religious institutions and rarely politico-religious parties.

The purpose of such alliances has little to do with the salvation of citizens' souls; mostly the rationale is far more mundane. In Serbia, for example, the introduction of religious education in Serbian schools came about, Drezgić argues, because delivering Milošević to The Hague to be tried for war crimes was a risky political decision that rendered the ruling party vulnerable. Hence, she sees the introduction of 'religious education in public schools [as] a pre-emptive damage control measure'.

***Appropriating spaces opened by democracy:***

Ironically enough, in a number of instances, it is not the imposition of an authoritarian regime which has provided religious institutions more ground to act. Instead, it is the easing up of previously constraining political environment and the introduction of a democratisation process that have given this opportunity to religious institutions. In this study, this is notably the case in the studies on Poland and Turkey.

Sometimes the new spaces have been occupied by religiously defined political parties; at other times, the space has been taken over through the alliances, treaties or other arrangements political parties have entered into with religious institutions. A similar space can emerge when the party that brought independence loses its hegemonic influence. Hence, in India, when the Congress Party lost its hegemony, this allowed anti-secular alternatives to be formulated and publically espoused. Turkish secularism, Arat points out, was neither democratic nor liberal: it was statist and both comprehensive and radical.<sup>6</sup> The regime inspired by Ataturk was less interested in securing religious freedoms than in disestablishing Islam and controlling its power in civil life. (2010: 871) When the multiparty system emerged, therefore, this provided new space to religious and politico-religious groups.

### *The wider picture*

International events can conspire to promote conservative religious outlooks and alliances. In the case of the Catholic population, the papal rule of John Paul II had a huge negative impact. In the USA, the authors argue that the alliance with religious groups fits into the alliance of ‘social conservatives’ and predominantly secular ‘fiscal conservatives’ in the Republican Party meshing the socially prominent religious groups with neoliberal economic and political interests. In Pakistan, the USA proxy war with the USSR in which Pakistan played cat’s paw during the first Afghan war, provided legitimacy to jihadist outfits as freedom fighters. This international legitimacy helped to mould the discourse and people’s attitudes on what is desirable and to be accepted and what is to be rejected and penalised.

### **The means of hegemony and points of focus:**

#### ***Narrowing down religious choice and spirituality***

From the USA and Chile, to Iran and Pakistan, passing through Nigeria, Serbia and Poland and Turkey, study after study indicates that the silencing or marginalisation of more progressive voices within religious traditions is not coincidental: it is a deliberate strategy of politically aggressive and ideologically conservative religion groups. As the Pakistan case study says about Zia-ul-Haq’s military regime: ‘Political Islamists systematically seek to de-legitimise and eradicate the diverse perspectives of the faithful, especially the mystical Sufi traditions which are antithetical to their positions and perspectives. The popularly-rooted, pluralistic and decentralised Sufi traditions in many parts of Pakistan are being eroded by the rise of a centralising institution-based Wahabi-Salafi Islam.’(Shaheed, 2010: 862) In the USA, ‘alliances serve to articulate religious values in such a way that religious positions that depart from a hegemonic Protestant vision of appropriate gender and sexuality become invisible,’ including progressive protestant voices. (Bernstein and Jakobsen, 2010:1028) With respect to Turkey, Arat notes that: ‘The more liberal interpretations of Islam, which do not expect women to cover

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<sup>6</sup> Parla and Davison argue that Kemalist secularism was not ‘true secularism’ because it prohibited ‘religious freedom’ rather than guaranteeing it, T Parla and A Davison, *Corporatist Ideology in Kemalist Turkey*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2004, p 6; cited in Arat 2010.

[themselves with a veil] and which the founding fathers assumed, is being replaced by another one increasing patriarchal control over women's bodies. The fact that alternative interpretations of Islam which do not restrict women's choices are not being propagated by government-controlled bodies is disconcerting. (2010:875) In Chile, researchers found that the politico-religious promotion of the concept of a 'natural law' 'ignores more progressive positions within the Catholic and Evangelical churches whose advocates have grown in numbers, but do not enjoy the same level of visibility and political weight as their conservative contenders.' Guzman, Seibert and Staab note that political aggressiveness is a key trait, and that the 'Political connections and enormous visibility (partly supported by conservative media), has marginalised more progressive protests, effectively silenced critical voices within the church, presenting its intransigent vision as the unique point of reference. (2010:973, 975)

Religion itself is instrumentalised in the political arena, used by many political actors who would not otherwise define themselves as 'religious'. Its use is selective, deployed in the pursuit of increased power and to promote agendas which are united, only it sometimes seems, by their overarching patriarchal understanding. Bringing preeminence to conservative agendas, the fusing of religion and politics impoverishes religion. Used in the political sphere, instead of being a spiritual experience, religion is reduced to a coercive force of imposed rules and regulations. Hence, I have argued that 'The overwhelming emphasis of politico-religious elements on punitive law pares down the faith of Islam to Muslim jurisprudence.' Secondly, the religion-politics nexus forwards a problematic notion of democracy. As pointed out in the case study of Chile, the connection straightjackets diversity and dissent in the public sphere and introduces manipulated democratic norms in which democracy is deemed acceptable for the general polity in terms of state-citizens relations, but the same right to self-determination and decision-making becomes unacceptable within the family and personal decision-making. This distortion undermines women's intellectual as well as bodily integrity.

#### *The language of activism and politics of language*

A point made by both Arat and Shaheed needs to be stressed: the values promoted by politically conservative religious groups reiterate 'values that the [population] they are more familiar with'. (Arat, 2010) Deploying the language of familiarity is an important feature of successful communication. Gaining significance from pre-existing lexicons of history and culture, it draws in the audience providing a shortcut to understanding in ways that an unfamiliar idiom cannot. The discourse of the religious Right has the advantage of drawing upon not only existing lexicons but also deep wells of patriarchal norms and values in society. In contrast, human rights and gender equality initiatives struggle against the tide. Using a language too often lacking rootedness, they expend considerable time 'explaining at length the exact phraseology of standards and norms referencing a mostly unknown world' while the narratives of religiously defined groups resonating 'deeply with the cultural lexicon is deemed self-explanatory'. The rhetoric of *shariah* as a 'one-stop justice window', for example, is particularly seductive 'when rampant class-bias enables better connected, more affluent people to regularly flout the law while penalizing the poor; where the state and its resources mean one thing for the poor and another for the rich'. (Shaheed, 2010:864) As one female *madrassah* student cynically observed in the Pakistan study: 'Even if people don't want Islam, they do want justice.'<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> R Karrar, 'Inside the mosque', *The Herald*, May 2007; cited in Shaheed 2010.

A relatively new development is the selective use of civil rights and human rights discourse by the political religious Right. In Chile, for example, the government made it obligatory for all pharmacies in the country to stock emergency contraception medication in 2005. However, a well-connected Opus Dei member who owns a pharmaceutical chain, refused to do so saying he was a ‘conscientious objector’ and received immediate backing from the Catholic clergy. Freedom of conscience has also been used to support doctors who refuse to perform abortions, despite the legal provisions under State law. The process is highly selective of course: women are denied freedom of conscience within the home and regarding their own bodies. ‘Freedom of conscience’ is reserved for those sharing the views and propagating the ideology of the religious right.

*Common focus on educational systems, sexuality and youth*

*Sexuality:* All politico-religious projects uniformly focus on sexuality, aiming to control women’s sexuality and promote hetero-normative family structures. Ironically enough, the politico-religious discourse which calls for the sanctity of home and sexual mores within this, in fact brings sexuality out of the bedroom and into the very public arenas of mass-media, and sometimes the streets as protests. The battlefield is one of ‘biopower, women’s bodies and sexuality’ as summarised by the Mexico study. As the study on Nigeria so eloquently puts it:

[R]eligion is a prime site for the construction of gender as well as sexuality... Women’s bodies constitute significant zones for the inscription of social norms, practices and values. This is where the apparently different agendas of the Christian and Muslim politico-religious groups come together, for both share the view that women’s bodies are sexually corrupting and therefore in need of control.’ (Charmaine and Jibrin, 2010:921)

The entry of religion into the political discourse attempts to reduce and convert womanhood into motherhood, as stated by Drezgić (2010), with similar patterns visible in Nigeria, Serbia, Chile, Mexico, Poland, USA, Pakistan India or Iran. Whether the issue is that of sex work in trafficking as studied in the USA, contraceptives, abortion and sex education in Latin America and Poland, the introduction of religious education in Serbia, dress codes and family laws in Iran and Pakistan, the moral panic engendered by women’s sexuality is prominent; the aim is ‘to control women’s bodies, discouraging them from working outside their homes where contact with non-relatives would be inevitable, and aiming to regulate their sexual lives [that is]... religious interpretations are expanding men’s control over the choices and bodies of women.’ (Arat, 2010: 875)

The studies, especially those on India and Pakistan, showcase women’s involvement in the conservative right-wing politico-religious parties: women who militate against gender equality and women’s right to be active members of the polity all whilst doing so themselves. Hassan’s (2010) reading is that although women in conservative politico-religious groups undoubtedly feel more ‘empowered’ through such engagements, they tend to replicate in the public sphere the domestic role allocated to them by patriarchy. These women appear to adopt wholesale the sexuality discourse from their male counterparts. In Pakistan, women journalists visiting the Red Mosque women’s seminary were made acutely conscious of their own sexuality, as one said:

With my head uncovered while I film, I feel the burden of being a woman, of my morality being under scrutiny. I am extremely conscious of my sexuality which, I learn, through my

interaction with my Hafsa sisters, is a possible threat to a pristine world. And I thought only men could make me feel so vulnerable!<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, not all women are victims of the fusion of religion and politics; a number are active agents, underscoring the need to discover what attracts women to apparently seriously misogynist projects.

Regarding sexuality, I would like to underscore two key points:

1. The view of women's sexuality needing to be controlled is not confined to either the religious traditions examined by the studies or to politico-religious groups, but is shared by secular elements as well. This is because controlling women's sexuality and reproductive powers is the base of patriarchal systems, regardless of other specifics in articulation and normative prescriptions that can, and do, vary.
2. Women's bodies constitute key sites mediating the experience of nationhood as well as 'the experience of religion, by the ways in which they configure gender and sexuality'. Veiling, for example, serves to distinguish Muslim from Christian or other women; it 'marks the body in a way that simultaneously inscribes gender and in many instances, religious identity, whilst masking sexuality'. (Pereira and Ibrahim, 2010: 921)
3. *Capturing the youth*: Politico-religious groups appear to make concerted effort to capture the youth. From Turkey to Chile and Mexico, religious institutions have consciously sought to monopolise or influence the educational systems, whether it is through opposition to sex education, modifying its contents, or objecting to human reproduction being taught. It is also executed by imposing the contents of textbooks, especially self-serving versions of history in India (by the Hindutva) and Pakistan, and in the latter case, also shaping religious instruction. This does not always entail direct interference. Influence can, and often is, exercised through connections and alliances with civil society, experts and politicians favourable to the views of conservative religious institutions/groups. In Latin America, politically active conservative religious groups have emphasised the right of parents to decide educational matters –presumably they believe parents can be more easily influenced than their off-spring through Church activities. These alliances have not been sufficiently explored as key means of influence.
4. There is also a definite, but insufficiently documented, link with business communities as noted in Turkey, where the Gülen business-focused community runs a number of youth-oriented initiatives, including hostels for 25,000 students. In Chile, Church-run educational institutions include the influential *Universidad de los Andes*, polyclinics and student residences. As in Turkey, sections of the Chilean business class also provide a strong base of support. In Pakistan, the assistance provided to students by the student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami political party is well known; it includes facilitating hostel accommodation as well as orienting and supporting students in new and often unfamiliar urban environments. Apart from actual financial or institutional connections, a number of the studies highlight the discursive links between separate entities engaged in politico-religious affairs, again an area for further investigation. Uncovering the material as well as discursive linkages would provide a more complete picture of the dynamics at hand.

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<sup>8</sup> A Salahuddin, 'Rendezvous with the "others"', *Newsline*, July 2007; cited in Shaheed 2010.

## **Conclusion: implications for the women's movement**

Ultimately, the issue is one of patriarchy and it is through the lens of patriarchal power that the nexus of gender equality-politics and religion needs to be examined. When religion and politics fuse, women and their issues inevitably become instrumentalised in the pursuit of larger agendas. Hassan (2010), for example, points to how the Rightwing Hindutva political lobbies subverted the women's movement demand for a uniform civil to ensure the equal rights of women from religious minorities for their overall agenda of promoting a Hindu nation. This left women's groups in a quandary as the uniform civil law was inserted into an altogether different project than that of women's equality.

A challenge for women's equality projects is the unusual positioning of religion as both an intensely personal, individuated and private experience, and simultaneously as highly public processes of communal participation, belonging, and identity. Ironically enough, religion showcases the feminist position that the personal is political, vividly illustrating how effects in one life domain ricochet to impact apparently unrelated aspects of other life domains. The deep-seated and intricate interconnections between the public and the domestic and between the political, economic, social and cultural spheres seem to be better understood by the Right, especially the religious Right, than progressive forces. A vigorous cultural agenda prescribing everyday norms is a hallmark of all politico-religious projects, most visible in discourses and gender-normative regulations around sexuality, dress codes, women's 'appropriate' spheres and roles. Women conforming to such prescriptive norms even within strictly socio-cultural spaces, rather than the political public sphere, become poignant political symbolic markers of 'appropriated political territory'. (Shaheed) The result is a reconfigured public order as well as private daily practices. Even when veils become the epicenter of heated debate and contestation, the problem is not the headscarf, as argued by Arat, but the insidious changing of mindsets towards a more conservative view of gender altogether as motherhood and the domestic sphere. As Anne Phillip says, (2007: 148) and a recent multi-country research project confirms,<sup>9</sup> women's 'horizons are drawn in relation to what is perceived as possible' and the intertwining of religion and politics constricts horizons and narrows down women's options while the long-term project for gender equality and women's rights initiatives must be to widen the horizons to the maximum possible.

With respect to the women's movement I would only reiterate a few critical lessons and challenges needing to be overcome.

1. In the absence of a robust democracy and accountable structures of State and society, the use of religion in politics gravitates to dictatorial rule using both the instruments of State and religious ideology to suppress dissent. There is a need to understand the real power struggles and untangle the apparently disparate forces that come together in order to develop effective countervailing strategies. On this there is both good and bad news.
  - The bad news is that religion in politics too often eclipses other reference points for state and society. Further bad news is that, as exemplified in Pakistan, the shifts effectuated by marrying religion to politics do not remain restricted to the State but permeate all aspects of society, so that the State is not necessarily the enforcer of new moral norms. Moreover,

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<sup>9</sup> *Women's Empowerment in Muslim Countries: gender, poverty and democratization from the inside out*, a DFID supported research consortium carried out extensive research primarily in China, Indonesia, Pakistan and Iran from 2006-2010. See [www.wemc.com.hk](http://www.wemc.com.hk)

the intensive use of violence by political Islamists to quell even the mildest of opposition to their views is hugely problematic and also brings into question the writ of the State.

- The good news is that effective democratization of state and society can oblige religious institutions to play by the rules of structured politics. As a result of such processes, in Mexico for example, the Church has been transformed from being *the* bearer of truth to becoming just another political actor in the democratic arena -- a big step. The question put by the researchers is how to ensure that the State not enforce a 'moral truth' as determined by the Catholic hierarchy, but 'protect a lay morality founded on individual autonomy and citizens' freedom of conscience.' (Guzman, Seibert and Staab, 2010:999) Further good news, is that coalitions built across religious and secular feminists in Turkey 'denounced any type of 'control over women's bodies whether in the name of modernity, secularism, the Republic, religion, tradition, custom, morality, honour or freedom.' (Arat, 2010: 880) Similar positive outcomes of such alliances are documented in Iran. (Hoodfar and Sadr) Some coalition-building is being undertaken in India to strategize on renewing a campaign for a uniform civil code that distinguishes the women's movement activists from the protagonists of Hindutva. (Hassan, 2010) Women's rights groups and human rights initiatives in general, need to build effective alliances and explore how to retrieve/safeguard the social and cultural spaces being either attacked or occupied by the right-wing religious-political combine.
2. A major challenge for women's rights activists is the highly skewed playing field in which civil society is not uniformly progressive but includes religious institutions engaged in both social and political arenas. As noted by Merike Blofield 'interest groups with a conservative agenda' are 'more organised, have more resources and tighter networks, and maintain better access to political parties'.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, more progressive advocacy groups, including those fighting for gender equality, are poorly resourced and have difficulties in forging effective links with and inroads into the agendas of mainstream political parties. They are usually dependent on creating effective alliances with social movements out of power.
  3. *Avoiding a carceral approach to feminism* In their very interesting case study on trafficking, Bernstein and Jakobsen signal the urgency of revisiting some of the tactics and strategies adopted by the women's rights movement. Underscoring how a shift from the local to the international arena has been aided by the human rights system and participation by the UN, they show how issues of class, race and international economic systems have been discarded in the new discourse around trafficking which has been reduced to the trafficking of women for sex work, which is equated with 'sexual slavery' by the Right. This has brought about an unlikely but real if unacknowledged alliance between mainstream feminist groups and religious conservatives. Bernstein and Jakobsen raise three critical concerns that have developed in the last two decades: (1) the displacement of activism focused on economic and social issues in favour of sexual and reproductive rights and health. (2) The growth of what they call 'militarised humanitarianism', reflected in spectacular rescues of women and children in an 'undercover mass-mediated model of activism [that] has become the emulated standard for evangelical Christian', regardless of later coverage that shows people 'escaping their rescue', and been adopted by 'even some secular feminist organizations'. (2010: 1033)

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<sup>10</sup> Merike Blofield, 2006 *The Politics of Moral Sin: Abortion and Divorce in Spain, Chile and Argentina* *The Politics of Moral Sin*, cited in Guzmán, Seibert and Staab (2010)

The study warns against the dangers of an emerging ‘carceral feminism’, a term used by Marie Gottschalk to describe ‘the commitment of abolitionist feminist activists to a law and order agenda’. Their review indicates how the location of interest has allowed a ‘convergence of evangelicals’ militarised humanitarianism with what might be termed ‘carceral feminism’.<sup>11</sup> The drift away from the welfare state to the carceral state as the apparatus for effecting feminist goals, is problematic since it ‘locates social problems in deviant individuals rather than mainstream institutions...seeks social remedies through criminal justice interventions rather than through a redistributive welfare state, and...advocates for the beneficence of the privileged rather than the empowerment of the oppressed’. A carceral state is uncomfortably close to the articulated positions and actions of politico-religious groups in this part of the world.

It is important, that activists strive to be as rigorous as possible in analyzing existing issues and to avoid unthinkingly adopting popular language, tactics and positions just because of common usage, especially in donor circles.

The challenge, as Berstein & Jakobsen say is to develop an ‘alternative feminist approach...[that] would shift the focus from the criminal justice system to the structural conditions that propel people of all genders to engage in risky patterns,’ that result in diverse forms of exploitation...The challenge for feminists in addressing the question of religion and politics is not so much whether to promote religious or secular advocacy as it is to challenge...dominance ...in both its religious and secular forms” because, as they say, ‘we cannot assume that religious influence in politics is necessarily conservative or that more secular politics will necessarily be more progressive than the religious varieties.’

For me the real issue is challenging patriarchal controls and systems, both secular and religious. While politico-religious groups and alliances with the state could take up economic issues from the standpoint of religion, so far they have focused intensely on the social. This focus could well be due to the lack of an articulated political economy agenda amongst the religious Right, as argued by Samir Amin, but this does not make the problem at hand any easier, for as feminists, or activists of the women’s movement, we too lack a political economy programme.

There is a pressing need to spell out clearly our vision, over and beyond what Rada calls the ‘a feminist vision according to which men and women were equal partners in the project of modernity, and the state would not privilege or marginalise any group.’ (2010:959) This is simply not enough. I shall end by reiterating the questions I put forward decades ago at the Simorgh conference *Engendering the National State*: which is that feminists and the women’s movement in general – also the human rights advocates in general - all seem to know what we do not want, we are far less clear about what we are concretely suggesting as an alternative to an obviously unjust system. We criticize the Nation-state as masculinist but propose no alternative; we are unhappy with globalization – on the whole – but propose no economic system of our own. Unless we do so and in language which has resonance with the people, we shall remain at a disadvantage; less able to leverage the alliances and support we need to change the system, not merely gain favours within it.

Thank you

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<sup>11</sup> Taken from Marie Gottschalk writing about responses to rape.

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