

Probing the Intersection of Religion, Gender, and Political Violence

Written by Luke M. Herrington

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LUKE M. HERRINGTON, NOV 8 2022

Despite enormous geographical, historical, and denominational differences, research on religion has convincingly and consistently demonstrated that women's religious experiences are quite different from those experienced by men (e.g., Dionne, Jr., et al. 2014; Fahmy 2018; Hacket 2016; Marshall 2010). Likewise, research on the gendered dimensions of political violence demonstrates that women and other sexual minorities are uniquely vulnerable during spasms of international conflict and civil war (e.g., Hynes 2004). Given these two facts, it should be wholly without controversy to suggest that men and women may have distinct experiences when it comes to such phenomena as religious violence, religious persecution, or religious oppression. Yet, situated as they are on their relatively isolated islands of theory, some feminist researchers and scholars of international religious freedom do little more than talk past each other where the nexus of religion, gender, and political violence is concerned. This is problematic for multiple reasons, chief of which may be that an inability to dialogue prevents the field from achieving a more general understanding of religious persecution on the one hand, and gender-based or sexualized violence on the other. More specifically, their inability to dialogue results in theoretical, conceptual, and statistical ambiguity, as it obscures important differences that likely exist between gendered violence targeted against religious minorities and religiously motivated violence targeted at women and people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ).

In the next section of this article, I trace this lack of theoretical engagement to ideological debates rooted in American partisan political discourse. I suggest that debates about sexual freedom and religious freedom in the United States (U.S.) have polarized academic discussions on these subjects in a way that undermines the study of International Relations, ultimately causing both Western feminist and religious freedom theorists to overlook important nuances and sights of potential synthesis and even collaboration. I subsequently turn to the nexus of religion, gender, and political violence, and demonstrate how the theoretical discontinuity between Western feminists and scholars of religious freedom undermines conceptual clarity in discussions of sacralized and sexualized violence. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (2006) assertions about the gendered dimensions of religious persecution provide a useful starting point from which to probe this problem. Finally, I conclude by recommending the adoption of a more inclusive, intersectional approach to religion, gender, and political violence.

International Religious and Sexual Freedom: An American Debate

Advocacy for religious freedom and advocacy for women's rights and sexual freedom have been on a collision course for some time (Boden 2007). Yet, it seems that feminist researchers and scholars of religious freedom only tacitly engage each other, if at all, and they never really do so directly. It seems plausible that this is because they have competing ideas about the spread of sexual and religious freedom abroad rooted in competing ideological visions of American politics.

By way of illustration, feminists like Susan Moller Okin (1998) observe that religious freedom is used as a pretext to justify the violation of women in private homes in a way that mirrors the American left's critiques of religion. That is, women's rights must be explicitly recognized as a core element of one's human rights because of the way religious fundamentalism rejects women's equality. The problem, as Okin sees it, is that human rights—as laid out in the

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Lockean tradition—were conceived of as the rights of heads of household, and thus, the rights of men. As such, fundamentalists' arguments for religious freedom intentionally imply a rejection of women's rights (Okin 1998).

Similarly, while Okin (1998, 36) avers that religious freedom and respect for "cultural differences" functions, in the international arena, as coded language for "restricting or denying women's human rights," international religious freedom advocates argue that the expansion of sexual freedom and LGBTQ rights at the United Nations contributes to the erosion of religious freedom (Baskerville 2011; Coleman 2013). From the latter's view, this also mirrors what's happening domestically in the U.S. and elsewhere throughout the West (Baskerville 2011; Coleman 2013), which explicitly links the critique to American conservative political discourse. Despite the fact that empirical research shows that American conservatives' perceptions of threat to religious freedom are actually shaped by attitudes towards gender, domestic political partisanship, and media consumption, the American right frequently frames the expansion of women's and LGBTQ rights as an assault on religious liberty (Goidel, et al. 2016; Herrington 2021; Williams 2018). Thomas Farr (2013), the first director of the U.S. State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom, himself criticizes attempts to subordinate religious freedom to what he views as the more novel notion of LGBTQ rights in the U.S. However, attempts to weaponize religious freedom this way only work if one assumes that LGBTQ and women-affirming religions, including progressive Christian churches that have abandoned traditional notions of gender and sexuality do not exist in the U.S. or anywhere else around the globe (Griffith 2017).

In other words, some feuds about sexual freedom for women and LGBTQ people are not just based on secular ideas, but also on real theological differences and disputes over scriptural interpretation within and between competing religious groups. That is, sexual freedom, including the right to terminate a pregnancy (or the right to refuse to do so) and the right to marry a member of the same sex, can itself be conceived as a component of religious freedom, rendering any government attempts to intervene in these debates potentially problematic exercises in interfaith or intrafaith theological arbitration that violate the principles of secularism and religious freedom (among others, see Brandzel 2016, 79; Castelli 2015; Cudd 2005; DeLaet and Caufield 2008; Griffith 2017; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2004; Toft 2013; Wenz 1992; also see Briggs 1977; Gaiser 1994; Gushee 2015; and Mecca 2009).

Moreover, the idea that feminists are inherently antitheist, anti-men, or anti-family is, like the idea that religion is ubiquitously patriarchal or anti-woman, premised on preconceived ideological stereotypes. As with all stereotypes, they may stem from real, but historically and geographically contextualized events or ideas, including honor killings, female genital cutting, extramarital promiscuity, and, among other things, divorce, but they are stereotypes, nonetheless. Feminisms, religion, theology, and spirituality vary immensely through time and space (Marshall 2010; Oliver and Wodon 2015), such that some branches of religion incorporate progressive ideas (Zimmerman 2011), while some branches of feminism (e.g., ecofeminism) incorporate notions of "womanist spirituality" and "inner goddess" (Seager 2003; Tøllefsen 2011).

This reality notwithstanding, neither side is happy with the records of policy accomplishments achieved by their intellectual rivals. In the introduction to her book on women and religious fundamentalism, for example, Katha Pollit (2002) laments the way the Taliban's destruction of ancient Buddhist icons in Afghanistan drew the ire of the international community in a way the Taliban's treatment of women never previously had. Meanwhile, Farr (2009) argues that religious freedom is the cure for the gender-based violence fostered in fundamentalist religious contexts. Although he largely overlooks the gendered nature of the incident, Farr maintains that a woman lashed in Saudi Arabia for letting unrelated men into her home was punished because the Saudi government failed to respect her religious freedom, not because she was a woman. He thus laments the State Department's promotion of women's rights as either not enough alone or not needed at all and instead avers that more resources are required to promote religious freedom throughout the kingdom.

With these apparently ideological tensions in mind, it is important to note that the gendered implications of religious freedom, like the gendered dimensions of religious persecution, are largely understudied (but see Amien 2015; Bush 2014; Castelli 2015). However, what little empirical scholarship there is on the cross-national relationship between women's rights and religious freedom actually limns a more complex portrait of their relationship than those Americanized portraits heretofore painted either by feminists or religious freedom activists. Yes, religious actors trying to silence opposition to their positions on gender and sexuality in the U.S. do use religious freedom discourses

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to political and theological ends (Castelli 2015), but early work on the spread of religious freedom abroad indicates that women's rights and religious freedom may go hand in hand. Women's socio-economic wellbeing, including literacy rates and enrollment in higher education, are strongly correlated with the presence of religious freedom cross-nationally. Meanwhile, when societies exhibit high levels of religious intolerance towards minorities, fewer women are elected to Parliament while men's and women's wages both decline (Grim 2008a; 2008b; Grim and Finke 2011). Very few scholars of either women's rights or religious freedom theorize their mutual compatibility, but these findings do support those in the minority that see the absence of religious freedom and the brutal suppression of women as linked (e.g., Willis 2002).

Interestingly though, fears that the expansion of women's and LGBTQ people's sexual freedoms might erode religious freedom domestically and internationally (Baskerville 2011; Coleman 2013) seem to receive some limited support as well. For instance, nation-states that place limitations on the majority's religion also tend to have stronger protections in place for women's rights (Bloom 2016). Yet, when further interrogated, it becomes apparent that those states seeking to constrain or repress minority religions have fewer protections in place for women (Bloom 2016). Furthermore, when Muslim countries have placed restrictions specifically on fundamentalist incarnations of religion, they too have seen improvements in women's social and economic conditions (Chaturvedi and Montoya 2013).

What this ultimately reveals is that scholarship polarized by American political discourse overlooks important nuances about the ways sexual and international freedom intersect. That an inability to effectively communicate exists between such relatively isolated islands of theory should thus come as little surprise. Yet, this only reinforces the fact that feminist theorists' and religious freedom theorists' collective inability to dialogue undermines International Relations' ability to meaningfully understand the relationship between gender, religion, and political violence.

Gender, Religion, and Violence

Although there has been little to no systematic attention paid to the gendered implications of religious persecution or the religious dimensions of gender-based violence, Mohanty (2006, 235), a post-colonial feminist, asserts that women "are the hardest hit by the effects of [...] religious persecution." There is certainly anecdotal support for her contention. For example, during the dramatic outbreak of religious violence that took place in Gujarat, India in 2002, Hindu nationalists raped and then burned hundreds of Muslim girls and women alive (Baldwin 2002). Similar violence occurred in Bosnia a few years earlier, when Croats and Serbs systematically employed rape as a weapon against their Muslim neighbors (Eisenstein 1996). Indeed, Caiazza (2002) concludes that raping women is a tactic of choice in religious conflicts not only because it demoralizes the enemy, but because it leaves women with a stigma of impurity that consequently erodes their reproductive potential. In other words, because women are perceived as the producers of posterity, rape is employed as an instrument of cultural genocide (Caiazza 2002; Eisenstein 1996).

According to Open Doors USA, a faith-based, Christian non-governmental organization (NGO), Christian women are particularly vulnerable to experiencing religious persecution. Their Christian faith and gender, maintains the NGO, puts them into a double bind, increasing their risk of rape and other forms of gender-based violence at the hands of Hindu and Muslim extremists (Woodiwiss 2018). Gender does seem connected to religious violence, but Muslim women have been stoned in Nigeria for having sex out of wedlock (Pollitt 2002), and as noted above, a widow in Saudi Arabia was once lashed for merely letting two unrelated men enter her home when they delivered food to her door (Farr 2009). Moreover, violence is commonly levied at women when they fail to live up to the ideals of modesty enshrined in cultural attitudes about dress. In Bangladesh, Muslims throw acid in the faces of unveiled women (Pollitt 2002), while women in Algeria have been stoned for similar reasons (Eisenstein 1996). In Iran, women could be lashed or even imprisoned (Hardacre 1993).

However, it would be as deeply problematic to characterize the religious violence committed against women as exclusively perpetrated by Muslim or Hindu men as it would be to characterize Christian women as their most vulnerable targets. In Israel, for instance, women walking through ultra-orthodox Jewish neighborhoods have been beaten for their own failure to dress modestly (Pollitt 2002). Meanwhile, Muslim women in the U.S. and Europe are especially vulnerable to violent manifestations of Islamophobia because their clothing makes them the "easiest, most

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visible targets” (Ispahani 2016, 103; Perry 2014), which is say nothing of the simultaneously sacralized and sexualized violence perpetrated by the U.S. military against Muslim men imprisoned at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and elsewhere (Human Rights Watch 2005; Swaim 2008). Finally, women have been persecuted and prosecuted as witches by Christians and others for centuries (Horowitz 2014). In fact, in the majority-Christian Central African Republic, as much as 60% of the female prison population is confined on charges of witchcraft (Hurd 2015).

That said, because of the dearth of research on the gendered implications of religious persecution and the religious dimensions of gender-based violence, it is not actually clear how any of these episodes should be classified. That is, whether any of these episodes might be more properly understood as gender-based violence merely legitimized by religion or if they are to be more correctly recognized as acts of religious persecution specifically targeted at women remains an open question (Bush 2014). This is important because acts of violence against women (and men or sexual minorities like LGBTQ people) may take different forms where religion is involved, just as violence against religious groups may take on unique characteristics where gender is implicated. Yet, the distinctions remain murky. Nevertheless, much of the religious (or religiously sanctified) violence targeted at women, whether it is best understood as gender-based or religious violence notwithstanding, seems to be committed by, or take place within the context of, religions’ fundamentalist movements.

This is hardly surprising; fundamentalist movements are frequently framed as the physical manifestation of a patriarchal backlash against the spread of feminism, women’s emancipation, and the expansion of women’s rights (Casanova 2009; Hardacre 1993). While fundamentalist movements manifest differently across religions and countries, they frequently perceive salvation as guaranteed only through a return to the sociopolitical norms (or “fundamentals”) that dominated during the periods in which the texts deemed sacred to the movement were originally written (Toft 2013). More often than not, this means women’s roles should be strictly limited to the home, where they can be kept in check by the patriarchal structure of the fundamentalist family (Hardacre 1993; Tickner 2002; Toft 2013). Dress, sexual regulations, and family laws emerge out of this arrangement as part of an effort to limit women’s movements outside of the home and to otherwise enforce the boundaries of their lives, even when women’s equality is putatively protected by a country’s national constitution. These boundaries can then be enforced violently or coerced spiritually, signifying the ways fundamentalisms frequently construct elaborate architectures explicitly designed to police women’s bodies (Hardacre 1993; Htun and Weldon 2015; Mohanty 2006; Tickner 2002). Thus, in places like Algeria, women are not only stoned for immodest dress, but for taking jobs outside the home as well (Eisenstein 1996). Indeed, women around the world found to be challenging the boundaries of their existence through, for example, the promotion of feminist principles or advocacy for equal rights, run the risk of being labeled, at the very least, complicit in their own colonization, or at the worst, *traitors* to the nationalist cause (Hardacre 1993). It is little wonder then that religious fundamentalism can be described, in general, as bad for women (Tickner 2002).

Nevertheless, many women flock to fundamentalist causes (Tickner 2002). While there are obviously regional and denominational differences in men’s and women’s religiosity that cannot be taken for granted, women are, broadly speaking, more theologically conservative than their male coreligionists (Connolly 1991; Dionne, Jr., et al. 2014). Protestant American women, for example, are more likely to view the Bible as the literal word of God (Barkowski and Hempel 2009). Hence, it should probably come as no surprise that some women find fundamentalist movements appealing, though their motivations for joining such movements may differ. For instance, Muslim women have been known to join Al Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and other terrorist organizations and insurgent movements inflected with strong fundamentalist values when they perceive Islam to be under attack from outside forces (Ispahani 2016). Of course, the irony is that organizations like ISIS place women, especially from minority religious groups, at great risk for death and debasement, while working to turn the proverbial clock back on all women’s rights (Ispahani 2016).

Yet, Mohanty (2006) does not necessarily seem to have the foregoing in mind. Instead, her claim that religious persecution disproportionately impacts women is embedded in a discussion of forced migration. She notes, for example, that most of the refugees in the developing world are in fact women or girls and implies that women’s forced migration is one chief consequence of religious persecution (Mohanty 2006, 234-235). Additionally, as refugees, these women are no doubt subjected to further traumas, including gender-based violence (Tickner 2002). Although

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Mohanty forgoes the exercise altogether, it would be difficult to quantify this relationship given ambiguity in the data. For example, instances of gender-based violence can be miscategorized as religious persecution in an effort to expedite asylum claims (Oxford 2012).

Consequently, Mohanty does not make her argument explicit, but her effort to draw attention to forced migration as one of the gendered implications of religious persecution still holds up at least under some preliminary scrutiny. Today, women and children make up about half of all the displaced peoples in the world and they are often among the first to flee violence and persecution (UNHCR 2015; 2017). Furthermore, religious persecution can be viewed, not only as *the* classic cause of forced migration (UNHCR 2015; Zolberg, et al. 1989), but as a chief driver of women's forced migration in particular (Holden and Reid 2010). Thus, for example, after being forced to watch their families murdered and being subjected to sexual violence at the hands of Islamic State militants, many Yezidi women were driven from their homes in Iraq. ISIS had targeted the Yezidis, whose religion is a synthesis of Zoroastrian and Sufi ideas, because their beliefs were deemed heretical. The men were usually massacred, but the women were trafficked into sexual slavery. Those lucky enough to escape were likewise displaced though, seeking refuge in places like Germany (Hosseini 2018; Otten 2017a; 2017b). Similar stories have been recounted by the Rohingya Muslim women fleeing violence in Myanmar upon their arrival at refugee camps in Bangladesh. Although there is some debate as to whether the experiences of the Rohingya qualify as religious persecution *per se* (Hurd 2015), many of the survivors were burned out of their homes, subjected to sexual violence, and forced to watch as their husbands and children were ruthlessly murdered in a campaign of ethnic cleansing (Gettleman 2017).

Conclusion

This article points in several directions for future research. Existing data are too limited to statistically assess the gendered implications of religious persecution or sacralized gender-based violence. Theoretical and conceptual ambiguity stemming from the overtly ideological debate over sexual and religious freedom only exacerbate this problem. Feminist researchers interested in the gendered dimensions of political violence and scholars interested in religion and International Relations must engage seriously with one another to deconstruct their politicized assumptions and clarify or eliminate these ambiguities. They must start by conceptualizing the relationship between gender and religious violence on the one hand, and religion and gender-based violence on the other. The field of International Relations will make little progress understanding the interaction between gender and religion in episodes of political violence if gendered violence targeted at religious minorities cannot be meaningfully distinguished from religiously motivated violence targeted at women or sexual minorities.

Such collaboration may be difficult, but space already exists for the feminist researchers and international religious freedom scholars to engage seriously with one another. As noted above, for example, some feminist scholarship has its own spiritual tendencies. Beyond this, Cudd's (2005) moral philosophical system that emphasizes human dignity and equality as the foundation of human rights mirrors the Christian notion of *imago dei* – "image of God" – undergirding some religious freedom scholar's conceptions of human rights (e.g., Farr 2008). Furthermore, activists in both camps bristle together under accusations that they tacitly – if unintentionally – collaborate with Western neocolonial projects. Western feminists have been accused of marginalizing women in the developing world just as religious freedom scholars are accused of trying to open developing countries to Christian missionary activity (Cozad 2005; Cudd 2005; Farr 2011; Mohanty 2006; Okin 1998; Sharkey 2008; Sullivan 2010). Despite rejecting these accusations, both camps' most astonishing intersection emerged when the human rights discourse used to justify the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan emphasized both women's rights and religious freedom, with many framing the war "as an attempt to rescue Muslim women from their (overly religious) male oppressors" so that the former could strip their headscarves and wear more lipstick (Grewal 2005, 133; Hurd 2015, 25). Of course, this is not to suggest that either camp embrace its imperialistic impulses. Rather, mutual space for collaboration exists because both ostensibly seek to reject their neocolonial ambitions. Indeed, by working together, they might find it easier to craft a more inclusive, depoliticized vision of women's rights and religious freedom.

In addition to research that further theorizes the distinctions between these categories, data must be collected that can look at the causes and consequences of gender-based religious violence and sacralized sexual violence. These phenomena are different, but it is unclear exactly how they are different and how they are related. Moreover, research

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is also needed to tease out the distinctions between violence perpetrated by states and non-state actors, as well as violence against women or LGBTQ people affiliated with the same religion and violence perpetrated against women or LGBTQ people of different religions. Even though the literature largely subsumes each of these potentially unique forms of violence into a monolithic category, the causal pathways contributing to each are likely dissimilar. Finally, while Mohanty's (2006) claim that women are disproportionately affected by religious persecution provides a useful jumping off point to begin interrogating questions about gender, religion, and violence, one need only recall the men of Abu Ghraib to realize that men's experience of religious persecution is a unique problem itself worth addressing.

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About the author:

Dr. Luke M. Herrington is an Assistant Professor of Social Science at the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) at Ft. Leavenworth. A political scientist and international relations scholar by training, he received his PhD from the University of Kansas. His research and teaching interests focus on political violence and extremism, religion in comparative and international politics, theories of great power conflict, and the role of various beliefs and attitudes (e.g., tolerance) in political life and development. His most recent work explores the negative impact of conspiracy theory on American national security.

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