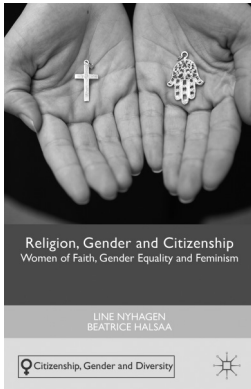


## Recensie



Line Nyhagen and Beatrice Halsaa (2016)  
*Religion, gender and citizenship: Women of faith, gender equality and feminism*  
Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan. 271 pages,  
£65.00  
ISBN 9781137405340

### **Religion, gender and citizenship: Women of faith, gender equality and feminism**

In this review essay, I discuss interdisciplinary and comparative research that is taking place in the fields of religious, gender, and sexuality studies. I make a case for the academic and political relevance of research projects that are interdisciplinary – and that, therefore, generate multi-layered knowledge by starting from various points of view – as well as projects that are comparative in nature in the sense that they do not isolate a specific social group or trend but reveal certain specificities through comparison. As a religious studies scholar interested in the construction of differences (religious, ethnic, gender, sexuality), I believe it is increasingly important to study and compare different identities and communities in contemporary diverse West-European contexts. Such comparative research provides insights in the many commonalities, but also variances, between various groups of people, not as essential differences, but as differences-being-made-and-in-the-making. To give an example: How and why are the identities and experiences of Christian, Muslim, and secular women (or youth, men, or LGBTQ's) similar or divergent? Interdisciplinary comparative research may yield insights into unexpected complexities but also possibilities for political solidarity. Thinking through the above questions, I will start this essay with a review of the 2016 book by Line

Nyhagen and Beatrice Halsaa, *Religion, Gender and Citizenship: Women of Faith, Gender Equality and Feminism*. I then point at some other research examples on religion, gender, and sexuality across different European contexts that are exemplifying the type of interdisciplinary and comparative research that I find to be so crucial.

## Comparing women of faith

The volume *Religion, Gender and Citizenship* by Line Nyhagen and Beatrice Halsaa is an inspiring illustration of cross-national and comparative research on religion and gender. Recently published as part of the Palgrave MacMillan *Citizenship, Gender and Diversity* book series, this volume is the series' first study of women of faith in relationship to gender equality and citizenship. Both the series and the volume result from 'FEMCIT: Gendered Citizenship in Multicultural Europe: The Impact of Women's Movements', which was a 2007-2011 European Commission research project. As the project consists of a comparative analysis of developments in Norway, the United Kingdom, and Spain, the volume promises to be of interest to *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies*' readers – mirroring, overlapping and/or contrasting with national, regional, and local tendencies in the Low Countries. The book, furthermore, does not only present a comparative analysis of various European settings, with their specific political, religious, and social histories, but it also provides us with Christian women's as well as Muslim women's points of view and practices.

*Religion, Gender and Citizenship*'s main and thought-provoking question is how religion can be a resource and barrier to women's citizenship from the perspective of religious women, as well as from the perspective of the authors as 'academic feminists in Europe' (2016: p. 3). This main inquiry is followed by various empirical sub-questions that address how religious women live their faith in everyday life, and how they think about (and practise) citizenship, gender equality, women's movements, and feminism. The book spotlights the standpoints of women embedded in various Christian (Pentecostal, Lutheran, Anglican, and Catholic) and Muslim traditions (Sunni and Shia). With their unique cross-national and cross-religious comparative approach, Nyhagen and Halsaa bridge feminist and sociological scholarship on citizenship, religion, and gender, while contributing to these fields' specific theoretical debates. Theoretical contributions are made by means of a critique of rights-based definitions of religious citizenship, plus a questioning of the secular-religious binary through the suggestion of common ground between religious women of various faiths and between religious and secular women (pp. 3-5). The research is based on in-depth interviews with a total of 61 Christian and Muslim women living in Norway (Oslo), Spain (Madrid), and the United Kingdom

(Leicester). The authors suggest that their findings are 'likely to be indicative of a wider set of Christian and Muslim organizations in Europe in which religious women are active and of a broader set of religious women's concerns and perspectives on gender, religion and citizenship' (p. 27).

After the introduction of the research in question and its methodology, the volume's second chapter situates the empirical study of Christian and Muslim women in Europe in relation to relevant theoretical perspectives, concepts, and empirical works in the sociology of religion, women's and feminist studies, and citizenship studies. Nyhagen and Halsaa criticise the term post-secular, the distinction between the secular and the religious, and the secularisation thesis, while forging links between the lived religion approach and a feminist lived citizenship perspective. Taking up the discussion about religious women's agency, the authors follow Robert Orsi's argument that attention must be paid to the structures and conditions in which any form of agency is performed. They additionally examine different feminist approaches to religion (such as Linda Woodhead's) and citizenship (as inspired by, for instance, Ruth Lister and Birte Siim). The authors argue that lived religion and lived citizenship perspectives expose the limits of rights-based approaches, as the latter ignore identities, participation, belonging, and an ethics of care, which religious women all find important. Chapters 3 and 4 empirically tackle the themes of identity, participation, and belonging, while citizenship inequalities between adherents of majority and minority religious traditions are highlighted.

Especially of interest to *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies* readers, the volume's 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> part empirically explore how religious women view gender equality, women's movements, and feminism. Nyhagen and Halsaa found that the ideas of equal worth and equal value were the preferred notions among the research participants, rather than the more mainstream notion of gender equality. The women considered gender differences to be both normative and descriptive, and notions of respect and understanding play a prominent role for them. Within this discourse of equal worth or value, the authors identified various strands of thinking. They, moreover, discuss some of the paradoxes and ambiguities involved in the women's attitudes towards women's movements and feminism. Both Christian and Muslim women, the authors point out, often perceive feminists and feminism as opposing religious morality. In light of my main argument, Nyhagen and Halsaa raise, in their concluding chapter, a relevant new concern: that of potential dialogue and collaboration between religious and secular women. The chapter explores common values through which religious and secular women may find common ground to forge critical resistance towards neo-liberal politics, neo-capitalism, globalisation, climate change, and environmental degradation. Nyhagen and Halsaa also point at conflicting values and conclude that less scope for

dialogue and collaboration seems to exist on issues concerning women's reproductive rights, divorce, and LGBT rights. They, furthermore, point at the danger of a strong secularism among some feminists and a strong anti-feminism among some religious women, which continues to produce barriers for dialogue and collaboration.

As noted in this essay's opening paragraphs, I will now show that *Religion, Gender and Citizenship* is part of a trend in the social sciences and the humanities towards thinking interdisciplinary and comparatively. Bridging sociology of religion, gender studies, and citizenship studies, and armed with a cross-national and cross-religious approach, the volume reveals that the perspectives and lived experiences of religious women across Europe are at the same time similar and different. Applying an intersectional awareness, the authors demonstrate that not only religion and gender but also race/ethnicity are important aspects of the identities and experiences of religious women. While the double comparative approach is one of the volume's main strengths, it might, at the same time, also be its key weakness: As Nyhagen and Halsaa readily admit, the sample of research participants (about 20 interview participants for each national context, and covering 6 religious traditions) is quite small, which makes it difficult to draw exact conclusions about specific national tendencies among religious women. The results additionally show that the research participants embrace rather conservative gender and sexuality perspectives, which raises questions about what kind of religious institutions were approached for recruiting research participants, and which voices are, as a result, included or excluded. Most of the interviewed women are family-oriented, emphasising traditional values such as motherhood, marriage, and love and care. Not one of them seems to live alternative life-styles, and all of them appear to be heterosexual. While maybe not representative of all women of faith, *Religion, Gender and Citizenship* nonetheless analyses the concerns and experiences of at least an important section of women of faith, a section that may be or turn influential under certain political-social-theological circumstances.<sup>1</sup> *Religion, Gender and Citizenship* is, therefore, crucial literature for scholars engaged in the sociological and anthropological study of religion and gender.

## Rethinking the study of religious faith and sexuality: Against disciplinary and political boundaries

Until now, cross-religious approaches to studying faith, religious practice, and gender and sexuality have been hard to find in the European academic context. Over the last five years or so, however, a number of individual and collective research projects in various European countries have begun comparing the expe-

riences of various religious groups to reveal both differences and similarities in constructions of gender and sexuality. The above-discussed volume by Nyhagen and Halsaa can be read as part of this trend: Starting from various disciplinary settings, these projects deliberately opt to examine various religious subjectivities and communities on the basis of an overarching theoretical agenda and/or conceptual approach.

An example from contemporary British sociology of religion demonstrates that many religious groups can be simultaneously investigated in one particular national setting. The 2009-2011 research project entitled 'Religion, Youth and Sexuality: A Multi-faith Exploration', by Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip and Sarah-Jane Page started from the lived experiences and understandings of religious young adults. The resulting volume 'illuminates the ways in which [religious young adults] navigate the terrain of sexuality and religion in diverse spaces and contexts, and how they operate in [...] dominant discourses' (Yip & Page, 2013: p. 2). The volume presents the narratives of religious, sexual, youth, and gender identities of young adults aged between 18-25, living in the U.K. Its comparative analysis, by means of quantitative and qualitative research methods, of the perceptions and experiences of young individuals belonging to six religious traditions deliberately counters dominant foci in the study of religion and youth (often privileging Christianity) and the study of religion and sexuality (often privileging homosexuality). Similar to Nyhagen and Halsaa, Yip and Page put lived religion at the centre and comparatively analyse the narratives of Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, and mixed-faith young adults.

The above-mentioned research project is significant, as it did not privilege the established religious group but treated both majoritised and minoritised religious communities on a par. Some other scholars are more explicit about the academic and socio-political necessity of going beyond *disciplinary* boundaries in the study of religion. Anthropologist Daan Beekers (2014) is one of them. He recently examined the pursuits of faith and constructions of piety of young Christians and Muslims in the Netherlands. Beekers argues against disciplinary boundaries that situate the study of Christianity mostly in the sociology of religion and the study of Islam within migration studies. This fixed disciplinary boundary is both academic and political of nature: It namely conveys the implicit message that Christianity intrinsically belongs to Western societies and the disciplines that examine their structures, while Islam and Muslims are positioned on the 'outside' as they, presumably, have (recently) migrated to Western context. An attempt to overcome this sociology of religion and migrations studies divide, then, also has to do with trying to undo the typical 'insider' versus 'outsider' construct. Researching Muslims and Christians within a comparative project namely enables theorists to reveal the many similarities, but also differences, in constructions of religious

subjectivity. In a recent article (2016) exploring the intersections of piety and sexuality, Beekers, for instance, shows that young Christians, more than Muslims, emphasise sexuality in their attempts at distinguishing themselves from the secular mainstream.

## Rethinking women in religious and secular settings: Bodies and transformations

As a researcher working at an academic institution, I find it interesting to note that popular or policy-oriented research, being less bound to traditional disciplines, seems to more easily approach the experiences of different religious groups in society as one single project. A Dutch example of such a project is the 2010 *Handboek Jongeren en Religie (Handbook Youth and Religion)*, edited by Van Dijk-Groeneboer, and we can find something similar in the Flemish 2014 publication *Pitstop: Stilstaan en Weer Doorgaan (Stop: Rethink and Get On)* by Engelbos, Hulin, Joos, Luts, and Vergauwen. Such policy-oriented publications, however, often do not pay attention to the intricate and intersectional ways in which categories of difference come into being, and hardly focus on gender and sexuality.

Talking about these categories of difference then, I would now like to take the time to focus on some examples of currently-running research projects on religion, gender, and sexuality that explicitly incorporate feminist theory, together with a positive approach to difference and alterity. The first is feminist theologian Elina Vuola's research project 'Embodied Religion. Changing Meanings of Body and Gender in Contemporary Forms of Religious Identity in Finland'. This interdisciplinary project combines feminist theology, religious studies, and anthropology of religion, and examines religion as it is lived while also conducting textual analysis to create a more comprehensive picture of how theology and religious identities interact (see also Kalkun & Vuola 2017). Drawing on feminist perspectives, the project's objective is to understand the complex relationship between religious traditions and their followers' identities and sense of agency within them. As the meaning of religious traditions and heritage is often debated in relation to issues of women's rights and sexuality, the project argues for taking women's agency, perspectives, and lived experiences seriously:

The pressures for change come from both inside and outside religious worlds. For those inside, the central question is how to balance one's identity as a religious person and one's need for autonomy, especially in issues concerning the body, family and sexuality, but also of religious authority (Embodied Religion, n.d.).

According to Vuola's project, spotlighting comparative case studies on minority religious traditions in Finland (Conservative Laestadianism, the Orthodox Church, and the Jewish Community), gives us unique insights into how religious subjects understand themselves and their religious tradition. Such a project, furthermore, spotlights the heterogeneity of these different religious traditions.

To conclude this essay, I would like to draw attention to the NWO research project 'Beyond "Religion versus Emancipation": Gender and Sexuality in Women's Conversions to Judaism, Christianity and Islam in Contemporary Western Europe' that I currently am co-conducting with Prof Anne-Marie Korte, Lieke Schrijvers, and Mariecke van den Berg.<sup>2</sup> Building upon the above-articulated insights about the importance of both interdisciplinary and comparative research, this research project analyses women's religious conversion in secularised societies starting from various perspectives and methodologies (qualitative empirical, cultural analytical, and religious studies). Similar to Nyhagen and Halsaa's volume, our project compares the experiences of women converting to various religious traditions through Schrijvers' fieldwork. Its interdisciplinary approach reminds of Vuola's research project. A multi-layered approach focusing on media and cultural productions, religious texts, and women's lived experiences is indispensable, we argue, for answering the project's empirical and theoretical questions about the supposed religion/emancipation paradox.

All the above examples – together with the earlier-reviewed *Religion, Gender and Citizenship* – provide innovative ways of studying religion, gender, and sexuality in different European contexts beyond established disciplines and socio-political categories. In current Western multicultural and multi-religious societies, in which inequalities exist based on religion, race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, and its intersections, it is crucial in gaining understanding of differences and similarities, and potential solidarities, between groups that are often considered to be mutually exclusive. The current context, therefore, necessitates furthering interdisciplinary and comparative research to deepen our comprehension of the politically-socially situated constructions of gendered and sexualised religious subjectivities. The examples discussed in this essay already push such research further.

## Notes

1. Think, for example, of the Catholic and conservative mobilisation against same-sex marriage and gender/sex studies in various European contexts (Bracke and Paternotte, 2016).
2. This 2016-2021 NWO project is hosted by the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Utrecht University, NL. See for further information 'Beyond Religion versus



Emancipation. Gender and Sexuality in Women's Conversion to Judaism, Christianity and Islam in Contemporary Western Europe' (2017) and 'Expert Meeting "Rethinking Religion, Emancipation and Women's Conversion"' (2017).

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