

Editorial

Religion, Gender, and Body Politics

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As sign and site of individual and collective identity, the human body has gained increasing importance and attention in today's culturally and religiously diverse societies. Worldwide many ideological conflicts on the management of diversity and the role of religion in the public sphere are being played out on 'the body'. This is especially visible in recurring debates on – often women's – religious dress, like the recent 'burkini-ban' in Nice, France (Abdelaal 2017). The fierceness of debates concerning the public bodily expression of religion – in particular Islam – in Western societies, conceals the fact that bodies in present-day society are governed, regulated, shaped and represented in many ways, often unrelated, or even in opposition, to religion. Akin to that, the enormous scholarly attention within both gender studies and religious studies to debates on Islamic women's dress (e.g. Ahmed 2011; Macdonald 2006; Read and Bartkowski 2000; Scott 2009), though an important corrective to dominant framings of Muslim women, risks taking attention away from other forms of religious and secular gendered body politics.

As various social theorists have argued (Mascia-Lees 2011; Shilling 2012; Turner 1992), the central position of the body within contemporary society reflects a number of social insecurities. Women's emancipation, first, has led to uncertainty about gender roles and, consequently, an over-emphasis on traditional expressions of masculinity and femininity in for instance the secular 'neomasculine movement' and Christian initiatives like 'The 4th Musketeer'. Second, medical interventions to prolong or terminate life can lead to reformulations of insecurities about death and its effect on the body. Third, technological innovation leads to questions about the limits and boundaries of what actually constitutes the human body. Not only does the excessive focus on religious bodily practices conceal the fact that there are more general social insecurities about embodiment at work, it also conceals that in practice the boundaries between 'religious' and 'secular' body politics are often blurred (see e.g. Samie 2013).

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The body that is a contested site in contemporary societies is often the body of a gendered, sexual, religious or ethnic other (e.g., women, LGBT's, migrants, or colonial others). These discursive practices of 'othering' presuppose a clearly defined 'we' superior to the 'other' (Brah 1996; Hall 1997, 2017: 128-131; Mohanty 1988), thereby reinforcing related dichotomies such as West-East, male-female, religious-secular, straight-gay and their power relations. The disciplining of bodily practices appears to take place mainly at the level of institutionalised religion and secularism where ideologies and politics of gender, sexuality and ethnicity are imposed. However, when we look at how people live in and through their bodies, creative and non-normative body practices can be identified that question, resist or inform these ideologies and politics. The deconstruction of the normative regulation and representation of the body should therefore not be investigated along the lines of the public-private divide, but in a manner that questions this divide and that is attentive to the ways in which lived religion and lived secularism permeate the (until recently virtually uncontested) boundaries between the visible, public and institutional on the one hand and the invisible, private and personal on the other.

In this special issue we invited a number of authors to explore why and how the gendered body has become a highly contested and constitutive site of dynamic secular and religious (identity) politics, ideologies and practices. Our aim has been to question the ways in which intersecting ideologies of religion, secularism and gender materialise through individual and collective body politics. Drawing from contemporary critical perspectives in the humanities and social sciences, notably postcolonial, queer and (post-)secular theories, the authors critically place practices and dynamics of body politics in broader frameworks of power. With these critical perspectives, enduring dichotomies in the study of religion and gender, like the public/private and religious/secular binaries, and Western and heteronormative dominant models of knowledge, are challenged. The articles in this special issue discuss body politics from a variety of geographical, national and social-political contexts, which illuminate different aspects of how body politics are gendered, sexualised, resisted and reproduced in relation to religious and secular practices and frameworks. Furthermore, the special issue sheds light on different disciplinary and methodological approaches to the study of religion, gender, and body politics, bringing together historical, ethnographic and literary studies contributions. All four articles show how 'top-down' or institutional forms of body politics are critically negotiated in people's lived embodied and religious practices. They point to an embodied agency or 'speaking back' that is not limited to empirical human bodies, but also takes shape through symbolic, imagined, discursive, or unborn bodies (O'Donnell, Krebs, Ji, this issue), or through bodily practices like *unveiling* (Hadžiristić, this issue; see also Fadil 2011). Collectively, the articles show how bodies are multi-layered and versatile: they are simultaneously an empirical entity, a discursive practice, technologies of the self, and technologies of governmentality.

In his article 'Absence, the Body Politic(s) of the Jezebel Spirit' Jonathon O'Donnell explores the ways in which in US Evangelical 'spiritual warfare' discourse the body of the Biblical character Jezebel functions as a site on which 'deviant' identities are projected. O'Donnell shows how in dichotomous 'third wave' neo-charismatic evangelical writings different kinds of bodies are imagined in relation to each other: that of Jezebel, the church, and the state. In their

attempt to frame the nation as a reality of God, light and righteousness versus a world of Satan, darkness, and sin, US third wave Evangelicals need a symbolic place to store those bodies that end up on the wrong side of the project of American spiritual warfare. The gendered, sexualized and culturally 'othered' body of Jezebel provides such a space. In unpacking the various ways in which Jezebel is imagined, however, O'Donnell simultaneously reveals the tensions and failures that are involved in the attempt to create an idealised America with an appeal to the Jezebel spirit: as an ambiguous character, she resists her own inclusion in such a dichotomous Evangelical nationalist discourse. Precisely because Jezebel becomes the site for the projection of anxieties towards 'nomadic' (black, LGBT) others, she forms an entry point for investigating the nomadic traits of third wave evangelicalism itself, for instance in its global formations and capitalist tendencies.

Jill Krebs, in her article 'The Body of Mary: Embodiment and Identity in Modern Apparitions', discusses how Roman Catholic devotees construct a variety of their own bodily identities in relation to the body of Mary. As Krebs argues, it is important to take into account the material dimension of apparitions, since it is precisely in the specifics of her body where the identities of her believers are projected. Drawing on recent literature on material religion, as well as post-colonial scholarship, Krebs explores the power relations that inform the constructions of various Marian bodies. She discusses how these constructions take place at the level of the formation of ethnic and national identity and believers' political concerns, often resulting in images of Mary which differ considerably from dominant, white, European-based imaginations. Like the Jezebel spirit in the article by O'Donnell, Mary resists her own passive inclusion into political projects, albeit in a different way. Krebs emphasizes that devotees experience Mary as an accessible ally who intervenes in reality and, importantly, comes into being through her relationships them.

In the third article of this special issue, titled 'A Time to Mourn, a Time to Dance: Abortion Death Rituals in South Korea', SeungGyeong Ji presents her research on the *ChonDoJe*: Buddhist and Shamanist abortion death rituals that are performed by South Korean women. Ji describes the 'birth' of two 'social figures' in these rituals: the ritual participants and the 'mythical figure of the foetus' soul'. Both are subject to secular discourses of birth control as well as religious mourning practices, which each have their own assumptions about which lives are, as Ji discusses in relation to Judith Butler's writings, grievable. In her layered and rich analysis of the rituals in question, Ji disentangles how seemingly oppositional framings of South Korean women who had an abortion are in fact mutually dependent. She investigates how women cannot be simply implicated as targets of governmental reproductive regimes, but are alternately constructed as Buddhists, sinners, mothers and mourners.

Tea Hadžiristić, in her article 'Unveiling Muslim Women in Socialist Yugoslavia: The Body Between Socialism, Secularism, and Colonialism', understands contemporary Bosnian controversies over the veil from a historical and post-colonial analysis of the different markings of the 'symbolic terrain' of Muslim women's bodies in various time frames. The Anti-Fascist Women's Front, founded in World War II to recruit Partisan women, in particular formed a channel for a form of state-sanctified feminism in which the practice of unveiling became imbued with gendered, but also ethnic- and class-related meanings that dictated who was and who was not an acceptable citizen. Through

the 'forgetting' of historical moments when the veil was very much an integrated part of Bosnian society, unveiling provides the possibility of a 'symbolic staging' of Bosnia as a modern state, but neglects women's bodies as a lived reality.

Overall, the articles in this special issue show how a focus on body politics forms an interesting, if not necessary, epistemological approach to contemporary dynamics of religion, gender, ethnicity, class and race.

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