Introduction (Contexts, Contestations and Voices)

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Controversies in the public arena regarding religion and sexuality often see these categories constructed as inherently oppositional or already in conflict. As state policies regarding sexuality and sexual diversity develop, often but not always promoting inclusivity and non-discrimination, it is imperative to develop a more nuanced discussion regarding the relationship of religion/ideology to sexual diversity and sexuality. What is the role of ideological commitments in promoting or arresting policies of inclusivity? How do policies become actualized within the environments they are intended for: i.e. education, health care, etc.? Debates about sexual and religious intersections continue to make headlines around the globe regularly; debates which are often responded to in media and public discourses by politicians, advocates and other interest groups.

Amidst protest New Zealand and France both legalized same-sex marriage (in April and May 2013 respectively). In May 2013, Nigeria passed a law that bans same-sex marriage (and public displays of affection between same-sex couples) and shortly afterward, Russia passed a law banning the promotion of non-traditional sexual relationships to minors, which includes foreigners speaking about homosexual rights in Russia (June 2013).² 2012 saw the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” in the United States as well as the legalization of same-sex marriage in numerous states, some by ballot for the first time (discussed by Jakobsen and Pellegrini, chapter 6). In 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down key provisions of the Defense of Marriage Act and tossed out an appeal of a lower court decision regarding Proposition 8 in California, which means that same-sex couples again can be married legally in that state. In 2012, the U.K. government announced that the right to be married would be

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² Russia’s policies have further come to the forefront regarding the upcoming winter Olympics in Sochi 2014.
extended to same-sex marriages, including marriages conducted in a place of worship provided the marriage was approved by that religious body.

Other controversies regarding religious and sexuality intersections were put on display in the aftermath of a decision from the European Court of Human Rights regarding whether male circumcision ought to be legal or not and further whether it was a religious or cultural tradition (discussed by Barras and Dabby, chapter 5). Gendered and religious debates are also implicated in Brazil, where female leadership of religious organizations is commonplace, and yet religious policies are not any more progressive than they had been with predominantly male leaders (see Rosas and de Castro, chapter 11). Is there a reason to assume that female leadership would necessarily account for more equal approaches to sexual diversity? When a practice, such as male circumcision, is put forward as potentially illegal activity, how do the religious and gendered narratives become represented in public and legal discourses? Barras and Dabby and Rosas and de Castro all consider what role, if any, gender plays regarding legal and policy decisions about sexuality and religion.

When sexuality, be it sexual identity, orientation or practices, makes its way into the public sphere, it is accompanied (and expected to be accompanied) by religion, often framed as a ‘natural’ antagonist. Same too for gender equality, religion is often constructed as inherently oppressive towards gendered rights, but these narrow constructions of religion and religious identity do not adequately respond to the research that has been, and continues to be, conducted regarding the ways in which individuals and adherents live their religious, gendered and sexual identities (see for example Yip and Page 2013; Wilcox 2010). Additionally, research on media and religion (Hoover 2006; Knott et al 2013; and Lövheim 2011; among others) challenges the way religious identity is portrayed in media coverage of debates, such as those listed above.

Questions in the opening paragraphs of this introduction are both answered through examination of the ways in which different countries, institutions, groups and individuals respond and reflect on their own identities and are also left as questions for the readers to reflect on at the end of the volume. The chapters contained here offer unique perspectives on debates within an international context, debates that cannot and are not easily answered. The volume seeks to challenge and reflect on the presentation of identities in the public sphere and the ways in which these identities are managed or regulated through both legal and discursive regimes.

The goal of this volume is to explore religion and sexuality from a range of countries across the globe, focusing on the theme of religious and ideological voices in state policies, for example marriage, education, health care and law. This includes voices from religious or ideological perspectives whose support