

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