

## Religion, Gender and Body Politics Post-secular, post-colonial and queer perspectives

International conference on behalf of the international research project “Interdisciplinary Innovations in the Study of Religion and Gender: Postcolonial, Post-secular and Queer Perspectives”, at Utrecht University, The Netherlands, 12-14 February 2015.

### Introduction

As sign and site of individual and collective identity profiling 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 the case in the aftermath of 9/11, when religion re-appeared in the public arena in an unexpected and controversial form, often related to disputes about the role and place of Islam in Western societies. Subjects of debate have not only become religious dress (hijab, burqa, kippa), but also other body-related cultural and religious practices, such as male and female circumcision, food regulations (e.g., ritual slaughter and religious fasting), conventional gendered social behaviour in the public sphere (e.g., physical greeting gestures) and daily religious practices (e.g., the presence of prayer rooms for Muslims in public buildings such as schools). Also the integrity and possible violation of the human body figure as important signposts in controversies over the acceptability of religious conventions and behaviour (e.g., sexual abuse, corporal punishments). Finally, in public expressions of feminist activism, sometimes against the religious establishment (e.g., Femen, Pussy Riot), the body is – again – an important messenger, tool or sign.

The fierceness of debates concerning the public bodily expression of religion – in particular Islam – 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. For instance, by subjecting oneself to ‘self-care regimes’ (Bauman 1992) by visiting gyms, spas and organic food stores, one can acquire the ‘physical capital’ (Bourdieu 1998) necessary to display the fit and healthy body that has become the dominant model of our times and that is encouraged through government-sponsored sports programs, television commercials and real-life shows (e.g. *My Big Fat Diet Show*). As Schilling (1993) argues, the central position of the body within contemporary ‘somatic society’ (Turner 1992) reflects a number of social insecurities. Women’s emancipation has led to uncertainty about gender roles and, consequently, the over-emphasis of traditional expressions of masculinity and femininity; medical interventions prolong life but lead to insecurities about death and the struggle against mortality and its effect on the body; and technological innovation leads to questions about the limits and boundaries of what actually constitutes the human body. Not only does the earlier mentioned excessive focus on religious bodily practices conceal the fact that there are more general cultural insecurities about embodiment at work, it also conceals the fact that in practice the boundaries between “religious” and “secular” bodily practices are often blurred.

### Conference Description: Aims and Perspectives

In this conference we want 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 in contemporary societies worldwide. In this we suggest to regard the body as simultaneously an empirical entity (e.g., the human or animal body), a discursive practice (e.g., the body politics or the body of Christ), and a focus of technologies of the self (e.g., ecstatic or ascetic bodies).

The body as 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", thereby reinforcing related dichotomies (e.g., 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 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.

We aim to question the ways in which intersecting ideologies of religion, secularism and gender materialise through individual and collective body-politics drawing from a range of contemporary critical perspectives in the humanities and qualitative social sciences, such as postcolonial criticism, post-secularism and queer theories. With these critical perspectives, we want to challenge persisting dichotomies in the study of religion and gender, like the public/private and religious/secular binaries, and Western and heteronormative dominant models of knowledge.

#### *At the crossroads: post-secular, post-colonial and queer perspectives*

This conference is organised within the international research project "Interdisciplinary Innovations in the Study of Religion and Gender". After having explored the three perspectives in separate workshops, the research project's final conference strives towards integrating the three perspectives, culminating in innovative research questions and methodologies in the study of religion and gender. The three perspectives refer to three major social changes which have an impact on the contemporary representation, role and practice of religion, gender and the body, as well as the academic reflection thereof:

1. *Post-colonial* criticism aims to challenge and deconstruct Western dominant models of knowledge, also in the study of religion and gender. It seeks to unmask colonial epistemological frameworks, unravel Eurocentric logics, and interrogate stereotypical cultural representations (Pui-Lan 2005). However, still today, Western dominant regimes of

knowledge are (un)consciously incorporated in academic works on religion and gender, consisting of hierarchically ordered binaries such as West/East, enlightened/backward and sacred/secular. Postcolonial theory aims to deconstruct these binaries of hierarchical oppositions and inequality and pays attention to different experiences of people across geographical, ethnical, racial, religious and sexual divides, and the power relations involved. Postcolonial criticism aims to analyse and interrogate the intricate relationships between post-coloniality, gender, sexuality and religion which are reflected in colonial, neo-colonial and imperial practices and body politics. It thus draws attention to the intersectionality of religion, gender and other categories of social ordering such as race, culture and ethnicity, something also apparent in post-secular and queer studies.

2. From a *post-secular* perspective the secularisation thesis, stating that religion is in decline or even that it is bound to disappear completely, is being questioned and criticised. “Traditional” forms of religion, while constantly changing and shifting, are still very much present in people’s lives as well as in the public sphere. Moreover, new forms of religion emerge in the form of spiritual movements or the “new” religions societies are confronted with in an age of global migration. Rather than speaking of a decline of religion, therefore, it would be more accurate to speak of a changing landscape of religious practices and presence. This means that not only the role of religion and religious ideology in the public sphere needs to be rethought, but also the (gendered) construction of religious selves (Peumans & Stallaert 2012) in societies that have been perceived to be secular and liberal. A post-secular perspective may rethink (1) the role of women both in “established” religious traditions and within new spirituality, where they seem to be overrepresented; (2) the effect of the religious-secular dichotomy on women who in this dichotomy have been associated with the spiritual and the private rather than the rational and the public; and (3) the conceptions of religious agency that have been produced within secular gender theory (Braidotti 2008, Bracke 2008). Post-secular research, then, is marked both by the intention to deconstruct the oppositional pairing of secularity and religion and by the urge to investigate the paradoxical present-day condition in which currents of ongoing secularisation and religious revival seem to co-exist, together with the implications this has on gender and body politics.
3. From a *queer* perspective, the entanglement of religion, gender and sexuality is viewed with distrust towards heteronormative schemes. These schemes are not limited to religious ideology (for instance religious moral claims of traditional family values), but also in, for example, secular forms of LGBT-rights discourse framing same-sex marriage as the ultimate goal of emancipation. A queer perspective on religion, gender and sexuality is sensitive to the ways in which shifting shapes of religion in the context of post-colonial and post-secular societies, can be constitutive of heteronormative religious subjectivities, but can also be a source of rituals, practices and discourses that challenge heteronormativity. Therefore, they can be creatively employed to imagine religious subjectivities outside of heteronormative frames (Wilcox 2013). Queer studies draw attention to the complexity and ambiguity of

sexual and gender identities as they are constructed in social, cultural, and religious discourses and (body) politics as well as in (homo)nationalist ideologies.

### Key-notes

Minoo Moallem, Professor of Gender and Women's Studies, University of California, Berkeley

Yvonne Sherwood, Professor of Biblical Studies and Politics, University of Kent

Ulrike Auga, Professor of Theology and Gender Studies, Humboldt University, Berlin

Scott Kugle, Associate Professor of South Asian and Islamic Studies, Emory University, Atlanta

Sarojini Nadar, Professor of Gender and Religion, University of KwaZulu-Natal

Please find the preliminary program with key-note lectures on our website:

<http://projectreligionandgender.org/programme>

### Call for papers

At this conference we welcome contributions that:

- use theoretical approaches drawing from insights in post-secular, postcolonial, queer and gender theories, clarifying body practices as a contested site of religious and secular practices;
- either theoretically or empirically challenge the secular/religious and public/private binaries in understanding contemporary body politics;
- do not only explore expressions and accounts of *ideal* religious and secular practices and norms, but also their manifold articulations with all the lived ambiguities and ambivalences;
- suggest, imagine or develop innovative methodologies in order to understand the complex ways in which religious and secular identities are formed through bodily practices.

Moreover, at this conference we encourage an interdisciplinary approach, welcoming insights from, amongst others, gender studies, men and masculinity studies, disability studies, theology, religious studies, anthropology, history, literature, cultural studies and media studies.

### Organisers

This conference is organised as the final event of the international research project "Interdisciplinary Innovations in the Study of Religion and Gender: Postcolonial, Post-secular and Queer Perspectives".

This project was initiated and coordinated by prof. dr. Anne-Marie Korte (Utrecht University) and dr. Adriaan van Klinken (University of Leeds). The conference will also host the celebratory launch of the newly established 'International Association for the study of Religion and Gender' (IARG).

## Practical Information

### Panel sessions

- Paper or panel proposals need to be submitted on the project website before 1 December 2014 (<http://projectreligionandgender.org/submission>). The conference organisation will inform all applicants about its decision before 15 December 2015.
- Individual paper proposals should include your name and institutional affiliation, the title of your paper and an abstract of max. 250 words.
- Besides individual papers it is also possible to submit proposals for a pre-arranged panel session of one and a half hour. A panel consists of maximum three to four paper presentations. Please provide the following information (max. 1.000 words): title of the panel session; name of the chair of the panel session; names, titles and abstracts of the papers.

### Poster sessions

- There is also the possibility to present your research via a poster presentation. Poster proposals need to be submitted on the project website before 1 December 2014 (<http://projectreligionandgender.org/submission>). The conference organisation will inform all applicants about its decision before 15 December 2015.
- Poster proposals should include your name and institutional affiliation, the title of your poster and an abstract of max. 100 words.
- During the ceremony on the second day (see [programme](#)), a prize of €200,- will be awarded for the best poster presentation.

### Finances

- The conference fee is €200,- and includes an annual membership of the International Association for the study of Religion and Gender (IARG).
- For students or researchers with a low budget, we can provide a small reduction of the conference fee.

### Contact

- For more information you can contact the project assistant Jorien Copier ([projectreligionandgender@gmail.com](mailto:projectreligionandgender@gmail.com)).