Towards Lived Religion and Lived Citizenship: Binaries and Complexities in the Study of Religion, Gender, Feminism and Citizenship

The notion that religion is bound to disappear has become increasingly untenable. There are far too many spiritually serious, well-educated, economically sophisticated, civically engaged religious people in the world.

(Ammerman 2014: 5)

Introduction

With overall trends towards increasing secular beliefs and more gender-equal relations and practices in contemporary Europe, how can it be that so many European women continue to adhere to religious faiths and doctrines that support the equal value of women and men yet also support gender inequality? This issue is complex, not the least because neither ‘religious’ nor ‘secular’ and neither ‘equal’ nor ‘equality’ are straightforward terms. Instead, they are being read, understood and practised in many different ways. Moreover, women have ambivalent and contradictory relations to religious institutions and authorities. They may choose to accept and submit to some religious prescriptions and practices, while contesting or rejecting others. As Casanova (2009: 17) has argued, ‘the religious politics of gender has become one of the most important issues facing humanity worldwide’, and it is therefore urgent to address how religious women themselves live and practise religion, gender relations and citizenship. This chapter situates our 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. It forges links between contemporary scholarly debates on religion and secularization, gender and secularization, institutional and everyday forms
of religion, the role of agency and structure in the analysis of gender and religion, different feminist approaches to religion, feminist theory’s contributions to citizenship theory, and, finally, the conceptualization of religious citizenship.

Feminist women’s movements of the 1960s and 1970s have mainly been understood as secular (Braude 2004; Bracke 2008; Jeffreys 2012). At the top of their agendas were issues such as abortion, contraception, women’s bodies and reproductive rights, which challenged ideals of motherhood rooted in notions of female piety and domesticity (Cott 1977). In the section entitled ‘Questioning the “post-secular”: The intertwining and contextualization of the religious and the secular’, we offer a critique of the term ‘post-secular’, of the distinction between the secular and the religious, and of the secularization thesis. Processes of both secularization and sacralization can be observed in contemporary European societies. Moreover, what is perceived as religious and as secular is subject to change and contestation and therefore requires attention to specific contexts.

In the next section, ‘Lived religion: A holistic approach to religion as belief and practice’, we outline the shift that is taking place within the sociology of religion from an institutional focus on organized religion to a focus on religion as lived and situate our own research within the ‘lived religion’ approach emerging from scholars such as Robert Orsi and Meredith McGuire. Later in the chapter, we forge links between the lived religion approach and the ‘lived citizenship’ perspective of feminist scholars such as Ruth Lister, Birte Siim and others. Before that, however, we suggest that the ‘lived religion’ approach poses challenges to the secularization thesis whether it is applied to the religious beliefs and practices of women or of men (see the section on ‘Gender and secularization’), and we also question the notion of a ‘post-secular turn’ in feminism (in the section ‘The “turn” that never was? The limits of dichotomous thinking’).

Notions of autonomy, empowerment and agency were vital to the feminist women’s movements originating in the late 1960s and 1970s. These notions have also become central to feminist analyses of religion and to debates about what constitutes agency within religious contexts. In the section ‘Analysing women’s religious agency’, we demonstrate shifts and developments in feminist debate about religious women’s agency and situate ourselves within the debate. Studies have often looked for religious women’s agency in the ways in which they have circumvented, resisted or challenged patriarchal structures. Recently, however, scholars such as Saba Mahmood, Phyllis Mack and others have proposed that agency can also be located in behaviour that reproduces patriarchal social norms. Conceptualizations of agency as residing in religious piety have a strong affinity with the ‘lived religion’ approach, and with Robert Orsi we argue that attention must be paid to the structures and conditions in which any form of agency is performed.