

Globalization, Gender and Religion: The Politics of Women's Rights in Catholic and Muslim Contexts

Jane H. Bayes and Nayereh Tohidi, eds.
Houndmills and New York: Palgrave, 2001

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Published by H-Gender-MidEast@h-net.msu.edu (July 2004)

Why Do Politics Play Out on Women's Bodies?

Studies dealing with the broad theme of 'women and religion' are often designed along the lines of edited volumes of essays on each of the major religious traditions, written (most often) by Western experts. Such an approach is perfectly legitimate and, when the results are informative, justified as well. It is an approach, however, that makes comparison between (and even within) traditions difficult, as one crucial aspect of this kind of tradition narrative is inevitably missing. That aspect, and the most important word in this book's sub-title, is 'contexts.' The contexts in the present case are not defined by there being only two traditions treated, the (Catholic) Christian and the (Sunni and Shia) Muslim. Very specifically, five of the ten contributors to the volume, including the two editors, attended the UN 4th World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1994. Two others were members of their countries' official delegations in Beijing while a third was, during preparation of the project, arrested and charged with treason for critiquing discriminatory laws against women in her own country. The Catholic populations dealt with are those in the United States (Susan Maloney), Latin America, with special focus on Costa Rica

(Laura Guzman Stein), Ireland (Yvonne Galligan and Nuala Ryan) and Spain (Celia Valiente), while the Muslim contexts include Turkey (Ayse Gunes Ayata), Iran (Mehranguiz Kar), Egypt (Heba Raouf Ezzat) and Bangladesh (Najma Chawdhury).

In the editors' words, the Beijing Conference reflected important international divisions of perspective and concern, one being "a new transnational and cross-cultural conservative and religious alliance against equal rights for women" and another the "growing implications of globalization for women and gender politics." Conference headlines were made by the alliance of some Catholic and Muslim delegations, including men and women and led by the Vatican in Rome. Their objective was a uniform position in opposition to various women's issues proposed in the Platform for Action (PFA). The editors bluntly ask, 'Why is it that politics in Catholic and Muslim contexts are so often played out on women's bodies?' The related but broader issue dealt with in this book is the variety of strategies adopted by women when traditional gender patterns are challenged by forces of modernity.

An important observation is made in the editors' introductory remarks concerning the connecting themes

between the essays, namely that in these debates “the ongoing tension [is] not only and simply between modernity and tradition, secularity or religiosity, but also between competing notions of modernity, modernization and traditionalism” (p. 14). The force of this remark, however, is blunted somewhat by the sentence immediately following, claiming that the “real line of demarcation seems to be between those forces who are committed to democracy, freedom of choice, and equal human/women’s rights and those who support authoritarianism, discrimination and gender hierarchy under a religious or secular guise” (p. 14). There are surely also competing notions of some or all of these terms just as there are of the ones previously mentioned. A similar difficulty in the editors’ presentation appears when they, quite rightly, assert that the feminist movement is not one but many and that negotiating modernity takes many forms. But it is not as immediately evident that what unites feminists is a belief in “human dignity, human rights, freedom of choice and the further empowerment of women *rather* than any ideological, spiritual or religious stance” (emphasis added, p. 50). This claim, like the one above, privileges a secular perspective. Yet both editors concede earlier that “a basic claim among various religious feminist reformers ... is that their respective religions, *if understood and interpreted correctly*, do not support the subordination of women” (emphasis added, p. 48). An illustrative point is the debate in Turkey over a woman wearing a headscarf in government offices or universities. In her fascinating piece, Gunes Ayata notes that the prohibition of the Kemalist government against headscarves dates from the 1930s. The ban included female students of theological colleges who could only cover their heads while reading the Qur’an. In the mid-1990s, the Islamic Welfare Party found itself ranged against secular state institutions, including the army, when it proposed legislation which would, in effect, make it a woman’s free choice whether or not she wore a headscarf in these public places (p. 169). Is the situation here a clear-cut one of democracy versus authoritarianism or of free choice against discrimination?

This leads to a comment on what is, perhaps, the most interesting contrast between feminist movements in Muslim countries: that described in the accounts on Turkey and Iran. The authors set each country’s context in the opening sentences of their narratives. With the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, reforms involving women’s rights were “some of the most important... attempts to break away from the Muslim world and turn toward the West” (p. 157). Contemporary Iran, by contrast, is a country where 70 percent of its population is under the age of 25, most of whom were born and educated under Khomeini’s Islamic revolution of 1979. Since 1980, both countries have witnessed new configurations

in their feminist movements: In Turkey, the older, secular Kemalist groups were challenged by ‘new’ feminists, influenced by recent radical Western feminist examinations of patriarchy, while in Iran those who conformed to the new Islamic state’s policies on women were opposed by ‘non-conformists.’ In Turkey, Gunes Ayata concludes, the ‘ongoing threat of Islamic fundamentalism’ has produced a bitter confrontation between women as symbols of opposing sides, the secular and religious (p. 173); as a consequence, the author laments, ‘women have lost the search for new solutions and alliances.’ Note that, by implication, only the secularist feminist view is deemed legitimate for all Turkish women. In Iran, Kar notes that while non-conformist and secular women who remained after the revolution agree that religious interpretation is not a beneficial strategy for women, there has nonetheless been a “convergence of elements of the religious and secular women in their thinking about an increasing number of issues with regard to women” (p. 199). Together with a commitment to debate, dialogue, and pluralism among the various feminist perspectives, these, ironically, appear to be precisely the elements lacking in the Turkish case.

Another fascinating contrast may be drawn between Maloney’s account of women’s issues among Catholics in the United States and Chowdhury’s coverage of the same questions in Bangladesh. Of the Christian population in the United States, which is about 70 percent, the Catholics are in the minority, while in Bangladesh, the Muslim population stands at just under 90 percent; the total population of the United States is approximately twice that of Bangladesh. The United States is a secular state, while the state religion in Bangladesh is Islam. According to demographer Emmanuel Todd, the fertility rate between 1981 and 2001 in the United States rose slightly from 1.8 to 2.1 while it dropped dramatically in Bangladesh from 6.3 to 3.3. Adult literacy in Bangladesh is still low at 34 percent, but is apparently set to rise quickly, as the fertility rate declines further. In the secular, more highly educated and pluralist context of the United States, Maloney’s article significantly deals with the more abstract subject of Catholic ‘feminist theologies,’ while Chowdhury discusses the very practical problems of the ‘politics’ of Muslim women’s rights. The Catholic feminists’ chief concern is not the American state but whether and how far to support the external authority of the Vatican. For Bangladeshi feminists the patriarchal state and the broader society represent the main focus of attention; the state itself must steer a cautious course between advocating policies that may benefit women and an awareness not to zealously confront conservative, patriarchal political forces. One Catholic perspective, described as ‘holistic feminism,’ is represented by the American academic who

chaired the Vatican delegation to the Beijing Conference; Mary Ann Glendon employs traditional Catholic sources to promote the view of woman as chiefly wife and mother. Equality of the sexes, in the Biblical sense, means men and women complement one another, a position familiar among Islamic feminists in Iran and Turkish 'fundamentalists,' but rejected by the Turkish feminists described by Gunes Ayata. In Bangladesh, the women's movement invokes articles of the Constitution to promote gender equality, but argues that it does not explicitly cover the private sphere of women's lives in the home. As Chowdhury concludes, on questions of gender equality in Bangladesh, there is ever a gap between political rhetoric and reality. In the United States, where Catholic women enjoy (relatively) higher levels of health, education and disposable wealth than their Bangladeshi sisters, there is, according to Maloney, little communication or contact between women of different perspectives (whether holistic, moderate or reconstructive). This is a situation similar to the

women's movement in Turkey, but much less so in Iran and Bangladesh.

This volume contains a wealth of material covering several important, but significantly different, contexts in which women contest, in varying degrees, traditional religio-patriarchal values and compete among themselves from a variety of perspectives. The final excellent essay of the book, by Heba Raouf Ezzat, on women's developments in Egypt reiterates the editors' point (noted above) that the struggle is not simply one between A and B, but of competing definitions of A and B or, in this specific case, between competing visions of secular modernity, Islamic modernity, and Islamist traditionalism. Ezzat's final cautionary words may fairly sum up all the contributions from whatever perspective each is offered, "that the story has no happy ending; it is still unfolding" (p. 272). Nonetheless, the story as told thus far is a must read.

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