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Recasting Secular Thinking for Emancipatory Feminist Practice

Niamh Reilly

Introduction

The renewed vitality of religion as a visible and contested feature of politics and public life globally has upset established ideas about secularisation and secularism in late modernity. This presents particular challenges for mainstream feminism, which typically views progressive political engagement and secularism as mutually constitutive. Four sets of developments shape contemporary debates about religion, politics and society and the role of feminism in this nexus. First, the 'clash of civilizations thesis' is now hegemonic in globalised Western discourse, pitting an imagined monolithic and 'backward' Islam against a monolithic and modern secular West. Representations of Muslim women as oppressed and requiring liberation through enforced compliance with Western 'secular' notions of gender equality are integral to this narrative, which also reproduces the myth that all Western women are, by definition, liberated. In this context, it is necessary for proponents of 'secular feminism' to interrogate the normative secularism they espouse and to consider if it is implicated in Islamophobia and related forms of oppression.

Second, ostensibly religiously-justified authoritarian and violent movements, which actively seek the subordination of women and girls and LGBTQ people continue to emerge around the world (of which 'Islamic State' is one example). At the same time, political forces in Western democratic countries that also oppose women's reproductive autonomy, LGBTQ rights as well as immigration are frequently linked to ultraconservative varieties of Christianity. Such links between conservative forms of religious traditionalism and violent or retrogressive political projects figure in arguments for a rigid separation of state and religion and stringent limits on the visibility and influence of religion in the public sphere. This view of secularism however – as the repression or

absence of religion – is no longer tenable as the default position of progressive political projects.

Third, the empirical basis of ‘the secularisation thesis’ – that is, the idea that secularisation is a global, inevitable process of modernisation – is also called into question by recent sociological scholarship. In this context, it is no longer taken for granted that the separation of church and state, the decline of religious authority in public life, the confinement of religious practice to private life, and the global diffusion of a particular liberal feminist view of gender equality are inevitable and interdependent sociological phenomena. Finally, profound critiques of the epistemological biases that underpin dominant understandings of the religious–secular binary, from progressive nonreligious *and* religious perspectives (Castelli, 2001; Mahmood, 2005; Scott, 2007; Butler, 2008; Braidotti, 2008) have exposed the authoritarian character and harmful consequences of some forms of secularism.

This article contributes to the task of specifying ‘a new, more inclusive, social practice of the secular in the third millennium’ (Braidotti et al., 2014: 12). To this end, it considers the implications of the foregoing developments for how we think about the interrelation of the secular, secularism and religious subjectivity within a re-theorisation of emancipatory feminist practice under post-secular conditions. Such emancipatory practice, I argue, must eschew static, de-contextualised and intolerant approaches to religion and take seriously critiques of oppression in the name of ‘secularism’ no less than oppression in the name of religion. It also rejects the assumptions that feminism is constitutionally aligned with secularism (as the absence of religion) and that ‘religious feminism’ is an oxymoron. Such views fail to recognise the ‘complex ways feminists forge religio-spiritual lives’ (Aune, 2015: 122) and impede the building of political alliances between religious and nonreligious feminist projects. I argue, it is necessary to recast secular thinking within a critical emancipatory perspective that recognises the positivity of non-secular subjectivities and religion as a resource in emancipatory feminist practice vis-à-vis the public sphere, as well as private and family life.

The rest of this article is organised in four sections. The next section provides a brief overview of the main debates on secularisation in order to contextualise the theoretical discussion that follows. A further two sections explore: debates in feminist scholarship on religion, secularism and the public sphere; and the limitations of dominant approaches to religion in mainstream political theory from an emancipatory feminist

perspective. The final section considers these critiques and concepts in relation to the work of the Malaysian advocacy group Sisters in Islam, to illustrate how secular thinking might be recast within emancipatory feminist practice in response to the post-secular challenge.

Questioning the secularisation thesis

The sociological evidence regarding secularisation questions established views on the subject. Some argue that the 'secularisation thesis' remains relevant in specific contexts. For example, focusing on dropping rates of church attendance and/or membership in the most stable and prosperous countries in northwest Europe, Steve Bruce (1996) concludes that there is a decisive overall trend towards secularisation as modernisation occurs. However, Bruce also finds that participation in traditional religious practices remains high in countries where the formation of national identity and religion were intertwined historically (Ireland and Poland for example). Along similar lines, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2004) claim that secularisation, understood as a 'systematic erosion of religious practices, values and beliefs has occurred most clearly among prosperous social sections living in affluent and secure post-industrial nations' (2004: 5). Vincett et al. (2008) usefully foreground evolving and diverse formations of 'women's religiosity' in the West vis-à-vis secularisation debates. They conclude that although in the West 'secularization is a fact' this cannot be used to infer as it often is that a 'that a given culture *must* secularize as it modernizes' (Vincett et al., 2008: 1).

Others contend that societies in different parts of the world (especially beyond Europe) are actively 'de-secularizing' or 're-sacralising'. They note as evidence the rise of new religious and spiritual movements and practices worldwide (Berger, 1999; Davie, 2002; Herbert, 2003). José Casanova's comparative study of Brazil, Poland, Spain, and the United States (1994) concludes that outside of Europe the 'de-privatization' of religion is underway. He also argues that attachment to a rigid separation of church and state (in France for example) is unique to a particular strain of European Enlightenment critique of religion, driven by context-specific battles regarding Church authority in Europe. Moreover, Casanova maintains that religion in fact has been continually present in the public spheres of a majority of countries, including long-established democracies, despite the rhetoric of the 'secular modern state' (Casanova, 2008; Stepan, 2000). The EU VEIL (Values, Equality in Liberal Democracies) project further confirms much variation within 'secular

Europe' in the role of religion in public life. The study found that state responses to the 'Muslim headscarf' vary with differences in the nature of church–state relations, policy frameworks for addressing discrimination, and prevailing cultural and legal concepts of citizenship in study countries (Kiliç et al., 2008).

Overall, therefore, the notion that there is a single, inevitable process of secularisation that is integral to 'modernisation' and 'progress' is not borne out by the sociological evidence. Rather, there are multiple paths by which different countries arrive at a particular settlement between state and religious authorities. It follows that the 'secularisation thesis' is at least as much a normative paradigm as it is a descriptive account of developments. Moreover, as Rosi Braidotti observes: 'different forms of secularism may be engendered by multiple models of modernity' (2008: 10). From this perspective, those who argue that human freedom requires a particular version of 'secularism', for example, as a core value of democracy, must acknowledge and defend its status as a normative political-social ideal that is open to interrogation and (re)interpretation. In doing so, it is necessary to articulate the conditions of the operation of 'secularism' specifically as a principle in emancipatory feminist practice. To inform this exploration, the next section considers relevant debates in feminist theory and scholarship on religion, secularism and the public sphere.

Feminist perspectives on religion, secularism and the public sphere

Until quite recently, most mainstream (secular) feminist writing on religion has taken a negative view on the subject. Feminist political sociology has focused on the gender-specific dimensions and oppressive impact on women of authoritarian and violent religious movements ('religious fundamentalisms'), mainly in global South contexts. Whether in the name of Christianity, Islam or other religions, these movements seek to impose literalist and ultraconservative versions of religious teaching through state law and policy, most often through severe restrictions on the sexual and reproductive freedom of women and sexual minorities (Shaheed, 2004; Othman, 2006; Al-Labadi, 2014; Yuval-Davis, 2014). Much of this work, explicitly or implicitly, tends to a 'radical Enlightenment' critique of religion (Robertson, 2015: 15). That is, it takes as given that 'religion is bad for women' and that 'secularism' is an indispensable constraint on the arbitrary exercise of religious authority,

which disproportionately affects women. This view is echoed in mainstream feminist political theory, which typically has adopted an unreflective alignment with secularism and paid minimal attention to religion except to flag it as a source of harmful cultural practices (Okin, 1999) or an aspect of 'difference' (Young, 2002).

In contrast, the discipline of feminist studies in religion always questioned the pervasive view that religion is an attack on human freedom. Elizabeth Castelli notes that conversations between religious and nonreligious feminists have been difficult because 'many [secular] feminists, whether activists or academics, have tended to read 'religion' as an abstraction solely in negative terms ... reading the embrace of religious affiliations or allegiances as a sign of false consciousness. (2001: 5). More recently, a rapprochement between nonreligious and religious perspectives in feminist thinking is emerging. Interventions by Rosi Braidotti (2008; Braidotti et al., 2014), Judith Butler (2008), Joan Scott (2007) and Saba Mahmood (2005) persuasively challenge the epistemological and normative credibility of the religious-secular binary and the unquestioning alignment of mainstream feminism with the secular half of the problematized dichotomy.

Addressing specifically the French doctrine of *Laïcité*, Joan Scott (2007) deconstructs dominant Western ways of thinking about 'secularism', as a cognate of 'modernity', 'progress' and 'democracy', which serve to position some religiously-marked subjects as 'backward'. Scott coins the term 'sexularism' to debunk the dual myth that sexual emancipation in the West is a reality *and* an outcome of secularism (2009). Judith Butler similarly objects to the logic of 'secularity as modernity', which, in Europe, she argues has facilitated 'cultural assaults' on religious minorities (2008: 3). Saba Mahmood goes further to question the 'liberatory' bias of such poststructuralist critiques on their own terms because they appear to locate 'agency [only] within those operations that resist the dominating and subjectivating modes of power', including resistance to certain religious practices. Against this view, she argues for a separation of 'the notion of agency from the goals of progressive [secularist] politics' (Mahmood, 2005: 14). In her theorisation of the postsecular condition, Rosi Braidotti seeks to recast critical subjectivity in positive terms, within an 'ethics of becoming', as emerging from 'creative affirmation' and 'vital generative forces' rather than from the negation and loss of 'destructive oppositional' strategies (2008: 19). From this perspective, Braidotti foregrounds the positive moment of the 'residual spirituality of much contemporary feminist theory', evident in feminist engagement with

'straightforward religious matters', 'neo-vital politics' and 'environmental holism and deep ecology' (2008: 14). In this article, I build on the foregoing feminist critiques of the operation of the Western centric secular-religious binary, and Braidotti's notion of positive non-secular subjectivity to consider how secular thinking can be recast for emancipatory feminist practice.

The public sphere and religion in political theory

The arguments I develop in this article have roots in critical theory, which is characterised by an 'interest in emancipation from all forms of oppression' (Bronner and Kellner, 1989: 2). Jürgen Habermas's (1989) conceptualisation of the public sphere (and his views of religion therein) have been very influential in critical democratic theory for several decades. While Habermas's later work adopted a more accommodating view of religion, most of his writing expresses a strong Enlightenment critique of religion, characterising it as inherently irrational and implicated in absolutist and authoritarian tendencies. His point of departure is a commitment to 'political liberalism', which he views as 'a nonreligious, post-metaphysical justification of the normative foundations of constitutional democracy' (Habermas, 2008a: 102). On this account, 'only those political decisions are taken to be legitimate as can be impartially justified in the light of generally accessible reasons' (Habermas, 2006: 5).

As critiques of the ethnocentric enforcement of secularism gained momentum, Habermas revised his thinking somewhat to concede greater space to religious language and arguments within his account of rational, democratic dialogic processes. He argues:

[T]he liberal state has an interest in the free expression of religious voices in the public arena. . . . Religious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life. In corresponding political debates, this potential makes religious speech into a serious vehicle for possible truth contents. . . . However, the institutional thresholds between the 'wild' political public sphere and the formal proceedings within political bodies also function as a filter that allows only secular contributions from . . . the informal flows of public communication to pass through. (Habermas, 2008b: 131)

Hence, although Habermas opens up the public sphere to religious voices and values, he nonetheless wishes to confine the role of religion to opinion formation in the 'weak' public sphere of civil society as distinct

from the strong public of parliamentary policy and law making (Cooke, 2007: 227). Further, he uncritically equates 'generally accepted language' with nonreligious language and continues to argue for the strong regulation of religion, underlining its subordinate status in the 'rational' public space. Moreover, Braidotti et al. (2014) argue that Habermas's 'post-secular' account of secularism problematically rests on ethnocentric assumptions about the singular compatibility of Christianity and secular critical thinking. This further drives the myth that 'religions like Islam ... have no claim to modernity, emancipation, or human rights' (Braidotti et al., 2014: 2).

More generally, many are critical of Habermas's central premise of a supposedly universal communicative reason, which seems to require an impossible condition – that all participants are equally well informed, equally positioned to access and process information, and equally disposed to use such information for the purposes of posing and counter posing 'good reasons' and 'best arguments'. In reality, Nancy Fraser cautions that 'deliberation can serve as a mask for domination ... beyond gender to other kinds of unequal relation, like those based on class or race and ethnicity' (Fraser, 1990: 64). Instead of Habermas's monolithic public sphere of equally-positioned interlocutors, Fraser posits a vision of multiple contesting 'subaltern counterpublics'. Especially in an unequal society, she argues, such counterpublics allow members of 'subordinated social groups [to] invent and circulate counterdiscourses ... and to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs' (Fraser, 1990: 67). Fraser recognises that subaltern counterpublics may be 'anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian' but argues that 'insofar as [they] emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics, they help expand discursive space' (1990: 67). While Fraser does not explicitly include religious voices and communities as potential subaltern counterpublics, her concept clearly encompasses this possibility. While the notion of contending 'counterpublics' relies on ideas of oppositional consciousness and contestation critiqued by Braidotti, it also contains positive moments relating diversity, tolerance and dialogue as well generative activity to 'invent and circulate counterdiscourses.' From this perspective, alternative terms such as 'critical publics' or 'emergent publics' could be used in place of 'counterpublics' to foreground the positive and generative aspects of the interaction of dominant (hegemonic) and emergent (counter) publics in expanding the discursive space, ultimately to emancipatory ends.

Habermas's treatment of religion is strongly challenged by

communitarian political theorists such as Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel. In the liberal–communitarian divide that structured much debate in normative political theory since the 1990s the communitarian side has always been more disposed to addressing religion and morality as constitutive features of public life. Sandel argues that despite the appropriation of communal values by conservatives in the United States and elsewhere, ‘there is nothing intrinsically conservative about family or neighborhood or community or religion’ (2006: 42). Rebutting Habermasian notions of reason as an abstract and universal attribute of all, Taylor insists that all reason is contextual and grounded in culture and experience, including religiously-mediated experience. Rather than conceive of the public sphere as a kind of filtering system based on a required mode of reasoned deliberation, Taylor’s vision of ‘secular democracy’ is one where ‘mutual recognition’ and ‘collaboration in common pursuits’ are fostered (Calhoun, 2011: 129) in ways that ‘maximize the basic goals of *liberty and equality between basic beliefs*’ (Taylor, 2011: 56), including religious beliefs.

As with all communitarian visions, however, the latter proposition raises questions about who speaks for communities in political and public life, especially in multicultural societies. Taylor is not sufficiently concerned with the micro politics of who formulates and articulates a community’s ‘beliefs’; the asymmetries of power and who benefits from them within social groups below the state; and the kinds of trade-offs that are deemed acceptable, and to whom, in reckoning the balance of ‘liberty’ and ‘equality between ... beliefs’ (2011: 56). These concerns, along with perennial questions relating to the operation of the liberal public-private divide in enabling gendered abuses of power in interpersonal relations and the family, are central to the theorisation of postsecular emancipatory feminist practice that traverses public and private life. How the secular, secularism and religious subjectivity are defined, and interact with gender norms is centrally important to this task.

The following final section examines what it means to recast secular thinking for emancipatory feminist practice vis-à-vis the post-secular turn. It builds on the deep epistemological critiques of the secular-religious binary developed by Scott and Butler, the positive ontology of nonsecular agency and political subjectivity espoused by Braidotti, and the critical, dialogic democratic practice championed by Fraser. I suggest that the vision, ideas and practices of the Malaysian advocacy group Sisters in Islam, as articulated by Norani Othman (2006) and Zainah Anwar (2009), offer an important illustration of how these elements can be combined in

context-specific emancipatory feminist practice.

Recasting secular thinking for emancipatory feminist practice

Nancy Fraser's deceptively simple description of the objective of feminism is an apt starting point in theorising emancipatory feminist practice. She proposes as a goal for feminism 'that we try to attain a good balance between *individual freedom* and *forms of social relation*' (2009, emphasis added). Elsewhere, I have outlined five essential ingredients of emancipatory cosmopolitan feminism informed by a critical study of the 1990s global campaign for women's human rights (Reilly, 2007; 2009; 2011).¹ Arguably, the most fundamental feature is an active recognition of the differences between women and the complex and contradictory *intersectionality* of their lives. That is, women's experiences and identities are shaped by (and shape) not only sex and gender, but multiple other dimensions that constitute our subjectivity and experience, from religion, ethnicity and sexuality to socioeconomic status and geolocation (Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Crenshaw, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 2006). On this view, particular forms of gender-based oppression, or the gender dimensions of other forms of oppression, cannot be understood in the absence of contextualised understanding. A corollary of this is that reciprocal cross-borders dialogue, aimed at understanding context-specific gender-based oppressions from the perspectives of those affected and, on this basis, the formulation of strategies of solidarity or cooperative action, are essential features of *emancipatory feminist practice*. This premise is also of vital importance in efforts to generate feminist dialogue towards emancipatory ends across religious identities and religious–non religious divides.

Fraser's recognition of the ontological status of interpretive struggles is a key dimension of the account of emancipatory feminist practice I wish to advance. She underlines that, 'Struggles over the *interpretation* of needs, rights, demands ...[and] over *existing normative forms*, are in *continuous*

¹ The essential ingredients of emancipatory cosmopolitan feminism are: A critical feminist 'global consciousness'; engagement with mainstream human rights mechanisms to extend their application to previously excluded and/or marginalised individuals, groups, issues and contexts; recognition of the intersectionality of women's identities and experiences and reciprocal, cross-boundaries dialogue to forge common agendas and actions; development of collaborative advocacy strategies, above and below states, around concrete issues; and engagement in 'global forums' as sites of transnational solidarity.

process in all societies ... the struggle over interpretations does not stop it is continuous' (2009, emphasis added). Struggles over interpretation are at the heart of most conflicts that arise between women's rights and the requirements of religious belonging. As noted, these struggles manifest in varied context-specific ways within and between religious traditions and communities. Importantly, they are frequently challenged *from within* as well as from outside religious communities. Often, this political and sociological complexity is ignored in the defence of secularism as a universal, abstract and supposedly progressive principle. As a result, the emancipatory efforts of religiously-committed critics are often rendered invisible, for example, attempts to further 'pro-choice' or LGBTQ-friendly interpretations of religious beliefs within religious communities. The work of Malaysian advocacy group, Sisters in Islam, and its leading exponents, Norani Othman (2006) and Zainah Anwar (2009), represent an important example of these dynamics in practice.

Norani Othman is a leading feminist and Islamic scholar who has analysed the gendered impacts of religious authoritarianism in Malaysia. While Shari'a law has been a feature of most Muslim societies historically, Othman notes that recent decades have seen the introduction of 'more and more Muslim laws that are retrogressive for women' (Othman, 2006). In Malaysia, the process began in the 1980s when the National Front coalition government led by Mahathir Mohamad endeavoured to win the support of the majority Muslim population and keep the more radical Islamist party (the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) out of power. A process of systematic administrative and legal reform ensued, which put over 100 Islamic scholars at the centre of federal policy-making mechanisms. At the same time, the Shari'ah judicial and legal system was strengthened and extended to the detriment of women (Othman, 2006: 344). In particular, 'polygamy and divorce have been made easier for men' and, increasingly, women who have been 'divorced, abandoned, beaten up or neglected by their husbands . . . complain of injustice and discrimination in their search for redress through Malaysian Shari'ah courts' (Othman, 2006: 344).

The strategies of Sisters in Islam illustrate emancipatory feminist practice in which religion is a locus of interpretive struggles of the kind envisaged by Fraser and the exercise of positive nonsecular political subjectivity advanced by Braidotti. For Othman, feminism in Malaysia must be a two-tiered struggle against gender discrimination emanating firstly from 'secular patriarchy' and, secondly, from more recent manifestations of 'Muslim patriarchy'. She expressly calls on the women's

movement in Malaysia to directly address the impact of authoritarian religion on the integrity of constitutionalism, respect for human rights and democracy. Othman warns that when authoritarian religious forces permeate state power, breaches of religious or moral ethics, as determined by local religious leaders, are treated as criminal behaviour. This is the scenario that Habermas seeks to prevent by excluding religious voices and arguments from the formal political sphere. In contrast to Habermas, Othman's response to the problem of religious authoritarianism is to call for the development of positive linkages among religious, democratic, constitutional and human rights values *within* religious communities. Building on the cultural legitimacy thesis espoused by Abdullahi An-Na'im (1992), she urges devout Muslim women to reflect in particular on the positive role of 'Islamic knowledge' in 'reclaiming the space for substantive democracy and justice' and to find a 'language of protest and resistance to religious and state authoritarianism' (Othman, 2006: 347). Importantly, she underlines that the extent to which 'internal debate among Muslims can help to . . . re-constitute women's rights and gender equality *in* Islam depends on the democratic space . . . that exists in Muslim societies' (Othman, 2006: 352).

Othman's analysis affords valuable insights that can assist in recasting secular thinking for postsecular emancipatory feminist practice. Formulated in a context of the deepening fusion of authoritarian religion and state power, for Othman the role of the neutral secular state is to guarantee a dialogic public civil space defined above all by tolerance. At the same time, the secular public space that Othman envisages is far from anti-religious; rather it is a site in which discussion of different interpretations of religious ideas is encouraged, both within religions and vis-à-vis different religious and non-religious worldviews. Othman embraces religion as a legitimate discursive horizon in shaping – if not codifying in state law – the ethical, moral and spiritual life of individuals and communities. Importantly, her vision calls for the active participation of religious women in critically reinterpreting religious concepts in emancipatory ways. As such, she blends Fraser's ontology of interpretive struggle and Braidotti's positive reading of the generative critical engagement of nonsecular subjects. Moreover, Othman sees such critical public debate as a pivotal to advancing the substantive realization of women's rights and gender equality within Islam, including in the Muslim family, and vis-à-vis the state.

The Musawah Framework for Action (hereafter: Musawah) is promoted as 'a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim

family' (Anwar, 2009: 11). It was developed through a dialogic transnational process by a group of Muslim activists and scholars, coordinated by Sisters in Islam. Signalling a commitment to religious pluralism and cross-religious dialogue, Zainah Anwar identifies Musawah as part of 'a global trend whereby women who work through religious frameworks have promoted and developed alternative interpretations of their faith in ways that challenge patriarchal domination of religion, and highlight women's rights as human rights' (Anwar, 2009: 8). Musawah resonates with many of Othman's arguments. However, in contrast to Othman's analysis, which foregrounds the imperative of the critical political subjectivity of devout Muslim women vis-à-vis the state, Musawah begins with the Muslim family and, from this location, addresses the state and the public sphere. The Musawah Framework document declares that: 'equality in the family is possible through a holistic approach that brings together Islamic teachings, universal human rights principles, fundamental rights and constitutional guarantees, and the lived realities of women and men today' (Anwar, 2009: 11). Musawah also insists that, historically, Shar'ia rulings are 'closer to ethics than law' (Anwar, 2009: 15) and, as such, are human-made interpretations, changeable and inclusive of a diversity of opinion (2009: 16–17). Moreover, 'laws and amendments introduced in the name of Sharia'ah and Islam should also reflect the values of equality, justice, love, compassion and mutual respect among all human beings' (Anwar, 2009: 16). On this basis, Musawah posits three principles on Equality and Justice in the Family: (1) The universal and Islamic values of equality, non-discrimination, justice and dignity are the basis of all human relations; (2) Full and equal citizenship, including full participation on all aspects of society, is the right of every individual; and (3) Equality between men and women requires equality in the family (Anwar, 2009: 18–20).

The Musawah approach undoubtedly privileges a 'liberatory' notion of *feminist agency in religion*, which is at odds with Mahmood's call for the separation of 'the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics' (2005: 14). Rather, it envisages a public-political space that fully includes religious arguments and expressions of religious identity as positive aspects of human self-understanding, communication and development. Importantly, Musawah purposively and actively bridges the public and private domains as the interdependent empirical focus of emancipatory feminist practice. Moreover, it foregrounds Islam as a positive resource, which defines family as a 'place of security, harmony, support and personal growth for all its members' (Mahmood, 2005: 20) and marriage

as a 'partnership of equals, with mutual respect, affection, communication, and decision-making authority between the partners' (p. 20). The theme of equality and reciprocal communication, in private and public life, runs through the framework. To realise the Musawah vision, the combined interaction of secular democracy, constitutionalism, human rights and, very importantly, equality in the family is essential. Together, these comprise the architecture of safeguards needed to enable positive, pluralist religious belonging and to prevent state-sponsored religious authoritarianism and oppressive practices in the name of religion, whether in family life or in religious communities.

Conclusion

This article began by problematising the alignment of mainstream feminism with antireligious or xenophobic expressions of secularism noting also that rigid constructions of the secular-religious binary fail to comprehend 'the complex ways feminists forge religio-spiritual lives' (Aune, 2015: 122). At the same time, religiously-justified violent and authoritarian political movements opposing rights for women and LGBTQ people continue to emerge around the world. These manifestations of the postsecular condition highlight the centrality of gender power relations in the nexus of religion, culture, 'race' and the state. Responding to the postsecular challenge requires recasting secular thinking within a wider retheorisation of emancipatory feminist practice. In this task, the generative possibilities of dialogue between established (hegemonic) and 'emergent' (counter) publics, along lines posited by Fraser, and the notion of positive nonsecular agency advanced by Braidotti, are especially valuable conceptual resources.

Recasting secular thinking from this perspective means affirming the role of nonsecular and religious subjectivities and norms in emancipatory political projects. It also means recognizing context-specific, gendered forms of oppression that arise from either enforced secularism or from coerced conformity to religious norms, and supporting democratic, dialogic means of addressing related 'struggles over interpretation'. As articulated in Musawah, inclusive secular practice further recognises the generative role of religious norms and values across private and family life *and* the public sphere. Conversely, it holds that civic norms and values, especially gender equality and individual human rights, are rooted in Islam and fully applicable *within* religious communities and family life, as well as in the public sphere and relations vis-à-vis the state. Moreover, Musawah

underlines that upholding and strengthening constitutional democracy is *essential* to underpin the articulation of progressive interpretations of religious norms in line with contemporary lived experience.

Musawah, therefore, concurs with well-established communitarian critiques of the rigid secular-religious divide, which banishes religious arguments from the liberal public sphere and relegates religious subjectivity to the private domain. At the same time, acutely aware of the dangers of the fusion of religious and political authoritarianism, Musawah also concurs with liberal imperatives of preventing the capture of the state by intolerant religious actors and organisations who would use the coercive machinery of law and state to compel compliance with particular (illiberal) interpretations of religious norms. Finally, for Musawah, addressing feminist concerns about the impact on women of harmful patriarchal interpretations of religious norms is paramount. The answer to this challenge is the empowerment of religious women as active agents and interpreters of their faith, as equal partners in private and family life, and as equal citizens in public life and vis-à-vis the state – all underpinned by constitutional democratic institutions and human rights protection. The struggle of Sisters in Islam to achieve implementation of Musawah in Malaysia is ongoing and contentious (Mageswari, 2017). As such it offers an instructive example of efforts to recast secular thinking for postsecular emancipatory feminist practice from a non-Eurocentric perspective.

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