intersections



Research Review

Being Muslim, Being a Citizen: Pluralisms, Secularisms, and Civil Religion

December 13, 2024

In a period of rapid social change, political polarization, and emerging threats to democracy worldwide, scholars are rightly turning their attention to democratic renewal. What sustains people as they work on the project of living together in increasingly diverse and pluralistic societies? Last year, the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) brought together a cohort of early career scholars all interested in religion, spirituality, and democratic renewal (RSDR). As editors, we solicited essays from this cohort that would highlight how religious and spiritual traditions sustain democratic and civic life, particularly within Muslim communities. Moreover, we aimed to show how intersections between religion and democracy often produce complex understandings of identity, community, nationalism, and belief. This forum demonstrates that there is no single, monolithic “religious” or “secular” position; these concepts vary over temporal, social, cultural, and national contexts.

The four essays in this forum explore civic engagement in Muslim communities in Turkey, the US, Tunisia, and India. Their varied perspectives confound divisions between the “secular,” the “political,” and the “faithful” in ways that are often not legible, particularly within Western civic publics. The forum does two things: First, it offers an important corrective to Islamophobic myths that unfortunately continue to perpetuate in both scholarly and popular culture. Second, it provides a way to look at new, different, and

emerging styles of civic engagement. These essays imagine democratic renewal *through* faith commitments, rather than despite them. They complicate discussions of political Islam or Muslim civic engagement which often seek to reinforce limited identitarian formulations that cast Muslims as fighting against Islamic extremism, combating Islamophobia, or finding ways to conform to Western iterations of democratic principles.

Civil Religion, Secularism and Faith in the US

US-focused political theory has positioned religion as a means of achieving the public good through voluntary participation in a wide range of community organizations, social movements, and religious groups. The civil religious tradition is ostensibly an interfaith tradition in that it asks for allegiance to the promise of the United States. This promise, in part, stems from constitutional principles of religious pluralism.[1] That said, one tension at the heart of the American tradition is that while the US Constitution ostensibly supports religious freedom and pluralistic democracy, much of American culture has been both implicitly and explicitly Christian-centric, and specifically Protestant-centric. Historically, various ethnic, racial, and religious practitioners were excluded from civic life. Anti-atheist, anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish, anti-Hindu, and anti-Muslim sentiment has proliferated at various moments in US history. While efforts for civic inclusiveness have broadened, bias and discrimination (particularly anti-Muslim sentiment), remain a growing concern in the United States and around the world. Recent work on Muslim civic life seeks to confront hate by spotlighting the rich tradition of volunteerism and political activism, thereby broadening our understanding of Western theories of democratic life.[2]

John Cafazza via Unsplash

In this vein, these essays show how Muslims negotiate their faith commitments within political and civic realms by transcending traditionalist formulations of religion, resisting autocratic governance structures, spotlighting equity-focused policies in civic institutions (e.g., banks, and educational institutions), and formulating pedagogical structures that combat racialized and colonial knowledge production, particularly in STEM fields.

> ***What are the conditions of dignity, solidarity, and listening that inform an actual democratic experience? Can we document new and unique cases where people are embodying not a romanticized or sterilized vision of democratic practice and pluralism, but accomplishing the messy work of connecting across differences?***

Being Muslim in the Public Square: The Forum Essays

We begin this forum with Şeyma Kabaoğlu's essay on *hijabi* women who seek to maintain dignity, piety, and self-determination in Turkey's financial sector. In "Men, Money, and Hijab: Financial Labor and Politics of Visibility in Islamic Banking in Turkey," Kabaoğlu analyzes how *hijabi* women contend with hypervisibility while negotiating concerns of dignity, agency, and gender in financial publics and the democratic possibilities of Islamic banking.[3] In promoting "inclusive financialization," the essay centers the autonomy and financial agency that hijab-wearing Muslim female bankers seek through the

"embodied labor of doubt, ethics, and piety."[4] This formulation encapsulates the experience of *hijabi* financial professionals who wish to maintain piety while seeking economic independence and career advancement. Kabaoğlu argues the Islamic bank operates as a "refuge for creativity," because its theory of financial labor accounts for one's identity as a Muslim.[5] The Western feminist pendulum which locates freedom and subordination on opposite poles cannot account for intra-community subjectivities in which religious and financial freedom are inseparable from "leading a life on one's own terms."[6]



Rachid Oucharia via Unsplash

Building on the theme of personal autonomy, Ebtissam Oraby, Arshad I. Ali, and Sam Burmester's fascinating essay "Learning Through Stories: Bringing Indigenous Muslim Wisdom into Science Education" discusses a study that pilots a STEM-based curriculum titled "The Art of Knowing" which sought to orient pedagogical approaches around non-European storytelling and multiple ways of knowing. The essay explains that "storywork" (e.g., using poetry to consider the ethics of existence, using fables to understand rational action and morality) creates multiple and diverse origin stories for knowledge production. Oraby, et al., explain that this approach helps Muslim students " see their cultural and spiritual identities reflected and valued in their education."Moreover, they argue that "the integration of concepts of knowledge inspired by Muslim storywork, including Ḥayy ibn Yaqzan…[foster] classroom spaces where students are not only empowered to engage with knowledge critically but also recognize and appreciate diverse ways of understanding the world." Such approaches can both provide better learning outcomes and prepare students to see knowing as a cultural and empathetic process. In this sense, their essay speaks to the importance of educational spaces that use non-western lineages of knowledge to produce

culturally literate policies.


Clem Onojeghuo via Unsplash

The concept of autonomy also drives the central narrative in Maro Youssef's essay "Violence Against Women: A Driver for Broad Feminist Cooperation in Tunisia, 2010-2021." She explores intersectional Muslim feminist movements in the wake of the Arab Spring in 2010 to show how these activists complicate Western feminist ideas of liberation, identity, and agency. Youssef's study of secular and Islamist female activist groups demonstrates how they formed strategic alliances to claim space within civic polities and maintain the rights earned decades earlier. She suggests that the coalition between these groups was successful in affecting policy change "because they shared a common threat: increased violence against women since the revolution" and argues that this "situational solidarity [between these two organizations is]…a fleeting type of coalition that seemingly opposing women activists or politicians form during moments of political angst."[7] Therefore, these solidarities were successful *because* they did not seek ideological alignment; rather, they remained invested in broader policy goals that would provide disparate benefits to each group.

The final essay in the forum also seeks to trouble secularist readings of Muslim civic engagement. In "'Why won't we protest? We are Muslims!' On the political theology of Resistance/ Feminist Islamic ethics of Resistance," Zehra Mehdi discusses the Muslim women of Shaheen Bagh to reflect on the "secularizing" of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests in India in 2019-2020. These protests sought to stop legislation that would have expedited citizenship for Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Jains immigrants fleeing persecution in neighboring Muslim-majority countries, but not Muslims. Mehdi contends

that by characterizing the protesting burka-clad women as “secular,” the national and international media perpetuated a discourse of resistance that failed to see how Islam informs not only the lives of Muslim women but also their protest.”[8]

Protests in India are often refracted through a communal lens as well as a religious one. In this case, the CAA and accompanying National Citizenship Registry (NRC) which sought to confirm the citizenship of every Indian using birth records, were both anti-Muslim policy projects (e.g., cow protection laws, investigations of mosques, anti-love jihad laws, etc.) of the current Indian government. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party have pushed India to shed its secular ethos and become a Hindu ethnostate. In contemporary India, the term “secular” has become politicized with those on the right using it to infuse public policy with Hindu majoritarian beliefs and those on the left often seeking to respond to the overt Hindu-centrism by locating their political positionality in a non-religious space. Mehdi’s essay offers a counter-ethical perspective that frames these women’s protests as both a reflection of democratic commitment *and* a hallmark of faith, a patriotic piety that is deliberately glossed over in the coverage of this iconic protest.[9]

Towards a Muslim Feminist Approach to Civic Engagement and Political Faith

Each of these essays speaks to the limitations of the Western feminist dialectic of freedom and subordination which works to discount the subject-centered agency of autonomy. As Muslim feminist writer Saba Mahmood argued:

> ***Women’s participation in, and support for, the Islamist***

> ***movement provokes strong responses from feminists across a broad range of the political spectrum. One of the most common reactions is the supposition that women Islamist supporters are pawns in a grand patriarchal plan, who, if freed from their bondage, would naturally express their instinctual abhorrence for the traditional Islamic mores used to enchain them. Even those analysts who are skeptical of the false consciousness thesis underpinning this approach nonetheless continue to frame the issue in terms of a fundamental contradiction: why would such a large number of women across the Muslim world actively support a movement that seems inimical to their "own interests and agendas, especially at a historical moment when these women appear to have more emancipatory possibilities available to them?"*** [10]

Mahmood shows us precisely what is at issue in this forum: how concepts of liberation and self-determination have traditionally been refracted through a Western lens of freedom which cannot account for Muslim women's experiences, desires, cultural connections, or political commitments. As Muslim feminist scholars Margot Badran and Fatima Mernissi argue, Islamic feminisms complicate Western and secular feminist approaches to liberation which often require eschewing religion and rejecting religious conservatism as patriarchal

oppression.[11] To this point, Valentine Moghadam argues that although fundamentalist views cannot be considered feminist, "there will be different strategies that women will pursue toward empowerment and transformation. We are still grappling with understanding and theorizing those diverse political strategies."[12]

Western liberalism can be understood as an extension of the US concept of civil religion that Robert Bellah described several years ago as "an institutionalized collection of sacred beliefs about the American nation."[13] More recently, Philip Gorski suggested that returning to civil religion could mean privileging traditions that spotlight the uniqueness of the American experiment. He argues that neither radical religious nationalism nor secularism can capture this aspect of the US political sphere.[14] Instead, he offers an unequivocal defense of "the civil religious tradition" which he claims, "is neither idolatrous nor illiberal, because it recognizes both the sacred and the secular sources of the American creed…provides a political vision that can be embraced by believers and nonbelievers alike, and…is capacious enough to incorporate new generations of Americans."[15]



Themanwithoutapast *via* *English Wikipedia*.

Gorski and Bellah contend that American civil religion transcends the particulars of religious belief and secular democratic commitments.[16] Bellah further suggests that civil religion paves the way for immigrants to embrace the promise of the US idea of liberality which is rooted in religious freedom as a feature of national identity.[17] However, such characterizations of civil religion continue to valorize a Western view of civic engagement and democratic commitment. They provide little space to understand why many Muslim adherents are compelled to engage in civic and political action as a marker of faith. Countering this perspective, these essays seek to untether liberalism, religious freedom, and civic engagement from Western intellectual and political histories and advance a vision of Muslim civic action rooted in ideological diversity and feminist collaborative politics.

In this vein, later critiques of Mahmood[18] conclude that even she cedes ground to the Western and post-structural feminist constructions of freedom and autonomy. To this point, a recent volume on Muslim women and civic engagement argues that much of Western feminism continues to operate on the ground that "Muslim women are hidden from the public eye, that they are submissive and subjugated, apathetic and uninformed beings, unable or unwilling to act as subjects in their own right and hence not entirely worthy of the many rights accruing from social, economic and political participation."[19] In contrast, these essays advance a framework of Muslim feminist civil religion that invites us to see social action as a central aspect of Muslim life.

Conclusion: A Civic Ethic of Faith

In these essays, we see solidarities and civic engagements that animate Muslims' ability to live in the world and be committed to that world *because* of their Muslim identities. The authors in this series show us Muslim communities that do not set aside, mask, or adapt their religious identities to pursue civic commitments, policy changes, or financial security. In doing so, the authors problematize Western conceptions of autonomy, freedom, and secularism. And, they problematize Eurocentric and Western feminist framings which cannot reconcile Islam with democratic participation. Taken together, they show that democratic renewal and self-determination are iterative processes. Thus, Muslim commitments to justice, equity, and civic life are also constitutive discourses of liberation.

Acknowledgments: Many thanks to Zehra Mehdi for feedback on earlier drafts of this essay.

Footnotes

[1] Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”; Herberg, *Protestant–Catholic–Jew*.; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.; Warner, *A Church of Our Own.*

[2] Cantori,“Civic Engagement and ‘Collective Goodness’”; “Inclusive and Included?”; “Trajectories of Public Islam”; Hobbs et al. 2023, “From Anti-Muslim to Anti-Jewish.”; Lajevardi, *Outsiders at Home*.

[3] Kabaoglu, “Men, Money, and Hijab: Financial Labor and Politics of Visibility in Islamic Banking in Turkey.”

[2] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

6] Ibid.

[7]Youssef, “Violence Against Women: A Driver for Broad Feminist Cooperation in Tunisia, 2010-2021.”

[8] Mehdi, “Why won’t we protest? We are Muslims!’ On the political theology of Resistance/ Feminist Islamic ethics of Resistance.”

[9] Ibid.

[10] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 1-2.

[11] Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy*; Badran, “Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/S

Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond."

[12] Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate," 1164-65.

[13] Bellah, "Civil Religion in America."

[14] Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*, 4.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Bellah, "Civil Religion in America."; Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present.*

[17] Bellah, "Civil Religion in America."

[18] Weir, "Feminism and the Islamic Revival: Freedom as a Practice of Belonging."

[19] Joly and Wadia, *Muslim Women and Power: Political and Civic Engagement in West European Societies*, 2.

Works Cited

Badran, Margot. "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/S Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 2005): 6–28. https://doi.org/10.2979/mew.2005.1.1.6.

Bellah, Robert N. “Civil Religion in America.” *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (September 1, 2005): 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1162/001152605774431464.

Cantori, Valentina. “Civic Engagement as Religious Duty among American Muslims: Between ‘Muslim Charity’ and ‘Collective Goodness’ in a Muslim Food Pantry.” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 41, no. 4 (October 2, 2021): 643–57. https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2022.2029015.

———. “Inclusive and Included? Practices of Civic Inclusivity of American Muslims in Los Angeles.” *Sociology of Religion* 83, no. 2 (April 1, 2022): 145–68. https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srab019.

———. “Trajectories of Public Islam: Public Religious Expressions among American Muslim Advocates.” *Social Problems*, September 6, 2024, spae053. https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spae053.

Deramo, Michele C. “Reflecting on the Politics of Piety.” *Spectra* 3, no. 1 (April 1, 2014). https://spectrajournal.org/articles/35.

Gorski, Phillip. *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017.

Herberg, Will. *Protestant–Catholic–Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1955.

Hobbs, William, Nazita Lajevardi, Xinyi Li, and Caleb Lucas. “From Anti-Muslim to Anti-Jewish: Target Substitution on Fringe Social Media Platforms and the Persistence of Online and Offline Hate.” *Political Behavior*, September 7, 2023.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-023-09892-9.

Joly, Danièle, and Khursheed Wadia. *Muslim Women and Power: Political and Civic Engagement in West European Societies*. Gender and Politics. London, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Lajevardi, Nazita. *Outsiders at Home: The Politics of American Islamophobia*. 1st ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108782814.

Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2012.

Mernissi, Fatima. *Islam and Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2002.

Moghadam, Valentine 2002, "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate." *Signs* 27, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 1135-1171. https://doi.org/10.1086/339639.

Rafiqi, Arzoo. "A Clash of Civilizations? Muslims, Christians, and Preferences for Democracy." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 58, no. 3 (2019): 689–706. https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12614.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Translated by Gerald Bevan. London: Penguin Classics, 2003.

Warner, R. Stephen. *A Church of Our Own: Disestablishment and Diversity in American Religion*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2005.

Weir, Allison. "Feminism and the Islamic Revival: Freedom as a Practice of Belonging." In *Identities and Freedom: Feminist Theory Between Power and Connection*, edited by Allison

intersections

Weir, 0. Oxford University Press, 2013.

https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199936861.003.0006.