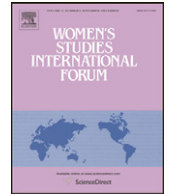


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Unhyphenated Jewish religious feminism

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SYNOPSIS

After 9/11 and with the re-awakening of a feminist criticism of religion, particularly of Muslim women who insist on wearing the veil as an act of piety, Mahmood (2005) offered a new way to conceive the pious female subject “in a context where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for achieving the subject’s potentiality.”

Following her, but in contrast to her Foucaultian analysis of subjectivization, we use Deleuze and Guattari’s work in *A Thousand Plateaus* to propose a reading which views thoughts and actions as events of double articulation; neither unidirectional nor bidirectional but a product of lines of flight and a rupture of the hegemonic power through movement toward the margins. In order to do so, this case study discusses how Orthodox Jewish women are creating unhyphenated religious feminism without falling into the binaries of religion and feminism that assume conflicting rationalities. We interviewed 44 women who openly declared themselves feminists and religiously orthodox, all of them members of the feminist religious organization *Kolech* (“your voice” in English).

Feminist scholars who previously engaged with Deleuze and Guattari’s theory wrestled with concepts of identity and difference. By contrast, we attempt to show how the concept of flights to the margins in daily decisions and actions articulates a religious feminist female subjectivity as multiplicity in spaces where the authority of both is redefined. The women we interviewed positioned themselves on the seams of religion and feminism by experimenting with temporary actions that changed according to the conditions and possibilities of their lives. The women of *Kolech* teach us that a feminist critique of religion, and more generally of liberal democracy, is possible from the margins where subjects can exercise their desires and ideas more freely.

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Introduction

How can feminism respond to women who wish to practice religion and follow religious orthodoxy as part of their desire for spiritual life of devotion? This question is particularly important after 9/11 when the many attacks on Muslim women who insisted on wearing the veil became an issue of fierce public and political debate even for feminists. Some saw the veil as a sign of women’s oppression; others warned against such a misunderstanding of religion and opposed the ideological split between secular feminist autonomy and freedom, on

the one hand, and religious fundamentalism and oppression, on the other (Badran, 2005; Mahmood, 2006; Scott, 2009, 2010). While we do not develop these debates in the current study, we do, however, address the question of feminist religious subjectivity in a way that circumvents the debate of integration or mediation. We therefore studied women who belong to *Kolech*,¹ a self-declared Jewish feminist religious organization, with an aim to understanding their religious subjectivity as a way of life. Through this specific case study, we are looking to problematize the concept of religious feminist subjectivity that converses with questions of authority (religious and feminist), faith, freedom, and identity. We ask what it means to work from the margins and in what ways the women of *Kolech* have practiced religious feminist subjectivity from the

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margins to create social change. We ask not how the women of *Kolech* reconcile between religion and feminism (although that question does lurk in the background) but rather how these women, who see themselves as feminists, fulfill their quest for spirituality and intimacy with God. Most specifically, our inquiry is about the politics of religious intimacy and piety for modern feminist lives.

We suggest a new theoretical reframing of the desire for religious intimacy and a fresh understanding of religious feminist subjectivity without hyphenating between these two systems of consciousness and power. By eliminating the hyphen we do not mean to say that these two paths – religion and feminism – become one whole identity. Rather, leaning on [Deleuze and Guattari's \(1987\)](#) concept of “becoming-minority,” we look at religion and feminism as two different plains from which lived events and experiences, ideas, and thoughts are viewed and interplayed, constituting “directions in motion” rather than “becoming.” That is to say that feminist religiosity is always continuous without a culmination point or an external end ([Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 22](#)). Our study of Orthodox Jewish feminists (in contrast to Reform or Conservative feminists who are more lenient with tradition) is a specific case study. It can, however, strengthen a theoretical articulation of devotion – both feminist and religious – in order to change the ways in which we understand the politics of faith and an acentered identity. Underscoring the premises of language, emotions, desires and sensibilities, we have underlined in particular women's shifts to the margins of feminism and religion and the connections they established “between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders” ([Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 23](#)). We can use this case to speak about the feminist subject of religion and faith almost in terms of “guerrilla logic,” namely, without a central identity and without one solution being similar to the other.

Previous Attempts to Connect Religion and Feminism

Nowadays there is vast literature on the interchange between religion (Christian, Muslim, and Jewish) and feminism. Feminists from different standpoints have been and still are engaged in a philosophical and theological critique of religious tradition, challenging the patriarchal reading of religious texts and the exclusion of women from certain rituals and services. Against the early feminist critique of religion and the conception of religion and feminism as mutually exclusive forms of belief, numerous attempts have been made since the 1980s to negotiate the terms (reinterpretation of texts, separating identities, or, in contrast, mediating dominant and minor identities).² Unfortunately, the present study is not the place to engage in a cross-generational debate between early and more current standpoints despite the need for such an endeavor ([Fuchs, 2003](#)).

This literature, however, mainly reflects attempts to bridge, reconstruct, transform, or repair the gap between religion and feminism or to reclaim, renew, and create holy texts in order to fit women's aspirations for equal participation in services, as well as to change the injustices wrought by male authorship of the holy texts (see, for example, [Adler, 1998](#); [Avishai, 2008](#)). The present feminist critiques of secularism ([Badran, 2005](#); [Mahmood, 2005, 2013](#); [Scott, 2009](#)) argues that women's observance of traditional practices, such as wearing the veil

which many feminists see as succumbing to women's otherness, should be reframed and rearticulated and not in terms of liberal equality. They claim that a religious subjectivity of devotion and faith requires a different theoretical understanding outside the binary dichotomies between secularism and religion, liberalism and fundamentalism, modernity and tradition, or feminist autonomy and religion submission. They see the need for a feminist theoretical understanding of women's piety rather than a new theology to bridge the gulf between religious fundamentalism and liberal feminism.

In *The Politics of Piety* [Mahmood \(2005\)](#) suggested that some Muslim women are wearing the veil not because it allows them more freedom of movement in public or more autonomy in daily life, but because of their strong desire for spiritual life and intimacy with God. Mahmood turned attention away from a focus on the politics of identity and to an understanding of the desire for piety and the need for religious devotion in women's lives. Based on her work with women who joined the piety movement in Egypt, [Mahmood \(2005\)](#) rejected the terms of the debate between subordination and resistance, offering instead a performative outlook on religious practices (including “the desire for submission to authority,” p. 15) that constructs the Muslim woman subject and the ways she lives and inhabits social and religious norms within structures of power. Mahmood thus raised an important question:

How do we conceive of individual freedom in a context where distinction between the subject's own desires and socially prescribed performance cannot easily be presumed, and where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for achieving the subject's potentiality? ([Mahmood, 2005, p. 31](#)).

While Mahmood used Foucault's theory of subjectivization as her framework, we use Deleuze and Guattari's concept of “becoming minority” to analyze Orthodox Jewish feminists' use of language to describe their flight to the margins of religion and feminism from where they reconnect their libidinal desire for piety with events, rituals, family, and community.

At the same time, our theoretical path cannot be separated from the history of Jewish feminist scholarship, long engaged in questions of theology that explored the ways to connect and integrate Orthodox Judaism and liberal feminism, pondering questions of oppression and equality and the need for women to remain connected to their religious community ([Greenberg, 1981](#); [Hartman, 2007](#); [Heschel, 1983](#)). The need to “rethink Jewish ideas and experiences from one feminist perspective” ([Plaskow, 1990, p. ix](#)) reflects the conflict and ambivalence that some Orthodox Jewish feminists have experienced. Likewise, [Plaskow's \(1990, p. xi\)](#) sentiment that “I am not a Jew in the synagogue and a feminist in the world. I am a Jewish feminist and a feminist Jew in every moment of my life” is clearly not just about a quest for equal rights but a call to rethink the meaning of Jewish theology.

In Israel some religious women have sought to reinstate certain customs from which women were originally exempted but which are permitted by the *Halakha* (Jewish law) ([Vigoda, 2001](#)). Studies of Orthodox Jewish women have mainly explored the ways women embrace practices, rituals, and commitments, such as the *mitzvah* (commandment) of *tzitzit* (a four-cornered fringed garment), praying wrapped in a *tallit*

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