



**Linköping University**

**RESEARCH CONFERENCES**

ESF-LiU Conference

**Religion, Gender and Human Rights:  
Challenges for Multicultural and  
Democratic Societies**

Scandic Linköping Väst, Linköping • Sweden  
21-25 June 2011

Chair:

**Dr. Niamh Reilly**, National University of Ireland, Galway, IE

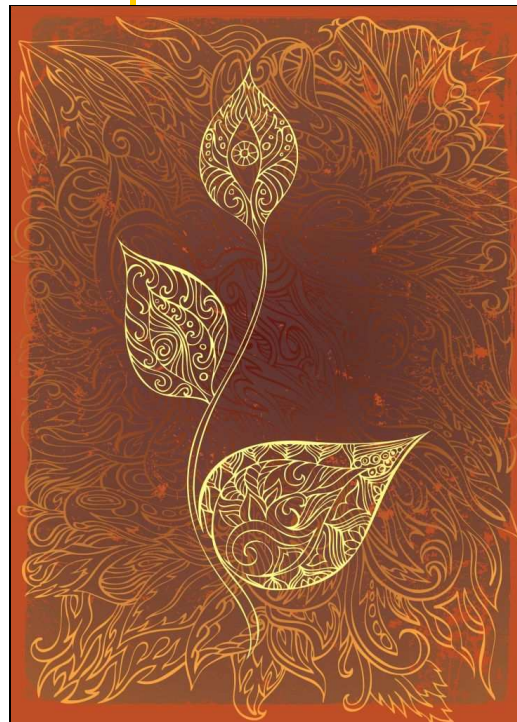
Co-Chairs:

**Stacey Scriver**, National University of Ireland, Galway, IE

**Sara Silvestri**, City University London, UK

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## Conference Highlights

*Please provide a brief summary of the conference and its highlights in non-specialist terms (especially for highly technical subjects) for communication and publicity purposes. (ca. 400-500 words)*

The ESF-LiU conference, Religion, Gender and Human rights: Challenges for Multicultural and Democratic Societies was held June 21<sup>st</sup>- 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011 in Linköping Sweden. Chaired by Niamh Reilly of the National University of Ireland, with co-chairs Stacey Scriver (NUI Galway) and Sara Silvestri (City University London/Cambridge University), the conference drew together leading academics and practitioners across multiple disciplines including: Anthropology, Business, Gender and Women's Studies, Law, Politics and International Relations, Religious Studies, Sociology and Theology. In doing so, it sought to address a notable gap in current scholarship, which (notwithstanding the prevalence of discussions about Muslim women's dress in debates around 'Islam in Europe', for example) has paid relatively little attention to unpacking the gender-specific dimensions of current developments at the intersection of religion, gender, identity, human rights and politics. Rather, the focus of most academic work to date has been on 'religious difference' as part of wider concerns about 'migration' and 'integration' in multicultural societies, which are often viewed as 'gender-neutral' topics, or as a challenge to safeguarding ostensibly European values, including a 'secular public sphere' and 'the equality of women and men'. While these are clearly important issues, there is a shortage of scholarship that advances more complex understandings of the role of gender (in tandem with other aspects of experience and identity) in the interplay of religion, migration, integration and human rights. Responding to this gap, the conference sought to foreground gender dimensions and analyses of unfolding developments around three interrelated sub-themes:

- Identity, migration, religion and multiculturalism
- Contesting religious subjectivities
- Human rights, religion and the state

Featured speakers included leading scholars in different relevant fields including: Naomi Goldenberg (Professor of Religious Studies, University of Ottawa), Tina Beattie (Professor of Theology, Roehampton University); Titia Loenen (Professor of Law, University of Utrecht); Stephanie Mitchem (Professor of Religious Studies, University of South Carolina); Sawitri Saharso (Professor of Intercultural Governance, University of Twente); and Mieke Verloo (Professor of Comparative Politics, Radboud University Nijmegen). Younger and emerging scholars played a prominent role across the full conference programme. The conference sessions were carefully organised and structured – across sub-themes, disciplines, stage of career, and country of speaker - to encourage dialogue and (re)invigorate debate and theorising on issues of religion, law, identity and politics. In doing so, it provided an innovative cross-disciplinary space in which to:

- Explore the gendered construction and articulation of identities within a context of globalisation, migration, multiculturalism and religious or faith diversity;
- Consider the possibilities and limitations of challenging patriarchal power within religious

communities from feminist perspectives;

- Examine the role of emerging ideas and legal reasoning in resolving (or exacerbating) tensions between 'religious freedoms' and 'human rights', including gender equality, in multicultural contexts

The issues explored throughout the conference present immense challenges to those who seek to advance gender equality and uphold religious freedoms and respect cultural diversity, while also combating related forms of xenophobia, racism, intolerance, and discrimination. Presentations at the conference highlighted new frontiers in social science and humanities research at the intersection of religion and gender in multicultural societies. In doing so, they have made a valuable contribution to understanding the gender implications of the apparent re-emergence of religion as a significant social, cultural and political force and the challenges this trend poses for how we conceptualise and enact democratic politics and human rights in Europe and beyond.

I hereby authorize ESF – and the conference partners to use the information contained in the above section on 'Conference Highlights' in their communication on the scheme.

# Scientific Report

## Executive Summary

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(2 pages max)

*Religion, Gender and Human Rights: Challenges for Multicultural and Democratic Societies* was an exceptional event in its scope and depth of analysis of issues of gender, religion, politics and society. The conference drew together experts, academics and practitioners from the fields of anthropology, business, gender and women's studies, law, political science and international relations, religious studies and theology to challenge and examine the intersection of gender, human rights and religion in multicultural and democratic (or democratising) societies.

In recent years, the re-emergence of religion as a significant presence in the public sphere across Europe and as a significant social and cultural force and policy issue has produced a number of interrelated tensions. These include: tensions between the claims of gender equality and the claims of religion and religious identity; new questions about secularisation as an empirical 'fact' and about 'secularism' as a prescriptive principle in contexts of growing religious diversity; and new conflicts between dominant cultural groups (e.g. Christian or 'secular') and minority groups vis-à-vis the articulation of national identity and belonging.

Although it is not well recognised, all of these tensions play out in important gendered ways. How these different sets of debates and related practices evolve has far-reaching implications for how gender equality, the human rights of diverse women and minority groups, and religious freedoms are accommodated within multicultural, democratic (and democratising) societies. Religious actors are often positively associated with civil society advocacy and service delivery around anti-poverty, social justice, and peace agendas, nationally and internationally. At the same time, a greater role for religion and religious values in public life and policy formation raises specific concerns for women and minorities. Conservative religious actors and institutions generally promulgate particular, traditionalist visions of family formation and intimate gender relations that contest human rights based approaches to reproductive and sexual autonomy. Similarly, they often have interests in influencing policy and practices around education, healthcare and employment in ways that potentially impinge on the enjoyment of a variety of important human rights by some. Despite this, there has been relatively little investigation of these issues from a gender perspective – a gap which this conference aimed to address this.

The conference was organized into three thematic strands. The first, *Identity, migration and multicultural* explored the issues of religious and national-identity construction among migrant communities, the development of faith-based organisations as a locus of support and social capital, and the negotiation of religious identity vis-à-vis 'secular' political identity within multicultural societies. Presentations in this theme consisted of a mix of analyses of recent empirical research projects, as well as theoretical analysis of current and emerging issues.

In the second thematic strand – *Contesting religious subjectivities* - a number of emerging issues were highlighted including the importance of recognising how increasingly complex identities challenge simplistic binaries. A number of papers called into question the automatic alignment of religious identity and traditionalism on one side, and secular identity, equality and rights on the other. For example, the widely presumed antithesis between Catholic identity and liberal approaches to reproductive and sexual autonomy was questioned, suggesting more complex relationships between religious identity and individual freedom on the one hand and the role of the

state and religious organisations on the other. The challenge posed to Christian religious doctrine by counter-hegemonic forms of embodied subjectivity such as transexuality was also considered. Presentations within this theme also explored how some articulations of ethno-religious identity utilise 'others' to solidify a dominant group. Other papers considered how migrants from communities whose national and religious identities are deeply intertwined negotiate their place within societies that are understood to be 'secular'; or the role that religious affiliation plays in underpinning material well-being and belonging through 'religious capital'.

In the final strand of the programme the interrelation of *Human rights, religion and the state* was examined. This strand focused on the legal and political consequences and challenges posed by the confluence of increasingly multicultural societies, the apparent re-emergence of religion in public spheres across Europe, and the vulnerability of religious minorities in Europe and internationally. Papers in this theme addressed particular challenges for democratic countries around: whether or not and/or how to regulate the co-existence of religious laws (e.g. Sharia law) and state laws; documenting and questioning the involvement of religious organisations (e.g. the Vatican) in determining individual state laws and the content of international legal norms; theorising the role of religious identities and actors in processes of diffusion (or otherwise) of human rights norms; and examining the role of the European Union and its member states in apparent failures to address instances of religious persecution in the jurisdictions of states receiving development aid. Other papers in this strand articulated, and considered how best to respond to, recurring tensions between minority rights and majority rights; between advancing human rights and meeting the security requirements of states; and between the ostensible claims of 'Islam' and of the 'secular state'. These questions were examined, in particular, from the perspectives of women's movements in different countries and a continued commitment to developing feminist theory and practice that recognises and respects the diversity and 'intersectionality' of gendered identities and experiences in context, including religious identities.

Other significant events during the conference included the poster session, in which fourteen high quality posters were presented by their authors and time was given for in-depth discussion between the audience and each poster presenter. Originally scheduled for one hour and a half, the session extended to over two hours as participants and presenters continued their discussions informally. The development of an impromptu, optional session proposed by a conference participant on the topic of the 'Arab Spring' and gender equality provoked lively discussion and debate and added to the interactive and developmental atmosphere of the conference.

## Scientific Content of the Conference

(1 page min.)

▪ Summary of the conference sessions focusing on the scientific highlights

Conference sessions were organised into daily thematic strands, including *Identity, migration and multiculturalism* (Day 1); *Contesting religious subjectivities* (Day 2) and *Human rights, religion and the state* (Day 3). Within each of these themes a number of sessions were organised to explore these issues within each strand in depth and across disciplines. Working through a gender lens, speakers in panel, roundtable and short-talk sessions approached relevant topics from a variety of disciplines and through different analytic channels. This approach was successful in encouraging dialogue between disciplines – academic and practical - and fostered creative exchange.

The conference opened with an introduction by conference Chair Niamh Reilly providing a brief overview of the issues that informed the substantive focus the conference, including the apparent re-emergence of religion in the public sphere; related debates in academia regarding the validity or not of the 'secularisation thesis'; existing and evolving tensions in feminist theorising and practice

in relation to multicultural politics, as well as the rise of autocratic, politicised religions; and the timeliness of revisiting the possibilities as well as the limitations of internal challenges to patriarchal power and other forms of oppressive gendered practices within religious communities. This introduction provided a basic framework through which conference participants from a variety of academic and disciplinary backgrounds could situate presentations and clarified the need for feminist and gender focused research to examine the nexus of religion, gender and politics at the current social and political juncture.

Following the introduction, an overview panel featured leading academics and practitioners in the fields of sociology, theology and law reflecting the three thematic strands. These presentations provided broad accounts of the themes of *Identity, migration and multiculturalism*, *Contesting religious subjectivities* and *Human rights, religion and the state* in order to more fully contextualize subsequent presentations in each of the three strands.

**Strand one: Identity, migration and multiculturalism** involved a roundtable session on **Migration, integration and multiculturalism**, and a short-talk panel on the topic of **Religion, sexualities and gender identities**. The roundtable session drew attention to recent findings from research projects in which presenters were involved, including papers on: identity construction among European Muslim women across five European countries, an education programme sponsored by the Austrian government aimed at Imams to prepare them for integrating their communities in Europe; a case study of the evolving practices among Catholic organisation in relation to migration issues and policy formation. This session also included a presentation on the role of social psychology in understanding changing patterns and responses to religious diversity in Europe. In the short-talk panel, **Religion, sexualities and gender identities**, presenters provided brief overviews into on-going and developing projects, producing lively and productive discussions with the audience. These presentations investigated the relationship between gender, identity and religion vis-à-vis the state (especially in relation to equality and non-discrimination practices), as well within particular religious communities (e.g. the Hizmet community in Turkey), within Muslim women's organisations in Turkey, and in Catholic Marian symbolism and cultural practices.

Finishing the day was the poster session. The posters presented were of an exceptionally high quality, both in terms of their scientific content and their professional appearance. Poster presenters remained with their posters for the duration of the session and answered questions and participated in discussions with the audience. A panel of judges circulated throughout the session and made their selection for the best poster and the runner-up. The audience was also encouraged to view all posters through their involvement in the selection of a 'popular prize' for the poster. The poster session was particularly valuable at encouraging dialogue between early-stage and established academics and thus provided opportunity to re-energise theorising around gender, religion and human rights.

On the second day of the conference, presentations were organised primarily around **strand two: Contesting religious subjectivities**. The day's sessions began with lively presentations in the first panel, which explored tensions between religious identities and other forms of identification and personal practice and belief. Presentations included examinations of the challenges posed within Christian religious communities in the UK and Poland respectively by transexuality and the 'Catholics for Choice' movement for reproductive rights. Another paper explored the role of religious subjectivities in Muslim women's movements in India and Pakistan. The issues explored in this panel had the 'added value' of analyses conducted in a number of different geographical settings (Poland, UK, Pakistan and India).

Later sessions included a further panel on **'Religion' in the academy through a gender lens: challenges in theory, methods and practice** and a short-talk session on **Nation, migration and border crossings**. Presentations of panellists provided both innovative theoretical accounts of the changing role of religion in social, economic and political life and analyses of empirical research on the experiences and gendered religious identities of different migrant groups including: Arab communities in Ireland, mainland Chinese migrants in Hong Kong, Maghrebi migrant women in France, and Polish migrants in the UK. This strand provided critical analyses of sites of contestation and reproduction of power within nation-states and various religious communities and social movements from a gendered perspective, shedding new light on issues that have been insufficiently examined through a gender lens.

**Strand three: Human rights, religion and the state** formed the focus of sessions on the final day of the conference. The first session examined **Religions, rights and public spheres** including presentations that: explored the intersection of racism and 'Islamophobia' in European politics of integration; unpacked theory of gender implicit in Vatican doctrine; and considered the challenges of balancing competing rights and maintaining a de facto separation between religious and civil law in increasingly multicultural and multi-faith societies. This session also included a presentation on the impact of changing patterns of 'Islamisation' in Iran on the prospects for women's political participation and equality. A subsequent roundtable on **Secularization, secularism and the public sphere**, considered in more detail the origins and limitations of dichotomous conceptualisations of secularism and religion and examined the implications of these in different sections of the Palestinian women's movement and in the development and articulation of the feminist project more broadly – both theoretical and practical. The short-talk panel, **Regulating religions and rights** provided overviews of research on human rights case law, gender equality and religious freedom, including recent cases of the European Court of Human Rights concerning the regulation of Muslim headscarves and access to abortion in different European countries. This session also addressed problems of the instrumentalisation of women's human rights in bolstering authoritarian politics in Morocco. The final panel of the day focused on **Gender and religion in transnational politics** which shed light on the lesser known religious and nationalist conflict in Eritrea, a discussion of developing methodology for comparative research on the role of religion in impeding diffusion of human rights norms or not, and a psychoanalytic examination of the construction of masculinities within Al Qaeda discourses. The presentations on the final day contributed importantly to the expansion of the horizon of analysis within the fields of law, human rights and politics by bringing into conversation cross-disciplinary perspectives and thus drawing attention to under-examined areas and challenging conventional interpretations of legal instruments.

Throughout all the panels, roundtables and short-talk discussions with the audience were engaging and fruitful, with audience members both pushing for and at times providing, answers to difficult methodological and theoretical questions. Both early stage and more established participants were involved in the discussions ensuring an excellent exchange of ideas across disciplines and levels of experience. A further highlight was the development of an impromptu session on the second evening of the conference exploring the 'Arab Spring'. This was an open discussion for any participants who were interested in being involved and attracted a strong gathering with insightful discussion.

▪ *Assessment of the results and their potential impact on future research or applications*

Presentations throughout the conference were of a consistent high quality and provided innovative

analysis of current challenges for the conceptualisation and advancement of human rights, equality and justice in contexts of globalisation and increasingly multicultural and multi-faith societies. The conference has generated recognition of a number of key themes that are likely to grow in importance in academic fields in the short-medium term and which will inform long-term analysis of multicultural and religious conflict in democratic states. The particular value of this conference has been to apply a cross-disciplinary gender lens to existing and emerging issues thereby exposing fresh dimensions and approaches to the conference themes.

The conference provided an opportunity for researchers to learn about the work being undertaken by others and thus to establish collaborative partnerships and networks. A number of links between researchers were created during the conference leading to plans of collaborative research on the medium scale. The conference has generated a strong network of active researchers in the topics of gender, religion and human rights which now composes a pool of talent to draw upon for a number of different projects – some of which, including an edited volume and a journal symposium, are already underway. Discussions between members directed at securing medium and large-scale research funding are also on-going.

## Forward Look

(1 page min.)

### ▪ Assessment of the results

This conference was unique and timely in its aim to build research networks and foster the development of new theoretical and empirical knowledge and analytical frameworks in the areas of gender, religion, politics, identity and human rights. The results of the conference are significant in terms of bringing together a unique mix of academics across disciplines (who would not normally work together) thereby fostering original thinking on conference themes. In particular, this conference has:

### **1. Contributed significantly to moving gender from the periphery to the centre of contemporary academic debate about the role of religion in public and political life, in democratic (and democratising), multicultural societies**

This conference produced work that explicitly recognises that gender relations and identities are core concerns of most religions and are central to debates on the re-emergence of religion in the public sphere. It has contributed new thinking about the gender dimensions of ongoing processes to rethink established understanding of (de)secularisation and the principle of secularism, and the implications of these developments for how to conceptualise inclusive democratic politics and human rights in multicultural societies.

### **2. Re-activated, re-evaluated and encouraged new feminist and gender theorising around the relationship between religion, gender, identity and politics. Conference presentations:**

- a) Explored new horizons in gender critiques of faith-based practices – not only with respect to Islam, but also in relation to Christian, Jewish, and other religions.
- b) Re-focused the attention of feminist and gender theorising on questions of religion, gender and politics in a ‘neo-secular’ or ‘post-secular’ age.



c) Advanced the development and application of an 'intersectional' lens to issues of religion, gender and women's human rights, thus bringing into dialogue feminist theorising on gender across global 'South' and global 'North' perspectives.

d) Directed the insights of feminist and gender theorisation and analyses of the discursive interplay of gender, religion, 'race' and identity.

### **3. Deepened understanding of the gendered dimensions of cultural, legal and policy responses to religion and religious identities and experiences by exploring examples from different countries across Europe and internationally**

Presentations used examples and case studies from across Europe including Ireland, Italy, Sweden, Turkey, Poland and United Kingdom and beyond Europe, including Canada, Eritrea, India, Morocco, Palestine, Pakistan and the United States.

### **4. Expanded the horizon of gender-focused human rights analysis at the nexus of religion, gender, citizenship and rights**

The conference expanded the research agenda by encouraging comparative analysis and critical examination of evolving developments and challenges in the (re)definition and implementation of new EU human rights provisions (in addition to Council of Europe), as well as UN and other regional human rights standards and mechanisms, towards elucidating 'successful' ways of balancing the core human rights of 'gender equality' and 'religious freedom' in multicultural/multi-faith, democratic societies.

*Contribution to the future direction of the field – identification of issues in the 5-10 years & timeframe*

Gender equality is likely to remain a central issue in unfolding debates surrounding the re-emergence of religion as a social, cultural, economic and political force in Europe and internationally. Policy-makers and actors will need to be alert the intersectional gender equality implications of these developments and be equipped to assess the impacts of both ostensibly secular policies and policy measures aimed at accommodating religious pluralism. In this context, there will also be a need for the development of context specific guidelines vis-à-vis 'why, when and how' to accommodation claims for policy accommodation based on religious pluralism or not within a framework of respect for gender equality, multiculturalism and religious diversity.

Further topics likely to be of significance during the 5-10 years time frame include the possible re-emergence of nationalist ideologies and related identities, based on ethnic, religious or other lines, that exclude members of minority communities living within state borders in gender specific ways. The development of extremist political parties mobilising around exclusive or intolerant nationalist platforms presents a challenge to gender equality, minority rights and respect for multicultural diversity that could become pressing during a time of economic crisis and on-going globalisation.

Theoretical challenges in the 5-10 year time frame include the necessity of continuing to deepen understanding of and analysing ostensible tensions between 'feminism' and 'multiculturalism' to recognise the agency of religious women within a context of respect for human rights, and to bring into dialogue 'secular' feminists and religiously-affiliated feminists. Furthermore, this conference has highlighted the need to rethink the reductive ways of thinking about 'the secular' and 'the religious' as binary opposites, which have become implicated in concealing or condoning certain

forms of oppression, intolerance or religious based persecution.

▪ *Identification of emerging topics*

A number of clear areas requiring ongoing and deeper investigation emerged during the course of the conference. Central to these are the need to:

Develop and foreground intersectional gender and feminist analyses of religion, politics and human rights, especially in the context-specific policy areas where religion is particularly important including: healthcare, employment, and education

Carry out cross-country, gender-sensitive analyses of emerging patterns of European identity mobilisation and their consequences, and of the adequacy of existing state and EU laws and mechanisms to address issues of discrimination, exclusion or intolerance that arise therein. Analysis should encompass examination of EU level initiatives and include analysis of North-South relations, particularly regarding relations with post-colonial countries

Deepen theoretical analysis and understanding of the role of diverse women's and minority civil society organisations in (re)negotiations of the role and presence of religious actors in the public sphere, with a focus on ensuring that women's human rights, gender equality and the rights of minorities are safeguarded in mutually non-oppressive ways.

Explore formations of 'hybrid' national and religious identities and the related ongoing (re)negotiation and (re)definition of religious values, political affiliations, gender identity and 'national-belonging' in contexts of migration, globalisation and fluid cultural identity patterns.

Undertake further research into the role that religious and faith-based organisations vis-à-vis the state, and in particular in the context of a global economic crisis and the contraction of public spending and the 'welfare state'.

▪ Is there a need for a foresight-type initiative?

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## Atmosphere and Infrastructure

▪ *The reaction of the participants to the location and the organization, including networking, and any other relevant comments*

Participants reported very positive feedback on the conference organisation and networking. In particular participants noted a very collegial atmosphere. Junior participants commented that they felt at great ease at the conference and were comfortable speaking with more senior participants. Others commented that all participants were approachable and friendly and that there were few internal divisions, in terms of age, seniority, gender or other groupings.

Of note, one very established academic commented on how positive the exchange between early-stage and advanced researchers had been during the conference and noted particularly the

importance of incorporating the ideas of a newer generation into the work led by established academics.

Participants also commented on the involvement of the chairs and indicated appreciation for the regular contact that had been made between the chairs and participants leading up to the conference.

A number of participants commented that they found the location 'strange' at first, but found that it was effective and provided all their needs. The connection between Linköping University and the location was not, however, clear to participants and raised some questions about the University's involvement.

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**Date & Author:**

22 July 2011, Niamh Reilly