

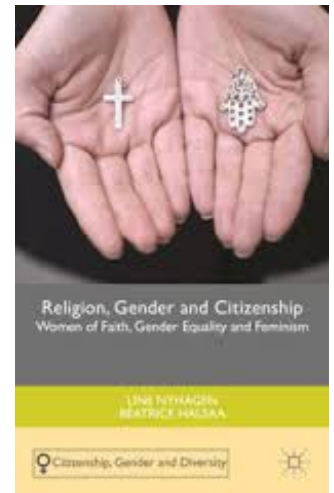
Book Review: Religion, Gender and Citizenship: Women of Faith, Gender Equality and Feminism by Line Nyhagen and Beatrice Halsaa

In Religion, Gender and Citizenship: Women of Faith, Gender Equality and Feminism, Line Nyhagen and Beatrice Halsaa explore lived experiences of faith through interviews with Christian and Muslim women in Norway, Spain and the United Kingdom. Haje Keli welcomes this book as a vital intervention that does an excellent job of demonstrating how women of faith negotiate citizenship, belonging, religion, gender equality and feminism in their everyday lives.

Religion, Gender and Citizenship: Women of Faith, Gender Equality and Feminism. Line Nyhagen and Beatrice Halsaa. Palgrave Macmillan. 2016.

While many books about religion and faith discuss theology or focus on the opinions of those who are viewed as spokespersons for their respective faiths, in *Religion, Gender and Citizenship: Women of Faith, Gender Equality and Feminism* the authors Line Nyhagen and Beatrice Halsaa have chosen to speak to women who identify as Christian (Catholic, Lutheran and Pentecostal) and Muslim (Sunni and Shi'a). This approach is both necessary and rare for a variety of reasons. The spokespersons representing faiths are most often men, and they tend to rely heavily on written sources that say little about religious peoples' everyday lives.

In contrast, *Religion, Gender and Citizenship* brings women, both Muslim and Christian, to the forefront of discussions on faith and citizenship, which is highly necessary in times of heightened xenophobia and Islamophobia in Europe. Some might claim that religious women are closed off and retreat into their own communities, but in this book we see that women of faith eagerly engage with the researchers and open up about their daily lives and engagements with religion. Nyhagen and Halsaa perceive the lack of representation for women of faith and seek to tackle this by interviewing 61 women of Muslim and Christian faith from the UK (Leicester), Spain (Madrid) and Norway (Oslo).



This book not only allows women to share their own narratives in their own words, but also helpfully focuses on women's lived religion through enquiring about their multi-layered identities and how they view citizenship within their contexts (see Chapter Four). Since the book goes 'to the source' by speaking to religious women directly, the reader is presented with new meanings of citizenship and of what it means to be a religious citizen in the respective countries. The book complements these empirical findings in Chapters One and Two, which describe the histories of Christianity and Islam in the UK, Spain and Norway in relation to immigration and citizenship.

Throughout the book there is a critique of mainstream feminist writing, as the authors feel this has failed to engage with religious women; they affirm that women of faith need to be included in dialogues about women's position in society. The book advises against accusing religious women of 'false consciousness' (223) and shows that, for the women interviewed, religion also serves as a helpful factor in their lives. In Chapter Three, 'Religious Identities and Meaning Making', the authors recount how the participants feel that their faith has given them direction at difficult times and has offered them guidance and lucidity in their busy lives (105).



Image Credit: Woman in prayer (David Amsler)

Chapter Six gives an indication of how much of a gap there can be between religious women and secular women, as only one of the participants identified as a feminist (201). The authors present what they refer to as the dominant discourse among the participants, a discourse of 'anti-feminism', as the women characterised feminism to be extreme, excessive and immoderate. The participants feel that feminism is 'man-hating' and is driven by the aims of promoting gay rights, abortion, divorce and domination over men (202). This particular chapter could be beneficial for feminist scholars as it is telling of how 'feminist messages' can be misinterpreted; perhaps a continued dialogue across secular and religious lines could remedy these misunderstandings. However, while the women did not self-identify as feminist, many supported women's rights and women's struggles against inequality (204).

Apart from the critique of current feminist scholarship, the book carries another important thread – the marginalisation and experienced 'otherness' of the Muslim participants. The authors note that Muslim women, when interviewed, often felt the need to 'explain' Islam and were ready to correct or defend any potential misconceptions (27-28). On the other hand, the Christian women often took for granted that the researchers had pre-existing knowledge of their faith and doctrines, and treated the researchers like insiders. The authors discuss the insider-outsider position as they recognise that the research process is informed by the researchers' own positionalities. The authors state that all the researchers were from Christian backgrounds and were more familiar with Christian practices rather than Islamic ones. Five of the six researchers were from a white non-migrant background, while the sixth was a black woman from a migrant background. Methodologically, this openness is crucial as it informs readers of how the researchers read the field and how the participants were reading them.

The Muslim women's experiences of exclusion are juxtaposed with the responses of Christian women, who happen to be predominantly white European. The Christian women do not bring up their ethnicity or nationality as important markers of identity. This is highly interesting and relevant as, like the authors state, it indicates that questions of identity and belonging have not been 'pushed on' these women as has occurred with Muslim women of migrant backgrounds (78-79). This theme flows throughout the book as a reminder that citizenship and identity for women is fluid, situational and can be contingent on one's religion and ethnicity.

It is somewhat disappointing that the book did not utilise an intersectional analysis of the material to a greater extent. It is not sufficient to merely write that one is going to make use of intersectionality as a tool: there has to actually be a thorough analysis using an intersectional lens to view women's privileges and disadvantages. The authors could

have written more about the social categories that lie at the base of intersectional analysis, and discussed at what times certain categories come to the forefront while others are pushed back. Each social category could have been further elucidated to explain the intersections of subjugation and privilege. There could have, for instance, been separate paragraphs about gender, class, social status, ethnicity and language proficiency, and a further analysis of how these different categories intersect and to what degree. There could also have been more engagement with the variances and consistencies between the two groups of women, as the authors tend to discuss the Christian women separately from the Muslim women. Ideally, a more holistic view of all the religious women's views could have been presented. Indeed, when the book does engage with both Muslim and Christian women's standpoints and looks at their lives comparatively, it adds interesting nuance to the material.

In summary, *Religion, Gender and Citizenship* is an important intervention in the topic of religious women and their everyday lives. It does not rely on religious texts or rituals to reach conclusions, but rather takes an honest look at religious woman from three European countries and how they identify with faith, how they utilise it and how they position themselves with regards to feminism and gender equality. The book does an excellent job of demonstrating how women negotiate citizenship, belonging, faith and the issue of how to relate to both women of different faiths and secular women. The book begins by clarifying how women identify themselves, and ends with how religious and non-religious women can find common ground through constructive dialogue, all the while being conscious of the imbalance between the status of Muslim women from migrant backgrounds and Christian women from white non-migrant backgrounds.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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