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The fact that in 2011 *Feminist Review* is publishing its first special issue on religion and spirituality in over 30 years of publishing feminist research is in itself a commentary on, and illustration of Niamh Reilly's discussion in this issue of the strong historical relationship between many (and especially western) feminisms and secularism, as well as the new visibility of religion in the contemporary world. As she argues, on many grounds, but particularly in relation to the current dominant political construction of 'a clash of civilizations', and the role of gender in that construction, it is now vital to interrogate earlier feminist certainties about the alliance between feminism and secularism, without losing the capacity to critique religious practices that oppress women, or to challenge, as Pragna Patel does in this issue, the new emphasis on, and mobilization of faith in public discourse.

This special issue intervenes in these debates, and explores women's experiences and narratives of religion and spirituality in different locations through new empirical work. Niamh Reilly's article opens the issue with an overview of how secularization is being re-thought from the perspective of gender, and of feminist critiques of the Enlightenment's rejection of religion, including Judith Butler's and Joan Wallach Scott's deconstruction of the mobilization of 'feminist' discourses in the representation of Muslims and Islam as traditional and regressive. Reilly problematizes the secular/religious binary and concurs with Norani Othman in arguing for 'a dialogic public space that is defined above all by tolerance', and that is far from anti-religious. Pragna Patel of Southall Black Sisters, writing from an activist perspective, points to the dangers of government interventions that have the effect of reducing the potential for secular spaces and redefining questions of gender, 'race' and ethnicity in terms of faith.

In a reflection on her own life journey Nira Yuval-Davis focuses on the relationship between religion and politics in the three very different contexts she has lived in: Israel in the 1950s and 1960s; the US in the 1970s; and the contemporary UK. She explores the possibilities and need for secular spiritual spaces in her own life. In the first ever survey of feminists' attitudes to religion, Kristin Aune finds similar practices and desires among younger third-wave feminists, who, in comparison to the general population, are found to be significantly less religious but more spiritual. She argues that this is due to three main factors: feminism's association with secularism; the decline of religion and feminism's role within it; and feminism's alignment

with alternative spiritualities. Aune explains this lack of religiosity among feminists partly in terms of feminism's location as a project of Enlightenment, and its challenges to the gendered nature of power dynamics embedded in religion. Alternative spiritualities have also been attractive to feminists because of their difference from organized forms of religion and because of their particular attention to Goddess spiritualities. Moreover, New Age spiritualities fit well with the individualized and consumerist environment of late modern/postmodern societies. Finally, over the last half century there have been major changes in women's roles that have produced all manner of tensions and contradictions: alternative spiritualities appear to offer ameliorative options to deal with these complexities. Aune is planning further qualitative work on the relationship between feminist political commitment and spirituality. In our view this will be timely and innovative, as we found the majority of articles submitted in the large response to our call focused on major world religions, rather than secular, alternative or New Age spiritualities. Clearly this does not present conclusive evidence of a trend in the field of feminist religious studies, and work on diverse spiritualities is published elsewhere (for example, Aune *et al.*, 2008; Browne *et al.*, 2010). However, we were left with a strong impression of the dominance of Christianity, and perhaps even more so Islam, as objects of study in the field.

Further challenges to the religious/secular binary emerge in Hafez's study of women activists in Egypt, who are motivated by intersecting religious and modernizing impulses, and whose actions can not be understood within a binary framework. Drawing on the work of Saba Mahmood and Nadjé Al-Ali, Hafez analyses how the activist women she has studied regard their activism as animated by Islamic ideals, but nevertheless also simultaneously inhabit a modernizing space. The physical and moral conduct expected of the village women, as well as the activist women, entails disciplinary techniques that produce new subjects and subjectivities. Through ethnographic research Hafez provides a troubling commentary on the economic, educational and social disparities and power hierarchies between the activists and the village women they work with. Claudia Liebelt looks at an equally troubling context where Filipina migrant care workers look after elderly Jewish people in Israel, often subjected to the moods and whims, and even cruelty of those they care for. Because of their evangelical Christian faith, the Filipina women Liebelt has studied regard their work as ethical and meaningful since they see the elderly Jewish people they look after as 'God's own People'. For these women, working in Israel is also highly valued because it gives them access to the 'Holy Land', a form of pilgrimage not feasible on their low incomes in the Philippines. Liebelt argues that evangelical Filipina migrants strive for salvation and prosperity and come to regard their care work of the Jewish elderly as a divine vocation. She concludes that 'Filipina evangelicals clearly reject the hegemonic subject position

ascribed to them. Instead, their practices and imaginations point to a new subjectivity in the making, one deeply rooted in Christian spirituality. Based on Christian morals, theirs is certainly a utopian subjectivity, albeit one whose emancipatory potential is limited at best'.

Studying the religious practice of a very much more privileged group of women – priests in the Church of England – Sarah-Jane Page finds that the presence of female bodies, and especially pregnant bodies in the sacred space, and in the leading role of the priest, generates new understandings of the sacred. In this way, a further binary, that of the sacred, traditionally associated with masculine and monastic norms of disembodied spirituality and the profane, often linked to women's bodies and the processes of reproduction which they carry, is profoundly challenged. The figure of a woman priest, whether heavily pregnant or carrying a small child on her hip, at the altar allows women in her congregation to see themselves as integral to, rather than threatening the sacred. These women priests also operate in feminized spaces such as toddlers' groups, which male priests would be less likely to venture into, in a further blurring of the boundaries between the everyday and the sacred, and between gendered spaces. Space and representations are also at stake in Vis, Van Zoonen and Mihelj's account of Muslim women's responses on YouTube to the anti-Islam film *Fitna*. Drawing on Isin and Nielsen (2008), they see these online interventions by women in a range of global locations as acts of citizenship that allow their voices to be heard. In response to sceptics who might challenge the effectiveness of these interventions, Vis, Van Zoonen and Mihelj argue that they constitute a challenge to the exclusions and limitations of more mainstream media and public discourse.

This special issue of *Feminist Review* addresses current debates on feminism, secularism, religion and spirituality and introduces new empirical work from a range of locations. The issue includes analysis of women's practice of spirituality within and outside faith traditions and women's relationships with, and roles in organized religion and religious institutions. It explores the gendered evolution of religious beliefs and practices in the context of global cultural exchanges through migration, media and travel.

Lyn Thomas and Avtar Brah

authors' biographies

Lyn Thomas is Deputy Director of the Institute for the Study of European Transformations at London Metropolitan University, where she previously taught French, and currently teaches media and cultural studies in the Faculty of Social Sciences. Her writings include *Annie Ernaux, an introduction to the writer and her audience* (Berg, 1999), *Fans, Feminisms and 'Quality' Media* (Routledge, 2002) and *Annie Ernaux, à la première personne* (Stock, 2005). She co-edited *The Theory*

and *Politics of Consuming Differently* with Kate Soper and Martin Ryle (Palgrave, 2008), and has recently published a second edited book: *Religion, Consumerism and Sustainability: Paradise Lost?* (Palgrave, 2010). Her research interests include religion, spirituality and media; television and radio audiences and fan cultures; lifestyle and reality television; and conceptualisations of class in France and Britain. She is a member of the *Feminist Review* editorial Collective.

Avtar Brah is Professor (Emeritus) in Sociology at Birkbeck College, University of London. Her publications include *Cartographies of Diaspora, Contesting Identities*, Routledge, *Hybridity and its Discontents: Politics, Science, Culture* (co-edited with Annie E Coombes), Routledge, and *Global Futures: Migration, Environment and Globalization* (co-edited with Mary J Hickman, and Mairtin Mac an Ghail), Macmillan. She is a member of the *Feminist Review* editorial Collective.

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