Religion, nationalism, and gender: Perspective from South Asia

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Abstract
Religious mobilization often takes the form of engagement with "the woman question": how should women as carriers of culture comport themselves? This article shows that many of the debates over the role of women and religion in South Asia are misunderstood when they are seen as instances of religious fundamentalism. Rather, the theoretical framework to make sense of public religion and gender debates should be through the lens of postcolonial nationalism. The creation and consolidation of the nation is what is at stake—not the creation of the religious community as such. In order to make this argument, the article offers both a review of the literature on secularism and gender as well as short case studies from India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. These three former British colonies have each struggled to arrive at a secular settlement and often the contestation over the place of religion has centered on the rules and roles of women in these societies.

Introduction

Religious fundamentalism and women's rights are usually seen as mutually hostile forces (Varma et al., 2016). Examining religion and women's rights in South Asia shows that their relationship needs to be understood in the context of postcolonial nationalism rather than in terms of the politics of fundamentalism. That is, the assertion of public religion with its preoccupation with gender matters is not an anti-modern force. It is actually a process of modernizing and adapting traditional societies to the nation-state system. By examining what may appear to be the politics of religious fundamentalism from a historically informed South Asian perspective, I show that a series of

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assumptions that undergird mainstream thinking are insufficient. While a great deal of scholarship has focused on religion as the source of conflict, newer, critical approaches to the study of religion take us back to the state as the most significant player. The dominant force shaping politics in South Asia is nationalism rather than religious fundamentalism.

In this article, I explore the critical literature on secularism and put it into conversation with research on gender and nationalism. By critically examining the language of religion, secularism, women, and nation, the constructed and contingent nature of these social categories becomes apparent. In order to illustrate the theoretical argument, I provide highly stylized narratives of the evolution of religion and nation in India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.[1] These cases share certain commonalities: they were British colonies, they have religious majoritarian impulses, they have secular commitments that are constantly tested, and there is lively debate in these countries over the role of women as carriers of culture. They also have important differences, especially that each has a distinct majority faith tradition (Hindu, Islamic, and Buddhist), which highlights the ways that nation-building rather than religion is at the root of the woman question. This comparative approach reveals just how much or little religion matters.

As I elaborate below, the construction of the private and the public in South Asia was based on an equation of the private with the religious and feminine, and the public with the political and masculine. Given these equivalences created by the post-colonial state, both feminist movements and so-called fundamentalist movements can be seen as challengers to a particular secularist settlement.

Colonial South Asia: Construction of private and public

Partha Chatterjee's (1993) history of anticolonial nationalism demonstrates that the delineation of public and private realms was critical to the imagination of new nations. He argues that anticolonial nationalism was first concerned with asserting sovereignty over the spiritual, inner domain and only subsequently became a political movement that sought to seize state power. The material, external domain included state power, the economy, science and technology—all realms in which the British were dominant and South Asians submissive. The spiritual, inner domain encompasses the essential features of cultures, family, and religion—realms in which early nationalists asserted their authority to preserve or reform practices exclusive of British colonial authority (Chatterjee, 1993: 6).

The adoption of this dichotomy itself was shaped by colonial forms of governmentality. The British government, especially after the 1857 mutiny, determined that it would regulate the interests of the public and leave the regulation of the particular, or private interests, to native elites. Indirect rule took the form of demarcating religious communities with representatives who were expected to govern private matters of faith and family (Freitag, 1990). The response to this from Indian, especially Hindu, nationalists took the form of asserting a national mythology centered on the metaphor of the mother. India was represented as a maternal figure in need of protection by her sons (Gupta, 2005). The particularly long engagement anti-colonial elites with England and British ideas about modernity and civilization led to a nationalism that accepted the idea that the status of women was a marker of modernity. Thus, women had to be reshaped to become simultaneously modern and able to sustain Indian culture (Seth, 2013). The burden of embodying the nation falls upon women.

The operation of the colonial state was shaped by the discourses of the Enlightenment and when anticolonial nationalists did turn to the political project of "reclaiming" the nation they claimed a state apparatus that already had European conventions of public and private inscribed within it. "In accordance with liberal ideology, the public was now distinguished from the private. The state was

required to protect the inviolability of the private self in relation to other private selves" (Chatterjee, 1993: 10). But, Chatterjee (1993: 10) goes on to point out the nationalist elite had already imagined and accepted a different demarcation between the material and spiritual, and the inner and outer realms: "The contested field over which nationalism had proclaimed its sovereignty and where it had imagined its true community was neither coextensive with nor coincidental to the field constituted by the public/private division." The result was that the post-colonial state inherited a set of public/private distinctions based on liberal Enlightenment principles and a set based on its own nationalist project. The legitimacy of the state's distinctions was in question from the start.

If the private realms of religion, culture, and gender were the true embodiment of the nation, then surely in an independent state these are properly the domain of state action? Yet, the state also claims to protect individual citizens shorn of their caste, religion, sex, class, and language. This tension could not be resolved in the writing of the Constitution and animates many of the religious movements discussed here. Amir Ali (2001: 2419–2425) argues that the historical construction of the public and private spheres during the anticolonial movement directly yielded a public/private boundary susceptible to the kind of mobilization seen in the 1980s in India during the Shah Bano controversy and in the attempt by the Sangh Parivar to make symbols of Hinduism into symbols of the nation.

India

A number of commentators have argued that the meaning of secularism in India is different to that in the West (see Chatterjee, 1995; Jaffrelot, 2011; Madan, 1987; Mahajan, 1998; Nandy, 1995; Sarkar, 1993; Smith 1963). While Western understandings of secularism are usually described as separating church and state, the Indian version is generally characterized as maintaining equidistance from each religion or being equally engaged with each religious community. The reasons for this distinction are numerous. One argument for this variety of multiculturalism "... was its relatively greater ability to recast the common self-understandings, institutions, and practices of ordinary people in ways that made sense of their desire for equality" (Ruparelia, 2008). That is, in the Indian context which was shaped by the particular dynamics of colonial governmentality and anticolonial nationalism, a secularism that acknowledged the deeply felt communities of faith was the appropriate institutional expression of a people's social imaginary. A related argument is that once the nationalist elites rejected the arguments made by Muslim representatives for federal or electoral institutions that would preserve the community in an independent state, they were forced to accept the claims made by them on cultural or religious grounds. That is, once partition became inevitable, so did a secularism that preserved distinct personal laws for religious minorities while the state codified, reformed, and regulated Hindu practices (Amir, 2001).

Just as Hurd (2008) describes two types of Western secularism (laicist and Judeo-Christian), in the Indian debate too there is a dichotomy between the Nehruvian liberal or Marxist understanding of secularism as a hard boundary between the private and public sphere and the Hindu traditionalist model which suggests that Hinduism itself is a faith based on pluralist non-dualism which equally values all paths to the same divine truth, and that to be Hindu is in fact to be secular.

The way in which the question of how to be secular in India was resolved at the moment of founding is best exemplified by the adoption of separate civil codes for different religious communities. The demarcation between the public and private occurred on the terrain of family relationships. Membership of a religious community overwhelmed the distinctions of power within a family unit. By assigning Muslims and Christians a set of personal laws governing matters like

marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance, the state argued that property rights and reproductive rights belong to the non-political, religious, private sphere. By adopting the Hindu Code Bill and its reforms, the same issues are treated as political and as matters of public interest for Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and others. This division not only established a gendered private and public divide, but also serves as a means of declaring followers of some faiths properly Indian while others are marked as outsiders (Agnes, 2001; Hasan, 2000; Tejani, 2008). Tejani (2013) has more recently argued that the secular division was more closely connected to the evolving policy on reservations for caste and religious minorities. However, the explicit disputes over the rights of women as members of religious communities are more important than the implicit agenda that sought to distinguish between types of minorities.

Under the current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, the secular settlement in India is undergoing a number of shifts. The introduction of the National Registry of Citizens which has primarily targeted Muslim families in Assam, the Citizenship Bill which seeks to differentiate between Hindu and Muslim refugees from neighboring countries, and the revocation of the special status of India's only Muslim majority state—Kashmir—are major steps in creating a Hindu nation. The recent decision by the Supreme Court to award the disputed land in Ayodhya to Hindu devotees of Ram is a significant symbolic move in consolidating a newly assertive Hindu majoritarianism. This follows on the heels of the Court ruling against the practice of triple talaq as a form of divorce that they claimed hurts Muslim women (Deo, 2018). The state today uses its power to determine who can be a member of the nation and how members of religious minorities should marry and divorce, and denies minorities rights to cultural autonomy.

Pakistan

Pakistan was the first state created in the name of religion—a homeland for India's Muslims (Devji, 2013). And yet, upon its birth its founder Jinnah declared the state to be secular. His famous inaugural speech to the constituent assembly promised that once the creation of Pakistan was complete its actual governance would be secular:

> You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place or worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed that has nothing to do with the business of the State. As you know, history shows that in England, conditions, some time ago, were much worse than those prevailing in India today. The Roman Catholics and the Protestants persecuted each other. Even now there are some States in existence where there are discriminations made and bars imposed against a particular class. Thank God, we are not starting in those days. We are starting in the days where there is no discrimination, no distinction between one community and another, no discrimination between one caste or creed and another. We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one State. (Jinnah, 1947)

Not only does he promise that the state will not discriminate on the basis of religion, but he contrasts Pakistan favorably with non-secular states like England. Given Jinnah's stature and continuing influence over Pakistan's self-understanding, this speech cannot be dismissed as an idiosyncratic statement by one leader (Jalal, 1985). Rather, it points to the very dilemma that every generation in Pakistan struggles to resolve. What does it mean to be a home for Muslims, a Muslim state but not an Islamic one?

One way in which this politics of self-determination plays out according to Sadia Saeed is through the persecution of Ahmadiyyas.[2] The Ahmadi are a small sect comprising less than 2% of the population of Pakistan but are a major object of legal controversy and legislation. The state has shifted from a position of accommodating them as Pakistani citizens in accordance with Jinnah's secularism to adopting a constitutional amendment declaring them non-Muslims. "The genealogy of the Pakistani state's highly troubled and historically shifting relationship with the Ahmadis crystallizes a core feature of modern public Islam – its contested and unsettled relationship with the nation-state" Saeed (2016: 1). Saeed (2016) suggests that each time this minority and its place in the state is debated, the debate is actually an attempt by the state to reconcile itself to its role as the governing body of a nation that has been defined as Muslim. The need for a state to belong to a nation, and the Pakistani nation's origins as a refuge for South Asia's Muslims, create an inexorable drive toward it being an Islamic state. But because there is no clear programmatic definition of an Islamic state, discussions about the Ahmadiyyas provide a means by which different views on this can be aired and empowered.

The repeated waves of controversy over the Hudood ordinances can be read in a similar vein. These were a set of legal reforms introduced in 1977 as part of an Islamicization package by Zulfikar Bhutto that adopted very regressive rules on adultery and fornication which reduced the value of a woman's testimony to a quarter of that of a man, thus making rape exceedingly difficult to prosecute. It is ironic that Bhutto is usually recalled as a secular populist and his successor General Zia as the Islamicist. Bhutto introduced the Hudood ordinances as a way to try and outflank the religious opposition to his rule. This is very similar to the way in which the supposedly secular Congress party in India introduced soft Hindutva in the 1980s.[3] Almost immediately after the ordinances' passage, commissions began recommending their review and repeal (Cheema, 2006: 121). In the 1990s, Benazir Bhutto's government acted to reform these ordinances, as did General Musharraf's government in the 2000s. Meanwhile, the Nawaz Sharif government fought to maintain them. Each government took a stance on these laws that particularly impact women and their access to the public sphere as a means of demonstrating their modernity or their commitment to tradition. So we have one military dictator supporting the laws (Zia) and another reforming them (Musharraf), one elected leader criticizing them (Bhutto) and another praising them (Sharif). Clearly these laws do not fall into easy binaries of liberal/illiberal, modern/conservative, secular/religious. Rather, debates over them become a way for governing authorities to signal which groups in the society they favor and which ones they oppose. The actual effect on women is sidelined in this politics of identity in which the Pakistani state is constantly trying to become an Islamic *and* secular state.

The latest version of this debate is embodied in the cricketer turned prime minister Imran Khan. He spent decades of his life as a sportsperson and tabloid celebrity. When he turned to politics in his later years, the persona he embodied was of an Islamic conservative. He has used the language of Islam to speak out against corruption, denounce Pakistani cooperation with the United States, and introduce various types of welfare schemes. His "conversion" is most visible in his third marriage to Sufi teacher Bushra Bibi, whom he married just before successfully winning the prime minister's post in 2018. Where his previous marriages were to glamourous socialites, this marriage is to a deeply religious person who is his spiritual guide. Reactions to Imran Khan often reveal more about a person's identity politics than their policy views (Hussain, 2018).

Sri Lanka

Before the British took over as Sri Lanka's colonial masters, the Dutch and Portuguese had established colonies. The Dutch introduced major changes in marriage and inheritance laws and

made them more rigidly patriarchal. As in India, the incursions of the British were resisted by Sri Lankans in many ways. One of these was through a movement for Buddhist education, including education for women. The women involved in this Buddhist revival were often the ones who participated in the discussions that led the state to grant women the vote in 1931. Despite this early franchise, most of the women who have played a significant public role in Sri Lankan politics have been sisters, wives, and daughters of powerful men (Jayawardena, 1986). Since the 1980s, feminists in Sri Lanka have faced continuing efforts to undermine their legitimacy. They are accused of being alienated from indigenous traditions, and of being elitist and therefore misguided. The importance of women to the anti-colonial nationalist project makes this line of defamation particularly powerful. Women are supposed to be repositories of culture, and women who are critical of culture, i.e. feminists, are seen as a threat to the nation itself (De Alwis, 2002).

The British favored the Tamil minority during colonial rule. Tamils in Sri Lanka are mostly Hindu or Muslim and many work in plantations as poor laborers, while the majority Sinhala-speaking community is predominantly Buddhist. The Tamils' colonial era status as the privileged minority allowed more of them to learn English and enter the state administration. Independence came to Sri Lanka through an elite pact and not as a result of national mass mobilization. The failure to build in hard protections for minorities, and resentments caused by Tamil dominance of the professions and administration, created opportunities for ethnic mobilization by Sinhala politicians. Soon enough, the Sinhala language became a gatekeeper for access to jobs and education, leading to Tamil frustration and mobilization (Tambiah, 1992). In the early 1980s, Sri Lanka experienced anti-Tamil pogroms and the rise of the LTTE as an insurgent force. For the next four decades, the civil war between the Tamils and the Buddhist majority defined politics in Sri Lanka. In the context of this war, ethnic polarization increased. Sinhala Buddhists highlighted their Buddhist traditions and increasingly made Sri Lanka a Buddhist nationalist state.

In 1978, Sri Lanka declared Buddhism to be the state religion. Thus it gave up the attempt to be a secular state but still had to deal with the matter of religious pluralism within the population. The inability to do so fed the civil war. The war also limited the space available for feminist organizing. Many women have been active over the years within human rights organizations, peace building initiatives, and in temporary Mothers' fronts, but a clear women's movement could not emerge. The foregrounding of battles over identity limited the space for gender-based mobilization (Jayaweera, 2002). The aggressive Buddhism of the majority placed women of all communities in a position that made it difficult to articulate their own gender-based interests except as mothers.

In today's Sri Lanka, an election concluded in 2019 in which the aggressive militarism of the Rajapaksa family defeated the more rule-based coalition that opposed them. The civil war came to an end through a military campaign that led to the death of thousands of innocent civilians as well as the displacement of hundreds of thousands into refugee camps. The idea of a federal solution or a negotiated solution has been abandoned. This embrace of aggressive Buddhist nationalism in 2019 really can be attributed to the series of "Easter" bombings carried out by middle-class Sri Lankan Muslims that targeted churches. In this more militarized environment human rights abuses, especially affecting journalists and rights activists, have become common. The room for feminist mobilization has nearly disappeared.

Invention of religion

The problem begins with the categories of religion and fundamentalism—these are analytical constructs that fail to travel outside the Euro-American context. Our understanding of

fundamentalism as a political phenomenon rests upon a common definition of religion. In fact, Almond et al. (2003: 17) define fundamentalism as "a discernible pattern of religious militance by which self-styled 'true believers' attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors." That is, they place religion at the center of their account of fundamentalism. Their book is titled *Strong Religion* for a reason. They essentially see fundamentalism as a version of religion that is a challenge to secularization and modernization. But what is religion?

The common-sense view of religion treats it as an institutionalized set of beliefs and practices related to the supernatural or divine. As soon as such a definition is subjected to scrutiny, we can see the problems with it. On the one hand it is too broad as it encompasses the experience of ardent sports fans, nationalists, monks, and UFO chasers. On the other hand it is too specific—what room is there for non-theistic traditions like certain varieties of Buddhism and Hinduism? It assumes a coherent institutional structure but there are few equivalents of the Catholic church in most traditions, even Abrahamic ones. Is the stress on shared beliefs or shared practices? Where is the line between religion and culture to be drawn? These and other questions leave most scholars of religion unwilling to commit to a general definition of the phenomenon.

Russell McCutcheon (2017) summarizes the consensus view within Religion Studies that the discipline itself and its object of study are outcomes of a particular 19th-century process of European imperialism. He says, "the very term 'religion' has a history and it is not obvious how we ought to define the term" (McCutcheon, 2017: 2). He goes on to show that outside of the Latin language family, there is no equivalent word for religion. However, due to the colonial encounter (and the knowledge it produced) people from all over the world know that their set of practices or beliefs are referred to when we ask them about their religion. Thus, we already see that the way in which religion is understood is based on a Christian model generalized out to the rest of the world in a process shaped by significant power differentials. Christian explorers and scholars named and collected "religions," while non-European Christians either met or failed to meet the standard.

The work of scholars like Donald Lopez (2012) and David McMahan (2008) has shown the way in which Transcendentalists translated and interpreted Buddhism in very particular ways. Rousseau, Madame Blavatsky, and Emerson wanted to use Buddhism to re-spiritualize the West based on their reading of Buddhist sources. "This vision of Buddhism, using only textual sources, emphasized the contemplative, rational, individualistic qualities of the tradition to the exclusion of those magical or folk religious aspects of the tradition emphasized by actually living Buddhists in Asia" (Loftus, 2018: 111). The assumptions and needs of Western audiences essentially created new religions. Under the colonial system, the educational system and texts of the West were authoritative. In order to access claims to expertise and administrative power, natives had to adopt these texts and interpretations of their own traditions. Thus, contemporary Buddhism was born in the image of Western definitions of religion.

Taking another step in this critical inquiry, one might wonder where Christian ideas about religion originated. Once we understand how the categories of the religious and secular came to be, we can reflect on the power of these categories and the work it takes to maintain them.

Talal Asad (1982: 29) writes, "that it is part of my basic argument that socially identifiable forms, preconditions, and effects of what was regarded as religion in the medieval Christian epoch were quite different from those so considered in modern society." The separation of religion and politics is often cited as a failure of Islam and other Asian religions to adapt to modernity. Asad, however, shows that this separation has never in fact been complete within Christendom. In fact, it was not even seen as a possibility until after the Reformation. While we tend to associate the

Enlightenment with the separation of church and state within Christianity, recent historical research supports Asad's claim that this separation was only one side of a contentious argument (Bulman, 2016). There was a religious Enlightenment as well as a secularist one.

Jose Casanova and Charles Taylor have examined the process by which "religion" was created within Christendom. Under the Catholic church, religion referred to the sphere of spiritual contemplation reserved for monks and nuns. The secular signified the space occupied by parish priests and the laity. This included everyone and was the realm that required designation. In the aftermath of the critiques of the church made during the Reformation, the church made an effort to bring religious life out of the monasteries and into the secular realm. This attempt to merge the monastic life with daily life is the Catholic response to the Protestant elimination of the "religious" sphere altogether (Taylor, 2007). Protestants did not have holy orders that remained apart from ordinary life. Rather, they collapsed the work of spiritual seeking and temporal work. This merging of the two realms is the beginning of what we would call processes of differentiation and privatization of religion (Casanova, 1994: 11–39). Religion gradually came to refer to the realm of church authority and property, while the secular began to mean the property and jurisdiction of the state. Over time, additional spheres emerged in the economy, family, law etc. Religion became a narrower realm that had its own logic that was distinct from the secular realm.

As a resolution to the European Wars of Religion, secularization became one proposed solution (Armstrong, 2014). Al Stepan's work has shown that most European states did not create firm walls of separation between church and state. Rather, they developed a variety of forms of the twin tolerations: the acceptance of state power by religious authorities in return for the state's protection of the church's exercise of authority over its own flock (Stepan, 2000). How is the border between the religious and secular established? The French and American constitutional orders can be seen as ideal-typical moments of national founding (Bernal, 2017). Both embraced secularism as central to the new republics. The French ideal of laïcité and the American disestablishment clause are held up as the two varieties of secularism available in the modern world. The French form of secularism refers to both the separation of church and state *and* the duty of the state to protect citizens from religion. Laïcité assumes that the role of the state is to maintain the privacy of matters of faith (Scott, 2007). This strong secularism was born of the antagonism between the monarchic church and the democratizing republic (Kalyvas, 2006). Everything to do with religion must be kept out of the public realm for fear that religious authorities will steal the loyalty of citizens away from the state.

In the American case, secularism was born out of the experience of religious minorities fleeing persecution. Therefore this version seeks to protect the religious realm from the scrutiny and control of the state (Feldman, 2006). The separation of church and state is valued as a means of protecting the freedoms of the religious. It is only more recently that the disestablishment clause has been read as calling for religion to stay out of the public, political sphere. The danger in the American case was seen as coming from the state which might use its coercive apparatus to violate the freedom of conscience of the devout. In both the American and French models, the solution proposed is to create a strong border between religion and the political. This border is based on the understanding that religion can be (and ought to be) private and that politics is public. The differentiation of religion and politics is secured by privatizing religion.

While that sounds like a simple enough matter, it turns out to be far from obvious what is religious and what is political. The boundary between the two varies from state to state. The particular histories and cultural contexts of a society, the relative balance of power between religious authorities and state administrators, colonial legacies, contemporary geopolitical

alignments etc. all shape how the border is constructed in each country. In fact, the secularist division of religion and politics is a thoroughly *political process*. As a process it is ongoing, contested, and open to revision. At any given moment in time we can see a particular secularist settlement. There is nothing natural or inevitable about these settlements (Hurd, 2008; Scott, 2014). Each one is of course built on the ones that came before, but each iteration is new (Hussain, 2010). Reasonable people can (and do) disagree as to where the border should be located. Should services for the homeless be provided by the state or by religious authorities? Who should articulate norms about genetic manipulation? How should funds be raised and distributed? What role does the state play in determining educational standards? These are all questions that trouble the boundary between politics and religion. Their settlement at any given time is similar to that of other political institutions—a matter of "congealed tastes" (Riker, 1980: 445). That is, at a given moment a particular version wins out over other possibilities. At another time, with another configuration of power, another border is equally plausible.

In the popular imagination, feminism can be summed up in the slogan, "the personal is political." This phrase comes from an essay of the same name by Carol Hanisch (2006 [1969]). It comes from the fact that the discovery by women that their individual travails actually had political origins and therefore political solutions was the key to mobilizing them to fight for their rights collectively. The phrase has since meant that issues that can be dismissed and trivialized as personal problems ought to have a legitimate claim to public attention. It became emblematic of feminism in the North as feminists pointed out the ways in which women's lives were constrained largely within a private, domestic sphere (Freidan, 1963; Okin, 1989). Carole Pateman (1983) has gone so far as to say that the dichotomy between the private and the public is what the feminist movement is all about. Some trace the origins of women's subordination to the creation of distinct spheres (Gavison, 1992). The distinction between the private and the public is a central focus of feminist critique (Elshtain, 1993; Lamphere and Rosaldo, 1974; Landes, 1998; Pateman, 1988). Bringing a matter into the public sphere is often the route toward dismantling its power to subordinate women. The feminist drive to publicize the lives of women is a critical step in redefining gender norms. Given the way in which the borders between the private and public are intimately tied up with the maintenance of gender norms, the feminist struggle is also deeply threatening to the nation-state.

Fundamentalism, gender, and nationalism

Most studies of religious fundamentalism and gender only focus on Abrahamic models of religion.[4] A basic problem with this is that the Abrahamic religions only just comprise the majority of the world population: 54.9% (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2019). That leaves almost half the world unaccounted for. It also flattens the diversities within the Abrahamic religions themselves. A Protestant understanding of religion as text based, monotheistic, congregationalist, and concerned with individual salvation gets grafted onto Judaism and Islam. And it certainly misses what religion looks like in the non-Abrahamic world.[5] One assumption is to think of religion as text based, and that we can know what adherents think about a particular issue by reference to a founding text. In the case of Hinduism at least, there is no founding text or canon that gives rise to a unified creed or belief system. The monotheistic assumption breaks down in polytheistic or non-theistic religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. The nature of the relationship between the individual and the divine is very different, as are understandings of morality and the afterlife. The ways in which Abrahamic subjects are thought to act in response to an all-seeing and

judging deity simply do not apply as ways of understanding behavior in other religious traditions. The absence of a congregation and private worship also means that assumptions about how social norms are formed and promulgated do not apply. In a context like Hinduism or Buddhism in which most religious activity takes place within the home, public religion takes on a very different cast. The modes of organizing socially and generating networks for mobilization are also very different than in a congregational model. If we ask questions about religion and politics from a non-Abrahamic perspective, religion no longer works as a variable that we can plug into models of fundamentalism. This is not to suggest that Hindus or Buddhists have not historically managed to engage in political campaigns. But it does draw our attention to the critical importance of modernity and democratic forms of government as shaping the particular ways in which religious identity becomes salient in non-Abrahamic and post-colonial societies. The South Asian cases should force scholars to consider *what religion is* in a different way.

Another problem in the literature is the peculiar focus on the question of gender almost solely in regard to just one religion: Islam. Many scholars have been highly critical of western scholarship's fascination with the alleged or assumed oppression of Muslim women (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Mahood, 2005; Mernissi, 1987; Moghadam, 2003). They point out that the overrepresentation of Islam in the study of gender oppression makes it seem as if that one faith is unusually repressive. This contributes to Islamophobia but also occludes the ways in which paying attention to gender can illuminate the processes by which all religions get politicized. By focusing only on women in Islam, political scientists suggest either that there is something about Islam that is particularly corrosive of gender equality or that there is something about Arab culture that is problematic (Donno and Russett, 2004). The South Asian cases can serve as a useful reminder that poverty is the biggest threat to most women, not their religious practices. South Asia's shocking maternal mortality rates, the missing millions of girl babies, and practices of seclusion and veiling cross religious boundaries and are most harshly experienced by women who do not have access to alternative livelihoods. Looking at gender beyond Islam is a needed corrective to the politically driven myopia of much of the literature on women and religion as it currently stands (Williams and Deo, 2018).

This article considers the relationship between religion, gender, and fundamentalism by comparing a majority Hindu, a majority Muslim, and a majority Buddhist society. Each of these was colonized by the British, which led to certain similarities in the way in which the matters of religion and gender were raised in the anti-colonial period. In all three, women were identified as vessels that bear authentic culture but also as objects in need of modernizing reform. The debates over which nation is in need of self-determination were debates that often took the form of ruminations over the role and responsibilities of women.

Gender, religion, and the state

Why are religious fundamentalists so concerned with sexuality? In popular discourse[6] as well as in some scholarship on the issue, the assumption is made that public religion is necessarily fundamentalist, which means that it is necessarily conservative. An aspect of conservatism is to stress familial ideology which seeks to control and contain women within the private sphere of the family (Joyce, 2009). The problem with this argument is that it is not the case that religious movements always seek to preserve the status quo when it comes to gender roles. They sometimes align with feminists in pushing back against state attempts to control reproduction and sexual mores. For example, many religious leaders and feminists are jointly opposed to China's attempts to control

the number of children a woman can have. A more sophisticated argument forgoes the assumption that religiously motivated actors are necessarily conservative and instead locates the religious concern with regulating sexuality within religious worldviews, conservative or not (Casanova, 2009: 15).

Drawing on Weber, Roger Friedland argues that the reason that religious nationalists seem to engage in acts of bodily violence and are preoccupied with sexuality is due to the state's attempts to control life and death. The control of legitimate violence by the state is countered by religious nationalists who believe that death becomes meaningful in the context of theology rather than in service of nationalism. The attempts by the state to regulate sexuality infringe on the ability of religious authorities to control reproductive love, another domain that properly belongs to the divine creators of life: "The religious nationalist political practices of sexual regulation and physical violence are ontological enactments, comportments that index God's absent presence, the divine as sovereign . . ." (Friedland, 2011: 83). The religious nature of fundamentalism explains its preoccupation with violence and sex. To understand the timing of violent acts and the particular issues related to sexuality that the Hindu right politicizes, we must turn to mundane explanations of electoral competition and historical context. But the fact that violence and sexual politics are central to the movement can be understood as an outgrowth of its religious inspiration.

In the case of India, the belief that the Hindu man is effeminate and needs to restore his virility and manhood is a staple of Hindu nationalist discourse. The reason for this belief is not difficult to discern. Although today the discourse points to the fact that Hindus were ruled by Muslims in the pre-colonial period as the chief source of this masculine anxiety, the emergence of this trope under colonialism explains it best. The history of orientalist knowledge production and its sexual politics positioned the native man as weak and effeminate while the colonizer was correctly masculine (Said, 1979; Stoler, 2010). Insofar as Hindutva was dreamt up in a colonized society, a major aspect of the ideology had to address this discourse. A number of other scholars have also examined the gendered construction of specific ethnic identities in colonial discourse (Chen, 2010; Gurung, 2014; Sinha, 1995: xi, 191; Streets, 2004; Teltscher, 2000) . Heather Streets (2004), for example, points out that the construction of specific ethnic groups as "martial races" and others as "effeminate *babus*" facilitated British mobilization and recruitment for the armed forces.

One final source for understanding the religious concern with the sexual is that historically most norms about family life and sexuality were the domain of the religious. As the state increasingly ventures into this territory to regulate marriage, divorce, inheritance, and so on it provokes a backlash from religious authorities (Gorski, 2007). That is, the decision by the government to launch reforms of family law and to promote women's empowerment through state policies is the reason for fundamentalist mobilization around these issues. In this reading, progress on achieving gender equality can be identified as leading to more vociferous opposition.[7] At times this dynamic might be at play, but clearly there are instances where fundamentalists as a part of the state themselves enter the domain of women-related legislation and not always in a strictly anti-feminist way. Support by the BJP for legislation related to domestic violence and sexual harassment, for instance, belies this story of a purely oppositional politics.

I have shown that the category of religion itself is unstable. It is in many ways a creation of the colonial orientalist. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam in South Asia are understood in terms that have been co-created by colonial missionaries and anti-colonial elites. The traditions and practices that are offered as timeless and immutable in fact have shorter biographies, as scholars of religion and history are pointing out. Given that religion itself is socially constructed in response to political

constraints, it should be uncontroversial to note that secular settlements are unstable. Any arrangement of the border between the secular and the sacred and its guarantee by the power of the state is contingent and contested. The are no purely secular or religious states. The struggle to define a state as one or the other is a means for post-colonial societies to try and stabilize their identities as nation-states Liow (2016). The imposition of the nation-state form as the dominant mode of organizing international politics is really what animates struggles over religion in South Asia and other parts of Asia. This is why it is not useful to study religion and politics in this part of the world through the lens of religious fundamentalism. One can gain much more clarity on the topic through studying nationalism and nation-building by the state.

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Notes

1. I did not include Bangladesh in this article because its national identity has been strongly impacted by the 1971 war of liberation in which the dominant colonial force was West Pakistan.
2. A similar story about the Ahmadiyya is told by Jeremy Menchik (2015), who studies their persecution in Indonesia. He argues that the debates in Indonesia over the Ahmadiyya acted as a means for competing Muslim organizations to unite in the anti-colonial struggle and as a way to build "godly nationalism" in the post-colonial period.
3. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer who reminded me of the role played by Bhutto and Gandhi in adopting religious approaches to governance while proclaiming their fealty to secularism.
4. Parts of this section appear in Williams and Deo (2018).
5. See problems in Huntington (2011) and Norris and Inglehart (2011).
6. See for example Goldberg (2008); Rushdie (2001); Schaeffer (2011).
7. Casanova (2009). See also Phillips (2009), which critiques this position.

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