PROJECT MUSE®

Feminist Studies in Religion and the The*logy In-Between
Nationalism and Globalization

Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth, 1938-

Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, Volume 21, Number 1, Spring
2005, pp. 111-119 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jfs.2005.0007>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/183428>

Roundtable Discussion

FEMINIST STUDIES IN RELIGION AND THE*LOGY
IN-BETWEEN NATIONALISM AND GLOBALIZATION
Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

Patriotic nationalism is the most powerful discourse of the day, as the flags on cars and houses and the pins and bumper stickers “in support of our troops” amply document. At the same time, the rhetoric of the most recent presidential campaign has driven home the degree to which religion is implicated in such nationalist discourse. Nationalism, gender, and religion are not separate, distinct discourses; they inform and construct each other.

However, in feminist the*logy and studies in religion, nationalism as the systemic kyriarchal structure that determines all of our discourses remains mostly unmentioned and unexplored.¹ Like maleness, whiteness, or Christian-ness, nationalism remains invisible and unconscious for those who inhabit the privileged kyriarchal position. Hence, with this roundtable the *JFSR* seeks to begin a serious discussion of nationalist rhetoric and to articulate it as a central concern of feminist the*logy and studies in religion.

The *Encarta Dictionary* defines *nationalism* both positively and negatively, as follows:

1. **desire for political independence:** the desire to achieve politi-

¹ In order to indicate the brokenness and inadequacy of human language to name the Divine, I switched in my book *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet; Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994) from the Orthodox Jewish writing of *G-d*, which I had adopted in *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992) and *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), to the spelling *G*d*, which seeks to avoid the conservative malestream association that the writing of *G-d* has for some Jewish feminists. Consequently, I have begun to write also *the*logy*, which literally means “speaking of G*d,” in the same way in order to indicate that I speak about G*d neither in masculine (*theology*) nor in feminine (*thealogy*) gender terms.

Kyriarchal means “emperor, lord, slave-master, father, elite male domination.” I have coined this analytic category to articulate the intersecting structures of domination: gender, race, class, and imperialism/colonialism.

cal independence, especially by a country under foreign control or by a people with a separate identity and culture but no state of their own

2. **patriotism:** proud loyalty and devotion to nation
3. **excessive devotion to nation:** excessive or fanatical devotion to a nation and its interests, often associated with a belief that one country is superior to all others²

This definition distinguishes nationalism as either a “desire for political independence” or “excessive devotion to nation” and uses “patriotism” as the middle term. It makes a whole lot of difference whether one approaches the problem of nationalism from the perspective of the third or the first part of the definition. I am interested here especially in the third part, given that the United States is not “a country under foreign control” but prides itself in being the world’s number one superpower. It is clearly devoted to the “belief that one country is superior to all others.”

In *Gender and Nation*, Nira Yuval-Davis has explored the first point of the definition of nationalism, and she has done so from the perspective of countries that have struggled for political and cultural independence. Her analytical project examined “a gendered understanding of nations and nationalisms” and explored “the crucial contribution of gender relations to several major dimensions of nationalist projects: national reproduction, national culture, and national citizenship as well as national conflicts and wars.”³ Thus, she has convincingly shown that wo/men were always central to the construction of the national sphere.

Whether they are politically conservative or emancipatory, many nationalist discourses use “religion” and “woman” as both identity and boundary markers. Female figurations such as “mother India,” “lady liberty,” and “mother church” symbolize in many cultures and religions the identity of the community or collectivity. Nationalist religious movements are basically political movements that use cultural and religious traditions as symbolic border guards. Gender symbols, control of wo/men, the well-being of the heterosexual patriarchal family, appeals to religious scriptures and laws, specific cultural codes of dress and behavior—all these become central to the maintenance of traditional values and the construction of national identity. Such national/religious identity is rhetorically constructed and often articulated in the interest of hegemony and the control of wo/men. To quote Yuval-Davis again,

Women are often constructed as the cultural symbols of the collectivity, of its boundaries, as the carriers of the collectivity’s “honor” and as

² *Encarta Dictionary*, Microsoft Encarta Reference Library 2004, CD-ROM, Microsoft Corporation, 1993–2003, s.v. “Nationalism.”

³ Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997), 3.

its intergenerational reproducers of culture. Specific codes and regulations are usually developed defining who/what is a “proper man” and a “proper woman”, which are central to identities of collectivity members. Feelings of disempowerment which result from processes of colonization and subjugation have often been interpreted by the colonized men as processes of emasculation and/or feminization. The (re)construction of men’s—and often even more importantly of women’s—roles . . . has been central in most such struggles.⁴

Critical feminist scholarship has shown that in modernity religion has been feminized. Religion has been conceptualized as belonging to the private, feminine, emotional, aesthetic sphere over and against which the public, rational, culturally authoritative, masculine sphere of progress, rationality, subjectivity, and modernity has been defined. However, in postmodernity, religion in the form of fundamentalisms seems to have again taken public center stage. In conjunction with nationalism, it is used to legitimate war and to control sexuality and wo/men.

In the past few years a stream of books has appeared not only arguing that the United States is an empire and that many parts of the world would benefit from American rule but also declaring feminism as dead or no longer necessary. Some of these books discuss the rise and fall of the American empire. Others elaborate the moral and economic price to be paid for being an empire. Whereas the American people fervently believe that America is a democracy, historians argue that the United States has always been an empire and that the present expansion of capitalist globalization is secured by the military-industrial complex. In his book *American Empire*, Andrew Bacevich, a former military officer, quotes Theodore Roosevelt, who in December 1899 said, “Of course, our whole national history has been one of expansion,” and Madeleine Albright, who in February 1998 stated, “If we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation.” Bacevich continues:

Bill Clinton interpreted the end of the Cold War as signifying the “fullness of time”—a scriptural allusion to the moment when God chose to transform history. . . . As the bloody twentieth century drew to a close, God’s promise of peace on earth remained unfulfilled; it was now incumbent upon the United States, having ascended to the status of sole superpower, to complete God’s work—or as members of a largely secularized elite preferred it, to guide history toward its intended destination.⁵

This “new world order” spanning the globe lives by the principle “Maxi-

⁴ Ibid., 67.

⁵ Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of American Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 1–7.

mize financial returns and profits as much as possible and everything will turn out fine.” The predictable results of the neoliberal economic model made in the USA are socially unjust, politically destabilizing, culturally destructive, and ecologically unsustainable.

Economic globalization has been created with the specific goal of giving primacy to corporate profits and values, installing and codifying such market values globally.⁶ It was designed to amalgamate and merge all economic activities around the world within a single model of global monoculture. In many respects wo/men are suffering not only from the globalization of market capitalism but also from their sexual exploitation instigated by it.

The economic and ecological impact of globalization and its attendant exploitation and misery have engendered the resurgence of the religious Right and of global cultural and religious fundamentalisms claiming the power of naming the true nature and essence of religion.⁷ Right-wing, well-financed think tanks are supported by reactionary political and financial institutions that seek to defend kyriarchal capitalism.⁸ Right-wing movements around the globe in the past decades either have insisted on the figuration of emancipated wo/men as signifiers of Western decadence and of modern atheistic secularism, or have presented masculine power as the expression of divine power.⁹ Such in-

⁶ See Jan P. Nederveen Pieterse, ed., *Christianity and Hegemony: Religion and Politics on the Frontiers of Social Change* (New York: Berg, 1992), 11–31. See also Paul E. Sigmund, “Christian Democracy, Liberation Theology, the Catholic Right, and Democracy in Latin America,” in *Christianity and Democracy in Global Context*, ed. John Witte Jr. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993), 187–207.

⁷ See the varied contributions in Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann, eds., *Fundamentalism as an Ecumenical Challenge* (London: SCM, 1992).

⁸ For an excellent critical analysis of the involvement of religion in this global struggle, see especially the work of the late Penny Lernoux, including *Cry of the People: The Struggle for Human Rights in Latin America—The Catholic Church in Conflict with U.S. Policy* (New York: Penguin, 1982), *In Banks We Trust* (New York: Penguin, 1986), and her penultimate book before her untimely death, *People of God: The Struggle for World Catholicism* (New York: Penguin, 1989). See also Robert B. Reich, *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21st Century Capitalism* (New York: Vintage, 1992); and Joan Smith, “The Creation of the World We Know: The World-Economy and the Re-creation of Gendered Identities,” in *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective*, ed. Valentine M. Moghadam (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994), 27–41.

⁹ See especially the declaration of the Division for the Advancement of Women titled “International Standards of Equality and Religious Freedom: Implications for the Status of Women,” and Rebecca E. Klatch, “Women of the New Right in the United States: Family, Feminism, and Politics,” in Moghadam, *Identity Politics and Women*, 425–38 and 367–88, respectively. Most of the contributions in Moghadam’s book are on women and Islam in different parts of the world. However, see Sucheta Mazumdar, “Moving Away from a Secular Vision? Women, Nation, and the Cultural Construction of Hindu India,” and Radha Kumar, “Identity Politics and the Contemporary Indian Feminist Movement,” 243–73 and 274–92, respectively.

terconnections between religious antidemocratic arguments and the debate with regard to wo/men's place and role are not accidental or of merely intratheological significance.

Hence, it is more than troubling that feminist discourses in religion have for the most part not yet critically problematized American capitalist nationalism as a structure of domination.¹⁰ We have not critically asked how such imperial "Americanness" shapes our discourses, be they womanist, *mujerista*, Latina, black, or white feminist. Is it sufficient to name and reflect critically on our racial, sexual, gender, and class social-religious locations while at the same time leaving out our nationalist determinedness?

To begin the conversation on the political and cultural impact of Americanness and U.S. nationalism, I will reflect on my own experience. This is justified in my view insofar as feminist discourses must remain rooted in a critical reflection on experience to avoid falling victim to the neutralizing and reifying tendencies of academic discourse. However, I do not understand experience as normative, because experience is always already shaped by kyriarchal discourses and calls for a hermeneutics of suspicion. Starting with my experience as a German immigrant, I will explore "Americanness" by way of a critical comparison with "Germanness."

I reflect here on Americanness and U.S. nationalism from the perspective of a "resident alien." Because I have not been able to bring myself either to swear the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag or to claim American slavery and Native American genocide as my own history and heritage, I have not yet chosen to become a naturalized American citizen. Neither am I able to subscribe to the fervent patriotism that supports the occupation of Iraq or the interference in the governments of Haiti and other Latin American states.

I was born in Romania as an "ethnic" German. As a young child, I was a refugee and displaced person and grew up after World War II in a village in the American-occupied zone of Germany. This social location has deeply shaped my understanding of nationalism. I remember, for instance, that my grandmother and the other wo/men of the village could not understand the American obsession with the flag. After the war, one could not buy anything; they had hidden and saved Nazi flags not because they thought they were sacrosanct but in order to make children's clothes out of them. But such a use of the flag was against American regulations. Anybody found with even scraps of the flag was fined and could go to prison.

Moreover, growing up under American occupation, I fully internalized the message that German nationalism was wrong and evil because it led to war and unspeakable suffering, whereas America was the liberating democratic power.

¹⁰ To my knowledge, the exception here is the new book by Sharon D. Welch, *After Empire: The Art and Ethos of Enduring Peace* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).

I remember having to write an essay in third or fourth grade comparing Adolf Hitler to George Washington: because as a boy Hitler lied and Washington refused to do so (so the story went), Germany was on the brink of total destruction, whereas the United States represented the victorious power for democracy in the world.

Right after the war Germans had no national anthem or flag, because those were the symbols of a nationalistic ethos that had led Germany into perdition. I remember that at an international Catholic youth congress in the 1950s, all stood up to sing their national anthems except for the German participants, who remained seated and were repulsed by the fervor and devotion that the other students exhibited for their national flags.

I grew up dreaming of a united Europe rather than a great Germany. As a fervent anti-Communist, I was enthusiastic about America as the land of democracy and equal rights. This admiration for America as the land of freedom, democracy, and justice for everyone, however, was seriously undermined during my student days in the 1960s, when I came to know the grievances of the civil rights, the Native American rights, and the anti-Vietnam War movements. When I came to the United States, in 1970, at the height of the Vietnam War, I was shocked to see the flag beside the high altar in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York and to hear the national anthem sung at the graduation Mass at Notre Dame. I could not quite make sense out of this, because America was supposedly a country where church and state were separated. When I witnessed displays of contempt for the war protesters who burned the flag, however, I began to understand the American veneration of the flag as the symbol of national military power and its "religious" significance.

The present militaristic rhetoric of the "war" against terrorism has many echoes within my German history. The transition from the Weimar Republic to the full-fledged exercise of Nazi power was in some ways quite different but still shared many characteristics that were jarringly similar to the post-9/11 situation in the United States. Strong signs of a weak economy; rising unemployment; deregulation and inflationary tendencies dismantling labor legislation; curtailing of social services; strengthening of capital; concern about homeland security; nationalistic patriotism; pro-family, antigay, and antiabortion rhetoric; the replacement of state social services with notions of voluntary charity; racist, antiforeigner sentiment; and rejection of dissent as unpatriotic and asocial—all these and more were characteristic of the Nazi period and also fuel the anti-Islamic and masculinist war rhetoric of American nationalism today.

As a child, I could never understand grown-ups who said they did not know what else they could have done to prevent Hitler from coming to power, because they had voted against him. In the past years I have felt the same helplessness and have come to understand what my German elders meant when they claimed they did not know what to do to prevent or interrupt Hitler's na-

tionalist war of expansion, his undoing of democratic rights, and the mass murders in the concentration camps.

In preparation for the Feminist Liberation Theologians' Network discussion on nationalism at the 2004 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, in San Antonio, Texas, I reread the collection of essays *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany*, edited by Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossmann, and Marion Kaplan, which was intended as a feminist countervoice at the beginning of the Reagan era. Because German feminism subscribed to views on motherhood and femininity similar to those of the National Socialist regime, the editors point out, it could not develop an alternative discourse to the nationalist Nazi rhetoric on reproductive issues and the glorification of femininity, body, race, nature, and motherhood: "There was a general consensus among feminists and non-feminists as to the desirability of motherhood for all women and on the family as the germ cell of the nation, class or Volk."¹¹ Because motherhood, family, and femininity always had been central to the middle-class German women's movements, no alternative feminist discourse could be found.

Carol Mason's book *Killing for Life* convincingly shows that a similar politics is at work in the United States today. She elaborates how the pro-life movement's grassroots organizing and rhetorical strategies have contributed to the consolidation of right-wing conservatism and its national power:

Narrating the new abortion warrior as besieged, outnumbered, and victimized, pro-life writing makes the white Christian heterosexual (and working- or middle-class) male a hero above all others. Despite the fact that people, regardless of their race, gender, sexuality, religion, class, or ethnicity, may deplore abortion and fashion sophisticated reasons to prohibit it, pro-life ideology habitually and consistently defines its hero as male, straight, Christian, and white.¹²

Mason's analysis of the kyriarchal rhetorical strategies of the pro-life movement in the United States convincingly shows how the New Right has radically reshaped the framework of public discourse on the body, wo/men's rights, and family. She also shows the continuity between this antiabortion and pro-family discourse and neoliberal criticism of the welfare state. Although feminist discourses in the *logy and religious studies for the most part have not explicitly subscribed to an antiabortion rhetoric, some have nevertheless tended to develop a pro-life rhetoric that does not critically reflect on its affinities with that

¹¹ Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossmann, and Marion Kaplan, eds., *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984), 22.

¹² Carol Mason, *Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-life Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 190.

of right-wing political discourse. Feminist discourses that extol motherhood, female superiority, relationality, or “sexual difference”¹³ unintentionally practice a rhetoric of affinity with right-wing discourses, because their difficult theoretical differentiations are lost in translation. Although feminist studies in religion and feminist the*logy have moved away from their early essentializing discourse on “woman,” it is still debated whether the labels “feminist,” “womanist,” and “*mujerista*” continue to participate in such essentializing tendencies. If gender studies just traces and reinscribes dominant views of gender without displacing the category of gender and without showing its imbrication with the categories of race, class, and colonializing imperialism, it also is in danger of contributing to the public essentializing discourses of the political and religious right wing.

In her ethnographic study of conservative Catholic, evangelical Protestant, and Orthodox Jewish wo/men, Christel Manning has shown that in different ways conservative wo/men grapple with right-wing and feminist discourses when seeking to integrate feminism with conservative religious discourses. She points to the strategic differences between these groups of religious wo/men that are due to their different historical experiences in the United States. Whereas Protestant wo/men believe that they have lost a position of cultural dominance, Catholic wo/men never had such a position, and Jewish wo/men still have an intense concern with survival. The attitude of wo/men to religion, nation, and feminism is shaped by historical experience as well as group dominant discourses on femininity and family:

The concerns for the survival of Jewish tradition, for unity in the Catholic Church, and for a Christian America are very different reasons to oppose the feminist movement. While theological differences may be temporarily set aside to pursue a common political goal, the divisions between Evangelicals, conservative Catholics, and Orthodox Jews go beyond theological disagreements and are rooted in long-standing differences in their relationship to American society. . . . It is probably no coincidence that most of the evidence for a potential cross-denominational conservative alliance comes from the conservative Protestants; after all, the concept of such a moral majority mirrors the Evangelical self-understanding that they are representative of America as a whole.¹⁴

If we were to construct critical political feminist the*logies and studies in religion that are conscious of their national location and its impact on their

¹³ For the feminist debates on essentialism and identity politics, see Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed, eds., *The Essential Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

¹⁴ Christel J. Manning, *God Gave Us the Right: Conservative Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, and Orthodox Jewish Women Grapple with Feminism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 238.

feminist discourse, we might be able to provide alternative discourses to those wo/men caught between the religious Right's message of traditional gender roles and their own desire and yearning for a societal and religious self-identity that can integrate their feminist values with their religious experiences and convictions.

Finally, the discourses of feminist the*logy and religious studies would benefit from the critical consideration of nationalism. Insofar as they tend to define and construct identity in terms of continents—Asian, African, South American, African American, or Euro-American feminist the*logy—these discourses tend to reinscribe nationalistic tendencies. Hence, we need to engage in critical reflection on the nationalist undercurrents of such self-naming and the different understandings of nationalism. The danger exists that a feminist identity politics centered on continents ends at best in a liberal pluralism that leaves each group ensconced in its own discourse and at worst in feminist antagonisms that diminish the little power for change that we have. If, however, we could remain conscious of the pitfalls of territorial nationalism, many of our theoretical and the*logical disagreements could be understood as political contradictions shaped by the discourses of nationalism.

For instance, I am often asked why I have named my feminist the*logical approach as a critical rather than a white German feminist the*logy. There is no question that my arguments are shaped by German history and politics. Yet to denote my feminist the*logical approach as German would mean to reify programmatically national experience as essential and central to my feminist discourse. My feminist discursive framework has been consistently formulated over a historical Germanic rhetoric that has celebrated femininity, body, nature, family, and relationality and that has focused on Germanic religion and culture as its central concerns.

Hence, I cannot adopt a feminist discourse that remains oblivious to the fact that “special nature or culture” theories are always functioning as anti-democratic “othering” discourses that can be used to legitimate nationalism and war. Instead, what seems to be called for at this moment of capitalist globalization under nationalist American hegemony is a transnational articulation and organization of feminist the*logy and studies in religion. Such a transnational approach can critically investigate the unintended imbrication of feminist studies in religion in nationalist discourses and can critically point out the contributions of kyriarchal religions to exclusivist nationalism and dangerous militarism. Such a transnational feminist ethos remains critically aware of its particular social, religious, and national location and at the same time seeks to fashion transnational discourse strategies that challenge kyriarchal globalization. I am looking forward to your responses.