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By Whose Standards? Religious Fundamentalism, Gender Equality and Cross Cultural Differences

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Dr Romina Istratii reflects on a presentation that she recently gave at the Woolf Institute, which drew attention to the epistemological, ethical and practical limitations of deploying 'religious fundamentalism', a concept deeply imbricated in western modern history, when analysing gender issues in non-western religious cosmologies and contexts.

Recently, the Woolf Institute hosted a conference dedicated to the intersection of '[Strictly Observant Religion, Gender and the State](#)', which sought to address the question "how strictly observant religious groups or 'fundamentalists' (Harding 2001) challenge two basic principles within contemporary societies: gender equality and the modern state". Having often encountered invocations of 'religious fundamentalism' to describe religious groups where this is not a self-referent in the disciplines I specialise in, namely, gender, religious and development studies, I undertook to interrogate the cross-cultural deployment of the terminology from an epistemological, ethical and practical perspective. I proposed that serious discussions would need to be had about its definition, whether and how this could be authoritatively decided and how its relevance *vis-à-vis* non-western religious expressions might be demonstrated before it is employed. I argued that this would need to be pursued with full awareness of epistemological hierarchies and cosmological pluralities that define the world and that make the transposition of any generalising concept or theoretical framework a complicated affair.

To bring these complexities to the fore I asked *inter alia*: Can the usage of a single umbrella term help us to understand and to analyse religious expressions in very different historical, political and cultural conditions, even if they share some similarities? To what extent can the deployment of a concept emerging from western experience with theological modernism in late 19th century reveal realities or human motivations embedded in non-western theologies? If there is indeed a type of religious intransigence or even aggressiveness^[1] emerging in interaction with western modernity and its paraphernalia, in many cases this intransigence cannot be disassociated from colonial histories and their consequences.^[2] How might this single terminology help to shed light on complex interactions between colonising and colonised parties in different contexts? More importantly, should not fundamentalism-related intransigence be differentiated from defensive responses originating in incommensurability of worldviews? For example, if objections to gender egalitarianism (e.g. through state legislation stipulating equality of all genders) are crucial to the conceptualisation of fundamentalism, should not more attention be given to the western epistemological origin and philosophical assumptions informing the concept of 'gender equality'? More practically speaking, can such internationalised terminologies increase understanding about context-specific gender-related issues, indicating locally appropriate strategies for their alleviation?

These questions do not deny the existence of rigid religious groups and expressions in the world and their possible pernicious implications, especially for certain gender groups. However, before deploying West-borne concepts to describe those, it is important to take into account the underlying power hierarchies that have historically defined the 'science' of knowledge-making, especially within gender and religious subjects. I cannot provide an elaborate analysis, but I [have demonstrated before](#) that gender equality – so central in invocations of religious fundamentalism - has been historically theorised in view of metaphysical understandings of gender and the human self as these evolved in dominant western feminist philosophical thinking.^[3] The prevalence of western epistemology is visible also in related concepts, such as gender equality, empowerment, or gender-based violence, which are almost unquestionably [internationalised through global agendas](#). On the other hand, conceptualisations and approaches to analysing 'religion' have been historically predicated on western experience with the subject matter,^[4] with gender and religious studies, in particular, [favouring West-borne 'hermeneutics of suspicion'](#) to approach religious traditions. These analytical frameworks can be problematic cross-culturally due to societies espousing different belief and knowledge systems, resulting in unique configurations of gender subjectivities and religious worldviews. However, writers who deploy 'religious fundamentalism' loosely have not generally reflected on these epistemological issues, neglecting also to problematise their own power to 'name' the other.^[5]

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My sense is that such tendencies are fostered, ultimately, by an underlying assumption that everyone ought to questionably gender norms that are considered 'progressive' in some strand of western thinking. In suggesting this, I am influenced by Judith Butler's contemplations on the deployment of sexual freedom ideals vis-à-vis religious migrant communities in Europe.[6] Butler discerned in the invasive practices of the European states that she examined an assumption that theirs was "a culturally advanced position" over the "pre-modern" religious beliefs of the migrants.[7] In a similar light, I would argue that when gender and development writers define a religious group as 'fundamentalist' without a sufficiently nuanced theoretical elaboration, they express a conviction that the gender standards they uphold have universal and normative power and should be superimposed on others. Echoing Butler, whose whole scholarly work has been about questioning the metaphysical edifice of normativity, I would argue that such a tendency is ethically problematic since there is no universally authoritative way of demonstrating the normative - the latter will always depend on what cosmological premises the theorist takes as 'ineffably' correct.[8] In other words, the global deployment of terminologies is too imbricated in the system of authoritative knowledge favoured by the situated theorist, which can obstruct a genuinely exploratory engagement with what falls beyond her cosmological remit.

As a departure from these tendencies, I have spent the past five years analysing gender-related issues that centre on embodied experiences of local belief and knowledge systems, paying particular attention to religious teachings and how these are understood in different social configurations. In my approach, I have generally suspended pre-theorised definitions of gender, religion or gender-related issues, relying on local discourses to suggest how these may be conceptualised and how their complex inter-relationships may be understood. I have employed primarily participatory and ethnographic methodologies with full awareness of my own epistemological location as a UK-based researcher espousing an Eastern Orthodox background, sharing my identity with my research participants and capturing to the best of my ability its effects on my research, while being cautious not to transpose assumptions emanating from my cosmological location onto these communities. For example, in 2014-2015 I investigated how asymmetries in the agricultural livelihoods of men and women in a Fulani *commune* in Senegal could be understood from the prism of the religio-cultural cosmology of the predominantly Tidjanni Sufi adherents. In 2016-2017, I interrogated how religio-cultural discourses intersected with attitudes and realities of conjugal abuse in the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahādo* community of Aksum in Tigray region. In both cases, I recognised the centrality of religious discourse in people's lives and was particularly keen on exploring alleviation strategies for gender asymmetries and conjugal abuse informed by this discourse.



Participatory workshop on gender livelihoods, Guédé Chantier, Senegal (Photo: Romina Istratii)



Participating at a village wedding, Aksum, Ethiopia (Photo: Romina Istratii)

Although I have yet to come across what the literature would consider a 'fundamentalist' religious group, I have certainly found aspects of rigidity in the lives of religious communities I worked with, and oftentimes these appeared conducive to gender asymmetries. However, these rigidities reflected distinct contingencies that a single theoretical framework could not possibly predict, capture or explain. In [my research in Senegal](#), I found that gender subjectivities were generally rationalised in reference to religious ideals, and these constrained the kind of changes adherents considered acceptable or feasible in the gender realm. However, it was also found that adherents' understanding of 'religious' norms was influenced by socio-cultural, political, gender, age and more idiosyncratic parameters, with the local imams and *marabouts* mediating in non-uniform ways individual interpretations and openness to change. Similarly, my latest research on [conjugal abuse in the Ethiopian Orthodox community of Aksum](#) evidenced that the mechanisms contributing to rigidly upheld vernacular norms associated with the continuation of conjugal abuse, whilst embedded in religious idiom, had less to do with theological teachings, the deployment of religious discourse by clergy or individuals' spiritual experience and more so with historical, political, psychological and material parameters that combined with the former to enforce conventions and a widespread resistance to certain types of change.

Not recognising such complex intertwinements could lead researchers and practitioners to place misguided emphasis on religious beliefs and to neglect other parameters enforcing local rigidities, failing also to

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appreciate the prospective resourcefulness of some religious discourse in addressing gender asymmetries and the gender-related issues. These are what I consider the more practical limitations of describing a religious tradition as fundamentalist, ultra-Orthodox, conservative, traditionalist or any other rigid designation that may be attributed on the basis of presumed relevance using the West as a reference point. As a gender-sensitive practitioner motivated by practical questions, I believe that it is imperative to always question if concepts and theories proposed in the dominant epistemology are helpful for increasing understanding about cross-cultural issues and for informing locally appropriate alleviation strategies; where this is not the case, there is no reason why these should not be reconsidered or abandoned altogether.

This article is written by Dr Romina Istratii who is an [Honorary Research Associate](#) at the Centre of World Christianity and the Department of Development Studies at SOAS University of London. She has eight years in African development research and has been working to attune development-oriented theory and practice to non-western religious worldviews and indigenous epistemologies.

For details of the research project, *Strictly Observant Religion, Gender and the State*, click [here](#).

[1] It should be clear here that I am excluding from my discussion religious groups that justify the use of violence and the killing of human beings to establish their ideals, which I absolutely condemn. I am only engaging with religious traditions and expressions that are generally non-violent, but still present tendencies for intransigence in interaction with western modern ideals and their effects.

[2] See, for example, Martin Marty and Scott Appleby, *Fundamentalisms Observed. The Fundamentalist Project: Volume 1* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991); John Hawley, *Fundamentalism and Gender* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Youssef Choueiri, *Islamic Fundamentalism. 3rd Edition: The Story of Islamist Movements* (London and New York: Continuum international Publishing group, 1997), Susan Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000). See also the more recent critical work of Simon Wood and David Watt, *Fundamentalism: Perspectives on a Contested History* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2014).

[3] A more elaborate analysis has been given in Romina Istratii (forthcoming), 'A Decolonial Perspective on Gender and Development: Recognising the Tacit Gender Metaphysics and their Limitations in Religious Cosmologies of Africa.'

[4] See, for example Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London: Fontana Press, 1993); Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion, Discipline and Reason of Power in Christianity and Islam* (London and Baltimore: The Hopkins University Press, 1993); Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), Robert McCutcheon, *Critics not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany, USA: State University of New York Press, 2001); Steven J. Sutcliffe, ed. *Religion: Empirical Studies. A Collection to Mark the 50th Anniversary of the British Association for the Study of Religions* (England and USA: Ashgate, 2004).

[5] See, for example, Juan Marco Vaggione, *Shared Insights: Women's Rights Activists Define Religious Fundamentalisms* (Toronto: Association of Women's Rights in Development, November 2008), Cassandra Balchin, *Ten Myths about Religious Fundamentalisms* (Toronto: Association of Women's Rights in Development, November 2008), AWID, *Key Learnings from Feminists on the Frontline: Summaries of Case Studies on Persisting and Challenging Fundamentalisms* (Association of Women's Rights in Development, 2011); Jessica Horn, *Not as Simple as ABC: Christian Fundamentalisms and HIV and AIDS Responses in Africa* (Toronto: Association of Women's Rights in Development, 2012); Joanne Sandler and Aruna Rao, "The Elephant in the Room and the Dragons at the Gate: Strategising for Gender Equality in the 21st Century", *Gender and Development*, 20, no. 3 (2012): 547-562; Korinna Zamfir, "Returning Women to Their Place? Religious Fundamentalism, Gender Bias and Violence against Women", *Journal of the Study of Religions and Ideologies* (2018): 3-20.

[6] Judith Butler, "Sexual Politics, Torture and Secular Times", *The British Journal of Sociology*, 51, no. 1 (2008): 1-23.

[7] Butler, "Sexual Politics, Torture and Secular Times", 3.

[8] While I invoke Butler here, I also find Butler's position problematic for this very reason. Her insistence elsewhere that "sexual difference should be rigorously opposed" becomes ethically questionable because it, essentially, deems non-secular worldviews with prescriptive understandings of sexual difference almost unviable.

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