

Book Review

This is a pre-publication version of a book review published in *The Sociological Review*:

Elder-Vass, D. (2017) Book Review: *Religion, Gender and Citizenship: Women of Faith, Gender Equality and Feminism*, by Line Nyhagen and Beatrice Halsaa, for *The Sociological Review*, 65:2, 429–431.

Religion, Gender and Citizenship: Women of Faith, Gender Equality and Feminism, by Line Nyhagen and Beatrice Halsaa. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2016, £65 (hardback), 282pp, ISBN: 9781137405333.

Dave Elder-Vass

Religion, Gender and Citizenship investigates the attitudes of religious women towards gender and citizenship. As the authors tell us, feminists have tended to ignore women of faith, seeing their religious views as backward and as obstacles to emancipation. Yet in doing so they have arguably been complicit with the intersectional marginalisation of this group. This book seeks to break with that neglect by acknowledging and documenting the substantial yet ambivalent role that religious faith plays in the lives and attitudes of many women. This inevitably generates a tension: how should feminists document views that are in some respects antagonistic to feminism? On the whole the authors seek to stand back and describe rather than to judge, and in doing so they present a fascinating and variegated account of their subjects, based on qualitative interviews with 61 Christian and Muslim women from Norway, Spain and the United Kingdom.

Broadly speaking, the book divides into two halves, on citizenship and gender respectively. For Nyhagen and Halsaa, citizenship is about much more than rights to reside and to participate in civil processes such as voting. In contrast with this *vertical* view of citizenship, they support a *horizontal* view in which citizenship is also a matter of our ability to participate in, and indeed to be accepted and recognised in, a much wider range of social activities. This is citizenship as *lived citizenship*, in which a citizen is someone who can feel they fully belong in the wider community.

For their participants, religion and citizenship are intimately connected. Without the freedom to practice their religion and to be organised as a religious group they are not full citizens but outsiders. Both the Muslim participants and the participants from minority Christian groups (mostly Pentecostals), although to varying extents, are highly conscious that some religious groups have more rights than others. Here the argument links to some very topical questions, notably abuse and legal

discrimination directed against Muslim women wearing the *hijab*. On the more positive side, many women in both these groups and majority Christian groups base their commitment to civic participation on their religious ethics of care, love, respect and tolerance. Religion, then, can be a positive resource for citizenship, in contrast with many of the negative stereotypes these women encounter.

Still, there is also a sense in which their religion can be a barrier to full citizenship, most strikingly when religious organisations exclude women from leadership roles within them, as most still do in all three of these countries. This brings us to the second half of the book, which addresses the attitudes of the participants to gender inequality, women's movements and feminism. The authors position this discussion by questioning some traditional feminist attitudes to religious women, pointing out that they sometimes played leading roles in earlier struggles for women's rights and that they have legitimate voices that we should be prepared to listen to.

Thus, for example, the *hijab* or Muslim headscarf has often been presented as a symbol of accepting a gender regime that expects women to be submissive to the leadership of men, with severe restrictions on what they are allowed to do. Yet this stereotyping neglects the diversity of Muslim women and their reasons for wearing the *hijab*. For some, for example, it is an assertion of cultural identity in the face of a hostile discursive environment and need not entail submissiveness at all. As the authors point out, headscarf wearers are actively asserting their agency.

Nevertheless, for most of these women, both Muslim and Christian, gender issues are less important than their religious identity. They are aware of gender issues and often concerned about them, but "demands for formal gender equality... are often not on their agenda" (p. 145). Nyhagen and Halsaa compare their attitudes to Karen Offen's concept of *relational feminism* in which "women and men have equal worth as human beings but have different natures and can therefore inhabit different roles and also be treated differently" (p. 116). But in practice this description is compatible with many very different attitudes to gender inequality. At the feminist end of the scale, it simply states the obvious – men cannot bear children, for example, and there are some physical differences, on average, that mean women and men cannot compete on a level playing field in certain sports – and this need not stand in the way of gender equality in most social roles. But at the other end, it becomes an excuse for radically anti-feminist positions such as the idea that women should look after homes and children while men occupy authority positions, and the majority of the participants seemed to take positions towards this end of the range.

This, however, is compatible with valuing improvements in the position of women, and their participants were broadly positive towards the historic achievements of the women's movement – not only in society more widely but also within the religious context. At least some women in all of these religious groups welcomed the increasing opportunities for women in religious organisations – from women bishops in the Church of England to prayer spaces for women in mosques – and indeed

recognised that this was a response to wider cultural changes that the women's movement has brought about.

Despite this, most of their participants were broadly negative about *feminism*, often dismissing it with stereotyped misrepresentations that are familiar from the mass media, and certainly seeing feminists as too extreme in their demands. In particular, participants across all the groups represented in this study tended to be strongly opposed to abortion rights, divorce and LGBT rights.

This brings us back to the tension with which this review opened. There it was presented as a tension in how feminists should document the views of women who reject feminism, but the subtext of the book is a more political question: can feminists *co-operate* with women who reject feminism as an ideology and yet support some demands for gender equality? The authors adopt a kind of sociological detachment from the views of their participants, showing the variety and complexity of their views and showing in particular that many of these women are at least quietly open to the pursuit of greater gender equality within their religious organisations. The implication is that feminists might work productively with women of faith on these issues, if both sides could overcome the influence of stereotyped representations of the other. There is a sense that the book seeks to create a space for dialogue by breaking down at least some of these stereotypes, and in doing so it makes an important contribution to opening up alternative strategies in this area. Still, I worry that the authors concede too much ground by abjuring any critical response to anti-feminist views on women's reproductive rights, autonomy, and sexuality. If there is to be a possibility of joint political work on some issues, then women of faith will surely have to accept the right of feminists to take a different stance on others, just as feminists will have to accept the right of religious women to advocate their religious values.

In conclusion, I can thoroughly recommend this absorbing book. It employs a wealth of subtly analysed empirical material to address a topic that has long been uncomfortable for feminists, and yet one which demands our attention in an age when religion is increasing rather than declining in political significance.