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## Representations of Religion on the British Feminist Webzine *The F Word*

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### Abstract

In 21st century Europe, where religion is a more visible focus in local, national and global politics, how do feminist organisations and groups approach religion? This article explores this through analysis of representations of religion on a prominent British feminist webzine, *The F Word*. In academic literature and public debates, two dominant viewpoints are articulated in debates on women's rights, religion and secularism: feminist secularism and religious inclusion. In the context of these debates, the study asks how *The F Word* writers approach religion, and whether and how their representations of religion reflect these academic and public debates. The analysis identifies four dominant approaches to religion, and two underlying themes, and sets these approaches in their wider social context.

### Keywords

Feminism; religion; internet; media; secularism; multiculturalism.

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### Introduction

In 21st century Europe, where religion is a more visible focus in local, national and global politics, how do feminist organisations and groups approach

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religion? Since the 1970s, feminist approaches to religion have arguably taken three main forms (Aune 2015). First, secular feminists took a '*feminism vs religion*' approach, advocating the separation between religion and state and critique religion(s) for oppressing women. Second, *the feminist turn to spirituality* saw some eschewing mainstream religion for female-centred practices such as Paganism or holistic spiritualities. The third group, *religious feminists*, vary in religious base (for example, Islam, Judaism etc.) and in their reformist or radical approach.

Today, in de-Christianized post-industrial Europe, religion has a marginal place in feminist discussions, both academic and public (Mahmood 2005; Reilly 2011). Most feminist organisations do not prioritise religion. But this does not mean they ignore it, and the increasing presence and visibility of religious minorities in Europe – Muslims especially, and Hindus, Sikhs, Jews and Buddhists – is generating new discussions of religion. Although there is very little academic analysis of mainstream feminist groups' (that is, groups not centrally concerned with religion) approaches to religion in Europe, two significant studies are Midden's (2012) analysis of representations of the relationship between feminism and religious and cultural diversity in the Dutch feminist magazine *Opzij* and van den Brandt's (2014, 2015) studies of how secular Belgian feminist organisations approach religion. Midden's (2012: 228–229) analysis shows that *Opzij's* conceptualisation of feminism does not include Muslim women: 'they position (secular/white) feminists on one side and Muslim women on the other'. Moreover, 'Muslim women's choices are investigated, while those of (white) feminists are not' (2012: 233). Midden advocates that Muslim women's standpoints be included and feminism 'defined in a more inclusive way' (2012: 233). In her 2014 study of one secular feminist organisation and two feminist humanist writers, van den Brandt (2014: 35) observes the 'ambivalent relationship between feminism and Islam in Western-Europe', in which context she uncovers 'divergent forms of feminist secularity' (2014: 43) in Flanders, Belgium. Some feminists vilify religion as oppressive, 'in need of containment and marginalization' (2014: 43); others promote dialogue and solidarity between religious and non-religious women. 'When we look at the different feminist secular narratives regarding Islam', van den Brandt (2014: 43) writes, 'we see how increasingly cultural-religious diversity and Islam interpellate white secular feminists. In their narratives, the simultaneous powers of the secular and religious are at work, reconfiguring one another'. The veil bans in Flanders prompted new alliances between secular and religious feminists in the form of two groups, BOEH! and Motief, which emerged to contest headscarf regulation and promote solidarity and inclusion beyond secular/religious boundaries, contesting assumptions that secularity=emancipation and religion=oppression. Van den Brandt (2015) regards these as signs of hope for European feminist coalition-building across differences.

In the UK, feminism and religion are increasingly visible, so this article offers a case study of a British online feminist webzine. In the 21st century a younger generation of feminist campaigners, aided by the internet and social media, are attracting public attention (Dean 2010; Redfern and Aune 2010). Religion's higher profile stems from religious pluralism, especially the growth of Islam, religious equality legislation, and concerns about religious radicalisation since the 9/11 hijackings and 7/7 London bombings (Knott, Poole and Taira 2013). The growing public interest in religion and feminism is one reason for investigating how UK feminists treat religion. Another is political: if religion and gender equality are,

as Europeans increasingly believe, important facets of identity requiring expression, it is important that feminists and religious people negotiate the best way to achieve their aims without sacrificing those of the other group.

One feature of UK discussion of feminism and religion – public as well as academic – has been a debate between two, often opposing, perspectives: between feminist secularists and feminist advocates of religious inclusion.

## The Case for Religious Inclusion

The relationship between religion and state in the UK is best understood as one of ‘weak establishment’ (Bader 2003: 270), involving ‘constitutional or legal establishment of one state-church’ – the Church of England – alongside ‘de jure and de facto religious freedoms and religious pluralism’. The Anglican Church continues occupying a privileged position, with some of its Bishops given seats in the House of Lords. It is also – alongside the Roman Catholic Church – a major provider of education, and a third of state-funded schools are faith-based, the majority Christian, but with growing numbers run by Jewish, Sikh, Muslim and Hindu groups. Especially since the 1980s, the UK’s approach to religious groups has been to include and involve them in the provision of state services, and to protect religious freedoms and inclusion through legislation. The UK passed legislation prohibiting discrimination at work or in the provision of goods and services on grounds of religion in 2003. Arguably a counterpoint to secular France, it has tried to accommodate religious groups’ requests as much as possible. Under Tony Blair’s Labour government from 1997 and continuing under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government from 2010 and the Conservative government from 2015, religious groups who run welfare services (such as homelessness or mental health support organisations) have been welcomed and often funded by the state to provide services previously delivered by local councils or government departments (Dinham and Jackson 2012).

This religious inclusion perspective has received broad support from religious women’s groups. Religious women’s organisations, especially under the Blair government, could apply for and receive state funding, including for inter-faith work, refuges for domestic violence survivors or Muslim women’s advocacy groups (Mubarak 2006; Spratt and James 2008). Groups including An-Nisa (founded in 1985 to work for the welfare of Muslim women and their families), the Muslim Women’s Network (founded in 2003 to advise the government about issues relating to Muslim women), Inspire (founded in 2009 to empower Muslim women and challenge extremism) and the Muslim Women’s Council (founded around 2009–2010 and initially regionally based) became significant voices working on behalf of Muslim women, enabled by public funds. Indeed, the Blair government actively sought out Muslim women via establishing the Muslim Women’s Advisory Group. This government initiative was, however, contested by women within and outside it, Rashid’s (2014) research shows, for stereotyping Muslim women as oppressed and focusing on issues of honour violence and forced marriage while ignoring pressing issues such as employment.

For women who prefer to use faith-based services, public funding of groups like these is welcome. Some UK-based religion and gender scholars also welcome

this, seeing it as preferable to a more secular approach that would avoid funding religious organisations. For instance, Linda Woodhead favours including religious perspectives and organisations in the political process and critiques liberal Enlightenment values for failing to do this. Woodhead (2013: 95) accuses secular liberalism of 'secular illiberalism' because of its 'failure to respect the freedom, rights and normal conditions of existence of decent religious people and institutions'. She gives examples including the banning of Islamic headscarves in parts of Europe and the funding of anti-terror programmes that monitor young people's website viewing for signs of extremism. She argues in favour of what Modood (2010) calls 'moderate secularism' which involves religious people in the state.

Like Woodhead, Reilly (2011: 14) challenges the religious/secular binary as 'a false and oppressive binary' that positions religion as anti-modern, oppressive, and legitimates control, even violence, towards religious minorities (especially, in Europe, Muslims). She supports Joan Scott's (2007: 96) contention that religion and democracy are better envisaged as "'parallel systems" of legitimisation'. Scott views accommodating religion as necessary for true democracy to flourish. Both take a communitarian political philosophical approach; for them, the Enlightenment focus on the rights of individuals unhelpfully ignores group-based rights.

In her study of Christian and Muslim women in Norway and the UK, Nyhagen (2015) points out that for women, religious inclusion – she uses the term 'lived religious citizenship' – is about more than individual or group rights. Religious women value belonging, identity and participation. Societies which do not enable women to experience all these dimensions of citizenship (even if they limit them because of a well-intentioned concern to protect gender equality) are not places religious women feel free to participate and fully belong.

Supporting religious organisations in the name of feminism is part of what Toldy calls (2011: 3) a 'postcolonial and post-secularist discourse', a discourse that could 'lead to the recognition of the emancipatory potential of some forms of religiously-inspired feminism'. In Europe, Toldy argues, Muslims are stigmatised as extremist 'others', while the majority of more liberal Muslims are ignored. Veiled Muslim women are considered the ultimate 'others'. Feminist secularists do not help when they assume the Western model of emancipation – which excludes arranged marriages and veiling – to be the only possible one, and in this they come dangerously close to 'racist feminism' (2011: 13). The religious inclusion perspective argues that secularism, in separating religion from the state, renders religious perspectives invisible and religious people disenfranchised. Moreover, the secularist claim that individual women's rights can only be ensured through refusing to grant rights to religious people as a group (because if groups are permitted to claim group-based rights, they will use those to enforce gender conservatism) is questionable, given that 'religious organizations are an important resource for minorities in their struggle for a fair place in the space of rights, individual rights included' (Bader 2003: 278).

Feminists advocating inclusion challenge the secular liberal feminist notion of agency for not taking account of religious women. Women's agency should not simply be understood as existing when women resist patriarchal norms, but also when they consciously enact practices of piety which do not involve resistance, are not purely rational, and are relational and affective (Mahmood

2005). Instead of viewing them as dupes of patriarchy, feminists should take their piety seriously as a form of agency, even when that agency challenges dominant feminist assumptions (see also Braidotti 2008).

## The Case for Feminist Secularism

The opposite argument comes from feminist secularists. One example of a strong anti-religion version of secularism is Benson and Stangroom's (2009) *Does God Hate Women?* More broadly, in the UK feminism is central to the wider secularist milieu, which includes groups such as the National Secular Society, the British Humanist Association, the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain and the Centre for Secular Space. Since 1989 when it was founded, Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF) has been the foremost feminist secularist voice. WAF – which disbanded around 2012 – brought together women of all faiths and none, to challenge the political movements of fundamentalist religions. WAF was concerned that the government's partnership with faith organisations means that money and influence is falling into the hands of fundamentalists who restrict women's rights. WAF believed that only secular institutions can bring equality for people of all religions and none. As Dhaliwal and Yuval-Davis's (2014a) collection of stories from those involved illustrates, during WAF's 25-year history there were differences of opinion. The central difference, it seems, related to the degree to which members were willing to accept that women could find religion empowering. WAF's heritage, founded in 1989 during the Rushdie Affair to defend 'the right to critique and live free from the influence of religion, religious leaders and religious organisations' (Dhaliwal and Yuval-Davis 2014b: 10) against resurgent fundamentalist threats to Rushdie's life, accounts for its spokespeople's public critique, rather than defence, of religion. Another reason for its emphasis on critiquing religion was the fact that 'many of the founder members of WAF originated from countries where religion had a stranglehold on public affairs' (Dhaliwal and Yuval-Davis 2014b: 17).

Feminist secularists such as WAF argue funding is going to religious conservatives who promote conservative gender roles – a charge levelled at both Conservative and Labour governments (Rehman 2014; Yuval-Davis 1992). Secularists oppose any public funding of religion, but focus particularly on the (often unintentional) public funding of fundamentalist groups who masquerade as religious moderates.

The British support for multiculturalism (from around the 1970s), secular feminists argue, has been bad for women. As in other European countries including Germany and Sweden, 'The policy...has been widely adopted as a more tolerant way forward towards integration than full assimilation into a "British way of life"', Yuval-Davis (1992: 283) writes, but 'Fundamentalist leaderships have been the main beneficiaries' (1992: 284). While multiculturalism 'aimed to legitimize heterogeneity in British national culture', it has 'created a space for separatist and fundamentalist movements which seek to impose uniformity and homogeneity on all their adherents' (Yuval-Davis 1992: 283). Under multiculturalism, conservative gender norms, including gender segregation in schools, or efforts to preserve marriages in cases of domestic violence, can flourish unchecked, an argument reminiscent of US-based Susan Moller Okin's (1997) essay 'Is

Multiculturalism Bad for Women?' British academic feminist Macey (2009: 61) answers Okin's question affirmatively:

multiculturalism facilitates male control over women, first, by ceding autonomy to community "leaders" to define the needs of communities; second, by creating a context that can hide women's suffering by ruling criticism of minority communities to be inadmissible; and third, by making professionals reluctant to interfere in so-called "community affairs" for fear of being accused of racism or Islamophobia.

Yuval-Davis (2014) observes a recent British policy shift to 'multi-faithism', away from identifying minority communities with their ethnicity (Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are now 'Muslims'). This shift, Patel (2013: 56) argues, 'has effectively redrawn minority communities as "faith communities" and placed power firmly in the hands of minority religious institutions that are authoritarian and patriarchal, if not fundamentalist'. Patel (2013: 45) lists areas in which conservative religious groups are demanding, and winning, accommodation:

Demands for separate faith schools, personal dress codes, blasphemy laws and personal laws to cover marriage, divorce and child custody have all been taken to represent a strong counter hegemonic voice to 'western' secular cultural impositions, and to that extent minority rights are increasingly and almost exclusively linked to the right to manifest religion...the State is unable to distinguish between valid or legitimate demands for equality and those that simply mask inequality, promote other forms of intolerance and uniformity of religious identity.

Patel's work with Southall Black Sisters, a feminist organisation helping ethnic minority women escape family violence, has led her to advocate secularism. Interviews with the women she works with revealed the women would prefer secular refuges where they are not stigmatised for having unorthodox religious beliefs, or none at all, and that are not run by religious communities who wish to reconcile women with their violent partners.

Secular feminists argue that feminism should make:

greater affinity with secularism, to engage critically with religious expression, introducing notions of left and right to the debate, to insist on the progressive nature of secularism, not as erasure of the right to religious belief but as the only means of safeguarding multiple versions of religious belief and the right to non-belief and dissent of all hues. (Dhaliwal and Patel 2012: 185)

This debate in favour of religious inclusion or secularism is frequently polarised and engaged in only by those with a particular interest in, or concern about, religion. It is possible to inhabit both positions in the debate, and indeed some people do. What unites both groups is a concern with challenging inequalities facing women (for example violence or poverty). There remains a fundamental disagreement about the ability of religious organisations to enable liberation for women, and both practical (for example, 'to minimise violence against women we must prevent religious organisations receiving funds') and theoretical (for example, 'it is unjust to deny opportunities to religious groups simply because they are religious') considerations are evoked at different times by those taking different positions. The very naming – as I am doing – of these positions as oppositional arguably reinforces the very oppositions I wish to critique. As secularism scholars contend, there are many versions of secularism (Jakobsen

and Pellegrini 2008) and many of them are not, unlike French *laïcité*, opposed to religion. Notwithstanding this, the religious inclusion/feminist secularism debates tend to be engaged in predominantly by those especially concerned with religion. What of more mainstream (non-religiously-concerned) feminist groups – how do they approach religion, and what is their relationship to public and academic debates on religion and feminism?

## Case Study: The F Word

With these debates in mind, this article explores how religion is depicted on the feminist webzine The F Word (hereafter, TFW). The study asks how TFW writers discuss religion. In the context of debates about women's rights, religion and secularism, I ask: 1) how do TFW writers approach religion? 2) What do these feminist constructions of religion demonstrate about their approaches to debates on feminism and secularism? Do they reflect the feminist embrace of secularism, or the feminist support for including religion in politics? Founded in 2001, it is 'an online magazine dedicated to talking about and sharing ideas on contemporary UK feminism' ('About The F-Word' n.d.). Despite being the UK's foremost, and probably longest running, feminist webzine, TFW has attracted limited academic attention (except for Dean 2010). TFW – and therefore this study of it – is not to be taken as representative of UK feminism, since it represents just one facet of a diverse feminist movement (for other studies of contemporary British feminism, see Redfern and Aune 2010; Dean 2010; Baily 2015; Long 2012; Mackay 2015).

As a webzine, TFW represents an online hybrid of a magazine and a cut-and-paste 'zine'. Zines, small circulation home-made magazines containing art work and writing and often associated with particular subcultures, were produced by, and popular with, young feminists in the 1990s and early 2000s. Those who have studied them see them as a form of DIY or 'third-wave' feminism (Piepmeier 2009). Zines are precursors both of individual feminist blogs and collectively-produced online magazines, which share the personal stories, pop culture and youth foci of the zine (Duncan 2000). Webzines comprise more personal stories and opinions than printed magazines or daily newspapers, and this means that they reveal more about the personal views of their authors (a point relevant for this study, since TFW writers are not journalists reporting on stories about religion but write from their personal perspective on religion). Webzines struggle, Choi, Steiner and Kim (2006) explain, between maintaining their DIY ethos and becoming commercialised, for instance funding author payments through advertising revenues. Refusing to become a vehicle for advertising, TFW volunteer editors and writers have borne all financial burdens themselves; they have employed crowd-funding only once (in 2010) to pay for a site redesign. Given that financial constraints often lead webzines to close, TFW has had a surprisingly long and successful duration.

Founded and edited by Catherine Redfern (2001–2007), then Jess McCabe (2007–2013), since 2013 its editorship has rotated among its collective of thirteen women (all currently or formerly UK-based). Redfern and McCabe have stayed closely involved with TFW: Redfern remains 'publisher', and McCabe 'editor at large'. The site encourages contributions 'from UK feminists, people living in the UK, or UK feminists currently living elsewhere' and is 'keen to encourage



and showcase new voices' ('How to contribute to The F-Word' n.d.). Until 2014, the editorial team behind TFW were almost all white, but June 2014 saw changes: of the 11 in editorial roles, 7 were white and 4 were non-white ('About The F-Word' n.d.). Its collective are all young (under 40), and this has been the case throughout TFW's history. Around 400 people are listed as contributors ('Archives by Author' n.d.), and these 'contributors' write most of the feature articles and arts reviews. The collective write most of the posts on its 'blog' section and compile all its 'news roundup' and 'comments round up' sections. It (@thefworduk) has an active presence on Twitter (36K followers in June 2015). The website [www.thefword.org.uk](http://www.thefword.org.uk) publishes an average of 54.7 posts per month.<sup>1</sup>

## Methodology

While not a discourse analysis in the formal sense, this article draws from the ideas of content analysis and discourse analysis: from content analysis in its quantification of text (Krippendorff 2013) and from discourse analysis in its qualitative examination of TFW's dominant discourses surrounding religion. Discourse is 'text above the level of sentences' (Krippendorff 2013: 22), 'a corpus of "statements" whose organisation is regular and systematic' (Kendall and Wickham 1999: 42); discourse analysis enables the identification of dominant meanings or narratives in TFW's web content. As both content analysis and discourse analysis hold, text and discourse relates to social context, and this study explores how the UK social context (in relation to prominent UK debates on feminism and religion, and to the specifics of the religious context) relates to TFW web content.

To locate articles, TFW's 'search' function was used. A pilot search using the noun and adjectival version of religion-related identifications revealed that the adjectival version produced more relevant articles, so the main search used the search terms: 'Agnostic', 'Atheist', 'Buddhist', 'Christian', 'Hindu', 'Jewish', 'Muslim', 'Latter Day Saints', 'Mormon', 'Pagan', 'Sikh', 'Spiritual' and 'Wicca'. These correspond to the major world faiths present in Britain, to smaller alternative religions and spiritual practices (for example, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, commonly known as the Mormons, 'Pagan', 'Wicca'), and to categories of non-religion (recognising that non-religion also constitutes an orientation towards religion and many feminists identify as non-religious – see Aune 2011).

## Quantitative Findings

Posts mentioning religion constitute a tenth of all TFW posts (see Table 1). Of 713 posts mentioning religion, 131 take religion as their central topic. In the three categories of remaining posts, religion appears less centrally: a) in a post on a different topic (391 posts), b) in readers' comments round ups (80 posts) and c) in news round ups (111 posts). Religion is not a central topic, but neither is it an insignificant one.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on sampling one month per year from 2005–2014, via <http://www.thefword.org.uk/blog/archives>. In addition to blog posts and feature articles on specific topics, this figure includes two other categories: compilations of reader comments and news round-ups.

**Table 1:** Religion references by type of post

Search term	Main focus of feature or blog post	In post on other topic	Comments round up	News round up	Total no.
Muslim	56	70	16	72	214
Religion (general/ range)	15	112	18	12	157
Christian	36	91	14	5	146
Jewish	9	36	6	9	60
Spiritual	3	42	4	2	51
Atheist	3	3	9	4	19
Pagan	0	11	4	0	15
Hindu	1	8	2	4	15
Sikh	6	2	1	1	10
Buddhist	1	4	3	1	9
Wicca	0	5	3	1	9
Mormon / Latter Day Saints	1	5	0	0	6
Agnostic	0	2	0	0	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>391</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>713</b>

**Table 2:** Posts with religion as their central theme

Search term	Feminism in religion: promoting religious feminism	Feminism vs. religion: challenging religious oppression	Supporting religious women	Debating religion and feminism	Arts review	TOTAL
Muslim	11	8	23	10	4	56
Christian	5	26	0	3	2	36
Religion (general/ range)	3	0	2	9	1	15
Jewish	2	3	1	2	1	9
Sikh	2	1	0	3	0	6
Spiritual	0	0	0	0	3	3
Atheist	0	1	0	2	0	3
Buddhist	0	0	0	0	1	1
Hindu	0	0	0	0	1	1
Latter Day Saints	0	1	0	0	0	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>131</b>

This article analyses only articles taking religion as their main focus. Posts were most frequently about Islam, then Christianity, then religion in general. Only 'Muslim', 'Christian' and 'religion' attracted more than ten articles. Possible reasons for this over-representation of Islam will be discussed later.

The posts with religion as a central theme took four main approaches (because of their small numbers, I do not discuss arts reviews). These were, in no particular order: feminism in religion: promoting religious feminism; feminism vs. religion: challenging religious oppression (this approach was the most prominent); supporting religious women; and debating religion and feminism (see Table 2).

## Qualitative Findings

### *Feminism in Religion: Promoting Religious Feminism*

Twenty three posts presented religious feminism positively. Eleven were about Islamic feminism; five addressed Christian feminism, two each Jewish and Sikh feminism, and three religious feminism generally.

Religious feminism featured in a post on feminist group LaDIYfest's collaboration with the University of Sheffield's *Hidden Perspectives: Bringing the Bible out of the Closet* project, encouraging Bible-reading from alternative perspectives. LaDIYfest were invited to bring contributors to produce performances and public readings. 'At a time when the Bible is claimed as the basis of calls to ban abortion or restrict equal access to marriage, we liked the idea of revisiting the Bible to see if it might be read differently', wrote Boast. Involvement in the project prompted new engagement with religion:

Feminism often has an antagonistic relationship with religion. While there are a lot of good reasons for this, the hostility can leave religious feminists feeling isolated. As a group that tries to be inclusive, we don't want to leave religious feminists out. In fact... religion might be the next step to consider in the move towards more intersectional feminisms. (Boast 2013)

This concern that 'we' (feminists) should include 'them' (religious feminists) betrays a 'we secular feminists' versus 'you religious feminists' approach Midden (2012) observed in *Opzij*. Boast only tentatively includes religion within the remit of intersectionality: 'religion *might* be the *next step* to consider' (my italics).

The Christian Feminist Network (founded 2012) featured in three of the five positive Christian portrayals. Introducing it, Mudge (2012) explains: 'while it's true that the church, over the centuries, has certainly bought into patriarchal practices and teachings, we strongly believe that at the heart of Christian teaching are principles of equality and empowerment for the marginalised'. Positivity about Christian feminism is portrayed as novel, a challenge to readers sceptical about Christianity's compatibility with feminism.

The first TFW author promoting Sikh feminism, Grewal, reporting on a Sikh Feminist Research Institute conference in Canada, uses a formulation similar to Mudge's (*a lot* expressed about religion is negative and patriarchal, *but* religion has an egalitarian side) (Grewal 2012). In another post, Grewal (2013) explains

that 'feminism is at the core of the Sikh religious philosophy'. 'We argue that to get to the universal and humanistic [core], you have to go through the feminism. If we have a vision of universal equality, that is great; but for women to be a part of that, they must be treated equal to men and in many, many instances... they are not'. This notion of a 'core' or 'heart' of equality appears also in writing on Islam.

Regular non-Muslim bloggers appear keen to support Islamic feminism and author the majority of TFW's positive stories about it. In one example, Redfern (2005) reports favourably on a newspaper article that argues that 'the best way to undermine the jihadists is to trigger a rebellion of Muslim women'. Redfern entitles her article 'Islamic feminists are key to anti-terrorism', yet the journalist wrote about 'Muslim women', only mentioning 'Islamic feminism' once. This slippage between the journalist's 'Muslim women' to her 'Islamic feminists' reveals Redfern's desire to link Muslim women to feminism – Muslim women become 'Islamic feminists'.

Reitzel's 'Hip Hop Hijabis' introduces a poetic duo, Poetic Pilgrimage, British Jamaican converts to Islam. Reitzel (2013) explains: 'They believe that cultural traditions and misinterpretations have distorted the original egalitarian message of Islam, which emphasised the spiritual equality of men and women and introduced rights to divorce, education and inheritance for women in an otherwise very patriarchal time and place'. Using the 'we' secular feminists versus 'they' Muslim women (Midden 2012), she writes:

Considering that the majority of the world's women are religious, how can their needs be supported by the western women's movement, which to a large extent has been shaped by atheist and secular feminism? And is it more productive and respectful to challenge misogynist practices from within a religious framework or to fight for that framework to be dismantled?

At first sight this reflects the (problematic) assumption that 'feminism' is secular, placing Muslim women outside the feminist remit. She sees the duo as reformers working within their religion. She does not describe the rappers as 'feminists', but argues that they are 'speaking out against practices such as FGM and honour killings from within an Islamic framework... reclaiming their religion from the grip of extremism'. Poetic Pilgrimage are not envisaged as feminists, but as promoting 'women's rights', reflecting debates among Islamic women's rights activists about the secularity and whiteness of the term 'feminism'. Other writers present reform within Islam as preferable to rejecting Islam.

### *Feminism vs. Religion: Challenging Religious Oppression*

The majority of posts portraying religion as an adversary of feminism concerned Christianity (26 out of 40). Islam attracted eight negative portrayals and Judaism 3. Sikhs, Latter Day Saints and Atheists were portrayed negatively once each.

Posts critiquing Islam mostly concerned the Middle East. One criticised Iran's policing of women's dress, reporting on women stopped by the police for not covering their heads sufficiently (Livesey 2007a). "'Westernised' women being killed in Iraq' was another headline reporting on the killing of women by

'religious extremists' in Basra, Iraq 'because of their "un-Islamic" dress' (Laura 2007b). Laura confines her evaluation to 'This is sickening. I don't really know what else to say', then defends 'Muslim women's right to choose to wear the veil'. Comparing feminists 'dictated to by Christians in government' to women 'dictated to by Muslim fathers or husbands', she expresses solidarity with women who are not free to choose their apparel.

We must refuse to let anyone but ourselves determine what we look like. This includes defending Muslim women's right to choose to wear the veil. Being dictated to by Christians in government is just as bad as being dictated to by Muslim fathers or husbands. And, guess what?, many Muslim women do genuinely freely choose to wear the veil. I may not be a big fan of Islam, or of religion in general, but until they begin to infringe on my freedom, I have no right to tell them what to do.

In this comparison, she seems to locate Muslim women's oppression primarily in the family, whereas she sees non-Muslim women as oppressed by Christians in political institutions. In both examples, religion is the source of oppression, and there is an implication that where women's choices are controlled by political figures, it is *Christian* politicians who are the politicians to blame. Interestingly, her argument advocates Muslim women choosing to veil, not choosing *not* to or *whether* to veil. Aligning herself with Muslim women leads her to criticise Christianity, defending only the right to veil. This reluctance to criticise Islam will be discussed later.

Few TFW writers criticise European Muslims. The only negative depiction of a British Muslim was of Conservative politician Sayeeda Warsi who became the first Muslim Cabinet member in 2010 and opposes homosexuality and early sex education (Whitehead 2010). Two stories address the increasing numbers of British Muslims turning to Sharia councils and Muslim Arbitration Tribunals to resolve conflicts. McCabe (2008a) expresses wariness as she shares a journalist's story that criticises rulings given to domestic violence victims, issuing the disclaimer 'OK, first a disclaimer: I'm no legal expert, but my instinct is that this [adds link] story in the Times, about sharia arbitrators, absolutely stinks of an attempt to whip up anti-Muslim feeling. A hefty pinch of salt is needed'.

Writers' reluctance to criticise Islam contrasted with forthright criticism of the church. Seven articles concerned the Catholic Church's opposition to legalising abortion. Attempts to persuade MPs to reduce the abortion time limit drew Laura's (2008) ire:

After watching [MP] Nadine Dorries and her fundamentalist Christian lawyer sidekick Andrea Williams..., I am feeling absolutely sick to my stomach about the potential for anti-abortion amendments to be passed... [I]t looked like much of Dorries' political propaganda... was written in conjunction with or by Williams, a woman who believes that the world is only about 4000 years old. Great. Just fucking great. Why can't they keep their bloody "morals" and religious mumbo jumbo to themselves? The sooner the UK follows France's example and officially separates church and state, the better... Seriously, these people scare the crap out of me.

Her ridicule ('fundamentalist', 'sidekick', 'religious mumbo jumbo') and revulsion ('sick to my stomach', 'Just fucking great', 'these people scare the crap out of me') are strong. She advocates separating church and state, presumably rendering religious arguments inadmissible in political debate.

Conservative Christian restrictions on sex education attracted criticism. Miles (2007) announced the government's decision to fund a vaccination programme for girls against the Human Papilloma virus that can cause cervical cancer (previously contested by a Catholic school refusing to administer it):

let's all breathe a collective sigh of relief that the various joint committees and government departments that have approved this programme have more sense than the Christian right. But...let's not forget that there are people fighting to constrain our rights at every turn; people who hate female sexuality and everything that goes with it. People who would rather their daughters died preventable deaths than were promiscuous. How very family minded of them.

Unlike all other religions, most posts about Christianity (26 out of 36) presented it negatively. One denounced Christianity as 'irredeemably sexist'. 'Jesus absolutely promoted a patriarchal structure, so from that point, all of his teachings are irredeemably sexist', Julia Long, as summarised by Laura (2010), argues: 'My main problem with Jesus is that he makes this claim to be the son of God: God is male, the son, obviously, is male. And he's surrounded himself – obviously the twelve apostles are all men, so that seems to set up a perfect patriarchal structure'.

### *Supporting Religious Women*

The third approach expressed support for religious women by challenging their and their religion's negative treatment by others. An overwhelming 23 out of 26 posts supported Muslim women. One sided with Jewish women accused of being too rich to need domestic violence support services (McCabe 2008b).

Supporting Muslim women against others' perceived Islamophobia is a dominant theme. Those positioned as oppressors are: governments (Belgium, France, Germany, Mali, Netherlands, Sudan, UK); journalists, bloggers and social media commentators; employers; and the British public. A third of articles defended Muslim women against others' attempts to restrict their clothing choices, whether by preventing them from wearing trousers (in Sudan, Laura 2009) or, more often, restricting their right to wear a hijab or niqab in public in Europe.

TFW reported on the 2008 French ban on face veils in public, covering both sides of this debate (Guest Blogger 2009). Izharuddin condemned Belgium's 2010 ban on full face veils in public, brought into force from 2011. Since so few women wear them, Izharuddin (2010) argues, mostly immigrants who are economically disadvantaged, the ban is like 'beating someone when they're already down' so that Belgium can reassert 'the hubris of the Belgian and French brand of secularism'. 'The heavy-handed penalty against the niqab and burqa is just another way to punish women without having to address the systemic racism and Islamophobia plaguing right-leaning countries like Belgium and France', she argues.

Laura (2011) creates a parallel between 'western' and conservative Muslim clothing 'ideology' in the post 'France's burqa ban: fighting oppression with oppression?', arguing that although many feminists in France supported the ban and 'I agree that the ideology behind covering women from head to

toe is oppressive', 'I can't agree that banning *women* from adhering to that ideology in public is the correct response'. This parallel enables her to place Muslim women on the same plane as other women subject to clothing ideals, creating a common connection, even a kind of sisterhood. This reflects her 2007 post (Laura 2007a) condemning the verbal attack on the director of an NGO who was wearing a five-piece swimsuit by a swimming club member, and journalists' negative representation of Islamic swimwear. She concludes:

[W]omen get to choose what we want to wear, how we want to present our bodies, and what makes us feel most comfortable, be it a barely there bikini or a fully covering five piece swimsuit. Our bodies, our choice, no one else's business.

'Our bodies, our choice' recalls the canonical feminist book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Boston Women's Health Book Collective 1971), implicitly placing Muslim women within the liberal feminist canon.

TFW writers defended women's relationship choices. Tsui reports on the suicide of Rema Begum, who was reportedly unhappy after losing her job being stalked by a stranger who revealed to her Muslim family that she had had relationships with non-Muslims. Tsui (2012a) concludes: 'There should be no reason for deaths like Begum. Women should not feel guilty over their choice of partners or lifestyles'. Reassuring readers that this critique applies to other religions too, she adds a link to an article criticising the Church of England's reluctance to ordain women as Bishops.

Other authors express concern that Muslim women suffering domestic violence may be unable to leave abusive partners. Livesey (2007b) criticises the German courts for denying a Moroccan migrant an early divorce on grounds of 'unreasonable hardship'. The judge ruled that her husband's physical abuse and death threats did not constitute 'unreasonable hardship' and read verses from the Qur'an 'to show that Muslim husbands have the "right to use corporal punishment"'; the judge rejected her claim because as a Muslim woman she should have expected his treatment. Livesey argues that this demonstrates a problem with some interpretations of multiculturalism: 'multiculturalism is seen as an excuse for gendered racism': 'By assuming there is some notion of static, "authentic" culture for immigrant groups by which all in that group should live (whilst, of course, criticising the lack of diversity in organisations) multiculturalists deny the breadth of views within a community'. Livesey criticises the 'multiculturalist' German state rather than the abusive husband or authoritarian interpretations of Islam. This is interesting, raising questions about whether TFW writers feel unable to criticise misogynistic expressions of Islam; the discussion will return to this.

In 2011, the only regular TFW blogger identifying as Muslim, zohra moosa, reported on the UN Women report *Progress of the World's Women: In Pursuit of Justice*. She draws attention to the report's discussion of 'parallel or multiple legal systems, where more than one legal system operates' (moosa 2011), supporting the report's arguments that such systems do not abrogate a state's responsibility to ensure women have equal access to justice. She applies this to Britain:

...race and religion also influences minority women's access to justice in mainstream legal systems... Violence against Muslim women in the UK is sometimes treated as related to a women's 'Muslimness', rather than to sexism. By

framing gender-based violence against Muslim women as a 'cultural' problem (think forced marriage and so-called honour crimes), rather than a problem of male abuses of power, failures of police forces to protect Muslim women...are... treated as cross-cultural misunderstandings, rather than the structural challenges that they actually are.

### *Debating Religion and Feminism*

The final group present a more complex debate and weigh up different viewpoints. The Islam articles focus predominantly on proposed French, Dutch and British veil bans. Foreign Secretary Jack Straw's 2006 comments about feeling uncomfortable talking to constituents wearing the niqab and asking them to remove it are discussed by Miles (2006), while McCabe (2006) reports on guidance issued allowing solicitors and legal advisors to wear it in court.

Kabir responded to a resurgence of public and political hostility to full veiling in public institutions by arguing for women's right to choose. 'I am a Muslim woman, but I do not particularly favour wearing the veil, yet I respect any Muslim woman's autonomy to do so', she writes, arguing that a veil ban would restrict girls' public participation: 'Students will be encouraged to go to gendered Islamic schools, which could push young Muslim women further away from "fully participating in society"' (Kabir 2013). 'I do not think face covering automatically equals oppression. Often it is Westerners who project oppression onto others', she explains, critiquing the Islamophobic British climate. She observes that in countries where women lack rights, the veil is an instrument of segregation. So 'Why would a Muslim woman choose to wear a veil in the UK, when in parts of the world, women are legislated to cover?' She responds: 'A feminist Muslim perspective could see this as a way to retrieve public space around their bodies, where the jilbab and niqab connote power in *rejecting* the male gaze'. Rejecting a niqabi woman's protest outside parliament – the protester argued that Allah required women to don the niqab and if women followed their example there would be fewer rapes – as an example of 'slut shaming', Kabir calls on feminists to work together: 'Muslim feminists and western feminists need to listen to each other as sisters, to create and build solidarity, in order to smash the high walls of sexism and racism'. This distinction between 'Muslim feminists' and 'western feminists' functions similarly to Reitzel's. 'Western feminists' are a different category from 'Muslim feminists', yet she calls both feminists; they are united and divided.

Other Muslim bloggers focused on different political issues. Limbada (2009) described her dilemma in being encouraged to leave, then offered protection, by a man during a violent demonstration at the Israeli embassy; 'Sister go back, you shouldn't be here...go back before they hurt you', he said. Limbada was one of only two women at the sit-in, where protesters were pushed and kicked by the police. Limbada appreciated his desire to protect his 'sister' yet was ambivalent about 'sister', a term commonly used between believers in Islam, seeing it as a term that 'enforces and demarcates unnecessary boundaries between the genders'.

The remaining posts debating feminism's relationship with religion articulated one argument: fundamentalist or conservative religion is negative for women, but liberal or feminist expressions of faith are welcome. 'Racism and



sexism are intertwined – so feminism must tackle them both head-on’, Wood-Querales (2007) explains, critiquing discrimination against religious people and challenging sexism within religion. ‘We need to start celebrating the positive aspects of each other’s religion or ethnicity, but at the same time seek to change traditions which harm women’. Tsui’s report from the Association of Women’s Rights in Development conference criticises religious fundamentalism and argues that people should be free to interpret religion as they wish; this will make it easier for Muslim women to combine feminism with Islam:

There’s a call for women who want to be feminist and Muslim... a yearning...to claim both identities... Within fundamentalism, only an elite crowd can interpret the religion or culture, and nobody else is allowed to say anything different. It results in a powered position where only certain people can define what it means to be an authentic woman. Zainah Anwar who heads up Sisters in Islam says that’s not true. Everyone should have a say about their interpretation of Islam, especially if there is not a separation of state and religion and with the practice of Sharia Law... The goal is that everyone should be able to contribute to the conversation so that the individual can choose what interpretation of Islam they choose to have...To be feminist and Muslim does not have to be a dichotomy. (Tsui 2012b)

She offers (‘my partner has previously said this to me’ – perhaps this partial disclaimer makes it easier for her to offer her next words) a rare criticism of other feminists for treating Christianity unnecessarily harshly: ‘We live in a world where it’s easy to criticise Christianity, but we’re afraid to criticise other religions for fear of being racist. Perhaps we all need to be a little educated about different religions so that we are able to critically comment’.

## Discussion

This analysis has revealed TFW’s four approaches to religion: feminism in religion: promoting religious feminism; feminism vs. religion: challenging religious oppression (the most prominent approach); supporting religious women; and debating religion and feminism. Only the final one, accounting for a quarter of posts, presented the relationship between religion and feminist issues in a complex, nuanced way. Interestingly, most of these posts were written not by regular bloggers (who, it appears, are mostly not religious themselves) but by occasional contributors, who appeared more knowledgeable about religion. In relation to the study’s first research question (how do TFW writers approach religion?), the answer is that given its large number of contributors, TFW does not present a single perspective on religion, but a variety of different perspectives, with four main narratives. Thus, the most important insight generated by the study is that there are several different perspectives on religion evident in this feminist webzine. Secondary to this, two themes emerged which require interrogation: TFW writers’ support for Muslim women and criticism of the church’s political power; I will return to this point shortly.

In relation to the second question (what do these feminist constructions of religion demonstrate about their approaches to debates on feminism and secularism? Do they reflect the feminist embrace of secularism, or the feminist support for including religion in politics?), in advocating Muslim women’s

choices against others who stereotype them or are Islamophobic, TFW's writers are closer to the religious inclusion approach than to feminist secularism. They express criticism of Christians in political institutions. They rarely discuss the concept of secularism or the public funding of religious groups. They advocate Muslim women's participation in the public sphere and oppose attempts to curtail their rights. Their support for Muslim women contrasts with Midden's (2012) findings and provides evidence of somewhat wider feminist engagement with religion than van den Brandt's (2014, 2015). This reflects different methodological approaches: while van den Brandt's study seeks out and explores feminist possibilities offered by case studies of secular feminist solidarity around Muslim women's issues, this study looks more broadly at approaches to religion across a 10-year span of writings on TFW. TFW writers' inclusion of religion as a serious topic of discussion, featuring posts not only on Islam and Christianity but also on Judaism, Buddhism and Sikhism, demonstrates their willingness to engage with religion.

Their positive representation of Islam provides a counter-narrative to the mainstream British media. Scholars have analysed the heightened visibility of Islam in Britain since 9/11, showing that representations of Islam are more numerous and largely negative. Muslims are depicted as threatening security through engaging in terrorist activities, and as conflicting with British values, provoking cultural tensions (Poole 2006, 2011). Knott, Poole and Taira's (2013) major quantitative study of British TV and newspaper representations of religion in 2008–2009 demonstrates a significant increase (compared to a 1982 study) in reporting about Islam, but Christianity still attracted the majority of coverage. Islam attracted less than 10% of newspaper coverage (and only 3% of TV coverage), although the 10% is high given the low (4.5% in 2011, a rise from 2.8% in 2001) proportion of England and Wales residents who are Muslim.

TFW's quantitative representation of Islam (56 out of 131 articles concerned Islam) is massively over-exaggerated, in relation to population size and mainstream media depictions, and amplifies the increased concentration on Islam in the mainstream. Qualitatively, its tone differs markedly. Instead of equating Islam with radicalisation and threat to British values, TFW offers a positive construction of Muslim women rarely found in the media, enhancing Islam's image. Although there were instances positioning Muslim women and feminism as opposites, reflecting what Midden and van den Brandt observed in the Netherlands and Belgium, the dominant narrative was of support for Muslim women against those misrepresenting or ill-treating them. Aligning themselves with Muslim women, TFW criticise governments, politicians, journalists, bloggers, employers and the general public.

Knott, Poole and Taira's (2013: 217) content analysis shows that the British media's 'dominant position' is 'one of fusion between (domestic and national) Christianity and moderate secularism'. TFW's position on Christianity differs quantitatively and qualitatively. TFW and mainstream media representations are reversed: in the mainstream, most media coverage concerns Christianity and its tone is mostly positive towards Christianity and mostly negative towards Islam. In TFW, a large chunk of coverage is on Islam and its tone is mostly positive, while Christianity is proportionally under- and negatively represented.

Why this reversal? I suggest that they recognise Christianity's majoritarian and Islam's minoritarian status and their representations reflect this. TFW writers see Christianity as unfairly privileged, a legitimate target for criticism. Conversely,

they see Islam as marginalised by the state, and Muslims as victims of Islamophobia. With the Church of England as the established religion, Christianity is envisaged as having too much authority, for instance with Anglican bishops in the House of Lords and government-funded church schools. Although they almost never mention the term 'secularism', TFW writers appear to support secularism where Christianity is concerned. Because Christianity forms a backdrop to UK culture, it is easier – and arguably more justifiable – to critique, since feminists feel they have the right and knowledge to do so and since Christians hold more institutional power than do Muslims. Whether their apparent secularism vis-à-vis Christianity extends to Islam is doubtful: it is likely that most TFW writers would view attempts to curtail public funding of Muslim-run welfare or educational organisations as Islamophobic.

Given that Islamophobia is considered the new form of racism (Allen 2010) TFW's support for Islam is also, I suggest, an expression of anti-racism. It typifies the British political far left's alignment with Muslims post 9/11, evidenced through the 2004 formation of the Respect Party, a coalition of Muslims and socialists opposed to capitalism and imperialism, who galvanised in opposition to Britain's involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Shain 2009). This leftist alignment, however, has been criticised by feminist secularists WAF, who, as they formed in the Rushdie Affair of 1989, accused British anti-fascists of supporting fundamentalist Muslims protesting against Rushdie's book (Yuval-Davis 1992). More recently, WAF criticised left-leaning human rights organisation Amnesty for supporting Islamism. In 2010 Gita Sahgal, one of WAF's founders, was suspended, then asked to resign, from her job as head of Amnesty's gender unit because she criticised Amnesty's alliance with former Guantanamo prisoner Moazzam Begg, director of CAGE, an advocacy organisation who campaign against the detention or killing of people under 'War on Terror' policies, but who Sahgal argued supported Islamist views, condoned terrorism, and threatened women's rights. (Five years later, Amnesty disassociated itself from CAGE, partly because of their refusal to condemn FGM and stoning.)

TFW bloggers keenness to support Muslim women has, it appears, rendered them unable to critique patriarchy in religions other than Christianity. The visibility of Islam in public debates has led them to offer support to Muslim women against their misrepresentations by others. In the process, they have emphasised Muslim women's agency (framed in terms of choices) without looking more broadly at the diversity within Islam and without critiquing the notion of choice itself. They also arguably offer little in the way of support to Jewish, Christian, Hindu or Sikh women who wish to contest patriarchal aspects of their religion but to remain religiously committed.

TFW writers' uneven treatment of religion is not unproblematic. This raises a question: are TFW writers embracing the kind of multiculturalism that secularists argue is bad for women, because it refuses to critique patriarchal manifestations of some religions – in this case, Islam? While TFW's support for Muslim women is welcome, since it challenges Islamophobic stereotypes, does it not represent a homogenising of Muslim women, drawing unconsciously on what Cooke (2007) calls the 'muslimwoman' stereotype, which assumes that Muslim women have the same views and desires? Such a stance also does not acknowledge complexities within Christianity or Islam. Just as the church comprises people supporting female bishops and others opposing them, within

British Islam gender equality is an issue about which there are diverse opinions. Some Muslims working for women's rights identify as 'feminist'; others do not. Some women abandon Islam to become secularists (the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain is an example); others (for instance the Muslim Women's Network or Inspire) work for reform within Islam, for instance, to improve women's access to mosques. Still others believe that women's rightful Islamic role is in the home.

While some TFW writers critique multiculturalism for relativising inequalities like domestic violence as 'cultural', in saving their criticism for politicians and journalists that represent women's religious choices negatively, are they not guilty of the things they accuse multiculturalism of: refusing to condemn instances of the religious oppression of women? This raises many important questions. How can feminists support religious women without ignoring religious misogyny? And how can they do so in an even-handed way among religions, especially given the unequal status of majority and minority religious traditions in the UK (in other words, that Christianity is the majority religion while the Sikh, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist religions have minority status)? Whether it is the place of white non-religious feminists – as most TFW writers are – to offer critiques of religion, or whether critiques should come from within religious communities needs debating. As Bracke and Fadil (2012: 42) argue, the way feminists have been pushed to take a 'Is the hijab emancipatory or oppressive?' position is problematic: there is little public space for a position that critiques that opposition as being responsible for sustaining the unnecessary problematisation of the headscarf and as being an oppressive 'form of governmentality...through which "proper" citizens of a multicultural society are produced'. Bracke and Fadil also maintain that being required to argue in liberal rights-based language in which personal choice is viewed as the supreme arbiter of whether something is 'emancipatory' or 'oppressive' neglects the wider social context in which women's 'choices' are structured by economic and political conditions. It also neglects both the variation in Muslim women's experiences and neglects versions of female agency that involve piety and duty.

Addressing these issues is not easy and it will not be easy for The F Word either. Widening their pool of writers to include women with diverse religious perspectives would spark a more complex engagement with gender and religion. This study, like van den Brandt's, demonstrates an increasing engagement among feminists in Europe with issues of religion. But if European societies are to be places where gender equality and women's religious freedom are taken equally seriously, there is a need to improve the quality of the conversation about religion amongst feminists, a need to raise feminists' religious literacy. This must, crucially, be what Bracke and Fadil (2012: 56) call 'a collaborative conversation in which excluded and marginalised perspectives are highlighted'. Webzines such as The F Word show great potential to host such conversations; it will require work and commitment to create and sustain them.

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