Secularity, Gender and Emancipation: Thinking through Feminist Activism and Feminist Approaches to the Secular

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Secularity, gender, and emancipation: thinking through feminist activism and feminist approaches to the secular

Nella van den Brandt

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Utrecht University, Utrecht, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT

In this article, I engage with feminist discussions about secularity, gender, and emancipation. The feminist study of the secular was spurred by interventions of Saba Mahmood [2005. *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press], and can be seen as a critical engagement with at least one basic assumption that underlies much of progressive thinking – that secularism is beneficial for women and LGBTQ subjects. I begin by exploring how the Belgian feminist activist platform Baas Over Eigen Hoofd! (Boss Over One's Own Head!) builds a locally suited theory and practice of emancipation. I analyse how BOEH! raises questions about gender and secularity. Second, I zoom-out by mapping feminist studies of the secular in Western European contexts, distinguishing various analytical approaches and visions on social-political secular emancipatory alternatives. To conclude, I relate local feminist activism to feminist academic discussions, and argue that there is a continued need for thinking about shared emancipatory futures.

Emancipation is not an 'all or nothing' affair. (Nancy Fraser in: Fraser and Liakova 2008, 4)

The story [of secularism] has had enormous staying power. Our view of history is shaped by that story. (Scott 2018, 14)

Posing questions about emancipation often means criticising political, social, cultural, and religious structures of dominance and revealing the relationships between freedom and its restrictions. Critical theories, such as feminist, postcolonial, and queer theories, and social movements, such as women's, antiracist, and LGBTQ movements, analyse the restriction of freedom in various ways and as such propose differing ideas about progressive change. In Western contexts influenced by a European Enlightenment tradition, 'emancipation' is a layered and emphatic concept, referring to equality, self-determination, liberation, and individual responsibility (Birkle et al. 2012). Posing questions about emancipation within this political-cultural framework leads to asking about the obstacles to equality and self-determination: Liberation from what? Self-determination regarding what? What does it mean to be responsible for building one's 'own life'? (Bauhardt 2004).

CONTACT Nella van den Brandt ✉ h.p.vandenbrandt@uu.nl

Starting from different conceptualisations and assumptions about power, the subject, and agency, as well as from different experiences and constituencies, critical theorists and movements develop various outlooks on society and how it could/should be transformed for the better. Emancipation is therefore a fluid concept that defies a solid definition across time and space, and its concrete meaning depends on the social groups, individuals, and topics involved (Birkle et al. 2012).

Exploring the ways in which political debates, media, cultural productions, and social movements envision emancipatory practice, one sees that 'emancipation' can itself be an object of study. Due to the pluralisation of critical theories, 'emancipation' can hardly be conceptualised in a general manner. A specific example is the conceptualisation of emancipation offered by critical pedagogy and the study of social work, where the founding figure Paulo Freire and his followers formulated 'empowerment theory' (Carr 2003). The articulation of empowerment theory often takes place in terms of 'development-models' based on a linear narrative that includes 'steps' such as identifying problems, deconstructing problems, social action, and further reflection. This conceptualisation of empowerment has become common within certain social movements, especially those who define themselves as critical popular education organisations (Carr 2003; van den Brandt 2017). Also second-wave feminist theorising and praxis, proclaiming that 'the personal is political', relies on an idea of empowerment as bolstered by critical reflection leading to action (Carr 2003). However, both within feminist theory and women's movements, there has been development towards different understandings. With the critique by Black feminist, postcolonial, and intersectional thinkers of the notion of 'women' as a homogenous group with similar experiences of oppression and similar needs (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991; Mohanty 2003), and the rethinking of feminist politics as not based on sameness but instead on alliances (Yuval-Davis 1999), the idea of women's emancipation has become fluid and understood as necessarily context-based. This shared understanding of women's emancipation among feminist theorists and many activists is aptly illustrated by feminist political philosopher Nancy Fraser who answers an interviewer's question about whether women in Western contexts are nowadays emancipated as such: 'I think we have to first of all deconstruct the question a little: which women, where. Emancipation is not an "all or nothing" affair' (Fraser and Liakova 2008, 4).

Feminist scholars often discuss diverging critical approaches in terms of the politics they enable (Dietz 2003; McLaughlin 2003). While supportive of the abandonment of a fixed interpretation and stable meaning of the concept of 'emancipation', I believe that we as individual scholars often remain attached to certain assumptions about what is (or is not) empowering tied to personal experiences and academic, political-social, and cultural-historical positionalities. These implicit assumptions may lead to 'judgements' about the political 'value' of specific feminist approaches, or specific social practices.

I follow here the anthropologist Saba Mahmood's argument for the need to be more aware of what we as critical scholars implicitly consider to be emancipatory. Mahmood (2001, 2005) intervened in the feminist study of conservative religious women by unpacking the liberal-secular assumptions underlying much of the so-called 'turn to agency'. Liberal-secular expectations about the universality of a desire for freedom, for example, are not just an innocent background – instead, they are part and parcel of the methodologies used to approach the study of religious women. According to Mahmood, the dominant conception of agency in feminist theory is (at best) of only partial utility in

understanding the lives and desires of those whose subjectivity is formed in non-liberal contexts. Drawing on Mahmood's insights – and on those feminist scholars who followed through localising and reformulating her arguments about the potential tension between feminist perspectives and empirical observations (i.e., Avishai, Gerber, and Randles 2012) – I therefore argue for the importance of an awareness of assumptions about power, freedom, and emancipation at play in our research: not in order to get rid of them, but instead to be able to pay more attention to the ways in which they are 'productive' aspects of our thinking. Such an awareness might moreover help us to more explicitly envision alternative futures.

In this article, I aim to engage with feminist discussions about secularity, gender, and emancipation. First, I discuss qualitative research conducted in Belgium on the feminist activist platform Baas Over Eigen Hoofd! (BOEH!) (in English, 'Boss Over One's Own Head!'), exploring the ways in which BOEH! envisions women's emancipation. Considering civil society feminist actors as knowledge-producers in their own right, I demonstrate how BOEH! builds a locally suited 'theory and practice of emancipation'. With its efforts, it creates discomfort among the various audiences it hopes to reach. I analyse this discomfort through focusing on the ways in which BOEH! (implicitly) raises questions about gender and secularity.

This exploration of BOEH! will function as a point of entrance into current academic debates about secularity, gender, and sexuality. The feminist study of the secular was spurred not only by current political-social developments and the so-called 'return of religion' across various Western and non-Western contexts (Alcoff and Caputo 2011), but also notably by the interventions of Saba Mahmood, whose legacy needs to be acknowledged for its importance in steering critical thinking about liberal-secular frameworks, Islam, and Muslim women. Feminist attention for the secular can be seen as a critical engagement with at least one basic assumption that underlies much of Western progressive academic and activist thinking: that secularism is beneficial for women and LGBTQ subjects. In the second part of the article I map feminist studies of the secular in Western European contexts and distinguish various analytical approaches. I end this exploration by foregrounding a number of scholars who recently posed explicit questions about potential social-political secular emancipatory alternatives.

To conclude, I relate local feminist activism to feminist academic discussions, and argue for the continued need through academic-activist collaboration of thinking shared emancipatory futures.

Local feminist theories of emancipation

In this first part of the article I pay attention to the work of BOEH!, a Belgian autonomous feminist activist platform fighting headscarf bans in education and at the labour market. I consider BOEH! (Boss Over One's Own Head! – a self-designation I will unravel later) to be a counter-voice that critiques dominant assumptions about and builds own notions of emancipation. These notions are informed by collective and personal experiences set in and against a specific political-social and religious context. Various feminist scholars across Western European countries such as the Netherlands, France, and Belgium analysed public debates about women's emancipation and ethnic and religious differences. They demonstrated that discussions and controversies in public domains often question

the equality and freedom of women belonging to minoritised communities and religious minority traditions, notably Muslims and Islam. These public debates are shaped by implicit understandings of 'proper' women's emancipation, which are based upon a conglomerate of assumptions. Among them is agency being understood as the property of abstract individuals, who profess autonomous will, free choice, and resistance (Scott 2009; Bracke and Fadil 2012; Midden 2012). Sexual freedom is often emphasised, and defined as the possibility to fulfil one's desire without restraint (Scott 2012) or the public visibility of women's sexuality (Moors 2009). Dominant understandings of 'proper' women's emancipation moreover emphasise the importance of provocation as a tool (Ghorashi 2005), and sameness instead of 'sexual difference' (Scott 2009) or political, social, cultural, and religious differences between women (Ghorashi 2005; Midden 2012). Importantly, the secular is considered a necessary condition for women's emancipation (Scott 2007; Göle 2010).

Female subjects belonging to minoritised groups, however, do 'talk back' (Bracke 2011; van den Brandt forthcoming). As critical counter-voices, they reclaim 'emancipation' and give it new meanings and directions, sometimes in transversal connections with women across differences. As such, they try to create opposition to and/or space within dominant discourses. I propose a conceptualisation of women's movements and feminist activisms as local actors of politically-socially situated 'theory and practice of emancipation'. Such a conceptualisation is a conscious epistemological-empirical choice (Van den Berg and Popov Momčinović 2015). Locating and investigating counter-voices emerging from small initiatives in civil society may reveal important alternative perspectives on 'emancipation' as not solely based on individuality, sameness, and the secular. The following analysis of the work of BOEH! indeed reveals that 'emancipation' can instead be considered as also, or sometimes even more, based on collective/transversal belonging, difference, and religious identity or tradition. BOEH! members, I argue, not only tackle the increasing opposition between ethnic-religious minoritised communities and traditions and women's emancipation (van den Brandt and Longman 2017), but also tackle the assumed essential 'vexed relationship' (Fadil 2014) between Islam and feminism.

BOEH!: a feminist counter-voice

In the following sections, I explore BOEH!'s theory of emancipation, and demonstrate how BOEH! constructs structural critique in combination with a fundamental openness to individual trajectories. So far, however, BOEH! has difficulties to reach the audiences it aims at: politicians and policy-makers particularly. Its structural critique ánd its openness to individual choices have been difficult to digest. An analysis of the efforts of BOEH! and the way in which its arguments have been received is highly relevant in order to think through the fierce oppositional responses. I argue that BOEH!'s 'illegibility' has to do with the radical secular feminist histories BOEH! aligns itself with in combination with the object of its activism, that is the Islamic headscarf.

This case study emerges from my PhD research (van den Brandt 2014) that looked at Dutch-speaking feminist actors in civil society in Belgium and the ways in which organisations and activists constructed discourses about the relationship between religion and women's emancipation. In this case study, I reviewed the political, social, and religious-secular context and the histories of the Dutch-speaking women's movements in

Belgium, and analysed BOEH!'s website, activities, and written documents (opinion articles, brochures, and flyers). I interviewed seven activists – those members who made up the 'core' of BOEH!'s activism throughout several years but who have been supported by many volunteers. During the interviews, I focused on BOEH! members' notions of feminism and solidarity across differences. What struck my attention was that while 'diversity' was lived and negotiated on an everyday basis within BOEH!, at times leading to new insights about feminism and solidarity (van den Brandt 2015), BOEH! members perceive their main challenges to be situated elsewhere: namely the indifference, negativity, or outright hostility they encounter from others. In this article, I unpack the discomfort BOEH! creates among the various audiences it hopes to reach by investigating BOEH!'s understanding of emancipatory thinking and practice in relation to local histories and debates about religion and women's emancipation. This analysis will be tied to excursions into theories of the secular in the second part of the article.

BOEH! is an autonomous feminist group that emerged in response to headscarf debates and regulations in Flanders, the northern Dutch-speaking region and community of Belgium. In Flanders, the return of religion in the public sphere has been mostly experienced in relation to concerns and anxieties about 'the Muslim other' who supposedly opposes Western-European liberal values and women's emancipation. Across Europe, the headscarf as a visible marker became the symbol of the religious otherness of Islam in political discourses on citizenship, liberalism, European identity, and gender equality (Kilic, Saharso, and Sauer 2008), and prone to becoming subject of polarisation, disciplinary practices, and regulation. Despite the differences in political and institutional histories between and often even within European states, in Belgium, Islamic veiling has been on and off the public and political agenda for almost three decades. Heralded as a 'multicultural' nation in terms of its dealings with linguistic-ethnic diversity among its dominant Dutch-French-German regions and populations, the current dominant political climate tends more to Flemish-ethnic nationalism and is increasingly exclusionary vis-à-vis what are perceived as non-European minorities. Despite the educational and institutional diversity that impedes central and general legislation with regards to bans on veiling, in practice today the headscarf is effectively banned from most schools in the country (Coene and Longman 2008; Bracke and Fadil 2012). In 2017, a federal ban was implemented on wearing the burqa and face veil in public spaces (Ouald Chaib and Brems 2013).

For a long time, protagonists in the headscarf debates talked *about* but not *with* Muslim women about their experiences, understandings, and needs. This exclusion generated Muslim women's critique and activism, insisting that their voices and experiences be recognised by politicians and policy makers (Coene and Longman 2008). The direct reason for BOEH!'s establishment was Patrick Janssens's decision, who, as the socialist major of Antwerp (SP.A), implemented in 2006 a headscarf ban for the employees of the Antwerp city service desks. From 2007 to today, BOEH! members protest against headscarf bans that throughout the years following after the Antwerp ban have been increasingly implemented in various sections of the labour market and education. Some BOEH! core members have participated on behalf of women's organisations or ethnic minority organisations; some have participated as individuals. These core members are variously situated in terms of ethnicity, age, and *zingeving* – a Dutch term that denotes the religious or secular schemes individuals relate to in order to give meaning to the ways in which they construct their lives, connect to others, and build communities,

such as religious traditions, humanist frameworks, or socialist discourse. From the start, BOEH!'s basic argument has been the following:

> BOEH! wants women to be able to choose for themselves what they want to wear on top of their heads without interference from the government or anyone else, and defends the equal rights of women and men. The choice to wear a headscarf is as much a human right as is the exercise of a worthy job and the obtainment of a degree. For that reason, BOEH! is against the misogynist decision – included in the Antwerp administrative agreement of 2007–2012 – that forces women to deny their individuality when they are functioning in an administrative job. (www.baasovereigenhoofd.be, last accessed 28 February 2014, translation mine)

Emancipation 1: practice of self-naming

Social movements and activists' theories and practices of emancipation are sometimes explicitly, but more often implicitly, formulated. I propose to look at BOEH!'s understanding of emancipatory thinking and practice as constructed on the basis of their multiple interrelated interventions: (a) their practice of self-naming; (b) an emphasis on freedom of choice; (c) their transversal feminism; (d) and the construction of feminist religious identities. The first three aspects of BOEH!'s activism are collective interventions. The construction of feminist religious identities is, however, a particular commitment that the Muslim BOEH! members spoke about. In the next sections, I outline these four interventions and the responses BOEH! received from various audiences.

Social movements and activists' practices of self-naming are meaningful, since they often express main goals, perspectives, and desires. The titles feminist movements choose for themselves may also reveal forms of attachment and dis/identification in relation to political-ideological, historical, cultural, and religious belongings (Bacchetta 2010, 117). Baas Over Eigen Hoofd! (Boss Over One's Own Head!) signals an attachment to feminist histories, in particular to the Dutch and Flemish second-wave feminist movement Dolle Mina, whose famous slogan was: 'Baas Over Eigen Buik!' (in English, 'Boss Over One's Own Belly!'). Choosing this title, BOEH! deliberately links itself to a particular movement and period in the history of feminism in the Netherlands and Flanders. This attachment is not the effect of a 'free-floating choice, it is rather a deeply situational one' (Bacchetta 2010, 117).

All BOEH! members are politicised subjects, but coming from various backgrounds they have been politicised in diverse ways. Some have participated in feminist and anti-racist struggles as female members of minoritised communities, others do so as white women. Two of BOEH!'s founding members used to participate in Dolle Mina. From 1970 up until mid-1970s, they argued for women's right to access to abortion and contraception, for more childcare facilities and playgrounds, and against the unequal position of married women. Dolle Minas received a lot of media coverage because of their playful and provocative street actions in main cities, such as distributing 'the pill' to passers-by. As such, Dolle Mina became an important symbol of second wave feminism in Flanders (Van Molle 2004, 359–361; De Smit 2006). Up until the year 1990, during which abortion was legalised in Belgian federal law, Dolle Minas and allies helped women in need of an abortion through undercover abortion centres in Flanders or to receive a legal abortion in the Netherlands, where abortion was legalised already since 1984.

BOEH! links to the radical second wave feminist struggle for abortion by adapting its slogan to refer to the current headscarf debates. The radical second wave feminist

emphasis on starting from women's point of view and experiences, and its struggle for equality and women's self-determination in areas such as education, work, and reproduction (Dequeecker and Roggeman 2005; Van de Loo 2005), exemplified by the well-known Dutch-Flemish second wave slogan 'De Vrouw Beslist!' (in English, 'The Woman Decides!'), was taken up by BOEH! to argue for the headscarf as similarly a matter of women's choice. Elly, one of the former Dolle Mina members, explained BOEH!'s deliberate linking of feminist struggles throughout time in the following words:

> So one of our slogans is 'Boss over one's own head', and we choose that deliberately. It refers to a long ago history, the abortion struggle of the 1970s in Belgium. […] It was a struggle for the right to abortion and it was about, as was Dolle Mina, becoming boss over your own belly. It was a struggle for the decriminalisation and legalisation of abortion, and for access to contraception. All of that was forbidden in Belgium for a long time, anticonception happened in hidden ways, and it wasn't allowed to spread information about that. So a lot of people weren't informed and they had unwanted pregnancies. The abortion struggle about becoming boss in one's own belly used the slogan 'the woman decides'. We believed that the church and the government should not decide about that, but individual women should decide themselves. You are free to have an abortion or not, you are free to use anticonception or not. It doesn't matter which [choice you make], but you must have the freedom to choose. That is fundamentally a feminist perspective. It is about an emphasis on autonomous freedom of choice, on self-determination. It is about my body, and I decide about it. So for us, the headscarf is part of that, of self-determination. Whatever I put on or how I dress myself, and whatever certain clothing means to me, that is my own business. […] Yes, that is our point of activism, our only point of activism. (translation mine)

BOEH!'s practice of self-naming reveals a notion of women's emancipation as (a) enabled by connecting to feminist knowledge and experiences from the recent past, and, (b) related to that, by furthering women's self-determination and individual choice. In the below section, I further analyse BOEH!'s focus on freedom, choice, and autonomy in terms of the work it does in destabilising the secular. But here it is important to note that, of course, while Dolle Mina and BOEH! both have argued for women's embodied self-determination, the bodies they reference are positioned differently in Belgian society. The struggle of Dolle Mina was about female bodies that were not marked by 'race' and not considered to be ethnically or religiously different. BOEH!'s struggle relates to the bodies of minoritised women, marked as racially, ethnically, and religiously different. In that sense, BOEH! does not only claim women's ownership over their bodies, but also over an object – the headscarf – that has often come to stand for Muslim women's Otherness. This embodied and symbolic struggle therefore implicates also a struggle against processes of women's racial, ethnic, and religious marginalisation.

Emancipation 2: centre-staging freedom of choice

In the above section, I analysed BOEH!'s self-naming, and explored the recurrence of the 'my body, my choice' trope inherent in this practice of self-naming – a trope that has proved important in second wave and contemporary feminism across Western and globalised contexts for the reconfiguration of women's agency (Boston Women's Health Book Collective 1970; Smyth 2002; Snyder-Hall 2010). It used to be, and still is, especially focused on women's reproductive and sexual agency, but it is nowadays applied in a much more general manner. For that reason, it has become subject of debate, attacked

by those who refute so-called 'choice feminism' since it 'offers a worldview that does not challenge the status quo, that promises to include all women regardless of their choices, and that abstains from judgment altogether'(Ferguson 2010, 247). Choice feminism is accused of encouraging neoliberal values of individualism and consumerism, while neglecting systemic inequalities (Thwaites 2017). The feminist choice paradigm has moreover been criticised and reconfigured to suit the intersectional struggles of women belonging to minoritised groups (Price 2010). According to women's studies scholar Kimala Price, U.S. women of colour reproductive justice activists

> … acknowledge that an emphasis on gaining legal rights, lobbying, and electoral politics is not necessarily a bad thing, [but] they argue that there has to be an intersectional analysis and the acknowledgment of oppression in order for women to truly gain freedom. (2010, 44)

BOEH!'s notion of women's freedom of choice should be considered as similarly reconfiguring the one used during the struggle of Dolle Mina: it argues for connecting women's freedom of choice to an intersectional struggle against sexism, racism, and Islamophobia.

BOEH!'s argumentation is based on notions of women's freedom of choice and freedom of religion as a human right, combining attachments to radical feminist traditions with a liberal political-intellectual human rights framework. One could argue that BOEH! has come to endorse a liberal feminist standpoint by enlarging the liberal principles of autonomy and freedom of choice to include the donning of the Islamic headscarf (Mahmood 2005, 195; Bracke and Fadil 2012). Today, in Western European contexts, the concepts of choice, equal opportunities, and diversity are indeed an intrinsic element of liberal and managerial discourses present in political rhetoric, policy-making, and society, at the expense of critical perspectives on structural inequalities (Bracke 2002; Ahmed 2004; Gill 2008; Longman and De Graeve 2014). A feminist free choice-argument is therefore hardly radical anymore. It may even buy into the post-feminist figure of the 'exceptional woman', and into more general neoliberal capitalist narratives about 'grabbing your chances' and individual economic responsibility, failure, and resilience (Braidotti 2005; Bracke 2017; Thwaites 2017). In the context of international struggles for women's reproductive rights, choice rhetoric has been similarly questioned. For example, sociologist and development scholar Lisa Smyth describes the tensions present in the notion of choice,

> … which on the one hand, acknowledges that women's decisional and bodily autonomy is at stake in (anti-) abortion politics, and, on the other, facilitates the "illusion" […] that a woman can make a "private" choice free from social, economic, and political constraints. (2002, 336)

The 'anti-abortion politics' in the above quote could be replaced with '(anti-) headscarf politics', and the critique seems a legitimate one also regarding BOEH!. However, in the case of BOEH!, I insist that something more profound is going on. This has not only to do with BOEH!'s intersectional politics, but also with the work it does in terms of the destabilisation of the secular.

BOEH!'s activities relate primarily to the Islamic headscarf. Flemish public debates construct the headscarf predominantly as a religious issue, and BOEH! similarly considers the headscarf (partly) in relation to religion through its emphasis on freedom of religion. A 'religious' issue is as such connected to a feminist history and politics that are in Flanders perceived to be and experienced as intensely secular, or even anti-religious. In Belgium, the struggle for abortion took place against the power of the Catholic church, the Catholic

political party (CVP), and the Catholic monarchy (Dequeecker and Roggeman 2005). In multiple ways, BOEH! unsettles assumptions about religion and women's emancipation: by its self-naming and object of activism; its attachment to diverse political-intellectual traditions; and, as a result, its (unintended) mobilising of memories of anti-religious feminist struggles and affects. As a consequence, BOEH!'s existence was met with surprise and disbelief, and BOEH! members felt dismissed especially by liberal and socialist politicians and policy-makers, and liberal, leftist, and humanist journalists and intellectuals. BOEH! touches upon dominant assumptions and affects tied to religion and emancipation, and seems to be hardly legible for some, and totally unacceptable for others.

So, while BOEH! considers the support of women's freedom of choice as legitimate emancipatory thinking and practice, it witnessed fierce responses by various actors who don't agree with the possibility of the Islamic headscarf as a matter of women's own freedom, choice, and desire. Both BOEH! and those resisting its argumentation cling to a similar version of autonomous choice, but these opposite voices in the discussion diverge in their opinions on whether religion may or may not provide a context for autonomous choice and desire. Since the liberal choice framework remains firmly in place, there seems to be no way out of this argumentative deadlock (Bracke and Fadil 2012). To put it more strongly, the argumentative deadlock that exists already more than a decade – bearing in mind that BOEH! celebrated its 10 year anniversary at 17 December 2017 with an event organised in Antwerp, including speeches, a panel discussion, and an afterparty – is based upon the current hegemony of liberal frameworks in discourses on women's emancipation. This liberal framework and its conceptualisation of freedom and choice springs from local histories and experiences, and is saturated by religious versus secular/anti-religious demarcations. A recent past in which liberal, socialist, and humanist movements and actors joined forces to struggle against the power and domination of the Catholic 'pillar' (the Catholic Church, politics, and civil society) explains a contemporary setting in which again liberal, socialist, and humanist voices share a conceptualisation of freedom, choice, and autonomy as ultimately secular/anti-religious.

The inescapability of this framework means that it becomes near to unimaginable to construct feminist thinking and practice outside of it – let alone to make such thinking and practice intelligible to those who set trends and make influential decisions in politics, law, policy-making, social movements, and media discourse.

Emancipation 3: transversal feminism

The (initial) dismissal of BOEH!'s existence and activism came also from those belonging to Muslim minoritised communities, mainstream women's organisations, and ethnic majoritised subjects belonging to BOEH! members' social environments of friends, colleagues, and family. In these responses, the Islamic headscarf is constructed as a Muslim women's issue only, with which non-Muslim women have nothing to do with. This perspective denies possibilities for feminist transversal engagements across different religious/secular and ethnic categories (Yuval-Davis 1999; Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2017). It doubts the sincerity of white feminists arguing in favour of the equality of minoritised women, and it makes it difficult to understand why non-Muslim women would be engaged in a struggle for the right to choose to wear the headscarf. Similarly, also part of the Muslim communities didn't understand why Muslim women would want to

cooperate with non-Muslim women. During the interview, BOEH! member Farah spoke of a deeply ingrained mutual distrust between communities:

> … I think that is the difficult story of BOEH! – we are diverse, but a lot of people and organisations do not want to see this diversity. It is continuously questioned. […] For example, [names of the white non-Muslim BOEH! members omitted] received many responses from their friends because these friends see them as figureheads of feminism and the feminist struggle of the 1970s, and now they seem to suddenly consort with Islamic fundamentalists, and so on. […] And we do notice it with the Muslim women, I am addressed myself by Muslims who ask 'Are you going to be part of a group with them? We Muslims should deal with this issue!' And they try to foist a unity [of Muslims]. While we think that diversity is BOEH!'s strength. […] And so we experience firsthand the polarisation of our society entering BOEH!. At the same time we have the feeling that within BOEH!, we are doing fine. And that we totally support its cause is in itself an interesting result, given the resistance we get in our private lives. Because we are a diverse group, [while] the distrust from both groups, from Muslims towards non-Muslims and vice versa, that distrust is very much a reality. (translation mine)

Individual BOEH-members therefore 'talk back' (Bracke 2011; van den Brandt forthcoming) to multiple audiences depending on the social environments they participate in. As alluded to by Farah, this means for the non-Muslim members that they often need to explain their commitment to the struggle against headscarf bans, but also to criticise racist and Islamophobic opinions they encounter. For the Muslim members, it means that they engage not only with racism and Islamophobia in society at large, but also raise their voice at times within Muslim communities. Generally, they need to defend their feminist religious perspectives.

BOEH! members are questioned by and speak critically to different audiences, such as politicians, policy-makers, school boards, and the media, but also mainstream women's organisations and Muslim communities' organisations. The Muslim BOEH! activists find themselves questioned about the possibility of being feminists in the first place, whereas the non-Muslim BOEH! activists are not questioned in the same way – a situation that emerges from the assumption that one cannot be a committed and practicing Muslim and a feminist at the same time. Both in academic and activist debates, the term 'Islamic feminism' as well as its referents are subjects of controversy and disagreement (Badran 2001; Winter 2001; Moghadam 2002; Tohidi 2003; Mir-Hosseini 2011). In BOEH!'s experience, talking back to various audiences is imperative to construct socially multi-layered emancipatory thinking and practice.

Muslim BOEH! activists' expressions of feminism are considered particularly subversive. In the context of a society that largely dismisses the possibility of religiously practicing Muslim women being feminists (Bracke 2007) but also in a setting that lacks a longer history of publicly visible feminist Muslim women and Muslim women's movements, Muslim women's feminist expressions are constructed almost from scratch through charting new ways of thinking and practicing both feminism and Islam.

Emancipation 4: constructing feminist religious identities

The Muslim BOEH! activists' public identifications with feminism are a social practice (Anthias 2002) that enfolds within a locally specific context. To gain recognition for their self-definition as Muslim women and feminists requires a lot of effort. The

Muslim BOEH! members told me about how they became feminists and/or developed as feminists in and through BOEH! (see also van den Brandt 2011). Several of them were at the moment of doing research involved in setting up a European *Karamah* branch in Brussels in order to bring international discussions about women's rights and emancipation within Islamic frameworks to Belgium. They have started to rethink both feminism and Islam in relation to their working lives, personal lives, and activism. Following Margot Badran's concise definition of Islamic feminism as 'a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm' (2005, 242), the Muslim BOEH! members can be thought of as constructing some of the first building blocks for Islamic feminism in Flanders/Belgium. Throughout the process of developing multiple critiques directed at several audiences (Cooke 2000), they construct their feminist and religious identities in new and interrelated ways. Salwa, for example, told me about how she uses historical and Islamic hermeneutical arguments to discuss religious practices with those around her at her work at a social-cultural organisation and thereby evokes new reflections and ideas that might affect the lives of some individuals around her. She does so by starting from the assumptions that according to Islam, men and women are of equal value and that historically, Islam evolved in different ways within various socio-cultural settings. Salwa describes the ways in which she incorporates Islamic feminist thinking within her professional encounters in Antwerp with those belonging to a community of Muslims with migrant Moroccan backgrounds:

> In the Quran, it [the story of the woman being created from the first man's rib] actually doesn't exist. […] It is a hadith [tradition about the sayings and deeds of the Prophet and his followers] by Abu Hurayra, who adopted the story [from the Christian tradition]. No one ever questioned that. […] [According to the Qur'an,] One soul was created and out of that both man and woman were created. So both are of equal value to one another. And you can discuss all other things from there, that is [the question of] where did the idea of women's subordination come from? And I tell all of this to my new trainee, and she responds that she didn't know about all that. […] There are lessons of very conservative people and yes, they [Muslim women and girls] hear about these issues, about how a woman is supposed to behave. And they accept it as the truth without questioning it. But actually, as Muslims we should question everything. As long as someone cannot prove that it is present in the Qur'an, I don't accept it. I personally don't accept it.

The Muslim BOEH! activists reconstruct their lived Islam through their feminist commitments to integrate notions of equality, learning, diversity and tolerance. These notions are not experienced as 'new' or 'alien' to Islam, but as intrinsically part of the Islamic message. Through these reconstructions, and the ethical work it requires, Islam emerges as a potential framework and path for women's emancipation (Vanderwaeren 2004; Badran 2005; Silvestri 2008).

The above analysis of the work of BOEH! demonstrates the complexity of its thinking and practice. It shows that BOEH!'s theory of women's emancipation is highly situated and context-dependent. According to this local theory, women's emancipation can be furthered through collective/transversal belonging, difference, religious identity or tradition, and a radical openness to women's individual trajectories and choices. Nonetheless, in dialogue with politicians, policy-makers, and journalists, the notions of women's 'choice' and 'autonomy' cannot escape locally dominant understandings of it – that include strong assumptions about religious and secular demarcations.

While one could argue against such a reliance on liberal frameworks, and this is indeed one of the tasks of critical scholarship, we need to be aware of the fact that differences are also experienced at the level of transversal feminist coalition-building and everyday life. Moving from a critical analysis of the emergence of religion and secularity as categories of knowledge and demarcation to paying attention to the microlevel of experience and intersubjective relationships forces us to appreciate the work that local feminist activists do. BOEH! members learn to navigate and criticise the subjectivities that are thrust on them, and try to collaborate beyond identity and community oppositions. They attempt to figure out how to talk in new ways about various topics, including human rights, religious freedom, the Islamic headscarf, sexism, racism, Islamophobia, and feminism. Having explored these different levels at which BOEH! breaks through some of the processes through which Muslim women are being marginalised reveals the necessity of further thinking through issues of religion, the secular, 'race'/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. In the second part of the article, I explore feminist theories and analyses of these issues in Western European contexts. I map various critical approaches in the field of the study of gender and the secular, and review scholarly proposals for social-political secular emancipatory alternatives. With this exploration, I hope to shed further light on the tensions facing BOEH!, as identified above.

Feminist approaches to the secular

The rise of the study of the secular in Western academia is intrinsically tied to current political-public debates that envision the come-back of religion in the public sphere. Main aims of studies of the secular include making sense of what is considered the renewed presence and importance of religion in the public sphere, but also to question the way in which 'religion' is debated and regulated (Korte 2011; Auga, Von Braun, and Bruns 2013; Braidotti et al. 2014). European feminist interventions in the academic study of the secular emphasise that the secular comprises phenomena and narratives that are situated within structures of power related to gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. In this second part of the article I explore what the study of the secular entails, and look into the perspectives and politics of feminist interventions. I do not aim to set-up an exhaustive overview, instead, I map various ways in which feminist approaches to the secular are build. As I refer to authors who discuss and analyse material mainly emerging from the U.K., France, the Netherlands, and Belgium, for matters of convenience this mapping is described as feminist scholarship on the secular in Western Europe.

For the sake of analytical clarity, I distinguish between the concepts secularism, secularisation, and secularity defining them as such: secularism as a political-ideological doctrine concerning the separation of religion and the state (Scott 2007; Göle 2010); secularisation as referring to the historical process of social differentiation, rationalisation, and individualisation with the related relegation of 'religion' to matters of the private sphere and individualised faith (Casanova 1994; Dobbelaere 2002); and secularity as conceptually prior to the political doctrine of secularism and historical processes of secularisation (Asad 2003). Secularity refers to the cultural and lived conglomerate of assumptions, practices, imaginaries, embodiments, affects, and social arrangements that prioritises 'private reason', 'this-worldly', and 'self-made' aspects of human life, installing them as common good and most relevant public cause.

'The secular', then, can be seen as manifested at these three levels – the political, the historical and the cultural. From here, I move to answering the question of why feminist scholars have felt the need to intervene and build specific approaches in the study of the secular.

Academic feminist concerns in Western Europe

In the post-9/11 context, the idea that women's emancipation and rights, and their religious engagements and belonging, are fundamentally conflicting, has regained plausibility (Aune 2011; Cady and Fessenden 2013). A strong assumption is that the secular foregrounds moral individual autonomy and equality and that monotheistic traditions create hierarchical differences between men and women, and divinely sanction women's subordinate roles (Bracke 2008; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008). Because of these dominant assumptions that value the secular and devalue religion, and which seem to stereotype and marginalise especially religious women's perspectives and religious-ethnic minoritised traditions, feminist scholars have felt the urge to ask if 'secularism is indeed good for women' (Aune 2015), and to investigate what is at stake in this construction of a secular-religion binary. Various scholars therefore increasingly started posing questions about what precisely constitutes historical forms and current transformations of the secular in relation to gender. To grasp feminist approaches to the secular in Western European settings, I suggest a distinction between what I call *discursive* and *experiential* approaches. This distinction is analytical, and feminist scholarly research may combine the two approaches.

The discursive approach is cross-disciplinary, but might be tied to the humanities and cultural studies in particular. The discursive perspective scrutinises how the secular comes into being as a culturally and historically situated category. This is done through exploring how terms such as 'secularism', 'secularisation', and 'secular' have had various meanings and implications across time and space. A critical focus of the exploration is how power relations and structures (based on 'race'/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality) infuse the emergence of the secular. This means that the discursive approach may look at political and media statements, but it could also (or at the same time) take scholarly discourses as narrative material that needs to be critically explored and evaluated. The main question guiding this approach is then: how is the secular constructed through time, space, and cultures? A related question often posed is: how does the secular govern and regulate our political, social, cultural, and religious existence? A Foucauldian understanding of *governmentality* often underlies this latter question.

Experiential approaches emerge mainly in social sciences and anthropology. This approach assumes that the secular is not only constructed at the metalevel of political, historical, and academic structures, but is also negotiated in civil society, lived in everyday life, and experienced through the body. As such, the secular is engaged at the microlevel of individual subject or identity formation. The main question being asked here is: what does it mean to be or become secular? Or, alternatively, what does it mean to be or become religious in a context that may value the secular more than the religious? The experiential approach may look into the diminishing role of Christian churches in people's lives and self-understandings, and the fact that belief is nowadays an option in the midst of religious and spiritual diversity as well as non-belief. Specific for feminist

scholars is that they privilege the experiences of women, ethnic, and/or sexual minorities as starting-points for their analyses.

A feminist postcolonial perspective often inspires feminist approaches of various types to the secular. For the discursive approach, this means to rethink the ways in which the secular comes into being not only through gender and sexuality, but also through categories of 'race'/ethnicity and (post)colonial histories and relations. The experiential approach tackles how secular formations marginalise postcolonial and/or migrant communities in particular ways, and how minoritised subjects negotiate such marginalisation. Feminist scholars taking up postcolonial theory often scrutinise how 'saving brown women from brown men' (Spivak 1988) narratives are part of current understandings of secular(ised) societies and women's and LGBTQ emancipation.

Let me give a concrete example of how a specific topic can be analysed productively through different approaches: the issue of women's religiosities and piety. A discursive approach may look into what kind of women's religious beliefs and practices have been institutionally encouraged by the secular arrangements of the state, the law, policy-making, and/or academic disciplines, and which forms are regulated, valued, devalued, and/or neglected or ignored (i.e., Scott 2007, 2018; Fernando 2013; Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska 2013; Knibbe 2018). It could also look into how powerful narratives in public debates and media construct secular notions and sensibilities while framing women's religiosities, and assumptions about gender, ethnicity, and sexuality that underpin these frames (i.e., Göle 2010; Bracke and Fadil 2012; Amir-Moazami 2013). An experiential perspective could take women's religiosities as a starting point to study how the experience of secularisation differs for various groups of people in society. In that sense, a study of women's religiosities (or secularities) creates *space* for specific experiences within the broader paradigm of secularisation, and as such reinforces and subverts the paradigm (i.e., Woodhead 2007; Aune, Sharma, and Vincett 2008; Longman 2018; van den Brandt 2018a). Alternatively, it could look into how individual female subjects construct religiosity while negotiating institutional and cultural discourses that prioritise the secular (i.e., Fadil 2009, 2011; Jouili 2015; Schrijvers and Wiering 2018). And, of course, the topic can be understood through combining discursive analysis with experience-based investigations (i.e., Bracke 2008, 2011; Longman 2014; van den Brandt 2018b).

Research indeed often combines various approaches. Having outlined the above two main approaches, the discursive and the experiential, one could argue that the above case study of the feminist activism of BOEH! reflects both approaches. By unravelling BOEH!'s multi-layered notion and practice of emancipation, and the challenges BOEH! members face in activism and everyday life, I revealed that BOEH! needs to counter and negotiate a discursive configuration of the secular that has local specificities, but at the same time characteristics that extent beyond the particular political-geographical and social context being discussed. Since its central notion – that of women's autonomy – seems to be mobilised and monopolised by a discourse of the secular, the argumentative deadlock it finds itself in cannot be easily opened up. As feminist historian Joan Scott puts it succinctly, the story that the secular is beneficial for women's equality and sexual emancipation (and the religious is not) has 'enormous staying power' (2018, 14). However, despite the fact that it is often not easy to categorise individual research into *either* a discursive *or* an experiential project, I suggest it is helpful to analytically distinguish between

disciplinary differences, main analytical priorities, and political engagements, in order to better grasp what is going on in feminist studies of the secular.

In feminist epistemology and methodology, the analytical is not set apart from the political. Feminist analyses of the secular therefore are often not solely analytical, but also critical of existing gendered, ethnic, racial, economic, religious, or sexual inequalities. Feminist approaches sometimes formulate explicit visions on how to build theory and society differently. The recent discussions in feminist theory about the so-called 'postsecular' and the concept agency illustrate some of the tensions and disagreements that arise when feminist scholars from across different disciplines and contexts reflect on the secular, religion, gender, and sexuality in, and beyond, Europe. This brings us back to the work of Saba Mahmood and the responses sparked by her interventions. The following discussion will moreover help to further add to our understanding of some of the challenges faced by BOEH!

The postsecular turn as a challenge to feminist theory

Feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti presents what she calls 'the postsecular turn' as a challenge to European feminism, and explores this challenge from different but intersecting political and theoretical angles. She points at the impact of 'extremism' on the monotheistic religions in a global context as exemplifying the postsecular turn (2008, 2). Braidotti speaks of the work of Susan Harding (2000) and Saba Mahmood (2005), who get positioned as part of the postsecular turn from within feminism, as presenting a 'double challenge' for feminist theory. First, these feminist scholars defend the notion that women's agency, or political subjectivity, can be informed by, conveyed through, and supported by religiosity or spirituality. Second, according to Braidotti, this notion of agency has an important consequence, which is an understanding of political subjectivity as not necessarily critical in the negative sense of oppositional, and therefore as not solely or primarily aimed at the production of counter-subjectivities (2008, 1–2). Instead, the emergence of the subject can be conditioned on 'creative affirmation', through practices of affirmation (2008, 15–19). Braidotti's framing of this double challenge to feminist theory is enabled by her simultaneous representation of European feminists as 'the secular and rebellious daughters of the Enlightenment' (2008, 3). The rise of (conservative) religious voices in public discussions, including those of postcolonial or migrant minoritised individual subjects or communities, as well as feminist engagements with religious women's subjectivities, then come to be positioned as necessitating renewed feminist reflections. While Braidotti nuances and problematises her own representation of European feminists later on (2008, 7–14), the notion of feminism as tied to the secular sheds light on some of the challenges faced by BOEH! Not only for feminist theory, but also beyond that, voices such as BOEH! can be experienced as a challenge to the secular assumptions and sensibilities of actors in politics, policy-making, journalism, and social movements. Such secular assumptions and sensibilities are increasingly critically scrutinised for the ways in which they function in establishing not only patterns of thoughts but also specific emotions and bodies (Scheer, Johansen, and Fadil 2018).

A pivotal intervention in the discussions about religion, gender, and the secular is presented by the work of anthropologist Saba Mahmood. As already alluded to, the work of Saba Mahmood has been at the centre of discussions in feminist theory, especially since

the 2005 publication of *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. The *Politics of Piety* was explicitly formulated as a critical voice within feminist theory, notably against some of its structuring but invisible liberal and secular assumptions in theorisations about subjectivity and agency. Already in a 2001 essay with an ethnographic analysis of the urban women's mosque movement in Cairo, Mahmood brings to the fore the conceptual challenges that women's participation in Islamic movements pose for feminist scholars. Such religious movements often provoke among feminists boredom or uneasiness because they are associated with fundamentalism, women's oppression, and backwardness. In the essay, Mahmood focuses on conceptions of self, moral agency, discipline, and desire that emerge from her analysis of the practices of women in a non-liberal religious movement. Mahmood aims to make this analysis speak back to feminist 'normative assumptions about freedom and agency against which such a movement is held accountable' (2001, 203). While Mahmood explores (and explodes) feminist dominant notions of women's subjectivity, agency, and desire as necessarily tied to critical consciousness, resistance, and freedom, Braidotti locates these feminist concepts in a European feminism that is historically largely 'justified in claiming to be secular in the structural and historical sense of the term' (2008, 3).

This de-linking of subjectivity, agency, and desire from universalising assumptions about autonomy, resistance, and a desire for freedom, as argued for by Mahmood, continues to inform feminist theoretical debates. There are those scholars who took up some of the challenges outlined by Mahmood, as well as her conceptualisation of agency, in their studies of the lives of female subjects. Many of the scholars referred to in the above section can be considered as part of this trend. But also critique and reluctance regarding Mahmood's work have been articulated. The divide seems to be between those who emphasise the need to remain close to female subjects' lived intersectional experiences vis-à-vis those who emphasise the necessity of normative critique of gendered power structures first. While there exist many critically engaged responses to the challenge of 'the postsecular turn' from critical scholars across disciplines and political-geographical contexts (i.e., Waggoner 2006; Bangstad 2011; Savci 2016; Terman 2016), as an illustration, I briefly discuss one recent example.

Sociologist and historian Rosa Vasilaki (2016) explicitly questions the 'politics of postsecular feminism' that she sees exemplified by the recent work of Judith Butler, Rosi Braidotti, and Saba Mahmood in the shift they introduce to the 'non-rational', the 'non-secular', and the 'religious' (2016, 103). Vasilaki examines the conceptualisations of religion, secularism, and agency in postsecular feminist theory. She affirms the necessity of rethinking agency beyond Eurocentric theorising and of interrogating the ideological uses of secularism in current Western contexts and its processes of demonising Islamic societies and communities. However, she poses questions about whether the postsecular conceptualisations of agency, in relation to religion as a context for subject-formation, 'can have genuine subversive, counter-hegemonic, conceptual and political effects' (2016, 106). In addition, Vasilaki argues that postsecular feminist theorising may risk the neutralisation of critical social theory itself due to a reluctance to account for the political ramifications of separating oppositional consciousness from social change, as well as autonomy from agency. Religious practices and subjectivity, she writes, often do not manifest themselves as counter-hegemonic and enabling, but instead rather as central

mechanisms of social reproduction with real exclusions and inequalities, especially towards women (2016, 117–119).

In this critique, Vasilaki positions recent writings of Judith Butler (2008), Rosi Braidotti (2008), and Saba Mahmood (2005) as exemplifying the politics of postsecular feminism. However, this positioning needs to be unpacked and critiqued. Only Braidotti relies on the term 'postsecular' in order to analyse current political-public debates and to situate feminist theory within religious and secular demarcations. Butler and Mahmood do not evoke the concept, but instead criticise secular formations in politics and academia and its (sexualised and gendered) conceptualisations of Islam and Muslims. In relation to the study of the secular, there are moreover important theoretical differences between Braidotti on the one hand, who assumes an a priori existence of the categories of the religious and the secular, but goes on to question the notion of feminism as located exclusively in the secular. Butler and Mahmood, on the other hand, aim at analysing the ways in which the categories of religion and the secular come into being in relation to gender and sexuality, temporality, and conditions of postcoloniality and imperialism. And while Braidotti and Mahmood reflect on the concept agency, Butler does not evoke it at all. As such, Vasilaki's conceptualisation of the 'politics of postsecular feminism' is theoretically flawed. However, her question about the social-political ramifications of recent conceptualisations of agency in relation to religion as a context for subject-formation is relevant, albeit it also needs unpacking. It is a recurring question, which I repeatedly heard being posed at feminist conferences and events, and in gender studies classrooms. Unfortunately, the question is often problematically formulated through conflating the scholarly aim of trying to *understand* certain phenomena and subjects with an apologetic attitude or even the aim of *promoting* the phenomena or subjectivities being studied. This conflation results from a too easy collapsing of the analytical and the political aspects of feminist research, and confuses the various domains that are potential targets of critique. An uncritical political and social support for the phenomenon or subjectivities being studied cannot be a priori assumed when examining the work of Braidotti, Butler, Mahmood, and other feminist scholars in the study of the secular. This seems to be exactly the mistake Vasilaki makes. She considers the reconceptualisation of agency she sees put forward by Braidotti, Butler, and Mahmood as meant to *replace* supposedly Eurocentric narratives of resistance and emancipation (2016, 105). However, trying to understand the formation of religious subjects within their particular contexts is not the same as promoting such subjectivities in terms of a normative social-political model.

Moreover, a proper distinction between approaches on the secular such as the one presented by Braidotti on the one hand, and those presented by Butler and Mahmood on the other, is important. It enables us to see, for example, that the work of BOEH! can be related to both: first, its transversal feminism destablises the presumed chasm between secular and religious actors; and second, the controversy it generates can be read as not just revealing but simultaneously constructing and reinforcing secular assumptions and sensibilities. The example of BOEH! therefore demonstrates that it is crucial to make such analytical distinctions in order to be able to arrive at a more in-depth analysis and multi-layered understanding.

Such conflations – of reading analytical endeavours as ultimately apologetic projects; and of collapsing different approaches to the secular – often result in a rejection of critical reflections on subjectivity, autonomy, and agency, which is highly problematic. At the

same time, the question about how to interrogate 'arbitrary authorities and the social inequalities that they sustain' (2016, 105) remains a crucial one as well. While the question posed by Vasaliki refers to *religious* authorities and inequalities, recent feminist critical studies of the secular indeed prioritise a focus on configurations of authority, regulation, inequality, and discipline as emerging from and within the secular. This observation may lead one to ask whether space exists to critique religious formations of power and inequality, especially when related to postcolonial and migrant minoritised religious traditions and communities. Does the feminist study of the secular necessarily negate critical reflections on religious subjectivities, communities, and traditions? The obvious answer is: no. It is important to note that many of the authors referred to in the former as well as the next section accomplish to do both. They are not romanticising religious subjectivities, but may take up diverging approaches and foci in different research projects and publications. However, some do indeed prioritise a critical engagement with the secular, and have often good reasons to do so, not least the aim to contribute new approaches and insights that highlight formerly unrevealed disciplinary regimes and mechanisms of power and authority.

Next to doing the critical analyses, a number of feminist scholars across Western European contexts have started formulating normative responses in terms of rethinking political-public arrangements and policy-making. They take seriously the current status quo of a diversity of regimes of church-state relationships across European nation-states; the prioritising of the secular in much of Western European public discourse and policy-making; and the existence of multi-layered forms of oppression (originating from religious authority structures and/or secular states and secularised majority populations who target and marginalise women, postcolonial, or migrant minority communities, and LGBTQ's in particular ways). Not so much unlike activists such as the members of BOEH!, these scholars want to help envisioning society in a more inclusive manner, and therefore ask: what could be secular emancipatory social-political alternatives?

Political engagements: potential secular alternatives?

An important political question among feminist scholars studying religion may have been for quite some time the 'why-question', that is, 'why are women (still) religious?' (Hardacre 1997; Chong 2006). This question has been more related to Islam than to any other religious tradition (Bracke 2003). While the study of Muslim women has been on the rise cross-disciplinary, especially in Western Europe, the study of women in other religious communities and traditions has been considered of limited importance, and reserved for feminist scholars in religious studies and theology. After the interventions of Saba Mahmood (2005) and her critique of 'secular-liberal feminist assumptions' in the study of Islam, and Rosi Braidotti's (2008) opening up of feminist theory in the face of 'the post-secular turn', the main political question seems to have shifted from the 'why' to the 'how question' in feminist inquiries of the secular: how can we methodologically (re)conceptualise subjectivity and agency (Bracke 2008) and theoretically and politically deal with differences, equality, and rights? (i.e., Dillon 2010; Reilly 2011). A good example of mapping feminist responses to issues of religion, gender, and the public sphere is provided by political and social theorist Niahm Reilly, who ends her exploration with the following social-political 'how-question':

In a post-9/11 world, the combination of increasingly globalised and multicultural societies, the unsettling of the secularisation thesis, and postmodern critiques of the religious-secular binary all raise profound questions for *how* liberal democracies respond to more visible and more active religious actors in public life and in politics. The questions raised are especially salient to women and sexual and religious minorities who are often adversely targeted in the exercise of politicised, autocratic religious authority. (2014, 7, emphasis mine)

Feminist concerns with the 'how' explore and rethink the substance of difference (religious, cultural, racial, ethnic, gender, sexuality), the location of difference (individuals, communities), the quality of difference (biological or cultural, or, inescapable difference or difference by choice), legitimate forms of expression of difference in political and public spheres, and the 'management' of difference through political-legal arrangements and policy-making (democracy, human rights, group rights, equal opportunities). The differences among feminist scholars of the secular in terms of national and disciplinary backgrounds, and analytical approaches, result in disagreements when it comes to answering the 'how-question'. As political theorist Jonathan Dean and sociologist Kristin Aune put it in their introduction to their special issue about feminisms across Europe:

But feminist engagements with religion vary, often polarized between advocates of secularism who argue that religious groups should *not* be given formal rights (for instance, that religion should not be considered a protected equality characteristic like ethnicity or gender), and those who advocating *promoting* the rights of religious people through formal means and funds. In Europe, these debates vary by country, reflecting different church-state relationships and the dominance of different religious groups. (2015, 388, editors' emphasis)

Moreover, disagreements emerge from diverging assumptions about women's rights and emancipation, and about the social-political structure that best guarantees them. In 2015, the how-question was further taken up by feminist scholars based in various European countries, Kristin Aune, Mia Lövheim, Alberti Georgi, Teresa Toldy and Terhi Utriainen, by organising the workshops 'Is Secularism Bad for Women?'. In the introduction of the special issue that resulted from these workshops, they contend that indeed, some forms of secularism are bad for some religious women. They therefore formulate a notion of 'good' secularism: 'If "secularism" enables tolerance, respect, religious freedom and treats the voices of diverse groups of religious women as just as important as those of men, it is surely good for women' (Aune et al. 2017). In the same special issue, Niahm Reilly (2017) and Line Nyhagen (2017) took up the challenge of further specifying what could be considered 'good' secularism. According to Reilly (2017), 'secular thinking' needs to be recast in order to affirm religious subjectivities and norms in emancipatory feminist political projects. She takes the Malaysian Sisters in Islam and the transnational Musawah Framework for Action as starting points (2017, 488–490) for rethinking and recasting 'secular thinking for postsecular emancipatory feminist practice from a non-Eurocentric perspective' (2017, 492). Such a thinking and practice would comprise: recognising context-specific, gendered oppressions arising from either 'enforced secularism' or religious norms; recognising the generative role of religious norms and values across private life and the public sphere; holding that gender equality and human rights are applicable within religious communities and across private life and the public sphere; and upholding and strengthening constitutional democracy as essential to support the articulation of progressive religious interpretations (2017, 491–492). Sociologist Line Nyhagen (2017) analyses the ways in which a number of feminist organisations and initiatives

across European contexts frame 'religion' and its relationship to women's emancipation. She urges scholars, social movements, and policy-makers to take a 'lived religion' approach seriously. Such an approach would not only make a patriarchal-institutional analysis, but would also ask important empirical questions 'about how religious and secular women actually live their lives and whether and how they understand, resist, reject or embrace notions such as "women's rights" and "gender equality"' (2017, 507).

A final example of providing a normative answer to current debates about women, religion, and the secular can be found in religious studies scholars Kim Knibbe and Brenda Bartelink's contribution to an edited volume on religion in Europe that aims at reaching out to policy makers. In their chapter, Knibbe and Bartelink (forthcoming) argue that the production of polarisation between religious and secular actors is undesirable as it stands in the way of perceiving and hearing what women need. Instead, they propose that when politicians and policymakers aim to 'empower' women belonging to religious minority communities, their analysis of gender relations should take into account the relationships of power in which women are embedded, including the majority – minority dynamics in which women find themselves (forthcoming, 126). The authors warn that the assumption that the emancipation of women and sexual minorities requires their exiting from religion is not only simplistic, but it also creates new forms of exclusion:

> … it does not recognize women's agency and the ways in which religious traditions enable women to shape their lives and relationships. Furthermore, it puts women from minority groups in an impossible position in terms of their own networks and communities. (2019, 137)

The discussions outlined in the above sections demonstrate disciplinary and methodological differences, diverging opinions on the political stakes of feminist research, and the difficulties and uneasiness that are and remain part of feminist theoretical reflections on religion (and religious women and LGBTQ's). In (Western) Europe, as a context in which many social movements have memories of anti-clerical struggles, these issues might be more at the forefront than anywhere else.

Conclusion

To summarise the work of BOEH!, one could say that a local theory and practice of emancipation emerges in BOEH!'s activism and argumentation in opposition to and through destabilising multiple public narratives: namely those assumptions about an incompatibility of religion, especially Islam, with women's autonomy and freedoms, and feminist identities. Through building transversal feminist activism across difference and targeting multiple audiences, also the assumption of a per definition lack of connections and shared visions among Muslim and non-Muslim women is problematised. BOEH's notion of emancipation is based on an understanding of the necessity of alliances among different women and of learning from local feminist histories, the center-staging of women's freedom of choice, and an openness to individual religious or secular trajectories. This local theory of emancipation puts connectedness, transversality, and innovation central.

In order to push the analysis further, the work of BOEH! can be considered in dialogue with feminist theorisations of the secular. Similar to feminist scholars who pose questions

about how to envision alternative and inclusive political-societal futures (Aune et al. 2017; Nyhagen 2017; Reilly 2017), BOEH! does not provide an easy answer. However, practicing feminist activism in new and unexpected ways, BOEH! contributes to opening up discussions and creating new understandings about women's empowerment in multicultural societies. The connections to other women across differences in past and present, and the potential connection to religious traditions and gendered practices, combined with liberal human rights argumentation and an emphasis on freedom of choice, opens up discursive space that potentially enables new and different emancipatory ideas, practices, and self-understandings relating to various forms of agency, religious/secular subjectivity, gendered embodiment, and citizenship. However, as also clearly demonstrated above, the potentiality of opening up new horizons is seriously hampered by BOEH!'s difficult in-between position: its feminist critique and creativity are (near to) illegible to an important (since politically and culturally powerful) part of the audience it aims to reach. This is predominantly due to the argumentative deadlock in which BOEH! finds itself – a deadlock that can only be understood through critically tracing glocal configurations of the secular. BOEH!'s reliance on a liberal notion of autonomy, even though it aims to open up to religious traditions, and religious female embodiment and belonging, cannot break through a locally dominant liberal understanding of autonomy that is saturated by a history rejecting all that is considered 'religious'.

At the same time, it could be argued that BOEH! is also in some ways speaking back to academic feminist discussions about the postsecular. In relation to Rosa Vasilaki's (2016) intervention in the feminist postsecular discussions, BOEH! demonstrates that religious practices and subjectivity can indeed be counterhegemonic. However, for BOEH! members, oppositional feminist consciousness remains tied to the possibility of social change, in the same way Vasilaki also envisions it. And where Rosi Braidotti (2008) presents the postsecular as a challenge to feminism, in my reading, BOEH! points at a challenge beyond the rethinking of agency and political subjectivity – that is: how to rethink the challenges to and dismissal of women's agency and political subjectivity when informed or supported by religiosity or spirituality? This question shifts the challenge from a focus on women's religiosity to critically rethinking the *political, social, and religious-secular conditions* that make particular forms of women's agency and political subjectivity legible, or (near to) illegible. Thus, the question would be: what are the conditions in which specific (counter-)voices, practices, and subjectivities are il/legibilised?

Having foregrounded Belgian feminist activist voices and experiences, and situating them within larger feminist theoretical-political discussions about the secular, gender, and emancipation, with this article I hope to contribute to further rethinking the secular through interdisciplinary feminist critiques. There is a continuous need for dismantling binary oppositions/contradictions in terms of religion-secularity and differences among women. Focusing on the emancipatory aspects of feminist theory, and the potentialities of transversal feminist activism, may have revealed the necessity of academic-activist thinking shared emancipatory futures.

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Nella van den Brandt finished her doctoral thesis at the University of Gent, Belgium in 2014. She works as a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Utrecht University, the Netherlands. She published in international journals such as *Culture and Religion*, *Social Compass*, and *Social Movement Studies*. Her current research focuses on religion/secularity, gender, media and culture, and religious conversion. She is managing editor of the journal *Religion and Gender*.

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