

# Freedom of Religion and Freedom from Religion in the Context of Contemporary Anti-Gender Politics

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary world, the topic of women's rights has often been employed and manipulated in debates on religious freedom. In her article Rola El-Husseini shows that whereas Western politicians have promoted liberal values, including religious freedom, internationally, they have rarely upheld these principles domestically. Often, these values have been applied selectively, leaving Muslim communities – especially Muslim women – without the protections usually afforded by liberal democracy. This contribution discusses how opposition to women's rights unfolds in contemporary Poland, where the Catholic Church has been instrumental in opposing women's and minority rights. In the conclusion, it poses the question of whether we truly need more freedom of religion, or whether maybe what we should strive for is more freedom from religion and a firmer division between the state and the church, indiscriminately of what type of church or religious belief this may be. Such a perspective is rooted in the recognition that so far every religion has contributed to infringing women's rights, and establishing and reinforcing social hierarchies.

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KEYWORDS

women's rights, reproductive rights, religion, religious freedom, anti-gender politics, populism, femonationalism, Poland

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DOI

<https://doi.org/10.32422/cjir.1596>

## INTRODUCTION

In her illuminating text Dr. Rola El-Husseini shows how the issue of women's rights is being used and abused in contemporary debates on religious freedom by various political regimes, including both autocratic theocracies such as Iran and liberal democracies such as France or the US. She contends that while Western politicians are quick to advocate for liberal values on the global stage, they fail to apply these principles consistently within their own countries. More specifically, they implement them selectively, often excluding Muslim communities, and particularly Muslim women, from the protections typically provided by liberal democracy. Moreover, the comparison between specific countries, such as Iran and the US, suggests that liberal regimes do not always offer more protections for discriminated groups: whereas trans rights have become a staple of American culture wars and some states have severely restricted access to trans health care, in Iran medical transition is available for persons experiencing gender dysphoria, even though trans persons still face discrimination in the country.

According to El-Husseini the falseness of the West's claim to be the center of rationality, enlightenment, and moral superiority is starkly exposed in its handling of women's rights and religious freedoms. The double standards and hypocrisy in the treatment of these issues in countries such as France or Germany are clearly visible as the regulations aimed at "protecting" vulnerable women frequently serve as a thin veil for racism and Islamophobia. In these contexts, women's rights and religious freedom are often weaponized to criticize non-Western societies, casting them as deviations from Western norms. The scholar cautions that such hypocritical actions not only alienate migrants and Muslim communities in Western countries but also fuel cynicism and distrust toward the West and liberal democracy among populations in the Global South.

El-Husseini's argument aligns with a broader body of literature discussing how, in recent decades, the concept of women's rights has been politicized and used to serve the interests of those in power (E.G. FARRIS 2017; SAGER – MOULINARI 2018; STOLTZ ET AL. 2021). As gender equality and women's rights have gradually (and often reluctantly) been acknowledged as essential components of a well-functioning democratic system, politicians are increasingly eager to present themselves as defenders of women. And more often than not they are happy to pay lip service to liberal values and group rights

without acting on them in any meaningful way. The initial results of our Horizon Europe project Co-Creating Inclusive Intersectional Democratic Spaces Across Europe (CCINDLE), which includes seven European contexts, among them Sweden, Belgium, Spain and the UK, confirm the arguments put forward by El-Husseini (KARLBERG ET AL. 2024). In the Swedish context, there is a growing tendency among the right to use femonationalist arguments, and a trend toward co-opting feminist rhetoric to promote xenophobic and anti-immigrant agendas is clearly visible. Right-wing politicians, such as representatives of the Sweden Democrats, readily employ the concept of gender equality as a “Swedish value” to oppose intersectional feminism and promote racist and xenophobic ideologies. They instrumentalize women’s rights and gender equality to justify policies and discourses that marginalize Muslim and immigrant communities, casting men as a threat to the society and women as victims in need of being saved and monitored (E.G. MULINARI 2016). Within this context religious freedom and, indeed, human rights are marginalized and readily sacrificed in the name of “security” without encountering much societal resistance.

## **WOMEN’S RIGHTS AND RELIGION IN THE “SECOND WORLD”: THE CASE OF POLAND**

As someone from the “Second World” – namely from a post-socialist country perpetually striving to catch up with the West – I need no convincing that representatives of well-developed Western European democracies often harbor a sense of superiority towards the rest of the world. This feeling of superiority is also evident among certain groups of Western feminists and advocates of women’s rights. Moreover, double standards and hypocrisy are not uncommon among politicians, no matter their political affiliations, and in recent decades the issue of women’s rights has become a convenient vehicle for virtue signaling and lecturing countries that “lag behind.” Simultaneously, my geopolitical positionality raises questions as to where post-socialist and post-Soviet countries are located in this debate: are we part of the West, as our economic development and membership in the European Union would suggest? Or are we closer to the authoritarian regimes in the Global South? Between 2016 and 2023 Poland was the fastest autocratizing country in Europe: the then ruling right-wing coalition managed to take over the public media, effectively dismantled the independent judiciary and seized control over large parts of civil society (E.G. BILL 2020; SZULEKA 2017).

When it comes to reproductive and minority rights, my country falls behind all the countries discussed by El-Husseini, including Iran. Poland has minimal protection for trans persons, and never introduced marriage equality or legislation allowing civil partnerships for LGBTQ couples. As of 2020, Polish women have lost the right to abortion in cases of severe fetal malformation, which was previously one of the three exceptions to the country's strict abortion ban (apart from rape and danger to the mother's life). The ongoing harassment of LGBTQ persons and the further tightening of the corresponding law in 2020 reflect the enduring political influence of the Catholic Church in Poland. Representatives of the Church have consistently advocated for more restrictive reproductive regulations, arguing that God's teachings should take precedence over democratic decision-making processes. In 2023 the chairman of the Polish Bishops' Conference, Stanisław Gądecki, declared that *"in the case of intrinsically unjust laws, such as those permitting abortion and euthanasia, one must never comply with them, nor participate in shaping public opinion favorable to such laws, nor express support for them in voting"* (GADECKI 2024). While the Polish Catholic Church is often credited with contributing to the process of democratization in the 1980s, after the transition its representatives have claimed that individual rights and women's rights, and indeed the democratic process of deliberation, endanger the country's Catholic identity and values (MISHTAL 2015).

Thus, while I fully agree with the author's analysis of how women's rights and gender equality have been appropriated by political forces in Western countries, I have concerns about some of the assumptions that underpin her argument. Framing religious rights in terms of individual women's freedom to worship, dress, and live as they choose works well in the text as a strategy to highlight the double standards in enforcing personal freedoms in many Western nations, such as France. However, religious freedom is never solely about an individual's right to choose, is it? The deep connections between religion – as a system of beliefs and religious institutions – and political authority make it impossible to separate personal beliefs from issues of identity, belonging, and power. While the nature of the connection between the state and the church differs between Iran and Poland or the US, it still dictates how women can exercise their freedoms in each of these countries.

The Polish case also shows that the political influence of a specific religious authority is not just an expression of people's religious beliefs. As the moral authority of the Catholic Church wanes, especially among the young generation of Poles, its political influence remains relatively strong due to the conservative views of a part of the political elites and the enormous resources that the Church has access to, including its own media outlets, civil society organizations and charity initiatives. Moreover, as shown by El-Husseini, even in France, which prides itself on the separation between the church and state, the famous "*laïcité*" can be interpreted as a form of Christian hegemony, and thus the country should be rather seen as a "*Catho-laïque*" regime enforcing a specific cultural and religious identity and establishing a clear hierarchy between different religious traditions. In other words, freedom of religion is not personal but political and should be analyzed as such.

## RELIGION AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE ERA OF ANTI-GENDER POLITICS

Keeping this in mind is even more crucial today, as we witness a global reversal of the long-standing trend of secularization. Secularization, characterized by the decline of religious influence and practice, reduced religious affiliation, and the diminished role of religious institutions in public and political life, has shaped many societies over the past decades. While it is often linked to Western countries, where secular values, scientific reasoning, and individualism gained prominence, this process also occurred in Central and Eastern Europe, former Soviet states, and various nations across the Global South. In recent years, however, we can observe a tendency to reinstate the political power of religious institutions in many countries across the globe, including Brazil, India, Israel, Poland and the US. The Brazilian activists and scholars Petra Costa and Alessandra Orofino <sup>(2024)</sup> observe that in order to understand the crisis of democracy that we witness in so many different contexts, including the Brazilian one, we need to account for the growing power of religious groups that seek to establish theocratic regimes ruled by fundamentalists. These groups are the key actors within the global anti-gender movement, which includes religious fundamentalists, ultraconservative civil society activists and right-wing politicians who oppose the very idea that gender is socially constructed and malleable, and challenge women's and minority rights, marriage equality, trans rights and gender studies.

Depending on the context, anti-gender actors may be openly anti-feminist – like the Polish right-wing politicians – or claim that they are the true defenders of women against racialized immigrant men and gender ideologues, as is the case in Sweden. As I argue together with Agnieszka Graff in our book *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (2022), the political influence of ultraconservative xenophobic forces is growing globally because of the opportunistic synergy between religious fundamentalists and right-wing populist parties. While these actors might disagree on other issues, they align on their resistance to changes in traditional gender norms and sexual freedoms, seeing them as a threat to their respective cultural, political, or religious interests. Religious authorities join forces with populist political leaders who use anti-gender rhetoric to gain votes from traditionalist segments of society and also to strengthen the moral division between the corrupt elites and the people. Simultaneously, far-right nationalists readily adopt the language of “protecting the family” and the traditional gender order to appeal to religious or socially conservative voters more broadly because such language serves well their primary goals, which focus on anti-immigration policies.

Moreover, in Central Eastern Europe and the Global South, anti-gender actors routinely demonize women’s rights as “foreign” and “alien” to the local tradition and promote the view that gender equality and minority rights are a form of Western colonialism, an “Ebola from Brussels” imported to Central Eastern Europe or Africa to manipulate, brainwash and ultimately control the people (KOROLCZUK – GRAFF 2018). To this end they readily silence local feminist voices and obliterate feminist histories of opposition and emancipation. Thus, while we rightly criticize the West for its hypocrisy and double standards, we should also acknowledge that the wave of critique of the West that El-Husseini observes, comes from both: the disillusioned populations of the Global South and East, and the right-wing actors who happily fuel this frustration and disillusion.

We live in a world where the pressure from religious institutions on individuals to conform to specific norms and behaviors is, in many contexts, growing rather than dissipating. People seldom enter religious communities on their own accord as adults; the vast majority of us are born into them and usually there are penalties for leaving. Whether these penalties are relatively insignificant, such as enduring the scorn from family

members during Christmas dinners, or severe, such as having our health or life endangered, freedom of religion can be achieved only if there is a viable option of choosing to leave it. While El-Husseini rightly highlights that Western observers often view Muslims, particularly Muslim women, as passive victims of oppression rather than active agents, we should not overlook the broader question of how modern states can simultaneously uphold both freedom of religion and freedom from religion.

In her text El-Husseini references the UN Declaration of Human Rights, stressing that religious freedom is “*the fundamental human right of everyone to worship, practice, and observe their religious beliefs, so long as those practices do not infringe on the rights of others*” (emphasis mine). Ideally, it should be understood by all that freedom of religion does not include the right to limit the freedom of others. In reality, however, the representatives of the Polish Catholic Church are deeply convinced that only a total ban on abortion will secure full religious freedom for Catholics in the country. Similarly, American evangelicals and Iranian ayatollahs firmly believe that recognizing women’s rights or LGBTQ rights infringes upon their own religious freedoms. As shown by El-Husseini, neither democratic institutions nor liberal traditions have managed to fully eliminate the tendency to use religion as a basis for inciting discrimination and violence. In Western countries such as France, the separation of the state and the church is still underpinned and heavily influenced by the legacy of Christian domination. With this in mind, one may ask a question: whether we truly need more freedom of religion, or whether maybe what we should strive for is more freedom from religion and a firmer division between the state and the church, indiscriminately of what type of church or religious belief this may be – not in the name of “*laïcité*” or a naïve universalism, but out of the recognition that, in practice, so far every religion has contributed to infringing the rights of certain groups, and to establishing and reinforcing social hierarchies.

**P.S.**

In 2022, I was invited to take part in a theater production titled *Radio Mariia*, which was co-written and directed by the renowned Ukrainian theater director and performance artist Roza Sarkisian. My role involved portraying myself – a Polish sociologist and feminist activist – in a future

scenario set in 2035, where I gave an interview discussing how the Catholic Church in Poland had lost its status as a political institution and moral authority. Since this vision is still far from reality, I had no script for my role; I had to envision a future without the Catholic Church, a cornerstone of Polish history and identity for centuries. Growing up in a working-class, deeply Catholic family in rural northeastern Poland, I saw firsthand how religion can serve as both a profound source of hope and a cause of despair and constraints for women. Thus, my task proved to be an exercise that was both terrifying and exhilarating: I was encouraged to imagine a world where women were liberated from religious authority and where people could explore diverse forms of community and spirituality beyond the strict confines of Catholicism. The play turned out to be one of the longest played productions in the recent history of the theater. Apparently, many Poles shared our desire to imagine a future without the Catholic Church.

I wanted to finish my short commentary with a personal story because, as a feminist scholar and activist, I strongly believe that recognizing and articulating our positionality promotes dialogue and enhances the understanding of our perspectives. I am confident that my views are grounded in established scientific knowledge, and my research and analytical skills, yet I also acknowledge that my background, experiences, and ideals shaped my stance on the issues at hand. My knowledge and my personal experience have taught me that the terms “freedom” and “religion” seldom go well together because they often represent conflicting values and interests, especially when religion plays a significant role in public life or politics in a specific country or region. And when you add “women’s rights” to the mix, it becomes even more problematic, as many feminist scholars and activists have already shown. On an individual level, most systems of belief have established moral codes and doctrines that followers are expected to adhere to, as these dictate what behaviors, lifestyles, or expressions are (not) acceptable. On the collective level, religious systems are usually structured around authority figures or texts that demand adherence to specific beliefs and practices, leaving little space for freedom and dissent. And in most contexts women bear the brunt of these restrictions.



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## NOTE

*The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Korolczuk acknowledges that her work on this article was supported by grants from the European Commission project CCINDLE (grant no. 101061256).*

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