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"Not Us, but You Have Changed!" Discourses of Difference and Belonging among Haredi Women

Feminist research into the position and participation of women in contemporary fundamentalist and traditionalist identity movements shows how essentialist ideologies of sexual difference are often deployed in critique of western secular liberal feminism. In this article the author draws a comparison between discourses of belonging according to studies of ba’alot teshuvah in the USA (female "returnees" to an Orthodox Jewish lifestyle), and her own interviews with "frum from birth" women (raised as haredi) in the strictly Orthodox Jewish community of Antwerp, Belgium. Whereas for the former, a rhetoric of choice, essentialism, and religious ideologies of female superiority appeared important, for the frum-born women, gender is more a question of orthopraxis and religious role equivalence. Nevertheless, the author argues that for the strictly Orthodox Jewish diasporic community in question, an increase in gender conservatism, with particular notions of female sexuality and modesty, goes hand in hand with isolationism vis-à-vis the surrounding secular society.

Key words: Antwerp Jewry · fundamentalism · gender conservatism · haredim · religious agency · strictly Orthodox Jewish women

La recherche féministe concernant la position et la participation des femmes dans les mouvements d’identité fondamentalistes et traditionalistes contemporains montre combien les idéologies essentialistes de la différence sexuelle sont souvent soumises aux critiques du féminisme libéral et séculier occidental. Dans cet article, l’auteure établit une comparaison entre les discours d’appartenance en se référant à des études portant sur les ba’alot teshuvah aux États-Unis (des femmes "revenant" à un style de vie juif orthodoxe), par comparaison à ses propres interviews avec des femmes "frum de naissance" (connues comme haredi) dans la stricte communauté juive orthodoxe d’Anvers en Belgique. Alors que pour les premières, un discours de choix, d’essentialisme et d’idéologie religieuse de supériorité féminine paraît important, le genre est davantage une question d’orthopraxie et d’équivalence de rôles religieux pour les femmes "nées frum". Cependant, l’auteure avance que pour la communauté diasporique strictement juive orthodoxe en question, une augmentation du conservatisme de genre, avec des notions particulières en termes de sexualité et de modestie féminine, va de pair avec de l’isolement par rapport à la société séculière environnante.

Mots-clés: action religieuse · communauté juive anversoise · conservatisme de genre · femmes strictement juives orthodoxes · fondamentalisme · haredim

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Women and Contemporary Identity Politics of Belonging

In the past decade, feminist research has shown both a growing interest and outright concern for the position of women in contemporary identity movements that propagate patriarchal gender ideologies (e.g., Sahgal and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Moghadam, 1994; Howland, 1999; Reed, 2002). These studies show how a particular kind of gender politics serves as one of the main characteristics of various fundamentalisms and traditionalisms in the global arena: whether the identity of the group is defined in terms of religion, nation, ethnicity or culture—women often come to symbolize its boundaries.

This “burden of representation” is accompanied by the regulation of women’s behavior according to a construction of femininity related to notions of tradition, morality, maternity, purity, chastity, modesty, privacy, domesticity, etc. As the figurative and literal reproducers of the collective, the control of women primarily concerns their sexuality, from which extends varying patriarchal measures. These may be expressed in patterns of seclusion or separatism, such as a demarcation between the feminine private and the masculine public sphere. Positions of ultimate authority, whether it concerns political power, or access to knowledge, such as the control over the interpretation of sacred texts and law, are mostly relegated to the hands of men. This gender differentiation is often founded on essentialist ideologies of the innate and exclusive sexual differences between women and men.

From marginal or minority movements within nation-states (e.g., the Belgium-based Arab European League), to official ideologies of the nation-state (e.g., Iran) or transnational “unholy alliances” between Catholic and Islamist fundamentalists, and from Hindu nationalism to the New Christian Right, a main feature of these many traditionalisms and fundamentalisms is their critique of western, secular and liberal gender equality, bent on a restoration of patriarchal hetero-normativity. This growing cross-cultural phenomenon proves many a challenge for contemporary feminist analysis and assessment.

Agency and Empowerment

Feminist methodological premises, such as taking women’s lives as the starting point for research, have introduced important correctives to earlier androcentric approaches in the study of fundamentalisms (e.g., Bauer, 1997). General trends within feminist theory including attention to diversity among women, intersectionality, postmodern relativism and self-reflexivity, anti-orientalism and postcolonial critique furthermore mark a shift from the premise of women as mere “victims” to that of “agents” in movements that propagate and enforce gender conservative norms. In the first place, the sheer historical, political and contextual variability in fundamentalist identity politics necessitates moving beyond the simplistic “cultural dope” or “false consciousness” paradigm in the portrayal and analysis of women in fundamentalisms. Whether—depending on structural conditions—they
collude, consent, accommodate or may bargain with patriarchal hegemony, a closer look reveals that as all human beings, women in fundamentalist contexts actively negotiate their practices and identities, to the extent that they may claim spaces or create possibilities of empowerment, autonomy, or control.

For example, some research shows how gender-role differentiation based on patriarchal ideologies of sexual difference—whether attributed to nature or “divinely ordained”—in a number of settings is embraced by women in view of a (re)evaluation of familial life, motherhood, yet also “remoralizing” or the domestication of men (e.g., Brasher, 1998). Sex segregation may enhance group solidarity among women, both in the realm of the private, as well as in the public sphere (e.g., Bacchetta, 1999). In practice, boundaries may be redefined when separation and modesty rules allow women to enter the public world of education and paid or voluntary work. Veiling practices, for example, show tremendous versatility cross-culturally, from the symbolic public affirmation of female Islamic identity to being pragmatically instrumentalized in order to increase women’s mobility.

Other studies point to the apparent paradox of women who do not seem to “practice what they preach”, by taking on public activist or even leadership roles within identity movements that propagate femininity ideals of privacy, modesty and a “return to the hearth”. Klatch (1994), in her study of women involved in the New Right in the USA, for example, notes how these “non-feminist” women who deride liberal equality feminism, nevertheless found their activism in their female gender identity. Thus, although women in what appear to be patriarchal identity movements throughout the world often subscribe to a rhetoric of feminism as one of the root causes of the ills of contemporary society—be it a “mainstream liberalism” version or a colonial “western” import product—they may be involved in what from the point of view of the feminist researcher might well be interpreted as “feminist” practices or strategies.

Therefore, beyond the “agency” framework and the identification of the practical gains and empowerment for fundamentalist women, the question can be raised as to the possible convergences between fundamentalist and feminist agendas, and its impact on the further decolonization and de-secularization of contemporary transnational feminist theory. Inspiring and provocative is the burgeoning research on the compatibility of Islam(isms) and feminisms within the context of postcolonial critique, yet also those studies on western liberal secular democracies, in particular involving the phenomenon where women at some time in their lives choose—as either converts or returnees—to take on religious conservative, traditionalist or fundamentalist identities (e.g., Manning, 1999; Franks, 2001).

In this article I look at one such religious fundamentalist identity movement within the context of western society. Based on existing research and my own interviews, I analyze the way strictly Orthodox Jewish—also known as haredi—women discursively appropriate ideologies of sexual difference and legitimize traditionalist gender-role differentiation. By comparing “frum by birth” (“frum” is Yiddish for “pious”) women with returnees, I will question feminist interpretation in terms of agency and
empowerment and finally briefly reflect on rapprochement between fundamentalisms and feminisms.

Jewish Fundamentalisms and Gender

Research on gender issues in Jewish fundamentalist and traditionalist movements remains relatively limited compared to its Abrahamic counterparts in Islam and Christianity. As with the modern politicization of both the latter, "fundamentalism" is a much debated term in its applicability to Jewish religious tradition and practice. Nevertheless, as an analytical category, fundamentalism is commonly employed for past and present varieties of Jewish identity politics that in one way or another make claim to some "fundamentals" of tradition which apply to the organization of the personal, social and political sphere, including that of gender ideology. The first main form of Jewish fundamentalism is religious right-wing Zionism, embodied in messianic settler movements such as Gush Emunim. The second main group that is the subject of this article is referred to as the haredim, from Hebrew, meaning "those who tremble (at the word of the Lord)". This is used as a generic and emic term for those strictly (also often referred to with the more pejorative adjective "ultra") Orthodox Jews who are staunchly traditionalist in their abidance to halakhah or rabbinical law, regulating and completely infusing their daily lives. As a transnational phenomenon, haredism compromises various strictly Orthodox Jewish communities throughout the world. This includes the Hasidim, followers of a charismatic religious movement that dates back to 18th-century eastern Europe, and who belong to several transnational communities in Israel and throughout the global Jewish diaspora. Contemporary Hasidic communities such as the Satmar, the Lubavitcher, the Ger, and the Belzer, all have their own distinct genealogies, traditions and identities. Another main group is the Mitnagdim, early opponents of the Hasidim in Lithuania, and initiators of the yeshiva movement.

Patriarchal hetero-normative gender ideology in strictly Orthodox Jewish identity politics derives from traditionalist interpretations of biblical and rabbinical sources that prescribe very different roles and identities for women and men. Similar to other fundamentalist gender politics, womanhood is defined in terms of reproductive capacities; her primary role is that of wife, mother and housekeeper. Religious law (halakhah) is invoked to account for gender role differentiation in which the paradigmatic forms of orthodox Jewish religiosity, such as the mitzvah (commandment) of Talmud study and primary involvement and responsibilities in communal religious prayer and ritual, are the providence of men. Among others, haredi women may not become ordained as rabbis, not become dayans (judges), nor bear witness in rabbinical courts. They are not counted in the minyan, the quorum of ten adult men (over the age of bar mitzvah) required for communal prayer service, nor may they lead prayer.

Gender inequalities also permeate religious family law (controlling reproduction, affiliation and descent) as in marriage, divorce and inheritance.
Although today haredi girls do receive religious education, their knowledge of rabbinic law is limited to those aspects relevant for their future role as mother and housekeeper. Finally, central to the very definition of haredi female religiosity are norms and rites surrounding women’s bodies and their sexuality. Especially upon marriage, women must abide to modesty norms pertaining to both their behavior and demeanor. They (and their husbands) must practice monthly sexual abstinence during their menses and seven days thereafter followed by ritual purification (according to the laws of niddah or family purity).

**Gender Ideologies among Returnees: Reconstructing the Self**

Scholarship on women in Jewish fundamentalist discourses and communities has, to date, not been extensive, and has primarily taken place where the majority of strictly Orthodox Jewry live (Israel and North America). Research on haredi women in the Diaspora (published in English) has primarily been carried out in the USA, and usually focuses on the Lubavitcher, the one particular Hasidic group involved in proselytizing or missionary “outreach” work, aimed at bringing secular Jews back to an Orthodox lifestyle.¹ Thus, Lynn Davidman (1991) and Debra Kaufman’s social scientific work (1993) deals with ba’alot teshuvah (Heb., pl., female, those who have “repented”) in the USA, women who have “returned” or become “newly Orthodox women” at some point in their lives.²

Characteristic of the trend in feminist research on fundamentalist women noted earlier, both Davidman and Kaufman’s studies take the voices and experience of newly Orthodox Jewish women themselves as the starting point for (re)conceptualizing religious agency. Despite their different research populations among ba’alot teshuvah in the USA,³ both writers tackle the apparent paradox of why their research subjects have chosen (Kaufman) or are in the process of choosing (Davidman) to join a traditionalist religious community where women’s role is prescribed by patriarchal ideology. Similarly, in both studies it appears that the ba’alot teshuvah’s choices are (at least partly) motivated by what seems to be a crisis or discontent with their personal gender identity and by the desire to “belong” to a wider community.

According to Davidman (1991: 99), both the women she studied who became involved in a modern Orthodox synagogue, and the young secular Jewish women who participated in a re-socialization program at an institute of the Lubavitcher Hasidim, were clearly in search of an identity, “for a clear definition of who they were as people”. Noteworthy among the modern Orthodox Jewish women was a rhetoric of individual choice, a view of “the free construction of the self”, in explaining their return to Orthodoxy. From Kaufman’s (1993) interviews with secular-raised, yet already “converted” modern and more traditionalist Orthodox ba’alot teshuvah, including Hasidic women, similar identity politics of religion and ethnicity came to the fore.
Beyond the need for communal belonging, the returnees in both studies were clearly in search of a gender identity that was distinctly feminine. They longed for a well-defined role of themselves as women, wives and mothers and were deeply attracted by the conservative views provided by traditionalist religious discourse, such as arranged marriages (among the Lubavitcher) and the religious values that were placed on women’s role within the nuclear family. In Kaufman’s interviewees’ eyes, the dominance of the liberal feminist understanding of gender equality had eradicated the differences between women and men, to the detriment of certain feminine values such as motherhood, nurturance and relationality. The laws surrounding niddah or menstruation, for example, were not perceived as derogatory to women, as they often are outside of Orthodox Jewish communities. Instead they interpreted the laws as “giving structure, regulation, and control to them over their sexuality” (Kaufman, 1993: 9). The mitzvah of monthly ritual immersion in the mikveh (ritual bath) was also interpreted as a personal and communal religious experience, transcending the self and spiritually connecting to other Jewish women in history (Kaufman, 1993: 81).

The accommodation of and “resistance” towards the patriarchal framework of excluding women from the public realm of religion thus took place through valorizing and sacralizing women’s domestic and mothering role, their sexuality and bodies, and associating the “female” or “the feminine” with the spiritual and the sacred as central to Orthodoxy. Beyond the general tenet of Kaufman’s analysis that those women actively choosing to join a fundamentalist community would be empowered by doing so, the author even goes so far to suggest that her informants were “celebrating sexual difference”, akin to a particular strand of feminist thought. Kaufman compares her informants’ views—who themselves claim to be anti-liberal feminist in orientation—to what some writers have identified as contemporary “radical feminists” or “cultural radical feminists”. According to Kaufman (1993: 150), radical feminists like Adrienne Rich or Mary Daly similarly argue for a celebration of women’s culture and often harbor an essentialist gender ideology, stressing the unique biological, emotional, temperamental, psychological and spiritual qualities of women. Certain radical feminists also wish to revalorize the feminine and the possibility of “women’s culture”, such as women’s connection to “nature”, the centrality of sexuality, procreation, and mothering.

However, in this comparison of identity politics between ba’alot teshuvah and certain cultural radical feminists, Kaufman does note one crucial difference. Although the Orthodox Jewish women in her study accommodate patriarchal gender ideology in view of their “empowered” female identity construction, they do not challenge the male hegemony in the public legal community. Ba’alot teshuvah merely capitalize on the sex-segregated social structure that is proscribed by patriarchal ideology in order to find satisfaction in their gender role and own women’s culture (Kaufman, 1993: 125). Thus, in interpreting her research subjects’ motivations, Kaufman, on the one hand, shows how they gain forms of empowerment, control and freedom that can be identified as “feminist”, yet argues that their objectives do not amount to the overthrow of patriarchy.4
Gender Ideologies among the “Frum by Birth”: Difference as Orthopraxis

Haredi Women in Antwerp

In 1998–2000 I conducted 25 in-depth interviews with haredi women who self-identified as Hasidic (from different groups such as the Belz, Satmar, Ger, Viznitz, Slonim, etc.), “Hasidic-oriented” or Mitnagdic, all living in Antwerp and affiliated with the strictly Orthodox Jewish congregation “Machsike Hadass”. Their ages ranged from 38 to 65 years old and they self-identified from “fairly involved” to the status of high-profile spokespeople within the community: as a rebbetsin (wife of a rabbi) or involved in community activities such as teaching, voluntary work or counseling. With some exceptions, their financial status could be described as middle-class, from relatively comfortable to well-off, with husbands either similarly at work within the religious community or in a range of occupations ranging from ICT to family businesses and the diamond industry.

Although my traditionalist Jewish research population was diverse in terms of their countries of origin and precise religious affiliation, all the women I interviewed were “frum from birth”, having been raised in religiously observant families. So although some women claimed to have intensified their religious observance throughout their lives, none came from a secular upbringing, to “return” at some later life stage. These wholly different backgrounds from those of the ba’alot teshuvah studied by Debra Kaufman and Lynn Davidman, I argue, may be accountable for some notable differences in the way these haredi women discursively constructed their identities.

Accounting for Difference

All the frum-born haredi women of the Antwerp Orthodox Jewish community unanimously put forward a gender ideology of “equivalence”, by claiming that men and women were different, being created differently by God, having different obligations and responsibilities according to halakhah, yet by no means could one be conceived of as inferior or superior to the other. Gender founded in sexual difference was primarily expressed in the institution of marriage following the commandment of procreation (incumbent upon men), characterized by notions such as “complementarity” or “harmony”, and God’s purpose for the creation of “two halves becoming one whole”.

In most of my interviews, however, the differences between women and men were legitimated and explained through a multiplicity of discourses, besides merely that of “religion”. This contrasts with Davidman’s (1991) study, in which the women interviewed often had essentialist understandings of femininity. For example, in the teachings in the Hasidic classes Davidman participated in, woman’s role in childbearing and nurture was seen as “a metaphor for her essential nature” (Davidman, 1991: 166). The process of re-socializing these “modern” women towards Orthodoxy required a “radical reconceptualization of femininity”, including the idea...
that “women’s nature is rooted in their biology and expressed in all aspects of their beings”. A similar pro-familial stance, according to Kaufman’s (1993) study of established ba’alot teshuvah, accompanied a view of women as essentially inclined to harbor values associated with care, nurturance and interconnected relationships.

In my interviews with various haredi women, I gained the general impression that the more “extreme” Orthodox Hasidic the women I interviewed were (such as the Satmar), the more likely they were to draw on essentialist constructions of gender and the more apt they were to explain these in a religious frame. For example, the obligation for men to study Talmud would be explained by their “natural attraction” towards logical or analytical thinking, as opposed to women, who were “more in tune with their feelings, being sensitive, intuitive and having more relational capacities”. The differences were then religiously accounted for, as in “God created women and men that way”, and these abilities concurred with their proper roles and perhaps their spiritual make-up.

However, the majority did not merely rely on religious notions of gender difference as in behavior and personality traits between women and men. Others maintained the differences between women and men were more psychological and social, following their roles rather than embedded in their biology. Some even denied there were any absolute differences that could be ascribed to religious philosophy. Here, the gender discourse these women applied was clearly borrowed from a multiplicity of ideological frameworks, beyond religion, such as popular psychology and medicine, magazines, “common-sense knowledge”, or personal viewpoints inferred from experience. Hence, I doubt these women’s viewpoints differ dramatically from those of many secular women (in the same age category).

For instance, Hasidic-oriented Susan (a 52-year-old mother of five), who started a degree in psychology when she was younger but gave up when she became pregnant and now does voluntary work in a counseling office for Orthodox Jews with psychological and marital problems, did not believe there were any essential differences between women and men:

Theoretically, you might say that women are better at listening and being empathetic, but I don’t know, you can’t generalize at all, just like saying women are more emotional than men, men are more practical. It’s a generality which isn’t always true. There are women who are very good mathematicians and engineers, even though you would say men have a more mathematical mind.

Sixty-year-old self-proclaimed “broad-minded” Hasidic Chana similarly had to think hard about any essential differences between women and men:

Perhaps to a certain degree you could say women . . . Perhaps they are more . . . mostly being tender-hearted . . . I’m not saying they always are, but there is something in them, they are softer on the whole . . . I’m not saying all women are softer than men, “cause that’s all rubbish “all men are tougher than women”, no . . . But in general . . . Men are go-getters on the whole; women are trying to become go-getters, which is also fine, if they need it, fine.
Thus, my informants, who were all frum-born—although some of them may gradually have become more Hasidic during their lives—appeared to be less essentialist in accounting for gender than follows from the research by Kaufman and Davidman on North American ba'ilot teshuvah. The ba'ilot teshuvah had not only been re-educated into religious philosophy and observance, but their reasons for consciously turning to a religious life and community had often precisely been motivated by their attraction to traditionalist gender ideology. This difference, I suspect, explains to some extent the fact that many of my informants were less cognizant of or, better put, less interested in certain religious discourse on gender. For them, difference was more self-evident, something that opposed to the returnees, they did not need to question or justify. Although they replicated gender differentiation, besides the “fact” of sexual difference, gender itself was not essentialized into any one kind of discursive formation (religious, psychological, subjective)—at least not to the extent one might expect to be the case in such a community, and is characteristic of many other kinds of traditionalist and fundamentalist identity politics.

Although the degrees of essentialism varied between the more modern Orthodox and the Hasidic returnees in both Kaufman and Davidman’s studies, and the factors driving these women to join such gender-conservative communities were by no means uniform, their interviews did show that gender was a salient aspect of personal identity. For the frum-born women of Antwerp, by contrast, gender identity appeared to be much less relevant in their self-definition. Additionally, their gender discourse was often even nonessentialist, although as I argue further on, in practice, dualism in gender roles and (religious) obligations was perceived as self-evident.

Sacralizing Difference

Kaufman (1993: 53) shows how returnees not only account for sexual differences on religious essentialist grounds, but also how some of them revert to religion in their celebration of the female in invoking feminine symbolic imagery. Many of the Hasidic interviewees even went so far as to claim that women may be more spiritually inclined, closer to God and in some ways superior to men. In this context they asserted that God told Moses to teach the Torah first to the women and afterward to men, or that the reason why women were exempt from time-bound commandments was that they were by nature more spiritually inclined. According to Kaufman, the contrast with the non-Hasidic women she interviewed can be explained by the fact that Hasidism incorporates mystical and cabalistic thought, and her interviewees had capitalized on feminine principles that exist within Jewish mysticism such as the importance of binah or wisdom, which is referred to as feminine or the Shekinah (the indwelling of God).

By contrast, even the most extreme Hasidic among the frum-born women I interviewed in Antwerp did not revert to any such feminine principles when I probed them on their understanding of spirituality. Even though most were educated, often intellectuals, and many were themselves teachers or retired teachers of subjects such as Hebrew or religious philosophy, they did not
emphasize any of the gender-related symbolism which appeared so relevant for the *ba'alot teshuvah*, claiming that they were not exactly sure, or this was "a subject their [rabbi-] husband would know more about".

Likewise, my informants were much less forthcoming on the topic of sexuality; a point Kaufman (1993: 78) raises herself as a possible difference between returnees and the *frum*-born. Whereas some were prepared to discuss the laws of family purity, they were hesitant to draw on personal experience and stressed the importance of the laws at a more general level. The practical "benefits" of monthly sexual abstinence that are often emphasized in apologetic literature and handbooks on *niddah* were stressed by many women. Psychological and (pseudo-)medical discourse was selectively used, such as the idea that sexual abstinence during menstruation would aid women’s reproductive health (e.g., prevent vaginal infections) or that the periodic avoidance of physical intimacy would also contribute to a more enduring and deep marital relationship in both the spiritual and physical sense. Thus partners can build a loving relationship that does not exclusively depend on physical intimacy, followed by a monthly rekindling of mutual attraction and sexual desire against the potential threat of monotony.

One Mitnagdic woman, who used to coach girls engaged to be married, told me how in her classes she tried to transfer a positive attitude to her students concerning the laws of *niddah*. She would refer to the symbolism surrounding the rituals, with metaphors such as rebirth, the *mikveh* as the womb, etc. However, as was also repeated by other informants, regardless of the meanings one could attach to such rituals—whether symbolic or practical—or however sexual abstinence and ritual immersion were experienced individually, all these forms of legitimation or explanation remained subservient to the *mitzvah* of *niddah* itself. This was first and foremost perceived as an obligatory commandment for women that was divinely ordained and therefore simply did not require any further justification.

**Practicing Difference**

Whereas the women I interviewed drew on a multiplicity of gender discourses and most did not exclusively appeal to essentialist explanations of sexual difference, they were all equally adamant on the centrality of the different religious obligations for women and men. Many women even answered my questions on whether women had any innate abilities or characteristics which explained their differences in Orthodox Jewish religious traditions and communities, by referring to women’s different religious obligations—their commandments—thus what women and men *did* differently rather than what made them essentially different according to gender ontology. For most of the women I interviewed, gender difference was seen as fixed in the realm of *practice*, which in itself forms the core—"orthopraxis" rather than "orthodoxy"—of traditional Judaism as a religion, often typified as a "modus vivendi", focusing on worldly (ethical) experience and practice rather than theological content or dogmas. Gender differences in religion were only relevant in the realm of religious deeds, the performance of the
mitzvot, which are halakhically prescribed along gender lines. According to Hasidic Tirza (aged 65):

Spiritually there are no differences between men and women, the belief is the same but the obligations are different, in the first place a woman does not have to do all of the obligations . . . Above all is belief which is the same for men and women, and besides that, men have to fulfill religious duties. But Orthodox life is not just prayer, it is also being honest, for example, in doing business, it comes down to bringing your belief into your daily life, like benevolence . . . This is the same for men and women, but then she has obligations in the home, but she must also pray, but not so often and at set times, she looks after raising the children.

In her ethnographic research among elderly illiterate Jewish women in a Kurdish neighborhood of Jerusalem, anthropologist Susan Sered (1992b) found that these women defined their own religiosity as correct moral behavior. Despite their exclusion from paradigmatic religious commandments, such as the mitzvah for men to study the Talmud, or to wear tefillin and tzitzit,8 Sered found that the women had reinterpreted and “domesticated” certain rituals and symbols from the male-defined official institutional sphere of religious study and practice. Sered furthermore discovered that the women interpreted the essence of the mitzvot in the context of their own domestic concerns. From their viewpoint, while a man could be religious yet behave immorally, for women, religiosity itself was defined as correct moral behavior. For men, religion meant the correct observance of certain rituals (learning, prayer), whereas for women the most important mitzvot were moral practices such as not to slander, gossip, steal or cheat and to help and feed others, all of them injunctions and practices that focus on religious behavior as interpersonal and contextually determined. For the women, the greatest mitzvah of all was to give charity, to give small sums of money, to cook for the sick, help the poor and the orphans, and so on.9

According to the women I interviewed, charity (tzedakah) and much broader, the performance of hesed (loving kindness) towards others was indeed often seen as the way in which to act upon the Golden Rule as a great religious and moral principle of Judaism. In spite of the large differences between Sered’s and my research community, giving charity also showed the same gendered pattern due to a similar religious gender role ideology. Men occasionally collect larger sums of money, by going round houses, for example. Women perform voluntary work, may drive people to hospitals, and similarly visit the sick and bring them food, but they also organize charitable events for fundraising, for schools, Israel, etc. If they are not working full-time (as teachers), many are extremely occupied with all kinds of voluntary activities, involved with school activities, girl scouts, holiday camps, or even editing children’s magazines.

In contrast to the elderly illiterate women of Jerusalem, however, the women I interviewed, who were mostly well educated and cognizant of both secular and “official” religious knowledge, did not see any of the gender-neutral mitzvot as more important for men or for women. Nor did they see the capability to perform these mitzvot as gender dependent. Men have to be equally honest, i.e., in their business affairs, while women have
to be altruistic with others in interpersonal contexts and in the domestic domain, such as when they receive guests. The fact that women and men perform these deeds in a different way was ascribed to the fact that they have different roles and therefore as merely consequential to these roles. I asked 53-year-old Mitnagdic Rachel whether performing *hesed* was more important for women or men and if they express it differently:

Rachel: That’s because men are more tied down to business and they have less time, I mean, materially, they often have less time than women. Women who do not have to work, I’m not speaking of the working woman who is very tied down to her job and to her family life, but let’s say you have women who are quite independent, and who are materially well off, they have much more free time to do these things, but it doesn’t have to do with being materially well off, a lot of women here do voluntary work.

Chia: Would you say women are any more naturally inclined, maybe they are more naturally altruistic or not really?

Rachel: Uh, it could be, but I believe it’s because they have sometimes less responsibilities, the men are taken up more by the work, by financial responsibilities, and such other things, so, that’s why the women have perhaps more time for these things than men.

Interview fragments such as these illustrate that whereas for the returnees, a rhetoric of choice, essentialism, and religious ideologies of female superiority appear important, for the *frum*-by-birth women in my study, gender is more a question of religious roles and orthopraxis. From the Antwerp *haredi* women’s point of view, as members of a minority community within and vis-à-vis a predominantly secular (or Christian) surrounding society, belonging is foremost contingent upon ethnicity and religion rather than the individual politics of gender identity, the latter being conversely so central in the returnees’ (re)construction of the self. This comparative case study therefore minimally shows that differentialist and complementarity gender ideologies that mark traditionalist or fundamentalist communities, from the standpoints of their female members are not always or necessarily determined by essentialist notions of sexual difference.

The difference in these discourses of belonging can be partly ascribed to both the locality and the type of strictly Orthodox Jewish communities that the *frum*-born women are part of, in that they cannot be straightforwardly subsumed under the rubric of contemporary fundamentalist identity politics, directly bidding for state or political power (as in the Israeli context). Furthermore, as “withdrawers” from—a predominantly gentle—secular modern society, the women interviewed did not appeal to a kind of celebratory gender essentialist apologetics that characterizes the Hasidic proselytizing outreach movement of the Lubavitcher globally, and that was reflected in the personal discourse of the female returnees, who choose to turn their backs on a dominant model of (secular) liberal gender equality. However, in the final paragraph, I illustrate how the inwardly focus of this diasporic *haredi* minority community bent on upholding tradition, has today nonetheless equally resulted in an intensification of patriarchal hetero-normativity.
“Not Us, but You Have Changed!” Women’s Standpoints

Despite the lack of gender essentialist legitimization, I inferred from my interviewees that similar to other contemporary traditionalist and fundamentalist identity politics throughout the world, gender-role stringency is also on the rise among Antwerp strictly Orthodox Jewry. The reproduction of the ethno-religious boundaries of such a minority community precisely hinges on the control of women’s sexuality, bodily praxis and behavior. The haredi women interviewed by and large discursively reproduced their status as symbols of collective identity under the perceived threat of what they called the “outside world”. From their viewpoint, in order to simply maintain—rather than, for example, to choose—identity, this requires partaking in an active resistance against the gender politics of secular modernity, and particularly the sexual mores (or lack thereof) of contemporary western society.

The control of women's sexuality according to traditionalist Jewish religious gender ideology is not only expressed through halakhist measures such as the laws of niddah, but also through the notion of tzniut, or modesty. My interviewees perceived tzniut as perhaps the most important religious principle of all, conceived as a kind of “capacity” or a “test of moral character”, for strictly Orthodox Jewish women. Most interviewees explained the main purpose of tzniut as related to men’s sexual desires, in order not to provoke or distract them. The main rationale put forward was that the body of a woman was beautiful and had to be treated with dignity and respect. Covering the body meant not to expose or “cheapen it outside” and to “keep it beautiful and only for the husband”. Through behaving and dressing modestly, these women also felt they could control their husband’s sexuality and his faithfulness to them. So whereas the strictly Orthodox Jewish man in the first place must see to it that he sufficiently turns up at the synagogue and that he studies and prays, which are public, or “outside” activities, for the women I interviewed, female piety foremost involved modest demeanor and behavior.

Although there is tremendous diversity in the practice of modesty—depending on the community, tradition or individual preference—correct demeanor includes head coverings (upon marriage, with wigs, kerchiefs, hats) and modest clothing (distinctively feminine but not conspicuous, for example, no bright colors, stockings, long sleeves covering the knees, elbows and neckline). Tzniut also means to behave appropriately, not to be “ostentatious” or “show off” by shouting, singing or laughing aloud. “Inner modesty” was described by my informants as not “to be arrogant or proud’, “to be rough”, or to “display your wisdom or your wealth”. Acting tzniut was even determined by the things you would read or talk about. Many women referred to the biblical passage “the honor of the daughter of the king is inside” (Ps. 45:14). Although some claimed it was not so easy to explain, tzniut was connected to notions of privacy and interiority; being modest was therefore linked to the broader context of women’s place within the family or private sphere and keeping her bound to the family and her obligations in order not to be attracted by the outside world.

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However, important to note is that this was not at all interpreted as submissive confinement.

Being a pious woman does not mean that, for example, one could not take on positions of responsibility and authority within the community. My respondents stressed that there was no religious prohibition on a strictly Orthodox Jewish woman becoming a headmistress or the boss of a big company. But in practice, and even more so in the case of small minority haredi communities such as in Antwerp, the rules of modesty and gender separatism simply make it difficult for strictly Orthodox Jewish girls and women to pursue higher education or apply for many jobs, as mixed environments are frowned upon. In spite of the possibilities for the haredi women I interviewed to educate themselves, work and travel, and their interests in secular culture and literature—within the boundaries of what they considered to be decent and non-vulgar—individual self-fulfillment in general remains subservient to their most important duty of maintaining the home. Through their religious obligations as mothers and in their domestic role they saw themselves as of utmost importance in the maintenance of stability, tradition and therefore the very survival of community.

Notwithstanding variable and sometimes ambivalent positions concerning the status of women today resulting from consecutive waves of feminist liberation, my interviewees ultimately often employed the kind of fundamentalist and traditionalist rhetoric that attributes to women though their individual gendered behavior the role of guardian of the purity and the modesty of the whole community. According to Hasidic Sarah, 50 years old, a teacher and wife of the head of a kollel (institute for advanced Talmud study for married men) and mother of three:

The difficulty is coming from the outside, not the inside; the difficulty is the attitudes in the outside world. This is a big problem nowadays, to protect our youngsters. We know where we are, and to us, we see that the world is not going towards a happier society, healthier society. To us it looks as if they are going backwards, in morals, in justice, in security . . . . But how to protect our youngsters of the influence? So we have to be much more strict nowadays. When I was child [after the war in Europe] they learned in the general schools, not Jewish schools, nowadays they can't do that, because they would be exposed to a certain kind of behavior, or studying, or media, or videos, or immoral things like that . . . . You can't do it any more . . . . So what can you do? Can you keep the children away from papers, from television? It's very, very difficult, so it becomes much more difficult, that's why we have to have our own institutions, we can't allow them to mix with the non-Jewish society, and we have to provide them with magazines, enough cultural material, we do that . . . . So we have our own colleges, we have our own seminars, oh yes, our religion, believes very much in . . . concerning what's going on in the outside world, and adapting also . . . We don't ignore, and just sit and wait for Moshiach, and close our eyes . . . . No, we are always involved in politics, economic life, cultural life, but since nowadays morals are so different and so low, we have to be more careful, to protect ourselves and our children mainly, to the influence which we find is a dangerous influence.

Hence, from the haredi women's standpoints, it was not so much their world, but the outside world that had changed. Even though the gender ideologies put forward were by no means always or completely essentialist, consistent with other contemporary traditionalist and fundamentalist identity move-
ments worldwide, it appears that in practice an increase in gender conservatism (e.g., stricter modesty rules) is taking place. Paradoxically, change is deemed necessary in order to remain the same.

Assessing Converging Feminisms and Fundamentalisms

By focusing on contemporary strictly Orthodox Jewry, I have argued that there are some notable differences between those women choosing and those raised in traditionalist or fundamentalist contexts. Among the latter in my case study, gender is more a question of self-evident orthopraxis and religious role equivalence rather than gender essentialism founded in individual choice and personal gender identity. However, in order for any haredi community to safeguard its boundaries and guarantee the reproduction of its collective identity, this requires women’s active participation in an intensification of its patriarchal policies. Furthermore, this comparison between discourses of gender, difference and belonging not only sheds light on the many differences and similarities between haredi women in diverse communities but also points out to the difficulties in interpreting their voices and lives from a feminist research perspective. I do not suggest a simple dichotomy between returnees as empowered “agents” versus frum-born women as mere “victims” within a framework of patriarchal heteronormativity. For as many other studies of women in fundamentalist and traditionalist movements also show, Jewish gender identity politics no doubt involve variable and often “mixed blessings” for their diverse female actors. The analysis, representation and assessment thereof depend on the particulars of research populations, methods and questions asked, yet also the feminist researcher’s positionings on the contemporary resurgence of religious identity politics and its variegated impact on gender relations.

A number of researchers on women who join fundamentalist or nationalist movements have stressed that although they may be personally or individually empowered by doing so, that does not imply this agency can straightforwardly be interpreted as collective feminist liberation (e.g., Bacchetta and Power, 2002; Bauer, 1997). Thus, Yuval-Davis (1992; 1999) problematizes the notion of empowerment in her study of strictly Orthodox Jewish female returnees among the Lubavitcher Hasidim in Israel and the UK, in that comparing this with radical feminism “mixes form with purpose, separateness with segregation, autonomy with male-defined women’s space” (Yuval-Davis, 1992: 218–219).10

As my own interviews with frum-born haredi women show, these women are similarly participating in the dynamic reproduction and negotiation of traditionalist gender ideology, albeit to a lesser extent in apologetic terms. The discourse my informants drew on, however, is no doubt equally “politically” informed. Not only does gender ideology invariably often conflict with actual reality—e.g., the ideal of the housewife-mother who does not have to do paid work—but my interviewees most likely did paint a rather rosy picture of haredi women’s status and lives, in order to understandably
counteract stigmatization from the “outside world” in their precarious position as an ethno-religious minority within a dominant secular society.

I therefore contend that at the analytical level we do well to move beyond dichotomies of oppression and empowerment using fine-tuned empirical studies of both the differences and cross-cultural similarities in fundamentalist and traditionalist women’s standpoints and agency. With this critical and comparative analysis of particular religious fundamentalist women’s standpoints in very diverse localities, I also hope to have shown that both fundamentalisms and feminisms are not only diverse, but that they are not necessarily always diametrically opposed. However, possible convergences must be interrogated with care. Hence, I at the same time concur with some of the recent warnings by feminist theorists about the potentially detrimental consequences of both epistemological postmodern relativism and political “multicultural” toleration for women’s actual rights and emancipation (cf. Sahgal and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Moghissi, 1999; Winter, 2002). In any case, the critiques and dissatisfaction of women with contemporary western secular liberal feminism, who claim their identities and express their belongings in religious terms, is a phenomenon with which transnational feminist theories must continue to very seriously—openly and critically—engage.

NOTES

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2. Other studies and accounts of ba’alot teshuvah or women in the Lubavitch movement are those of Morris (1998); Levine (2003); Topel (2002) and Yuval-Davis (1992; 1999).

3. Davidman (1991) studied two distinct Orthodox communities who attract ba’alot teshuvah: a modern Orthodox synagogue and a Lubavitch Hasidic residential yeshiva. Davidman stayed in the yeshiva in order to focus on the women in the process of conversion. Kaufman (1993) conducted in-depth interviews with 150 already converted and established ba’alot teshuvah in five major urban areas across the USA. Twenty-five were modern Orthodox, 85 ultra-Orthodox (Hasidic) and 40 strictly Orthodox women across the USA. The women mostly came from middle-class backgrounds, were well educated and had previously been assimilated into secular culture.

4. Despite these nuances, Kaufman’s interpretation has nevertheless been critically received for a somewhat over-generalized and over-romanticized portrayal, while neglecting the great diversity in haredi women’s lives. Sered (1992a), in a book review of Davidman (1991) and Kaufman (1993), for example, takes
Kaufman to task for accepting her informants’ point of view too easily and neglecting to compare their perceptions with actual practice, or including interviews with women who had more negative experiences under patriarchal law or left the Orthodox Jewish community. Yuval-Davis (1999) likewise argues that the similarities Kaufman refers to between ba’alot teshuvah and radical feminists confuse between male-defined mandatory gender segregation and the radical feminist women’s separate communities.

5. Whereas in the 18th-century Hasidic communities or “courts” developed all over eastern Europe, each under the leadership of a rebbe (holy person whose authority is based on charisma and piety), their rabbinic opponents in Lithuania evolved into the Mitnagdim. They rejected the cult surrounding the rebbe and its emphasis on spirituality and mysticism, by remaining committed to the priority of both law and Torah study. In the 19th century, the differences between the Hasidim and the Mitnagdim began to decrease, a process which carried on into the 20th century.

6. Of the estimated 15,000 to 18,000 Antwerp Jews today, the vast majority are affiliated with one of the two Orthodox religious congregations, the Shomre Hadass and the Machsike Hadass (Gutwirth 1999: 605). The Hasidic population is assumed to number some 5,000 to 6,000 inhabitants, which makes them approximately a third of the total—mostly Orthodox—population, indeed a unique situation compared to anywhere else in the world. The post-war reconstitution of the predominantly Orthodox Antwerp Jewish community thus involved an evolution towards a relatively tight, cohesive community, located in a particular area of Antwerp, with its members acting upon the same structural networks of religious, economic, social and educational organizations: “All of Jewish life in the town is hasidically coloured” (Gutwirth, 1999: 605), thus giving Antwerp Jewry its unique character and sometimes the title of a contemporary shtetl.

7. Using the snowball technique in locating informants, I did not gain access to one particular group, but was continuously referred to women from different Hasidic and non-Hasidic Orthodox backgrounds, refuting the suggestion that the different religious groups of Antwerp live in isolation from each other. Perhaps as a result of the specific situation of Orthodox Jewry in Antwerp—being a relatively small, yet cohesive community—the interaction between different traditionalist Jews, and especially the women, appeared to be quite high. Categorical distinctions were often rejected by my informants, some claiming “we are not that different from each other”, apart from, perhaps, details of dress and demeanor. The interviews were carried out in either English or Dutch.

8. Tefillin are the two leather boxes or phylacteries containing scriptural passages that are bound to the left arm and on the head and worn during morning prayer on week days. Tallit is the rectangular garment to which the tzitzit, fringes, are attached.

9. Sered (1992b: 47–48) relates her findings to Carol Gilligan’s research on women and moral development, equating women’s moral judgements with helping and pleasing others, opposed to men’s moral judgements, more often resting on universal principles of justice, equality and reciprocity.

10. Despite all possible differences due to class position or other sociological determinants, Yuval-Davis (1992) argues that basic halakhic gender inequalities remain in place and some of the women and social workers she interviewed reported cases of physical and mental exhaustion, postnatal depression among the poorer large families and other familial problems.
REFERENCES


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