

Jan Feldman is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Vermont, and author of *Lubavitchers as Citizens: A Paradox of Liberal Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), an ethnographic study of Hasidim in the United States, which argues that liberal and democratic values are not necessarily intertwined. Feldman’s recent *Citizenship, Faith, & Feminism* explores similar contradictions between citizenship, multicultural values, and faith. Indeed, Feldman’s aim is simple: to “reveal commonalities between Jewish and Muslim feminisms” (xi). However, the process by which Feldman demonstrates her claim that it is necessary to disentangle “religion from accrued cultural and traditional attitudes or practices that are hostile to human dignity” (xii) is far more complex. Feldman’s research examines Jewish and Muslim feminisms in the United States, Israel, and Kuwait to reveal how citizenship impacts on traditional faith. Feldman’s methodology relies not only on secondary literature but “open-ended interviews” with feminist activists (xii). This allows Feldman, an Orthodox Jew who is versed in Arabic as well as Hebrew, a unique perspective, revealing that “Feminists of faith, whether Jewish or Muslim, American, Kuwaiti, or Israeli, have more in common than they perhaps realize” (201).

In each of the chosen examples – the United States, Kuwait, and Israel – Feldman reveals how traditional/Orthodox faith is a potential danger to feminist demands for “religious equality” and its alignment with civil and political egalitarianism (201). Feldman demonstrates that in Kuwait the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis would, if given the opportunity, undo recent feminist reforms. Equally, in Israel, the unwillingness of the civil government to force compliance with existing laws on the Orthodox communities, the role of Orthodoxy in the judiciary (specifically in family law), and the growing influence of the Haredi threaten to undermine feminist gains. Likewise, in the United States, both Muslim and Jewish “women” represent “minorities within minorities,” and the United States’ acceptance of “diversity” and “sensitivity” to minorities means that authority is devolved to traditional,
androcentric power structures, which, for Feldman, “entrenches male power within religions and cultures” (202-203).

According to Feldman, Muslim and Jewish feminisms are based on resolving claims about who has the right and the authority to speak on behalf of G-d and to interpret the sacred texts, whether the Torah or the Qur’an. Equally, the dialectic remains between those religious authorities that assume the sacred texts and their interpretation is relative and changeable, and those who argue that the original interpretations, such as through the Talmud and the *ahadith*, are permanent and can no longer be subjected to renewed exegesis. Moreover, the question is also about whether some Jewish and Muslim feminists are even willing to reinterpret texts that are often assumed to be inherently misogynistic and androcentric. However, generally, Muslim and Jewish feminists in the United States, Israel and Kuwait have located in the sacred texts G-d’s so called original and “authentic” discursive through reinterpretation and alternative exegesis. Equally, the mining of the Qur’an and the Torah for gender inclusionary material has been combined with assumptions of citizenship as a means of applying the equality bound up in civil rights to calls for gender equality in traditional religious communities.

Indeed, citizenship has been a means of securing emancipation and civil equality for Muslim and Jewish feminists. However, while Israel, the United States and Kuwait are recognised as democracies, each has a different relationship between religious and civil authorities. In Kuwait the official religion is Islam; in Israel it is Judaism, and in the United States the state and religious faith are separate. According to Feldman, these “dual systems pit women’s equal citizenship status against their unequal personal [religious] status” (10). The ways in which Muslim and Jewish feminists have tended to respond to religious inequality, for Feldman, can be reduced to several common themes, such as that laws which challenge divine justice are void; that it is vital to differentiate between divine revelation and will and cultural extensions of its original meaning, and that the sacred texts exude multiple and evolving interpretations, the most viable of which encourages the wellbeing of the entire community of religionists. In sum, the strategies of Jewish and Muslim feminists are based around using already gained civil freedoms to challenge religious inequality, and to ensure that “God is just and that men and women share in divine justice and mercy” (201). The
conflict between civil and religious values and laws therefore creates a system of “dual
citizenship” (81).
For Feldman, this is no more true than in Kuwait, where women are liberated by civil law but
continue to be unequal citizens within shari’a law. This means that the drive for political
equality and rights is a “virtue” from a civil perspective, but a “sin” from a religious
viewpoint (81). In Kuwait, the state is predicated on a combination of monarchy and
democracy; society, despite modernisation, is generally both traditional and patriarchal, and
the religious authorities maintain control of family law. The status of women and access to
the professions and formal education is often relative to class. Women from the social elite
have access to education, politics, and the civil service, but social mobility is not prevalent,
and women from the lowest social strata do not enjoy the same privileges. Feminist scholars
in Kuwait have located the basis of gender equality and women’s political rights in Qur’anic
sources and in historical evidence that women were once actively involved in social and
religious life; the prohibitions against equality are therefore shown to be later cultural
interpretations that have supposedly misinterpreted the original meaning of the Qur’an.
In Kuwait, women are equal citizens according to the state; however, they are prescribed
family and domestic responsibilities by tradition, and by the monarchy, a tribal role. The
National Assembly has elected several women, despite Islamist objections, and others serve
as government ministers, but the issue for Feldman is whether the successes of Kuwaiti
feminism can be maintained. Women are still unable to join the army, to serve as judges, and
post-secondary education is theoretically segregated by gender, even if this policy has not
been uniformly imposed. Likewise, in the courts women’s testimony only counts for half that
of a man’s, marriage and divorce are policed by religious law, and popular rejection of
democracy has led to the growing popularity of Islamists, and even death threats and
accusations of complicity in foreign conspiracies against female MPs. According to Feldman
“dual” commitments to citizenship and to the religious community creates a dilemma. Indeed,
Kuwaiti feminists, like their Israeli and American counterparts, are often forced to prioritise
between civil equality and religious identity.
Similarly, in Israel men and women are entitled to equal rights of citizenship. However, the
same issue of “dual” civil and religious spheres means that Israeli women are members of an
egalitarian society on the one hand, and subject to exclusion and subordination on the other.
This is because Orthodoxy maintains authority over family law. The broad concerns of Israeli feminism (whether of Orthodox or secular backgrounds) are summarised by Feldman as the necessity that the “state should uphold and support gender quality using courts, legislation, and enforcement,” and that “Reform cannot be imposed on religious authorities but must come from within religious circles” (121). For Feldman, the “burden is on feminists to demonstrate that Judaism is compatible with gender equality” (121). But this is easier said than done in a society where women, as mothers, are subject to civil and religious laws, as well as ancient traditions and customs. Israeli feminists use their civil freedoms to encourage the religious authorities to implement reform within the halakhic system, but as Feldman suggests, given that “Israeli women straddle these [two] legal worlds” there is no simple answer to the current situation, which is “intolerable” (150-151).

In Israel Jewish women, Feldman argues, confront several barriers to wholesale political equality, in particular because of the “ultra Orthodox” Haredi (111), though equally because high-ranking IDF (Israeli Defence Forces) experience is generally closed to women. Orthodoxy has an alleged “monopoly” and is assumed to be the “official” version of Judaism (117), civil divorce is non-existent, the agunah is emblematic of the legal inequalities experienced by women, and the state is all too often unwilling to enforce its influence on the Orthodox authorities, which Feldman argues is the “very community that is most resistant to gender equality” (128). Equally, Israeli feminists are hindered by awareness that the state of Israel is itself fragile, and that gender equality is, compared to the threat of terrorism, Intifada, and external criticism of Israel, a trivial concern. Moreover, Israeli feminists are perhaps “victims of their own success” according to Feldman (129). Indeed, while Orthodox women can now engage in study of the sacred texts, serve in the IDF, and work as Family Law Consultants (Yoetzet Halakha), the myth of equality fostered by romanticization of the kibbutz does tend to mean that feminist concerns are relegated to the margins.

In comparison with Kuwait and Israel, the United States separates church and state; religious freedom is enshrined in the First Amendment’s free exercise clause. In the United States religion is a private concern, religious affiliation is voluntary, and association is dependent on liberal notions of individual autonomy and choice. Nonetheless, Feldman demonstrates how the “dual” concerns of citizenship and religious affiliation are replicated in the United States under the aegis of multiculturalism. Indeed, while gender equality is often a feature of liberal
culture, multicultural acceptance and accommodation of religious minorities can undermine the efforts of Jewish and Muslim feminists. Feldman argues that in a multicultural system, where the state defers recognition and rights to a religious group, conflict can arise between “liberal democracy” and “group differentiated politics of identity” (17). Accordingly, a particular religious group, including its values and laws, can supersede civil legal codes. For Feldman, this means that the state risks giving its “seal of approval to civil rights violations,” and in the process not only identifies the women of these groups as “heretical” and “disloyal,” but ensures that traditional power structures are maintained (17).

Problematically, for Feldman, Judaism and Islam cannot be reduced to the model of voluntary associations. This is because the Jewish and Muslim communities are based on genealogical and diasporic patterns of identity as opposed to traditional American principles of liberalism, individualism, and territoriality. Both Islam and Judaism are family religions structured around descent; both are part of a wider diaspora, both revere external geographic areas – Mecca and Jerusalem, and both use sacred texts as the basis for communal law. This means that Jews and Muslims, as citizens, can sometimes be caught between two different legal systems. In the Jewish case, for example, dissolving a marriage is an initial matter of civil law, but not all religious communities in the United States recognise civil divorce. Therefore, it is specifically vital for women intending to remarry that a get is secured in order to avoid the children of that new marriage being defined as mamzerim. Thus, even though the state can be a powerful advocate for gender equalisation, liberal and multicultural assumptions about religious freedom and the autonomy of minority groups, undergirded by the constitution itself, can serve to enforce legal barriers to women’s equality. Feldman argues that in order for women in the United States to benefit from liberal and multicultural policies, “the potential for coercion and rights violations within groups must be addressed” (175). Ideally, for Feldman, this means that the state should ensure that the accommodation of religious minorities does not impinge on gender equality, and that challenges against religious authorities on the basis of civil citizenship and justice for all citizens be upheld.

Feldman’s Citizenship, Faith & Feminism is a unique text; of course, to Muslim and Jewish feminist scholars and activists the concerns highlighted within the text will not be new. However, the way in which Feldman draws commonalities between Islam and Judaism, and international comparisons between Israel, Kuwait, and the United States is distinct,
particularly in light of the conflict between citizenship, religious identity, and multiculturalism. This is not to say that Feldman does not marginalise some complex and historical differences between the faiths, but this is perhaps a strength of *Citizenship, Faith & Feminism*. Indeed, Feldman does not pretend to have the answers and is right to claim that “Recapturing the promise of gender justice embedded in Judaism and Islam is an ongoing struggle” (71). Equally, Feldman is able to emphasise the fact that Jewish and Muslim feminists share similar concerns, aspirations, and even contexts. This includes the stark choices that Muslim and Jewish feminists make in deciding whether to endure injustice, suffer voluntary exile, or struggle within their communities using civil equality as a basis for reform. For Feldman, this is a common struggle “rooted in a desire [of Muslim and Jewish feminists] to see that G-d given justice prevails for our daughters” (204).