

RELIGION & GENDER

Vol. 5, no. 2 (2015), 129-134 | DOI: 10.18352/rg.10130

Introduction

Gendering the Secular: Interventions in Politics, Philosophy and Movements

TERESA TOLDY*, UNIVERSITY OF COIMBRIA, ALBERTA GIORGI, UNIVERSITY OF COIMBRIA AND NELLA VAN DEN BRANDT, UNIVERSITY OF GHENT

This special issue is a result of the Lisbon summer school 'Secularism, Gender and Democracy'. The summer school took place from 4 to 6 July 2012, and was organised by Mathias Thaler and Teresa Toldy at the Centro de Estudos Sociociais/Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra. It had as its topic the contentious relationship between religion, secularism and politics, and the impact that this relationship has on gender issues. The summer school invited critical scholars who presented as keynote-speakers cutting-edge research on secularism, democracy and gender, including Chia Longman and Veit Bader. It also attracted an inspiring international and strongly engaged group of senior and junior scholars who presented and discussed their work. One of the main approaches of the summer school was to scrutinise the manifold and complex ways in which gender is affected by, and at the same time itself affects, modes of religious/secular and democratic governance in modern societies. The three papers in this special issue were presented and discussed as short papers at the summer school, and were upon selection for publication developed into full peer reviewed articles. As guest editors, we are proud to present this selection of papers that raise important questions about the relationship between secularism, gender, rights, democracy, philosophy and activism. Resulting from an interdisciplinary summer school, the articles represent various disciplinary backgrounds and analytical and political engagements. Together, they discuss, analyse and intervene in the political-legal, philosophical and civil society domains and their constructions of religion, secularism, politics and gender.

Religion plays an important role in contemporary societies: multiculturalism, migration, and bioethical debates, among others, put religion in the spotlight of the public sphere, thereby calling for a redefinition of classical secularisation theories. Today, the separation between religion and politics, as well as the meaning and substance of democracy, are being questioned. This invigorated interest in secularism and democracy can be observed, for example, in the

*Correspondence: Centre for Social Studies, Associate Laboratory, University of Coimbra, Colégio de S. Jerónimo, Largo D. Dinis, Apartado 3087, 3000-995 Coimbra, Portugal. E-mail: toldy@ces.uc.pt/toldy@ufp.edu.pt.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution License (3.0)

Religion and Gender | ISSN: 1878-5417 | www.religionandgender.org | Uopen Journals

recent work of Talal Asad (2003), Talal Asad et al. (2013), José Casanova (1994, 2009), Jürgen Habermas (2008), Saba Mahmood (2005), Tariq Modood et al. (2006) and Charles Taylor (2007). While the constitutive role of gender is often not recognised in public and academic debates on secularism and democracy, the Lisbon summer school started from the premise that gender relations lie at the heart of these transformative processes.

As noted by various observers, in post-9/11 Western academic and public debates, 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; van den Brandt 2014). In public debates, law and policy-making, but also in feminist theory and research, the notion of women's emancipation is predominantly framed in terms of rights, equal opportunities and individual autonomy. It is as such intrinsically tied to political and philosophical liberal-secular frameworks, which are assumed to be beneficial to women (Mahmood 2005; Scott 2009; Withaekx and Coene 2011). A strong assumption is that secularism and liberal-secular democracies foreground moral individual autonomy and equality and that monotheistic traditions create hierarchical differences between men and women, and divinely sanction women's subordinate roles (Braidotti 2008; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008; Midden 2014). This implicit claim on universality and freedom in this framework has been criticised for its gendered, sexual and ethnic exclusions and opposition to religious traditions, which are considered obstacles to equality and individual autonomy (Braidotti 2008; Butler 2008; Scott 2009).

Within this academic and public context, questions about secularism, democratic and gender have been increasingly critically scrutinised, (nearly) parallel to the increased interest in studying religion, politics and gender. In Europe, gender relations have over the last 20 years become the focal point of controversies over the contested separation of religion and politics. The various 'headscarf affairs' in many European countries attest to this fact, but also arguably lesser known debates such as about honour-related violence and LGBT rights (Bracke and Paternotte forthcoming; Longman and Coene 2015; Scott 2007; van den Berg 2014). Faced with the at times racist or otherwise exclusionary agendas behind many of these affairs, a critical approach is needed. Questions have been posed about what precisely constitute historical forms and current transformations of democracy and secularism in relation to gender, and how to build revised conceptualisations and approaches. In these inquiries, new analytical approaches such as 'multiple secularities' (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012), 'multiple modernities' (Bracke and Fadil 2009) and 'post-secularism' (Habermas 2008) have been proposed. Such approaches enable theorising the contested role of religious traditions in the public sphere and civil society and have informed debates about the meaning and substance of democracy and the multicultural society (Gutmann and Taylor 1994; Habermas 2008; Minkenberg 2007; Modood 2010, 2013; Ozzano and Giorgi 2015), as well as the constitutive role of gender and sexuality (Braidotti et al. 2014; Reilly and Scriver 2011; Scott 2007).

Through an in-depth and contextually sensitive discussion, we thus need to continue refining our understanding of how secularism and democracy interrelate with gender issues today. As this special issue presents a small selection of papers contributing to the above sketched debates and fields of study, it calls for continuing the interdisciplinary discussion about religion, gender, secularism and rights. An important and challenging new initiative, and an inspiring

example of how to proceed further, is the 2015 'Women, Religion and Secularism' project that currently runs a [blog](#) under the same title.¹ This project is funded by the International Society for the Sociology of Religion and led by Kristin Aune from Coventry University, Mia Lövheim from Uppsala University, Tehri Utriainen from Helsinki University and Alberta Giorgi and Teresa Toldy from the Centre of Social Studies (Lisbon). It organised throughout 2015 an international series of workshops entitled 'Is Secularism Bad for Women? Women and Religion in Multicultural Europe'. Raising questions about women's religiosities, rights and freedoms, the project starts from the premise that women's rights and religious people's rights are often pitted against each other, whereby '(l)aws, policies, and practises are advocated that will help *either* those of faith, *or* women, but not both' (WRS n.d.). Starting from here, the project puts the relationship between religion, gender, equality and secularism central and turns in an innovative manner Susan Moller Okin's famous question 'Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?' (1999) on its head by asking: 'Is Secularism Bad for Women?'.

Grasping the complex interface between religion and politics, and how it impacts on gender involves different disciplines, needs to be based on conversations between Political Science, Sociology, Gender Studies, Philosophy, Anthropology, Religious Studies and Theology. As guest editors of this special issue, we therefore call for continued rigorous discussions across disciplinary divides, and for creating more venues and opportunities to do so internationally and across gender, sexuality, ethnic and age differences.

Article overview

This special issue aims at picking up on the importance of reconceptualising secularism and democracy, and takes up the challenge of exploring how gender and race/ethnicity matter in this regard. Its subtitle, 'Interventions in Politics, Philosophy and Movements', refers to the three articles included, which intervene in the field of the study of gender, secularism and democracy through taking political-legal debates, philosophical inquiry and social movements as material for analysis.

The first article, 'Values and Veils in Danish and Norwegian Parliamentary Debates and the Absence of Gender' by Jonas Lindberg, conducts a comparative analysis of the parliamentary debates on the issue of Danish judges and Norwegian policewomen wearing Islamic veils. Lindberg demonstrates that the

¹ Among other, interrelated, initiatives, we can point to previous and current international networking and research collaboration in this field like the International Association for the study of Religion and Gender (IARG). IARG, established in February 2015, is the result of a three year networking programme called 'Interdisciplinary Innovations in the Study of Religion and Gender: Postcolonial, Post-secular and Queer Perspectives'. It hosted various expert meetings, focusing on postcolonialism (SOAS, London), post-secularism (University of Turku, Finland), queer perspectives (Barnard College, New York), activism (Ghent University, Belgium) and body politics (Utrecht University, The Netherlands). This international research and networking project was initiated at Utrecht University and funded by the Netherlands Organisation of Scientific Research (<http://projectreligionandgender.org/>).

underlying purpose in invoking values such as secularism, secular progress and neutrality is 'to distinguish between the majority population and (religious) minorities through the use of a narrative of secular progress' that pushes religion (specifically Islam) to the private sphere. Lindberg's research shows that the notion of neutrality 'packages hegemonic cultural values of the majority rather than representing any real neutrality': exercising neutrality in public office comes to signify adapting to the non-Muslim majority population. For both Denmark and Norway, despite the high esteem of gender equality, Lindberg finds that women's position and equality are less referred to in the debates. In Lindberg's opinion, 'the lower degree of explicit gender issues' could be read as 'an indication that the main issue at stake is a clash between the narrative of secular progress and values that are perceived as the opposite of that narrative'. Since the topic of the veil has functioned to emphasise the divide between Western societies and Muslim, Lindberg suggests that silencing the topic of gender equality means to try to deviate the debate to an allegedly neutral field: 'the issue at stake is not just general principles on gender and religious equality or even the authority of the actors but the very identity of the modern state in terms of public trust'.

Also the second article, 'The Concept of Neutrality with Regard to Gender and Religion: A Critique Exemplified by the Approach of Martha Nussbaum' by Cornelia Mügge, takes issue with the concept of neutrality. It uses the oeuvre of Martha Nussbaum, notably her Capabilities Approach, as material to analyse how political philosophy constructs the meaning of 'neutrality' and assesses its plausibility in the face of debates about gender and religion. Mügge poses the normative question of whether the state should 'intervene or not in a regulatory capacity – and in which way and to what extent?' Mügge argues that the concept of neutrality should lead to a less ambitious position than what Nussbaum proposes: since political norms cannot reach actual neutrality, the latter should be reconceptualised as an ideal to be oriented to. In the end, Mügge argues for a state that seeks neutrality: indeed, in her words, 'no morally motivated judgement, criticism or law with regard to gender and religion can be regarded as really neutral, but, instead, any judgement or law is potentially in need of revision – not only because of an imperfect implementation of the moral norms that it is based on or because it is just wrongly based on certain comprehensive norms, but because there is no actually neutral moral norm it could be based on'. The articles by Lindberg and Mügge can be critically read in tandem: whereas the first points out the problems and exclusions taking place in political-legal debates that take a presumably universalised understanding of neutrality as their premise in discussing the acceptability of Islamic veils in public office, the second argues for a very different way of state dealing with neutrality as a continuous and shifting search in the face of a changing and unequal society.

Finally, the third article, 'Representations of Religion on the British Feminist Webzine *The F Word*' by Kristin Aune, directly addresses the issue of the relations between religion, women's rights and inclusion in contemporary feminism in the U.K., by analysing the prominent feminist webzine *The F Word*. Through a longitudinal analysis of the different frames, approaches and positions that emerge in the webzine, Aune points out the difficulties of the feminist debate addressing the intertwinement of religion and women's rights. First, by means of a quantitative analysis, Aune shows the level of engagement

with religion in feminist discussions at *The F Word*. Secondly, a qualitative analysis is made of the different approaches that emerge towards religion and – more specifically – towards the relation between religion and women’s right. Aune distinguishes four approaches: ‘promoting religious feminism; feminism vs. religion: challenging religious oppression (the most prominent approach); supporting religious women; and debating religion and feminism’. Interestingly, Aune shows how only one of the approaches, the last one, ‘presented the relationship between religion and feminist issues in a complex, nuanced way’. Finally, Aune underlines the differences between mainstream media discourse and what emerges from the analysis of *The F Word*, suggesting that ‘TFW writers see Christianity as unfairly privileged, a legitimate target for criticism. Conversely, they see Islam as marginalised by the state, and Muslims as victims of Islamophobia’.

The three articles included in this special issue address secularism and democracy from the perspectives of gender and race/ethnicity, and related issues such as the tensions between universalism and particularism in relation to justice, in different arenas: the parliament, political philosophy, and civil society. The authors explore the implicit assumptions and contradictions underlying familiar visions and concepts relating to the secularism, democracy and gender; deconstruct narratives about religion, secularism and women; and analyse the public and the political frames addressing these issues. Together, they underline the relevance of continuing to carefully unpack both public and academic understandings of secularism, progress, neutrality, religion and rights in changing contexts from the perspective of gender and critical inquiry.

References

- Asad, T. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Asad, T., W. Brown, J. Butler and S. Mahmood. 2013. *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech*, New York: Fordham University Press.
- Aune, K. 2011. ‘Much Less Religious, a Little More Spiritual: The Religious and Spiritual Views of Third-Wave Feminists in the U.K.’, *Feminist Review* 97, 32–55.
- Bracke, S., and N. Fadil. 2009. ‘Tussen dogma en realiteit: secularisme, multiculturalisme en nationalisme in Vlaanderen’, in Karel Arnaut, Sarah Bracke, Bambi Ceuppens, Sarah de Mul, Nadia Fadil and Meryem Kanmaz (eds.), *Een Leeuw in een Kooi: De Grenzen van het Multiculturele Vlaanderen*, Antwerpen: Meulenhoff/Manteau, 93–110.
- Bracke, S. and D. Paternotte (forthcoming). Special issue: ‘Habemus Gender’, *Religion and Gender*.
- Braidotti, R. 2008. ‘In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism’, *Theory, Culture and Society* 25:6, 1–24.
- Braidotti, R., B. Blaagaard, T. De Graauw and E. Midden (eds.). 2014. *Transformations of Religion and the Public Sphere: Postsecular Publics*, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Butler, Judith. 2008. ‘Sexual Politics, Torture and Secular Time’, *The British Journal of Sociology* 59:1, 1–23.
- Cady, Linell E., and T. Fessenden. 2013. ‘Gendering the Divide: Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference’, in Linell E. Cady and Tracy Fessenden (eds.), *Religion, the Secular and the Politics of Sexual Difference*, New York: Columbia University Press, 3–24.

- Casanova, J. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Casanova, J. 2009. 'The Secular and Secularisms', *Social Research* 76:4, 1049–1066.
- Gutmann, A., and C. Taylor (eds). 1994. *Multiculturalism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Habermas, J. 2008. 'Notes on Post-Secular Society', *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25:4, 17–29.
- Jakobsen, J., and A. Pellegrini. 2008. *Secularisms*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Longman, C., and G. Coene. 2015. 'Harmful Cultural Practices and Minority Women in Europe: From Headscarf Bans to Forced Marriages and Honour Related Violence', in Chia Longman and Tamsin Bradley (eds.), *Interrogating Harmful Cultural Practices: Gender, Culture and Coercion*, Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate, 51–66.
- Mahmood, S. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Midden, E. 2014. 'Rethinking the "Arab Spring" Through the Postsecular: Gender Entanglements, Social Media and the Religion/Secular Divide' in Sandra Ponzanesi (ed.), *Gender, Globalization and Violence: Postcolonial Conflict Zones*, New York/Abingdon: Routledge, 245–264.
- Minkenberg, M. 2007. 'Democracy and Religion: Theoretical and Empirical Observations on the Relationship between Christianity, Islam and Liberal Democracy', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33:6, 887–909.
- Modood, T. 2010. 'Moderate Secularism, Religion as Identity and Respect for Religion'. *The Political Quarterly* 81:1, 4–14.
- Modood, T. 2013. 'Multiculturalism and Religion: A Three Part Debate. Part One Accommodating Religions: Multiculturalism's New Fault Line', *Critical Social Policy* 34:1, 121–127.
- Modood, T., A. Triandafyllidou, and R. Zapata-Barrero (eds.). 2006. *Multiculturalism, Muslims and Citizenship: A European Approach*, New York/Abingdon: Routledge.
- Okin, S.M. 1999. 'Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?' in J. Cohen, M. Howard, and M. Nussbaum (eds.), *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 7–23.
- Ozzano, L., and A. Giorgi. 2015. *European Culture Wars and The Italian Case. Which Side Are You On?*, New York/Abingdon: Routledge.
- Reilly, N., and S. Scriver (eds.). 2011. *Religion, Gender, and the Public Sphere*, New York/Abingdon: Routledge.
- Scott, J. 2007. *The Politics of the Veil*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Scott, J. 2009. *Sexularism: RSCAS Distinguished Lectures 2009/1*, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Ursula Hirschmann Annual Lecture on Gender and Europe.
- Taylor, C. 2007. *A Secular Age*, Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Van den Berg, M., D.J. Bos, M. Derks, R.R. Ganzevoort, M. Jovanovi, M., A.-M. Korte, and S. Sremac. 2014, 'Religion, Homosexuality, and Contested Social Orders in the Netherlands, the Western Balkans, and Sweden' in G. Ganiel, H. Winkel and C. Monnot (eds.), *Religion in Times of Crisis*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 116–134.
- Van den Brandt, N. 2014. *Religion, Secularity and Feminism in a West-European Context: A Qualitative Study of Organisations and Activism in Flanders*. PhD dissertation, Ghent University, BE.
- Withaecx, S., and G. Coene. 2011. 'Voorbij de Tegenstelling Tussen Vrouwenrechten en Cultuur. Pleidooi voor een Cultuursensitieve Benadering van Eergerelateerd Geweld', *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies* 14:1, 7–19.
- Wohlrab-Sahr M., and M. Burchardt. 2012. 'Multiple Secularities: Toward a Cultural Sociology of Secular Modernities', *Comparative Sociology* 11, 875–909.
- Women, Religion and Secularism (WRS). No date. 'About', accessed 21 December 2015, <https://womenreligionandsecularism.wordpress.com/about/>.