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Secularism, Feminism, and the Public Sphere

Niamh Reilly

In the early twenty-first century, religion resurfaced as a highly visible aspect of political and public life in all parts of the world. This has provoked renewed debate about the role of religion in late modernity. The widely held conception of secularism as a core tenet of a liberal, modernizing paradigm is now in question. That is, the phenomena of the separation of church and state, the progressive "secularization" of modern societies and relegation of religious practice to private domains, and the growing acceptance of gender equality are no longer presumed to be inevitable and interrelated. Most graphically, the events of 9/11 (11 September 2001) and the ensuing "War on Terror" have put religion at the center of global politics, albeit very narrowly as a problem of combating "radical Islam."

   In the context of Europe, globalization, immigration, and European Union enlargement have fostered the re-emergence of religious identities and actors—across all faiths—as significant social, cultural, and political forces in public and private life in an increasingly multicultural Europe. These events underline the need to critically examine established ways of thinking about religion, secularism and the public sphere, and in particular, the status of women and the role of feminism in this nexus. Four sets of developments shape the parameters of this enquiry. These are: the dominance of the "clash of civilizations thesis" in everyday and academic discourses; the continued emergence of politicized, autocratic, and violent movements in the name of religion; the ongoing scrutiny of the empirical and philosophical basis of the "secularization thesis"; and new critiques of the religious–secular binary from progressive perspectives, both nonreligious and religious, as well as from expected traditionalist or conservative standpoints.

   The rest of this chapter is divided into four sections. The first outlines the four sets of developments just noted that shape contemporary debates about religion and secularism in public and political life and the role of women and feminism therein. The second section considers, from a gender perspective, debates in normative political theory about religion, secularism, and the Habermasian public sphere. The third section continues to explore these themes as they are dealt with in feminist scholarship on the critical edges of Enlightenment thinking. Finally, the conclusion considers what is involved in rethinking secularism as a feminist political principle in a context of globalization and in contemporary multicultural societies.

Key Developments Shaping Contemporary Debates

The cataclysmic events of 9/11 in New York City, and subsequent bombings in London and Madrid, have been understood and discussed in the West in ways that

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reinforce the cultural essentialist notion of a "clash of civilizations," that is, the idea that there are irreconcilable differences between a supposedly rational and free West and an irrational and oppressive Islam. This is marked by the conflation of Islam with the threat of terrorism. Moreover, in Western liberal democracies, the violence of 9/11 has been filtered through a lens of anxiety in relation to the increasingly visible multicultural composition of societies. These developments have pushed to the surface questions about the accommodation (or not) of "other" religions in established practices that regulate existing religions vis-à-vis the state and in public life. Concerns are often presented as being about religion per se in liberal democratic societies and the threats that religious actors pose to the rule of (secular) law. However, much of the accompanying debate revolves around alarmist constructions of "Islam in the West" as the quintessential religious "other." This imagined clash of civilizations has played out in Europe especially around the role of the state in the regulation of different modes of Muslim women's dress in public settings (Skjeie 2007). Significantly, safeguarding gender equality and women's rights, and/or the secular nature of the state or public sphere, have featured prominently in justifications of punitive policies aimed at migrant or minority groups in the West, particularly Muslims.

These developments are a reminder of the centrality of gender power relations at the intersection of religion, culture, and the public sphere. Tensions between calls for women's equality and the rights of sexual minorities on one side, and the claims of religions on the other are well documented across all major religions and in every region of the world. It is also well recognized in feminist scholarship that gender identities and ethno-religious identities work together in complex ways that can be exploited by dominant groups, often at the expense of minority women. This is evident, for example, in the targeted use of sexual violence in ethno-religious conflicts and, conversely, in justifications to wage war or to prohibit forms of Muslim women's dress in the name of defending "women's rights." It follows that a more nuanced understanding of the changing role and influence of religion in the public sphere, and the implications for how secularism is construed, requires complex, multidisciplinary, and comparative gender analyses. Yet, with some notable exceptions (Phillips 2007; Mahmood 2005; Scott 2007), gender rarely figures as a principal concern or category of analysis in the literature on multicultural politics, religion, and the public sphere (see, e.g., Levey and Modood 2009; Parekh 2005; Kymlicka 1996; Taylor and Gutman 1994).

The emergence of politicized, autocratic religious movements over the past three decades, across all regions and major religions (Bhargava 2011: 92–93), further underlines the need to re-examine current notions of secularism in the nexus of religion, state, and gender and the role of women and feminism therein. Whether in the name of Christianity, Islam, or other religions, these movements seek to impose literalist and ultraconservative versions of religious teaching through state law and policy, most often targeting the sexual and reproductive freedom of women and sexual minorities (Shaheed 2004; Othman 2006; Al-Labadi 2014; Yuval-Davis 2014). The rise of "Islamic State," a transnational, "nonstate" militarized movement that purports to be religiously motivated and uses violence to achieve its ends, is a particularly egregious manifestation of this trend. More generally, religious minorities the world over are at risk in any context where dominant religious communities enjoy privileged or established positions vis-à-vis authoritarian states (Mekonnen and

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Van Reisen 2014). New approaches are called for that challenge politicized religious authoritarianism and violence in all its guises, without rendering religious individuals and communities susceptible to discrimination, persecution, or cultural violence and without enabling the cooptation of feminist projects for retrogressive purposes.

Debates around the relevance of the "secularization thesis" also shape contemporary discussions about secularism, women, and feminism. The sociological evidence on secularization is contradictory. Some continue to argue that the secularization thesis is relevant in specific contexts, where secularization is understood as a process of steadily declining public influence and/or privatization of religion. For example, focusing on dropping rates of church attendance and/or membership in the most stable and prosperous countries in northwest Europe, Steve Bruce (1996) concludes that there is a decisive overall trend toward secularization as modernization occurs. However, he also finds that participation in traditional religious practices remains high in countries where the formation of national identity and religion were intertwined historically (e.g., Ireland and Poland). Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart draw on World Values Survey data (1981–2001) to argue along similar lines that secularization understood as a "systematic erosion of religious practices, values and beliefs has occurred most clearly among prosperous social sections living in affluent and secure post industrial nations" (2004: 5).

In contrast, others argue that societies in different parts of the world (especially beyond Europe) are actively "de-secularizing" and that this is evidenced by the rise of new religious and spiritual movements and practices (Berger 1999; Davie 2002; Herbert 2003). José Casanova's comparative study of Brazil, Poland, Spain, and the United States (1994) leads him to conclude that outside of Europe the "de-privatization" of religion is underway. He suggests that enforcing a rigid separation of church and state (e.g., in France) is unique to the European Enlightenment critique of religion, which was driven by a rejection of particular, context-specific links between churches and authoritarian regimes in Europe. Subsequently, updating his theory of public religion, Casanova maintains that religion has been de facto continually present in public spheres in a majority of countries, including long-established democracies, despite the rhetoric of the "secular modern state" (Casanova 2008; Stepan 2000). These conclusions are echoed in the findings of the EU VEIL research project (Values, Equality in Liberal Democracies). The study reveals much variation within Europe in state responses to the Muslim headscarf, which maps onto significant differences in the model of church–state relations, traditions regarding antidiscrimination, and prevailing cultural and legal concepts of citizenship in each of the countries studied (e.g., Kiliç et al. 2008).

Overall, therefore, the notion of a single path of secularization is not credible. While participation in formal religious practices (mainly in affluent liberal democracies) appears to be declining, the relevance and diversity of religious and spiritual identities and practices more broadly continues to be significant and actively evolving in most societies. At the same time, fears about the consequences of the fusion of religious authority and state power (especially in some European contexts) have led to a strong, normative attachment to a particular brand of secularism, understood as a strict separation of "church and state," and the effective containment of religion to the private sphere of personal and family life. However, if it is recognized that this vision is more prescriptive than descriptive, and that "secularization" defined in this way is not an inevitable outcome of modernization,

there is an onus on proponents of the secular democratic state to acknowledge and defend its status as a normative political-social ideal and to define its parameters and modalities in nonoppressive ways.

Along with doubts about the empirical validity of the secularization thesis, the extension of influential poststructuralist critiques of Enlightenment rationality to questions of religion has also prompted reconsideration of the interrelation of secularism and feminism (Reilly 2011). Feminist studies in religion has always challenged the Enlightenment critique of religion. However, this body of work has been largely unheeded in "secular" scholarship to date. Elizabeth Castelli, for example, problematizes the operation of the secular–religious divide as follows:

> It has been an obstacle to some conversations that many feminists, whether activists or academics, have tended to read "religion" as an abstraction solely in negative terms—reading "religion" only as a constraint ideologically and institutionally, and reading the embrace of religious affiliations or allegiances as a sign of false consciousness. This negative rendering of "religion" is in many respects an ironic holdover from Feminism's own Enlightenment inheritance. (2001: 5)

This critique has gained purchase as poststructuralist thinking gathered momentum and unsettled the Enlightenment underpinnings of many disciplines across the humanities and social sciences—including the equation of "objective knowledge" with "the rational" and, more recently, with "the secular." Writings by Joan Scott and Judith Butler exemplify a more recent, explicit poststructuralist feminist engagement with "religion." Specifically, their analyses expose oppressive discursive practices that attend gendered understandings of "secularity as modernity" culminating in, as Butler describes it, "cultural assaults" on religious minorities (2008: 3). Similarly, addressing the French doctrine of *laïcité*, Scott argues that ideas about secularism "structure the way we think about how to deal with religion in general and Islam in particular" (2007: 95). She criticizes normative secularization theory, which conflates "secularism" with forward-looking "modernity" and "democracy," and the Enlightenment critique of religion, which demands the triumph of reason over superstition, sentiment, and belief. From this perspective, the moral panic around Islam in Europe and the related bans on Muslim women's dress come into focus as forms of state violence that are apparently justified when viewed through a rigid reading of the religious–secular binary. Deepening poststructuralist critiques of secularism as coercive normative practice, Saba Mahmood further questions the "liberatory" bias of poststructuralist feminist theory. She criticizes its "overwhelming tendency … to locate agency within those operations that resist the dominating and subjectivating modes of power" and urges instead a separation of "the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics" (2005: 14). In doing so, Mahmood argues, feminist analysis closes off recognition of "dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance" (14), including certain religious practices.

In summary, in a post–9/11 world, the combination of increasingly globalized and multicultural societies, the unsettling of the secularization thesis, and poststructuralist critiques of the religious–secular binary all raise profound questions for how liberal democracies respond to more visible and more active religious actors in public life and in politics. The questions raised are especially salient to

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women and to sexual and religious minorities who are often adversely targeted in the exercise of politicized, autocratic religious authority. Because questions of gender and religion are typically constructed as "private" within liberal secular logic, reconsidering the interrelation of state and religious authority through a gender lens necessarily entails rethinking dominant understandings of the public sphere. Toward this end, the following section briefly reviews this literature with a focus on gender, secularism, and feminism.

Religion, Secularism, and the Public Sphere: Engendering the Debate

Habermas's conceptualization of the public sphere ([1962] 1989) has featured prominently in normative democratic theory for several decades. For social democrats, his theorization enabled an important distinction to be made between the machinery of the state (formal politics, law, and public administration) and "public arenas of citizen discourse and association" (Fraser 1990: 56) where domination by state or free-market interests is subject to public contestation. At the same time, as a perennial defender of the radical promise of European Enlightenment ideals, Habermas's work also exemplifies the "Enlightenment critique of religion." Typically, religion was addressed by Habermas as inherently irrational, absolutist, and authoritarian—that is, as the Enlightenment's "other." More recently, however, reflecting the renewed visibility of religion as a significant social and political force and as a scholarly subject of cross-disciplinary inquiry, Habermas's perceived intolerant treatment of religion in public and political life has attracted more critical attention. In response, he has modified somewhat his argument for a carefully delineated and restricted place for "religion" in the public sphere. Recognizing the relevance of Habermas's ideas to contemporary scholarly analyses of the interrelation of religion and political life more generally, this section considers key fault lines in debates about religion in the Habermasian public sphere, the implications for the rethinking established understandings of secularism, and the relation of both to feminism as a political project.

Habermas's point of departure on religion in public life begins with a commitment to "political liberalism," which he understands as: "a nonreligious, post-metaphysical justification of the normative foundations of constitutional democracy" (2008a: 102). Elaborating this "secular" view of the basis of the constitutional democratic state, Habermas insists that "the democratic process counts as a procedure of legitimate lawmaking" and, crucially, that "democracy and human rights are interrelated in a coeval manner in the process of founding a constitution" (2008a: 103). This legitimating function of the democratic process, therefore, demands continual "inclusive and discursive [processes] of opinion- and will formation" (103) whereby those affected by norms, laws, and policies can have a meaningful say in their formulation. For Habermas, the legitimating character of such discursive practices requires a commitment on the part of all participants—as "free and equal members of their political community" (2008b: 121)—to decide outcomes in a disinterested manner on the basis of "good reasons." Building on liberal theorist John Rawls's prescription for "the public use of reason," Habermas characterizes and defends his account of the "secular state" as follows:

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> In a secular state only those political decisions are taken to be legitimate as can be impartially justified in the light of generally accessible reasons, in other words equally justified vis-à-vis religious and non-religious citizens, and citizens of different confessions. A rule that cannot be justified in an impartial manner is illegitimate as it reflects the fact that one party forces its will on another. Citizens of a democratic society are obliged to provide reasons for one another, as only thus can political power shed its repressive character. (2006: 5)

Hence, for Habermas, the legitimation of norms, policies, and laws implemented by a state requires them to be "rationally acceptable" to all affected, regardless of participants' religious worldviews.

Critics of Habermas's public sphere have highlighted various weaknesses, many of which focus on the gap between his ideal of public deliberation and "actually existing democracy" (Fraser 1990). Most frequently, critics are skeptical about Habermas's central reliance on a supposedly universal communicative reason because, seemingly, it entails an impossible requirement or presumption that all participants are equally "well informed," equally positioned to access and process information and other resources, and equally disposed to use such information for the purposes of posing and counterposing "good reasons" and "best arguments." For example, citing feminist research that reveals gender differences in modes of communication and the sidelining of female voices in mixed-gender exchanges, Fraser cautions that "deliberation can serve as a mask for domination … beyond gender to other kinds of unequal relation, like those based on class or race and ethnicity" (1990: 64). Hence, in contrast to Habermas's monolithic public sphere where participants are imagined to deliberate in search of the "common good," Fraser welcomes the contesting and parallel presence of multiple "subaltern counterpublics." Especially in an unequal society, she argues, such counterpublics allow members of "subordinated social groups [to] invent and circulate counterdiscourses … and to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (67). At the same time, she recognizes that subaltern counterpublics may also be "anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian" but argues that "insofar as [they] emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics, they help expand discursive space" (67). While Fraser does not explicitly include religious communities as potential subaltern counterpublics, clearly, the concept encompasses their inclusion.

Overall, therefore, Habermas's theorization of the public sphere has been faulted for privileging "Western," "bourgeois," and "masculine" perspectives, which he presumes to be "universal." That is, Habermas's public sphere fails to comprehend and address the scale and depth of the barriers to equal participation in public discourse and the invisibility and "lack of voice" experienced by sizable minorities, if not a majority of people, in most (democratic) societies. This is especially so, as Fraser underlines, for historically discriminated-against and marginalized groups, including women and minorities. More recently, critiques have highlighted the potentially oppressive nature of the "secular" logic exemplified by the Habermasian public sphere. For some, like Judith Butler and Joan Scott, as discussed earlier, this is prompted by concern about the politics of secularism in the post–9/11 era, including battles over the regulation of Muslim women's dress in public spaces. For others, criticism of Habermas's treatment of religion reflects an extension of long-running critiques of the limits of liberal individualism by communitarian political theorists

such as Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel. In the liberal–communitarian divide that has structured much debate in political theory since the 1990s the communitarian side has always been more disposed to addressing religion and morality as constitutive features of public life. Sandel notes, "Liberals often worry about religion in politics because they associate religion with intolerance [and the] resolve to avoid wars of religion has shaped much liberal political thought" (2006: 146). Despite the appropriation of communal values by conservatives in the United States and elsewhere, however, he argues that "there is nothing intrinsically conservative about family or neighborhood or community or religion" (42). Indeed, he cautions a "vision of public reason [that] is too sparse to contain the moral energies of a vital democratic life … opens the way [in public life] for the intolerant and the trivial and other misguided moralisms" (246).

As critiques of the secularization thesis have gained momentum, Habermas has conceded greater space to religious language and arguments within his account of rational, democratic dialogic processes. He argues:

> [T]he liberal state has an interest in the free expression of religious voices in the public arena. … It must not discourage religious persons and communities from also expressing themselves as such in the political arena, for it cannot be sure that secular society would not otherwise cut off itself from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity. … Religious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life. In corresponding political debates, this potential makes religious speech into a serious vehicle for possible truth contents. … However, the institutional thresholds between the "wild" political public sphere and the formal proceedings within political bodies also function as a filter that allows only secular contributions from … the informal flows of public communication to pass through. (2008b: 131)

Hence, Habermas wishes to confine the role of religion to opinion formation in the "weak" public sphere of civil society as distinct from the strong public of parliamentary policy and lawmaking (Cooke 2007: 227). Moreover, he asserts that while "morally convincing intuitions and reasons" offered by "religious citizens" should be heard, they must be translated into "generally acceptable language" (Habermas 2006: 15) if they are to be incorporated in formal state law and policy. Although Habermas uncritically equates "generally accepted language" with secular language and remains intent on regulating the presence and role of religion, at the same time he attempts to decenter a narrow secularist mindset (exemplified, e.g., by the French doctrine of *laïcité*). In doing so, his recent work signals a distinct move toward a more tolerant and pluralist stance on the presence of religious discourse in the public sphere of democratic states. For poststructuralist scholars, however, Habermas's accommodation of religion in the public sphere falls far short of what is required (Bender and Klassen 2010; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008). Specifically, Bender and Klassen argue that the ideology of pluralism is an inadequate "solution" to religious difference because, in its various manifestations, it "articulates and naturalizes the very boundaries of difference that it seeks to diminish, overcome and mediate" (2010: 15) and is "always directed toward and galvanised by multiple fields of knowledge power" (18).

For different reasons, communitarian critics such as Charles Taylor also consider

Habermas's compromise with "religious citizens" to be deficient in key respects. While not disputing that contemporary democracies should be neutral vis-à-vis different religious communities, Taylor takes issue with the liberal preoccupation with religion as "strange and perhaps even threatening" (2011: 51). Rebutting Habermasian and Rawlsian understandings of reason as an abstract and universal attribute of all, Taylor considers all reason to be contextual and grounded in culture and experience, including an array of religiously mediated identities and experiences. Rather than conceive of the public sphere as a kind of filtering system based on a required mode of reasoned deliberation, Taylor's vision of secular democracy is one where "mutual recognition and collaboration in common pursuits" are fostered (Calhoun 2011a: 129) in ways that "maximize the basic goals of liberty and equality between basic beliefs" (Taylor 2011: 56), including, but not limited to, religious beliefs.

As with all communitarian visions, this account raises questions about who speaks for communities. It is not sufficiently concerned about the politics of who formulates and articulates a community's "beliefs," and what kinds of tradeoffs are deemed acceptable in balancing "liberty and equality" against "beliefs." The majority of religious organizations continue to be structured along patriarchal and often hierarchical, social class lines; hence it is usually educated, middle-class male leaders who speak for communities and who have the discretion to ignore or actively suppress internal dissent. Feminist critics have long raised concerns about the subordinate status of women in all major religions. While much of this criticism reproduces an unreflective equation of secularism with feminism, some is also derived from poststructuralist critiques of identitarian politics. Jakobsen captures the pitfalls involved when she asks:

> [H]ow do we fully represent religious differences in the public sphere? Who are the appropriate representatives of religious communities? The Institutional leaders of those communities? Charismatic leaders? Someone else? And if those leaders also happen to be all men or of one race, who represents the racial minorities and women of this group? … In other words, crosscutting differences make it difficult if not impossible to use a unit of identity … to find a means of representing everyone. (2010: 33)

Hence, there are problems with the scenario envisaged by Taylor of flexible negotiation among "religious communities" aimed at arriving at a settlement between "liberty and equality" on the one side and "beliefs" on the other. It concedes too much to powerful arbiters of community "beliefs" and risks disregarding the will of some members of the community, dissenters, or others adversely affected by the settlement.

Offering another response to the challenge of "accommodating" different and often conflicting worldviews (including religious positions), Judith Butler eschews equally the totalizing logics of the universal deliberative subject, the communal value-driven "we," and identitarian religious belonging. Rather, she posits a notion of "cohabitation" instead of such aspirations to agreement, integration, or authenticity. Butler elaborates an ontological understanding of cohabitation as "our convergent condition—one of proximity, adjacency, againstness, one of being interrupted by the memory of someone else's longing and suffering, in spite of oneself" (2011: 88–89). She continues:

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> Since there is no home without adjacency, and no way to reside anywhere
> without the outside defining the space of inhabitation, the *co* of cohabitation
> cannot be thought simply as spatial neighbourliness. There is dependency and
> differentiation, proximity and violence. (2011: 89)

Butler's idea of cohabitation expresses a more radical break with liberal and communitarian versions of the public sphere than does Nancy Fraser's embrace of multiple subaltern counterpublics. Subaltern counterpublics, while expressing deep critiques of the dominant, bourgeois, public sphere are nonetheless construed by Fraser as oriented toward the eventual inclusion of subaltern counterpublics in the public sphere. This is achieved through the hopefully transformative integration of the "needs, perspectives and strategies" of previously excluded groups (Fraser 1990: 66). Fraser suggests that the presence of illiberal counterpublics is an inevitable dimension of discursive richness, which by definition is valued positively within a framework of normative participatory democracy. Ultimately, therefore, Fraser's response remains rooted in emancipatory critical theory. This entails a continuing commitment to the deliberative ideals at the heart of Habermas's public sphere and a qualified ontological assumption that "communication across lines of cultural difference is not in principle impossible" (69) as long as participants are not required to "bracket differences" (presumably including religious differences). In contrast, the beginning of a tenable response from Butler's perspective entails recognition among antagonistic communities (citing the example of Israel and Palestine), that their continued mutual existence relies upon the "reality" that they are constitutionally and simultaneously deeply opposed and deeply interdependent.

   The differences between Butler's and Fraser's analyses reveal basic fault lines between poststructuralist and critical theory positions regarding the prospects and limits of dialogic democratic practices in addressing the challenges posed by increased visibility and claims of religion in public and political life. Craig Calhoun (2011b), also approaching these questions from a critical theory perspective, concurs that insisting on the privatization or exclusion of religious perspectives and actors from the public sphere is incompatible with the goal of civic solidarity, which deliberation in the public sphere ostensibly seeks to foster. He further questions the rationale for and practicability of translating religious norms into secular forms, noting that "conflicts between worldviews and religious doctrines that lay claim to explaining man's position in the world cannot be laid to rest at the cognitive level" (2011b: 87). Calhoun cautions against "abandoning norms of fairness or state neutrality among religions" and argues for the normative necessity and practical possibility of building a "uniting bond of a civic solidarity, which cannot be legally enforced" but without which segmentation of communities "along the dividing lines of competing world views" replaces reciprocity and solidarity among citizens (2011b: 88). Read from Calhoun's perspective, therefore, Butler's concept of cohabitation appears to offer only an "unsteady modus vivendi" and likely political disintegration "into irreconcilable segments" (88).

   In contrast to poststructuralist positions, critical theorists locate the solution to accommodating diverse and/or conflicting religious claims in the public sphere in political, dialogic practices and in the retention of a commitment to a neutral and inclusive notion of secularism. Liberal-multicultural theorist Anne Phillips offers a similar response, which she roots emphatically in a commitment to individual rights. Phillips recognizes that

[g]ender equality does not depend on a strict separation of religion from politics … [and] there may be a range of possible combinations, along an axis from greater to lesser religious engagement in politics, compatible with strong regimes of gender equality" [provided] "the rights of the individual" [remain central]. (2009: 45)

Rajeev Bhargava similarly holds with rehabilitating secularism. He offers an account of nonbinary, "critical social secularism," which he places within a framework of moral and ethical reasoning (2011: 110). Among other things, this entails a "principled distance" on the part of the state (as distinct from a rigid separation of state from religion) and a commitment to combating four forms of domination: interreligious, intrareligious, domination of religious by secular, and domination of secular by religious (111). The following section continues to explore these themes in the nexus of religion, secularism, and the public sphere as they are dealt with in feminist scholarship on the critical edges of Enlightenment thinking.

Feminism, Religion, and Democracy on the Critical Edges of Enlightenment Thinking

In feminist scholarship that is critical of the Enlightenment but retains a significant commitment to the radical promise of its ideals, there are two dominant approaches to religion: first, feminist political and social theorizing that typically deals with religion as an absence, and second, a substantial body of feminist political sociology, which primarily focuses on the harmful effects of politicized religion and "religious fundamentalism" (Jeffrey and Basu 1998; Anwar 2009; Shaheed 2009). Religion is generally ignored as an empirical horizon or as a category of analysis in the work of influential Western feminist political theorists. A cursory review of the index pages of a selection of widely used texts in the field (Young 2002; Bryson 2003; McLaughlin 2003; Harding 2004; Hartsock 1998; Okin 1992) indicates that none have included "religion" or a related term. Notably, however, feminist theory texts that focus on the experiences and perspectives of women in the global South tend to include sub-stantially more references to religion, although usually along the negative lines noted earlier and evident in the political sociological literatures (e.g., Mohanty 2003: ch. 9; McCann and Kim 2010; Nussbaum 2000; Tripp et al. 2009).

On one level, the absence of religion even in Western feminist political theory is puzzling. As an area of scholarship concerned with examining the gendered exercise of power across public and private domains, much remains to be interrogated within all major religions wherein: "men hold "most or all of the roles of authority and prestige' and "from these positions … control and dictate the norms of the [religion] for all women" (Gross 1996: 106). On another level, the silence on religion confirms the observations (Castelli 2001; Beattie 2005; and others) that most such scholarship retains an unexamined Enlightenment view of religion—as the antithesis of rationality and freedom. The persistence of this view of religion in feminist political theory, however, is at odds with quite basic feminist critiques of the public–private divide, which now underpin the most moderate liberal feminist agendas (evidenced, e.g., by the focus on remedying domestic violence or securing "family-friendly" conditions of work). Hence, even if it is accepted that the influence of religion is or ought to be

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confined to the "private sphere," it surely remains relevant to the theorization of the gendered exercise of power along the personal to political spectrum. This point is underlined when one considers that women make up the majority of actively religious people worldwide (Furseth and Repstad 2006: 190–191; Woodhead 2008). It follows that feminism, as a conceptual and practical project concerned with the "emancipation of women," must acknowledge the role of religion in women's lives in more complex and nuanced ways than has happened to date.

The presumption that religion is not relevant in influential feminist theory texts also reveals a problematic Western bias. It assumes that injurious gendered religious practices are really only a problem for women in societies that are "not modern" (i.e., in or from the global South) who, within this logic, are generally construed as victims of religion. Religion is rarely seen as a problem in the same way for Western religious women who are more likely to be understood as complex subjects negotiating contradictory identities and demands (e.g., Catholic women who use contraception or conservative women who champion "equal but different" arguments about gender roles within the church). Certainly, much feminist scholarship at the intersection of religion and politics has roots in a liberal Enlightenment tradition epitomized by a commitment to women's equality and human rights. Yet, despite "freedom of religion" also being a cornerstone of this tradition, because religion is frequently implicated in endorsing subordinate roles for women relative to men and/or harmful cultural practices, equality feminism tends to view religion primarily as a threat. Much criticism has been leveled against this brand of feminist thinking as inevitably Western-centric and neo-imperialist (Razack 2008; Grewal 1999). Susan Okin's (1999) essay "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?", for example, is often cited (somewhat unfairly) as epitomizing a retrogressive, universalist position wherein the experience and worldview of white, Western, middle-class, and, ostensibly, secular women is falsely universalized as the norm of "modern emancipated womanhood." This variant of Western feminism as mobilized in the context of the Muslim headscarf debates, against supposedly unemancipated women and the men who oppress them, is rightly criticized by Scott (2007) and Butler (2008).

Undoubtedly, the War on Terror narrative is infused with gendered and racialized perceptions prevalent in the West that equate Islam with fundamentalism and "terrorism." This makes Muslim and other minorities in the West more vulnerable to intolerance, discrimination, and state-sponsored abuses of human rights (Fekete 2004). In addition to affecting women as members of targeted minority communities, as seen in conflicts over the Muslim headscarf, these trends have wider gender-specific implications. For example, minority women often play a daily interfacing role between their communities and the majority population (e.g., around accessing housing, education, health care, and other services) and, in this regard, can bear the brunt of prejudice and discrimination against the community, which they are perceived to represent. Further, in situations of heightened tension between minority and majority communities, minority women who experience abuse within the family or community are extremely unlikely to seek assistance if they fear that they will be stigmatized for betraying the community and/or that their abuser will be subject to maltreatment by the authorities.

Much feminist scholarship on the critical edges of the Enlightenment tradition focuses on problematizing "religious fundamentalism" and, in this regard, can be

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implicated or co-opted in retrogressive narratives of the War on Terror. However, blanket critiques of this work, which retains a commitment to Enlightenment norms, often miss the counter-hegemonic, postcolonial moment of this body of literature. This includes nuanced analyses by feminist scholars from various global South standpoints about global South contexts from Egypt and Iran to India, Pakistan and Malaysia (Al-Ali 2000; Anwar 2009; Jeffrey and Basu 1998; Badran 2009; Narayan 2000; Othman 2006; Shaheed 2009; Tohidi and Bayes 2001). While the arguments of these scholars are complex and varied, they share a common critical orientation that challenges gender inequalities in context, rejects cultural essentialism, and aspires to the substantive realization of gender inclusive visions of democracy and human rights.

In global South contexts, cultural essentialist arguments are mobilized by autocratic, religious movements that conceal gender-based oppressions in the name of upholding authentic communal religious integrity and rejecting Western secularism. As Farida Shaheed argues, around the world, processes of decolonization, national independence, modernization, and globalization have generated a "bewildering pace of change" and a need to construct new histories and (re)create identities and ways of belonging at the individual, community and national level (1989: 4). It is important to keep in mind that, in the global South, most funda-mentalist religious projects have roots in a legacy of Western "colonisation and hegemonic rule and control" (Shaheed 1999: 63).

At the same time, writing about secularism, gender, and the state in Egypt, Nadje Al-Ali is highly critical of the now hegemonic scholarly literature from "the Islamic perspective" that takes as given the unequivocal equation of secularism with the "West" and "Christianity." Al-Ali problematizes this relatively new orthodoxy in Egypt and the Muslim world more generally, characterizing it as "an essentialist presupposition that has to be challenged" (2000: 131). Such arguments promulgate a false dichotomy that permits only two possible standpoints in postcolonial contexts: either to defend "authentic" local culture against "the West" or to collude in the neo-imperialist imposition of Western values and agendas. Within this logic, which is at the heart of contemporary violent Islamist projects, internal dissent is not simply absent but ineffable as critical voices are only heard as "Westernized" betrayers of Islam and local culture—with feminist voices especially castigated as "Western" (Mukhtar 2003; Shaheed 1989). This logic is deeply disingenuous. It denies the agency and belonging of locally situated, indigenous dissenting subjects who both (a) articulate women's equality or human rights claims in their own contexts and (b) firmly reject the imposition and false universalization of human rights values from various dominant standpoints, internally or externally.

Feminist critics of religious fundamentalist movements (Saghal 2004; Imam and Yuval-Davis 2004) are also critical of some multicultural positions in the West. Saghal has criticized British multicultural policy in particular, which initially allowed certain social policies to be determined by conservative male community leaders. In response to "secular" Asian feminist pressure to address crimes against women in these contexts (especially forced marriage), British politicians and policymakers, reflecting a dominant progressive understanding of multiculturalism, looked for religious arguments (Hindu, Sikh, Muslim) to justify legal and policy interventions against forced marriage. In doing so, Saghal argues, they "resorted to developing support amongst the very people [they] wanted to criticise, and thereby helped increase their hold over 'their' communities" (2004: 58). Similarly, regarding the

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Muslim headscarf debates, arguments from a multicultural perspective can err by focusing only on impediments to Muslim women to wearing Muslim dress but not on the right of a Muslim woman not to do so if that is her wish. In doing so, they fail to acknowledge and address the conflicts that regularly arise when the self-determination of a woman clashes with the "beliefs of the community." This underlines that, to the extent there is a problem or not in relation to a woman wearing a Muslim headscarf, it is the problem of maximizing the conditions of her self-determination. If a woman is forced to, or prohibited from, wearing any form of Muslim headscarf, whether by an individual or a state actor, it is equally unacceptable from an emancipatory feminist perspective.

   The final section considers what is involved in rethinking secularism as a feminist political principle in a context of globalization and in contemporary multicultural societies.

Conclusion: Rethinking Secularism as a Feminist Political Principle

The need to re-examine established ways of thinking about secularism and its relationship to feminism has arisen in the context of the confluence of a number of developments in recent years including the increasing dominance of the "clash of civilizations" thesis, the expansion of progressive poststructuralist critiques of Enlightenment rationality to encompass questions of religion, and sustained critiques of the "secularization thesis."

   Without the presumption of an inevitable, singular path of secularization, there is an onus on defenders of secularism to argue its merits and modalities as a normative political principle. This entails moving away from defending ethnocentric accounts of secularism as universally applicable. Rather, it means clearly defining the purpose of secularism and justifying its operation in specific contexts. On the view, the principle of secularism is invoked to specify context-specific conditions of human freedom, including the freedom of women and of sexual and religious minorities, among others, within an emancipatory, inclusive account of the democratic polity. This requires genuine respect for religious pluralism. Such an approach must be attentive to the scope of religious authority enjoyed by different actors in order to safeguard against violations of human freedom through the abuse of religious authority in various contexts and to eschew constructions of religion as only a constraint and the antithesis of freedom.

   Any vision of feminism that aligns automatically with antireligious expressions of secularism or blanket condemnations of Muslim women's dress as an offensive symbol of the oppression of women is untenable as a basis for emancipatory feminist practice in a context of globalisation. Elsewhere, I have developed an account of cosmopolitan feminism that outlines the tenets of a nonoppressive, globally oriented feminism (Reilly 2007). Most important, emancipatory cosmopolitan feminism entails recognition of the complex and often contradictory intersectionality of women's identities and experiences cutting across gender, socioeconomic privilege, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, geolocation, and so on (Brah and Phoenix 2004; Crenshaw 1991; Yuval-Davis 2006). It also requires recognition that this complexity can only be comprehended through dialogic practice. Embracing such a feminist ontology of intersectionality, then, demands that the content of any practical emancipatory

agenda, aimed at transforming gender oppression, will be formulated in mutually respectful dialogue. It cannot be imposed by one group of women or men on another group of women in the name feminism. Moreover, this cosmopolitan feminist perspective embeds feminism in democratic practice oriented toward the substantive realization of human rights and freedoms.

The strategies of the Malaysian nongovernmental organization Sisters in Islam, as articulated by Norani Othman (2006) and Zainah Anwar (2009), offers a practical illustration of emancipatory cosmopolitan feminism in which religion features centrally. Othman argues that feminism in Malaysia must be a two-tiered struggle against gender discrimination and oppression emanating first from "secular patriarchy" and second from more recent manifestations of "Muslim patriarchy." She expressly calls on the women's movement in Malaysia to directly address the impact of authoritarian politicized religion on the integrity of constitutionalism, respect for human rights, and democracy. When authoritarian religious forces permeate state power, she warns, breaches of religious or moral ethics, as determined by local religious leaders, are treated as criminal behavior. (This is precisely the scenario that Habermas seeks to prevent by limiting religious speech to the informal public sphere.) Othman, however, goes beyond Habermas's safeguards by insisting on the *necessity* of making links between religious and democratic, constitutional, and human rights values *within* religious communities. Building on the ideas of Abdullahi An-Na'im (1992), Othman urges other devout Muslim women to reflect critically on the role of "Islamic knowledge" in "reclaiming the space for substantive democracy and justice" and to find a "language of protest and resistance to religious and state authoritarianism" (2006: 347). Finally, she stresses that the extent to which "internal debate among Muslims can help to … re-constitute women's rights and gender equality in Islam depends on the democratic space … that exists in Muslim societies" (352).

This vision articulated by Othman (2006) in a scenario of the deepening fusion of authoritarian religion and state power expresses an instructive feminist reading of the principle of secularism in emancipatory politics. In this account, secularism underpins a dialogic public civil space that is defined *above all* by tolerance. Similar to Bhargava's vision (2011), such a secular public space is far from antireligious; it is a site of tolerance for competing interpretations of religious ideas *within* religions and respect vis-à-vis different religious and nonreligious worldviews. In this regard it rejects the "Enlightenment critique of religion," which views religion as the antithesis of rationality and freedom. However, it equally defends a notion of secularism as one that demands state neutrality vis-à-vis different religious communities and subjectivities.

Othman's public sphere, therefore, includes religious argument and expressions of religious identity as aspects of human self-understanding, communication, and development, and she admits religion as a legitimate discursive horizon in shaping (if not codifying in law) the ethical, moral, and spiritual life of communities. Significantly, this vision calls for the active participation of religious women in critically reinterpreting religious concepts in emancipatory ways. Moreover, Othman sees such critical public debate as a pivotal mechanism in the substantive realization of women's rights and gender equality both within Islam (including in the family) and vis-à-vis state. This account of a public sphere, which rejects the opposition of religion and secularism, resembles Scott's (2007) suggestion of religion and the state

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operating as "parallel systems of interpretation." Othman, however, is less equivocal about what is required to ensure that the scope of religious authority exercised in such public spheres does not translate into the legitimization of gendered and other forms of oppression: a secular democratic state, grounded in constitutionalism and human rights and critically (re)interpreted from emancipatory feminist perspectives.

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