

Joan Wallach Scott  
*Sex and Secularism*  
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*Reviewed by Serene Khader, 2019*

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**Quote:** "Scott persuasively shows that the idea that secularism increased gender equality in the West is false. If anything, she argues, increases in the West's self-definition as secular necessitated new techniques of gender subordination."

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Joan Scott's recent work has been vital in illuminating a widespread political phenomenon: the way appeals to secularism arouse feminist sentiment while simultaneously functioning as Islamophobic dog whistles. Where her *Politics of the Veil* analyzed specific discourses surrounding the French headscarf debate in the early 2000s, *Sex and Secularism* attempts a "history of the present" (7). In this more historical book, Scott reveals two facts with far-reaching current implications: a) that the role of secularism in marking a contrast between a putatively feminist West and a misogynistic "rest" is nothing new, and b) that the idea that secularism brings about gender equality is empirically specious. The book is an impressive accomplishment, and one that stands to offer much to philosophers in particular.

Philosophers, at least those writing in the Anglo-American tradition, tend to study concepts and their entailments. Distinctive of Scott's approach to secularism is the refusal to reduce secularism to a concept. Instead, she treats secularism as "a discursive operation of power whose generative effects need to be examined critically in their historical contexts" (4). Regardless of whether all concepts need to be understood in this genealogical fashion, secularism seems particularly amenable to being studied in this way. One reason for this is simply that the meaning of secularism does seem to shift from context to context. Scott adeptly demonstrates this, tracing discussions of secularism from the nineteenth century to the present. For example, nineteenth-century invocations of secularism, though they were always racialized, often demanded the expulsion of the state from the public sphere. Yet the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights must have had a different notion in mind when it ruled in 2001 that the crucifix could appear in classrooms because it represented Italian culture, and concordantly its values of liberty and equality as well as the "secular nature of the state" (quoted on 19). Scott also argues that a different type of incorporation of Christianity into secularism

occurred during the Cold War. Because the project of distinguishing the United States and Western Europe from the Soviet Union required a form of secularism that was distinct from atheism, secularism then morphed into the right to practice a religion.

A related reason secularism is worth studying as a historical formation is that treating it as a single concept may confer legitimacy on suspect political projects. Assuming that there is a more than superficial unity to uses of the term risks playing into the hands of Western cultural chauvinists who attribute the West's putative superiority to its adoption of superior moral principles. The apparent unity of the concept of secularism may derive more from unjustified commitments to the idea that Western culture has developed through increasing realization of sound moral principles than from genuine shared logical entailments among the term's uses. After all, as Scott points out, citing an 1862 lecture from Ernest Renan, the idea that Islam could never be secular is as old as secularism itself (19). It may be the case that what unifies uses of secularism is just the way it buttresses ideological Western self-conceptions.<sup>1</sup>

If something like this is indeed the source of secularism's apparent unity, philosophical insistence that secularism is a concept risks conferring logical and moral legitimacy on what is, in reality, a mishmash of opportunistic rhetorical appeals. In an era of clash of civilizations rhetoric, where the enemy of the West is now taken to be a decidedly unsecular Islam, assuming secularism is a concept can mask sets of criticisms that seem more clearly motivated by racism or xenophobia. The so-called "new atheists" often claim that they are merely criticizing religion, but some of their key voices defend European far-right parties and insist that Islam is uniquely threatening.<sup>2</sup>

None of this shows definitively that secularism is unworthy of study as a unified concept. Nor does it imply that the principles philosophers associate with secularism--like the ability to pursue multiple conceptions of the good--are necessarily bad. It implies instead that philosophers interested in secularism need to be aware of the risks scholars court when writing about it. One of these is the risk of doing bad philosophy because one assumes that a coherent concept exists where it does not, or because one's ideological background commitments drive them to treat what are actually central cases of secularism as misuses. Another is the risk of offering harmful moral prescriptions because one does not recognize the work that the principle to which one is appealing does in real-world political discourse.

The only way to offset these risks is empirical engagement. Whether past uses of the term *secular* have a single referent depends on historical facts. Whether contemporary ones encourage us to pursue worthy political ends or function to fan the flames of Islamophobia depends on facts about our political landscape. If I am right that awareness of empirical facts is key to doing good philosophy about secularism, Scott has done philosophers a significant favor by writing this book. Though Scott offers much in the way of original analysis, much of her contribution in it is to synthesize decades of scholarship by others. Philosophers who are looking to educate themselves on the history of secularism, and the history of gender relations in the West (a point I will turn to in a moment), will find fruitful directions for further inquiry here.

This is a book about *sex* and secularism, not just secularism. Indeed, the book focuses more on drawing attention to empirical facts that break the link between secularism and feminist progress than questioning the coherence of secularism as a concept. (The two are deeply related, however, since the idea that secularism has driven the West's ostensible success at gender equality feeds the idea that secularism is a unified concept with a positive moral valence.) Western discourses on Muslim women are riddled with the notion that the continued permeation of religion through various spheres of life causes sexist oppression. It is commonly argued in such discourses that some type of secularism will cause Muslim women's liberation; the concurrent justification for the ban on hijab in French public schools in terms of *laïcité* and gender equality is a key example.

Scott persuasively shows that the idea that secularism increased gender equality in the West is false. If anything, she argues, increases in the West's self-definition as secular necessitated new techniques of gender subordination. The doctrine of spheres, according to which women belonged in the home partly because of their role as protectors of virtue, was, according to the scholarship Scott discusses, a *product of* secularism. Before the nineteenth century in Europe, part of the value of religious involvement in the state was thought to be its moralizing influence. This caused a worry that demoting the church from its public role would simply exile morality from human life. To solve this problem, it became necessary to delineate a distinct sphere of life in which the Church did belong. The result, in Scott's words, was that "religion was privatized and feminized at the same time" (32). Religion became associated with women, and this ushered in the casting of motherhood as a type of spiritual guardianship and a civilizing influence on men. The result was a new set of reasons that it was desirable to exclude women from public life. A common worry among antisuffragists, for example, was that participation in the public (now nonreligious) sphere would corrupt women and rob society's fount of virtue.

Scott also argues that anxiety over the loss of the regulatory functions of religion produced a new social fixation with women's reproductive capacities. Scott makes two types of arguments to this effect. First, she claims that the late nineteenth-century decline in religious arguments for women's role in the home caused only a change in popular *justifications* of the role rather than the role itself. The tone of the new justifications was naturalistic or scientific. The physicalism of science highlighted women's role as biological reproducers. For example, language about energy from physics was used to claim that where men expended energy as part of a drive toward intellectual accomplishments, women stored it for "physical reproduction" (63). Similarly, the ascent of evolutionary theory and social Darwinism permitted the claim that women's subordinate role derived from the need to reproduce the species. Second, Scott makes a more psychoanalytic argument. Borrowing from Weber's idea that the scientization of society brought about "disenchantment" and the absence of a social way of making sense of death, Scott contends that there arose in response a desire to infuse the process of making life with purpose. This in turn produced a need to regulate the heterosexual couple--and especially to regulate women's sexual behavior.

Scott's critique of the idea that secularism brings about gender equality does not only draw on counterexamples in the West. She adduces a number of examples of how secularism influenced Western imperialist projects in ways that increased colonial and sexist control over women in the colonies. For example, in the 1920s, the Syrian parliament granted women the right to vote. When Syria came under French rule, the French returned the question of whether women should have the right to vote to religious leaders, since they were seen as the correct arbiters of what should happen to women. Moreover, Lebanese and Syrian feminist claims that local religious leaders were violating the teachings of the Qu'ran were ignored in the name of the idea that such ideas were irrelevant to public life (117). In another example of the gender-perverse effects of secularism in the colonies, Scott argues that social Darwinist ideas led to laws policing non-Western sexual practices. Colonial policies shaped nonheterosexual and nonmonogamous social forms to more closely mirror the nuclear family form in the West and, in many cases, forbade interracial marriage.

The history of the exclusion of women from political life in the West is often told, especially in philosophy, as a story about the incomplete realization of modern ideals. In particular, it is often argued that religious traditions that subjugated women were slowly but progressively overcome and that this led to women's liberation. Scott's rendition suggests a different version of the story. Hers is less willing to cast modern ideas as aligned with reduction in gender injustice. In her view, the strain of modernity that went by the name of secularism actually necessitated women's subordination and furnished justifications of it. When the social role of religion shifts, anxieties about women's role often ensue. If she is right about this, there are serious reasons to question the truism that secularism (whatever it is) produces gender equality; it may just as well produce new technologies and justifications of women's subordination.

I have said much about the value of Scott's book for philosophers, but philosophers (including this one) can find much to quibble with in the book. The sections of the book that attempt to take on ideas in political philosophy about individualism are somewhat unsatisfying. Scott claims, as she does in previous work, that there is a tension between the idea that individuals are rights-holders and the attempt to include women in the polis, ostensibly because women are a social group. Scott's claim that widespread ideas about women's attributes affected women's abilities to be recognized as individual citizens seems correct, but her claim that women could never count as individuals because they were a group or because of the abstraction of the category of the individual is imprecise and overreaching.

More conceptual precision would also have improved the book's overarching argument about the role secularism has historically played in causing women's oppression. At times it seems that the new forms of gender injustice Scott associates with secularism might be better understood as stemming from--perhaps even epiphenomenal on--capitalism or colonial racial ideologies. For example, part of her argument that the doctrine of the spheres is a product of secularism focuses on the increasing economic specialization of the period. One even wonders at points whether the point of the book is really that secularism is a red herring rather than that it plays any specific role in furthering projects

of domination. Of course, the idea that secularism cannot be separated from these systems of domination is part of Scott's point. On the other hand, however, a lack of analytical separation among the phenomena makes it difficult to glean positive political lessons, because it becomes difficult to tell when the relationship between secularist arguments and domination is contingent.

But these really are disciplinary quibbles, and philosophers stand to gain much from reading this perspicacious and ambitious book. It is a must-read, not only for those interested in religion or decolonial theory, but for any feminist philosophers interested in the relationship between modern political ideals and gender equality.

### ***References***

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<sup>1</sup> I argue in Khader 2018 that the idea that the West's putative superiority arises from principles endogenous to Western culture insulates Western ideals from critique.

<sup>2</sup> See Greenwald 2013 for a discussion of how the "new atheists" target Islam in ways they do not target other religions.