

INTRODUCTION

The Discourse of Secularism

ATTENTION TO SECULARISM has again entered popular discourse as part of the “clash of civilizations” rhetoric. Of course, there is a long history of academic study of secularization, the processes by which European states are said to have brought organized religion under their control, introduced bureaucratic management and technical calculation into their governing operations, and justified their sovereignty in terms of republican or democratic theory, that is, as representatives of the mandate of those considered citizens, not as the embodiment of God’s will. Secularism has been taken to be synonymous with these processes; the historical triumph of enlightenment over religion. But in its recent usage, it has had a simpler referent as the positive alternative, not to all religion but to Islam. In this discourse secularism guarantees freedom and gender equality while Islam is synonymous with oppression.

Although some critics of Islam specify their target as political and/or fundamentalist Islam, most indict all of Islam in their condemnations. Thus, the idea of a “clash of civilizations,” as articulated by the political scientist Samuel Huntington in

1993, posed Western Christianity against Islam in a conflict that, he maintained, “had been going on for 1300 years.”¹ In the article, he soon referred to Western Christianity simply as “the West,” and although secularism was not denoted as such, it was implicit in the contrasts that he offered between freedom and oppression. As the phrase “clash of civilizations” gained prominence, especially after 9/11, secularism and gender equality became increasingly emphasized as the basis for Western superiority to all of Islam. So in 2003, the head of the French commission recommending a ban on Islamic headscarves in public schools explained that according to the principle of *laïcité* (the French word for secularism), “France cannot allow Muslims to undermine its core values, which include a strict separation of religion and state, equality between the sexes, and freedom for all.”² In the same year, the American political scientists Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris argued that “the true clash of civilizations” was about “gender equality and sexual liberalization.”³ The religious demands of Islam were said to deny both. Since then, the emancipatory effect of secularism on women has been so taken for granted that the American novelist Joyce Carol Oates expressed surprise at the criticism she got for tweeting that “the predominant religion of Egypt” was responsible for violence against women during the summer protests of 2013.⁴ It seems never to have occurred to her that misogyny of the kind responsible for the domestic violence that she often chronicles in her novels might be at issue, and that her comment might be construed as Islamophobic, so self-evident did her opinion seem to her. Perhaps the most virulent attack on Islam in the name of secularism comes from a defiant French organization called Riposte Laïque (Secular Retort), which brings together groups from across the political spectrum to defend the republic from impending annihilation by the Muslim hordes. “When one is attached to the Republic,

to democracy, to women's rights, to freedom, to secularism, one has the obligation to be islamophobic simply because Islam cannot tolerate emancipatory values."⁵ Here, by definition, secularism is associated with reason, freedom, and women's rights, Islam with a culture of oppression and terror. In this formulation culture is reason's other—reason assures the progress of history while culture protects immutable tradition.

In this book I examine the ways in which gender has figured in the discourses of secularism. I revisit a large body of literature written by second-wave feminists, as well as by historians of religion, race, and colonialism. I synthesize this work and offer new interpretations based upon it. The literature allows me to document the uses of the term "secularism" and to identify its various meanings and contradictions. On the basis of this history, it is very clear that the gender equality today invoked as a fundamental and enduring principle of secularism was not at all included in the first uses of the term. In fact, *gender inequality was fundamental to the articulation of the separation of church and state that inaugurated Western modernity*. I go further to suggest that Euro-Atlantic modernity entailed *a new order of women's subordination*, assigning them to a feminized familial sphere meant to complement the rational masculine realms of politics and economics. When the question of Islam arose in the late twentieth century, along with a polemic about the "clash of civilizations," gender equality became a primary concern for secularism. And even now, what counts as that equality is difficult to define because its meaning is secured largely by a negative contrast with Islam.

The book's arguments can be briefly stated this way: first, the notion that equality between the sexes is inherent to the logic of secularism is false; second, this false historical assertion has been used to justify claims of white, Western, and Christian racial and religious superiority in the present as well

as the past; and third, it has functioned to distract attention from a persistent set of difficulties related to differences of sex, which Western and non-Western, Christian and non-Christian nations share, despite the different ways in which they have addressed those difficulties. Gender inequality is not simply the by-product of the emergence of modern Western nations, characterized by the separation between the public and the private, the political and the religious; rather, that inequality is at its very heart. And secularism is the discourse that has served to account for this fact.

The Discourse of Secularism

The title of this chapter, “The Discourse of Secularism,” is meant to signal that I am not treating secularism as a fixed category of analysis but as a discursive operation of power whose generative effects need to be examined critically in their historical contexts. This means that when I refer to secularism, it is not objective definitions I have in mind. Instead, following Michel Foucault, my approach is “genealogical,” that is, it analyzes the ways in which the term has been variously deployed, and with what effects. This approach does not deny the reality of the institutions and practices said to embody secularism; indeed, I examine those closely in the chapters that follow. But instead of assuming that we know in advance what secularism means, or that it has a fixed and unchanging definition, I interrogate its meaning as it was articulated and implemented differently in different contexts at different times.⁶

This approach distinguishes my work from much of the vast literature on secularism that has emerged in this century—usually directly or indirectly in response to the clash of civilizations polemic. Whether written by anthropologists, philosophers, or historians, these studies either assume or at-

tempt to pin down an ultimate meaning for the concept and the processes it connotes. They fashion an analytic category distinct from the actual historical usages of the word itself. They ask undeniably important questions about the impact of secularization on religion or the state, about what is entailed in the constitution of secular subjects, about whether and how secularity opens the way for nonnormative sexual practices, about the nature of belief in a “secular age.” Secularism is understood, for this body of scholarship, either as the linear evolution of ideas and institutions that brought us modernity or as a conceptual and political formation with identifiable characteristics.⁷ It is used as an analytic category, with a set of characteristics that are apparent to an observer even when the word itself is not being used by those whose lives are being studied.⁸ In that work, *secular* (referring to things nonreligious), *secularization* (the historical process by which transcendent religious authority is replaced by knowledge that can only originate with reasoning humans), and *secularity* (a nonreligious state of being) tend to be conflated under the umbrella of secularism.

In this book I do not take secularism as an analytic category apart from the discourse that deployed it, nor do I accept the assertion that gender equality is an inevitable (though belated) feature of secularism’s history. Here I am in disagreement with the philosopher Charles Taylor’s progressive narrative of secularism. From his perspective, the implementation of secularism is synonymous with progress, emancipation, and modernity. Discussing “Locke’s egalitarian imaginary,” he notes that “[it was] at the outset profoundly out of synch with the way things in fact ran. . . . Hierarchical complementarity was the principle on which people’s lives effectively operated—from kingdom . . . to family. We still have some lively sense of this disparity in the case of the family, because it is really only in

our time that the older images of hierarchical complementarity between men and women are being comprehensively challenged. But this is a late stage in a ‘long march’ process.”⁹ I think this comment assumes a cumulative progress toward equality that simply hasn’t been the case. It works with an idealized or reified notion of secularism as a transcendent phenomenon when, in fact, it is anything but that.

I am more in agreement with Talal Asad’s critique of this idea of secularism (written before Taylor’s book) as a “myth of liberalism”—and with his call for attention to its discursive construction, that is, to its genealogy. “The secular is neither singular in origin nor stable in its historical identity, although it works through a series of particular oppositions,” among them the political and the religious, the public and the private.¹⁰ To this list I would add the opposition between reason and sex, masculine and feminine, men and women. My focus is on the politics of the discursive articulations of secularism, particularly as they depend on references to gender. In that sense, I am writing on the history of the polemical uses of the term and their resonances for political, social, and economic institutions and policies.

But—readers be warned—this is not a conventional intellectual or social history of the word *secularism* and its associated practices. It is, instead, a set of arguments bound loosely by a periodization related to the emergence of modern Western nation-states (from the eighteenth century on); it juxtaposes examples from places with different histories and geographies, not in order to deny their specificity but to insist on what was common to their invocations of secularism and its effects. Some readers will find the juxtapositions to be unlikely; some will want more contextualization than I have provided. Some will chafe at what they deem to be overly sweeping transgeographic historical claims about gender, sexuality,

secularism, state formation, and capitalism. These are inevitable objections, which nonetheless misunderstand my own polemical aim: to engage and discredit, with a broad brush and the provision of as many varied instances as I could find, the current representation of secularism as the guarantor of equality between women and men. A broad brush inevitably invites objections, qualifications, instances that don't fit the overall pattern I think I discern. If this book provokes others to pursue more detailed and precise histories, that is all to the good. My aim is to open—not to definitively close—a conversation about the place of gender equality in the discourse of secularism.

I think of this book as exemplifying what Foucault referred to as the history of the present: a history that critically examines terms we take for granted and whose meanings seem beyond question because we treat them as a matter of common sense. Certainly, secularism has had that status for many of us. It is the reason, I think, that many of my colleagues, when hearing about this book, have expressed surprise at my interest in critically examining the term. They ask: Are you questioning the value of the neutrality of the state in relation to religion and the principle of religious noninterference in the deliberations of politics? Isn't it dangerous to do that at this moment of evangelical religious revival the world over? Do you dispute the fact that there is more space in liberal secular societies for a diversity of views about such things as sex and politics, and for dissenting movements to emerge? No, I reply, I endorse those principles and agree that there may be more open spaces, more possibilities for variety and change in some societies rather than others, but I don't think that those openings can be attributed entirely to "secularism," and to the contrast with religion upon which it depends. Simply endorsing that contrast doesn't help me to understand the discursive

operations of secularism, its history, and contemporary political uses. I think it is important to explore the history of this polemical term to see how it has delimited our notions of progress, modernity, and change. This is a form of critique as Saba Mahmood defines it: “To critique a particular normative regime is not to reject or condemn it; rather, by analyzing its regulatory and productive dimensions, one only deprives it of innocence and neutrality so as to craft, perhaps, a different future.”¹¹

The very periodization of modernity—its contrast with a feudal past—was produced by a discourse of secularism, according to the critique of it by Kathleen Davis. She calls it “the ‘triumphalist’ narrative,” which “came to mark the conditions of possibility for the emergence of the political qualities designated ‘modern,’ particularly the nation-state and its self-conscious citizen.”¹² She links it as well to colonial conquests: “The liberation of Europe’s political, economic, and social life from ecclesiastical authority and religion was defined as the very basis of politics, progress and historical consciousness . . . Correlatively, Europe’s ‘medieval’ past and cultural others, mainly colonized non-Christians, were defined as religious, static, and ahistorical—thus open for narrative and territorial development.”¹³

Davis points out that the periodization established by the secularization narrative offers an idea of modernity that depends for its definition on a contrast with an invented regressive feudal past. Her description of the actual history of feudalism finds it characterized by many rational, juridical aspects not easily distinguished from what counts as “modern.” From this perspective, the categorization of religion as a singular phenomenon is not the predecessor but the product of secularization; it serves to define retrospectively what modernity is not. It is in these terms that Tomoko Masuzawa understands

“the invention of world religions” in the nineteenth century and the vast scholarly enterprise that made religion a new object of study, the means by which the secular and the modern were allied in the Western historical imaginary.¹⁴

In recent years, scholars have begun to question the historical account of the inevitable triumph of the secular. Asad points out that the simple story of the decline of religion is no longer tenable. “If anything is agreed upon, it is that a straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular is no longer acceptable.”¹⁵ Jordan Alexander Stein adds that study after study has revealed the persistence and importance of religion in the very countries of the West in which it was supposed to have disappeared. “The history of secularism,” he writes, “is the history of a story we told, not of a thing that happened.”¹⁶ This story offered an abstract, schematic representation and a periodization that ignored the particular details of different nations, instead providing a unifying rationale for a series of economic, social, and political developments with diverse causes and outcomes, not all of them the result of what might be called a secular frame of mind. But although it may not reflect the realities it claims to describe, the secularism story (secularization, secularity) does have an important influence on the way these realities are perceived. It is a story, moreover, that has served different purposes in the historical moments and contexts in which it is told. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, secularism was deemed the progressive alternative to religion—the sign of the advance of civilization. In our current context it is portrayed as a practice threatened by the return of religion, specifically Islam, although the Islam it refers to is as much a manifestation of secular politics as it is of the spiritual qualities associated with religion. The point is that secularism is a political discourse, not a transcendent set of principles, or an accurate representation of history. Like

all discourses, though, it has a purpose and a set of effects that produce a particular vision of the world—a vision that shapes and is accepted as reality, even as it misrepresents history.

Secularism's Genealogy

The word “secularism” has a recent history—dating back only to the nineteenth century. Since it was first coined in that period, secularism has been a weapon in the arsenal of what Edward Said famously designated “Orientalism”—the caricatured representation of “the East” by Western academics and “a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators [who] have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny, and so on.”¹⁷ Today, secularism is at the center of arguments about immigrants being advanced by politicians on the right and the left in the countries of Western Europe.¹⁸ In these debates, secularism is identified with Western practices and beliefs that are said to contrast dramatically with Islam; gender equality is offered as one of the defining characteristics of this secularism.

The word “secularism” is not new, but compared to the much older *secular* (which the *Oxford English Dictionary* [OED] dates to the thirteenth century), it is surprisingly modern.¹⁹ It was initially used as a polemic during nineteenth-century anti-clerical campaigns in England and France when it stood for free speech and the moral autonomy of individuals against the pressures of organized religion. George Holyoake, a founder of the British Central Secular Society in 1851, came up with the term *secularism* to describe an alternative value system, independent

of religion but also of atheism, which would teach “the law of humanity, the conditions of human progress, and the nature of human duty.”²⁰ For the French, who first used the word *laïcité* in 1871 (as the Third Republic was struggling against the parties of throne and altar), the point was to offer “a political conception implying the separation of civil society from religious society [in which] the state exercises no religious power and the church no political power.”²¹ The word was used in these instances as a challenge to the cultural authority of organized Christianity and to its ability to influence or rival state power.

Secularism in its nineteenth-century usage takes its meaning from the definition of the *secular* as this-worldly. In the *Encyclopédie* the first use of *séculaire* is tied to things that happen at the end of a century (*siècle*), suggesting its roots in earthly temporalities.²² The *OED* finds allusions to *secular* as early as the thirteenth century, referring to “secular priests,” that is, to members of the clergy who left the cloister for a life in the world. A second usage distinguished the world and its affairs from the church and religion. The term, we are told, was largely negative: nonecclesiastical, nonreligious, nonsacred.²³ The negative connotations of *secular*, in its earliest usages, testify to its placement within religiously centered discourses—the religious defined (positively) against the worldly.

The sociologist of religion, José Casanova, locates the notion of the secular squarely within Western European Christendom’s “double dualist system of classification.”²⁴ The double dualism referred first to the Augustinian distinction between the City of Man and the City of God, this world and the next. In addition, within the world of man, there was a secular and a religious sphere. “Both dualisms were mediated . . . by the sacramental nature of the church . . . simultaneously belonging to both worlds.”²⁵

As Casanova tracks the history, we see the secular acquiring increasingly positive connotations. First used to refer to the way in which once-cloistered monks became priests living among laypeople, it then referred to the expropriation of monasteries and other church properties after the Protestant Reformation. The *Encyclopédie* links the word to the settlement of the Thirty Years' War at Westphalia, when German princes "seized the property of bishops, abbés and monks that were situated on their estates."²⁶ By the time of the French Revolution, the secular referred to the state and its representatives in opposition to the church and the clergy. If once the secular had been subsumed within religious discourse (as its antithesis), now it was the other way around: the religious became the negative other of the secular. The dualism Casanova refers to remained, but the City of Man now reigned supreme, and politics rather than sacrament mediated the difference. Religion did not disappear. It was relegated to the realm of the private: private conscience, private practice, private affect. In this discourse, the very absence of religion in spheres of economy and politics defined them as secular, even when the realms of private and public were, in fact, more difficult to separate than this representation implied.

Casanova notes that the particularity of the Christian conception distinguishes it from other religions (Eastern ones, in particular) which endorse no such dualisms and have no ecclesiastical organization. The historical study of "the transfer of persons, things, meanings, etc. from ecclesiastical or religious to civil or lay use" is, he suggests, not the study of a universal process but of a process distinctively embedded in the history of Western Christian societies. Writes Asad, "This separation of religion from power is a modern Western norm, the product of a unique post-Reformation history."²⁷

By the nineteenth century the secularism/religion opposition was framed in terms of another binary, that between men and women, masculinity and femininity. The City of Man was literally represented as a masculine domain; within its walls and subordinate to it was the feminized realm of religiosity. The implementation of this separation was different in different countries and at different times. In majority Catholic nations like France, there were direct attacks on church power; in Protestant England and America, in contrast, religious practice itself was secularized, but in all cases the association of women and religion was clear. This is not to say that the institutions of religion were in women's hands; to be sure, churches both Catholic and Protestant were profoundly patriarchal organizations. Rather, nineteenth-century secularist campaigns deployed the language of sex difference in order to disarm the power of religious institutions, not by abolishing those institutions but by feminizing them.

Since the nineteenth century there have been changes in the ways the discourse of secularism has been mobilized, using a familiar set of oppositions but attributing different meanings to them. "Political" and "religious" in the nineteenth century meant the nation versus institutionalized religion (state versus church), but also the Christian nation versus the "uncivilized" and "primitive" tribes in Africa and the Ottoman lands. "Public" and "private" separated the market and politics, instrumental rationality and bureaucratic organization from home and family, spirituality, affective relationality, and sexual intimacy. Men figured on the public side, women on the side of the private. These oppositions continued well into the twentieth century, although the use of the word "secularism" itself declined as a way of designating the modernity of Western nations.

Secularism emerged again as a key word toward the end of the twentieth century with the return of religion as a social and political force, and particularly with the substitution of Islam for Soviet communism as a threat to the West at the end of the Cold War. Our twenty-first-century discourse of secularism conceives of the realms of the political and the religious differently from its nineteenth-century antecedents. “Political” signifies liberal democracy; “religious” denotes Islam. Gender equality is portrayed in terms of the difference between uncovered and covered societies, the sexually liberated versus the sexually repressed. In this contrast both religion (once a matter of private conscience in Western democracies), and sex (once associated with the most private and intimate side of life) have entered the public domain. Christianity has become synonymous with democracy, and the asymmetrical complementarity between women and men that grounded nineteenth-century secularism’s discourse has been reoriented as a contrast between the fate of women, West and East.

The meanings of secularism have shifted in accordance with shifts in the political and social aims of those who invoke the term. At the same time, the story itself has had enormous staying power. Our view of history is shaped by that story; political appeals to it gain persuasive influence from simplified lines of division between the traditional and the modern, the repressive and the emancipatory. In the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century versions of the discourse, gender *inequality* provided the template for the organization of nation-states, the allocation of citizenship, and the justification for imperial rule. In its current version, secularism has become synonymous with (an ill-defined) gender equality that distinguishes West from East, the Christian secular from the Islamic. The attribution to secularism of these enduring qualities gives it something of a religious aspect, as fundamentalist as the Islam

to which it is counterposed. Why has secularism reentered our vocabulary when for decades the very concept was absent from the rhetoric of emancipatory movements—movements whose animating spirit was often deeply religious? How and when did women's equality become identified with secularism? In what ways have the varying invocations of secularism shaped policies, laws, and institutions, as well as our understanding of history? These are some of the questions I address in this book.

The Evidence from History

I began this project because I knew that the current claim about secularism—that it was necessarily synonymous with women's emancipation—was simply not true. As a student of gender and women's history in France, I was startled to hear politicians claim that gender equality was a primordial value of democracy, dating back at least to the French Revolution of 1789. My work, and that of many scholars inspired by second-wave feminism and postcolonialism, has demonstrated over and over again the ways in which women in the modern West were excluded from political participation and cast in decidedly subordinate roles in the family and the labor market. I've returned to that work in the course of this book. It shows, among other things, that gender equality is absent from the founding documents of Western democracies even as they invoke the universal principles of the Rights of Man. It was not that the difference of sex was ignored at these moments, but that its troubling presence was resolved by the exclusion of women from the public sphere. In France, as late as the 1990s, there was an outpouring of opposition, largely from male politicians, to the passage of what became France's law on parity—a law that sought to guarantee equal access for women

to elected political office.²⁸ Even after passage of the law in 2000, the goal of equality remains far from attained; in the legislative elections of 2012, women won some 25 percent of seats—doubling their earlier representation—but male politicians have continued to find ways to impede the progress of women in their quest for political office. To hear these same politicians invoke women’s equality as a primordial value is still surprising, to say the least. It can only be concluded that they are instrumentalizing the concept for very specific political ends.

Gender equality did not become a primordial value for French politicians until this century and then only in contrast to Islam. This became clear to me when I did some research on the law of 1905 that separated church and state in France. I was reviewing the rulings on applications of the law, offered from 1905 to 2005, by the French Conseil d’État (France’s highest administrative court, whose task is to deal with the legality of actions taken by public bodies). From 1905 until 1987, the court assumed that the question of religion had little bearing on the “woman question.”²⁹ Even when offering its first opinion about the legitimacy of banning Islamic headscarves in public schools in 1989, the court did not raise the question of gender equality. Rather, it framed its decision in terms of threats to public order and proselytizing in the schools. (In 1989 they found neither to be in evidence.) In 2004, on the eve of passage of the headscarf ban, a report by the court noted that its previous decisions had been less influenced than they now would be by “questions linked to Islam and to the place and status of Muslim women in society.”³⁰ The issue of women’s equality as a feature of the separation of church and state was a new one for this body that had been offering guidance for nearly a century on the meanings of the law of 1905. It

came up only in the context of heated debates about the place of West and North African immigrants in French society.

The French case is not the only example of the way in which the sharp opposition between the West and Islam serves to conceal the persistence of inequality on the Western side. Discrimination based on sex is evident elsewhere historically and in the present. A Swiss federal court, ruling in 2001 against a teacher who wanted to wear a *hijab* to class, argued that “it is difficult to reconcile the wearing of the headscarf with the principle of gender equality—which is a fundamental value of our society enshrined in a specific provision of the Federal constitution.”³¹ In Switzerland access for women to the vote took until 1971, making it hard to see gender equality as “fundamental” in the sense of a long-standing principle.

Currently, there is no lack of documentation about discrimination against women in the countries of the West: on average women earn lower wages than men and have nowhere near parity in political representation; working-class and immigrant women are at the very bottom of wage scales, often confined to the “care” industry; race is an important factor in the differential treatment of women; glass ceilings still prevent elite women’s rise to the top in corporations and bureaucracies; domestic violence against women in all classes continues at alarming rates; misogynistic attacks seem to be increasing; sexual harassment is a fact of life for many women at work, at school, and on the street; women’s access to contraception and the right to abortion are being seriously challenged by religious fundamentalists and their political spokesmen in the United States and elsewhere. The list could go on and on. This is not to say that the difficulties confronting women are the same the world over, only that the idea that inequality exists solely for Muslim women is simply not true. The stark contrast

between Islam and the West works to distract from those difficulties on the Western side, but also to obscure an older history in which (as I will demonstrate in the chapters that follow) secularists represented life in terms of idealized separate and unequal spheres—political/religious, public/private, reason/affect, man/woman. According to their accounts, the presumed natural difference between the sexes was the social foundation of modern Western nation-states; sexual difference secured the racial superiority of Western nations to their “others”—in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

*Christian Secularism as a Mark
of Racial Superiority*

I have been struck in the course of research for this book by the way in which—contrary to the stated terms of the religious/secular opposition—Christianity was included on the secular side. I have already cited Huntington’s notion of a clash of civilizations in which Western Christianity confronts the proponents of Islam. The association of Christianity and Western democracy is a persistent feature of the contemporary discourse of secularism. Arguably, this is a legacy of the Westphalia Treaty of 1648 that ended the wars of religion in Europe and established the principle of state sovereignty (especially the right of each ruler to determine the religion of his territory) for all of Christendom. As a result, state sovereignty (whatever the form of governance) and Christian practice became inextricably intertwined.

The explicit linking of secularism to its Christian traditions has become ever more forceful in the twenty-first century. When, for example, the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2001 that crucifixes could be

displayed in Italian public school classrooms, it did so (per-
versely it may seem to some of us) in the name of secularism.
The court declared that the crucifix was a cultural symbol that
represented the identity of “Italian civilization” and its “value
system of liberty, equality, human dignity and religious tolera-
tion, and accordingly also of the secular nature of the state.”³²
In 2006, Pope Benedict XVI identified Christianity with reason
(a hallmark of secularism once seen by anticlericals as antithet-
ical to Catholicism), attributed to it the development of Europe,
and contrasted it (by citing the opinion of a fourteenth-century
Byzantine emperor) with the irrational violence of Islam.³³

When I began this study, I initially attributed the associ-
ation of religion exclusively with Islam to the visibility Mus-
lims had acquired as a result of the Iranian Revolution of
1979, the growing numbers of Muslims residing in the coun-
tries of Western Europe, and the September 11, 2001 attacks
on the World Trade Center in New York City. But I’ve learned
not only that Christianity—sometimes unmarked, sometimes
asserted—inheres in the discourses of secularism, but also
that there is a tradition of pointing to Arabs and Muslims as
the others of Indo-European Aryans that long antedates this
recent history and that is tied to the articulation of the iden-
tity of Western nations and their colonial outreach.³⁴ Edward
Said often cited Ernest Renan, philologist and philosopher, as
an illustration of Orientalism. Here is Renan in a lecture to the
Collège de France in 1862:

Islam can only exist as an official religion; it perishes when
it is reduced to a free and individual religion. Islam is not
only a state religion, the way Catholicism was in the France
of Louis XIV, and as it is still in Spain; it is a religion that
excludes the state. . . . Islam is the most complete negation

of Europe; Islam is a fanaticism much worse than what was known in Spain at the time of Philip II and Italy at the time of Pius V.³⁵

Tomoko Masuzawa, looking beyond France, writes that this view of history was crucial for establishing “the essential identity of the West” through a contrast with its religious others.³⁶ “In the course of the nineteenth century, Islam . . . came to acquire a new alienness. Instead of being begrudged as the luxuriantly overbearing dominion of Eastern infidelity, the rule of Islam was now condescendingly viewed as narrow, rigid, and stunted, and its essential attributes were said to be defined by the national racial, and ethnic character of the Arabs, the most bellicose and adversarial of the Semites.”³⁷ Gil Anidjar notes that in this period “religion is the Orient, the imperial realm to be governed and dominated, bombed, reformed and civilized.”³⁸ In his view, the discourse of secularism always already included Christianity on its side against an Islamic other. But even if this was not everywhere the case, the important point is that there was an anti-Muslim aspect to the discourse of secularism that could be drawn on—as it has been recently—whenever the concept was invoked.

There is a connection between the secularism discourse’s insistence on gender equality today and its anti-Islamic stance that has roots in this colonial history. As imperial powers conquered Arab lands, they pointed to the “barbaric” mistreatment “native” women received at the hands of their men. Moreover, they conflated race and religion in the figure of the Arab Muslim. Islam was the sign of Arab inferiority as Christianity was the mark of white superiority. So Lord Cromer, the local agent of the British after its occupation of Egypt in 1882, wrote that “the position of women in Egypt is a fatal obstacle to the attainment of thought and character which should accom-

pany the introduction of European civilization.”³⁹ The civilizing mission was justified as a means of elevating Arab/Muslim women’s status, a status that was portrayed as degraded in contrast to white women’s—even when white women did not enjoy citizenship or equal treatment under the law. While Islam was said to brutally repress women, secular Christians promoted the relationship between women and men as one of asymmetrical complementarity. The superiority of the Western organization of the difference of sex was confirmed by its contrast with the benighted East, represented as a region of racial (and thus social, political, economic) inferiority—if not permanently (biologically) so, then far behind on the evolutionary scale. Darwinian notions were taken up to explain progress in terms of the survival of the fittest. White skin was associated with “normal” gender systems, dark skin with immaturity and perversity. In this way, the inequalities of gender and the inequalities of race served to justify one another; they were taken to be the indisputable facts of natural history.⁴⁰

Representations of racial difference were invariably sexualized, albeit in different ways. The Antillean psychiatrist Frantz Fanon offered this explanation for the “biological danger” that he saw whites associate with colonial subjects. “For the majority of white men the Negro represents the sexual instinct (in its raw state). The Negro is the incarnation of a genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions.”⁴¹ This man of dark skin (Fanon is talking about Arabs as well as black Africans) is depicted as the repudiated alternative to, literally the dark side of, the libidinal repression required by civilization. If he is also terrifyingly attractive, it is because he expresses the fantasy of “the civilized white man,” his “irrational longing for unusual eras of sexual license, of orgiastic scenes of unpunished rapes, or unrepressed incest. Projecting his own desires on to the Negro, the white man behaves ‘as if’ the Negro really had them.”⁴²

In Fanon's understanding of it, desire served as a nexus for gender and race in the psychic politics of Europeans; gender distinctions were the product of the complex entanglements of family, race, and nation. Ann Laura Stoler reminds us that "race was a primary and protean category for colonial capitalism and managing the domestic was crucial to it."⁴³ In this mix, race was not only sexualized (as Fanon describes it), but it was also given a religious connotation. Christianity was the sign of white superiority; Islam was represented as one of the "other" religions practiced by inferior peoples of color. Conversion to Christianity was offered as a way of civilizing so-called backward peoples—for this reason missionaries were often dispatched to the colonies by the otherwise secular leaders of nations. But religions were also ranked by their treatment of women: the place of women in each of these different systems became a telltale sign of the superiority of one (Christianity), and the inferiority of the other (Islam, spiritism, polytheism).

The Utility of Gender

Gender is at the very heart of the secularism discourse.⁴⁴ The representation of the relationship between women and men has provided a way of articulating the rules of organization for emerging nations; in turn, those rules established the "truth" of the difference of sex. To put it another way, gender and politics were co-constitutive, the one establishing the meaning of the other, each providing a guarantee of the otherwise elusive and unstable grounds on which each rested. Gender referred its attributions to nature; politics naturalized its hierarchies by reference to gender.

How did this work? The social rules that announce and enforce the meanings of the difference between women and men insist that they refer to the timeless truth of anatomical genital

differences. But the only truth there is about these differences is that their ultimate meanings are impossible to secure. Anthropologists and historians have shown that the traits and roles attributed to men and women have varied across cultures and time; sociologists remind us that they vary according to race and class, even within a single space and time; philosophers have grappled with the ways in which perception informs the lived experience of a material body; and psychoanalysts have taught us to be skeptical of the power of normative regulation to contain the unruly operations of the unconscious.

Gender, psychoanalysts insist, does not reflect the dictates of bodies. Rather, the difference of sex is the place where the relationship of mind and body, nature and culture is confounded. Writes Alenka Zupančič, it is the zone “where the two realms overlap; i.e., where the biological or somatic is already mental or cultural and where, at the same time, culture springs from the very impasses of the somatic functions which it tries to resolve.”⁴⁵ Gender, from this perspective, does not base its social roles on the imperatives of physical bodies; rather, it is a historically and culturally variable attempt to provide a grid of intelligibility for sex. In the process, its rules extend beyond, even as they invoke, bodily references.

Those who fashion myths and offer religious or scientific explanations for differences of sex do so in the language of social organization; this language is not only about men and women but about hierarchy, lineage, property, community, and—perhaps most significantly—that other “natural” category, race. There are many differences among scholars about whether gender or race is the primary category for establishing hierarchies of difference. Sylvia Wynter, for example, argues powerfully for the primacy of race (“the ultimate mode of otherness”) in what she calls the “totemic system” of difference—in it sex and class are “subtypes of otherness.”⁴⁶ Those

who call for analyses of “intersectionality” insist that all forms of otherness be taken into account, too often without asking how sex, race, or class establish specific kinds of identities and what the actual intersections consist of.

In my readings of the discourse of secularism, gender and race operate differently in the articulation of the national identities of Western European nation-states. The difference of race works to establish the outsider status of those others who aren’t part of the presumed homogeneity of the national body—they are not only others but outsiders. The difference of sex poses another set of problems. It is a difference that can’t be extruded; indeed, it is necessary for the very future of the nation.⁴⁷ Women may be men’s others, but they are intimate and necessary others. Their standing as insiders, as members (and reproducers) of the national body, elevates them above racial outsiders; their subordination is not of a piece with the subordination either of race or, for that matter, of class. If secularism is a discourse about the articulation of the sovereign identity of Western European nation-states, then a racialized gender (the attribution of meaning to the difference of sex) is at the heart of that discourse. It is a problem of difference that is not external to the national body, but whose conceptualization nonetheless affects the way all outsiders are perceived, how their handling of differences of sex and sexuality establish their place on the evolutionary scale of civilization.

When the lines of gender distinctions hardened, as they did in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they enabled a new vision of politics (one I will discuss at greater length in chapter 3). With the advent of the democratic revolutions (in France and the United States) at the end of the eighteenth century, the absolute monarch no longer served as the embodiment of political authority. In his place were “the peo-

ple” and their representatives, whose ultimate authority was uncertain at best. Who ruled and in whose name? Democracy, in the words of political theorist Claude Lefort, brought with it a regime of indeterminacy and uncertainty.⁴⁸ In this context, Foucault deemed sexuality “a dense transfer point for relations of power.”⁴⁹ “Transfer point” is the key term here, for it can suggest the mutually constitutive nature of gender and politics that I want to evoke. At the same time, it suggests a certain separation that is not exactly the case. It’s not that gender and politics as established entities come into contact and so influence each other. Rather it’s that the instability of each looks to the other for certainty: political systems invoke what is deemed the immutability of gender to legitimize asymmetries of power; those political invocations then “fix” differences of sex, in that way denying the indeterminacy that troubles both sex and politics. When we ask how the roles and relationships of women and men figure in representations of modernity, we gain insight into the way whole societies—their politics and cultures—are being conceived.

Secularism—the polemical word first uttered in the nineteenth century—built on notions of differentiation that came into increasing prominence a century before. Its repudiation of religion as a relic of the traditional past followed from idealized distinctions between spheres of public and private, political and religious, modern and traditional, state and family, West and East, masculine and feminine, male and female. These distinctions had nothing in them of gender equality; rather, they were marked by a presumption of gender *inequality*. This was not simply a matter of refiguring gender distinctions that had existed from the earliest times, but of making the difference of sex a more central feature for explaining social and political organization.

Scholars have pointed repeatedly to an increased emphasis on the lines of sexual difference with the rise of capitalism and nation-states from the eighteenth century on. Kevin Floyd notes that “Capital’s enforcement of a strong differentiation of public from private . . . is based on its naturalization of private property, but is also ultimately inseparable from an ongoing differentiation of social labor including a gendered division of labor, a division between manual and intellectual labor, and an atomizing, disciplinary specialization of knowledge itself.”⁵⁰ Nancy Armstrong examined English conduct books that, she says, by the end of the eighteenth century “transformed the female into the bearer of moral norms and the socializer of men.” They also offered techniques for regulating desire “aimed at nothing so clearly as producing gender-differentiated forms of economic behavior.”⁵¹ Denise Riley writes of “the increasing sexualisation, in which female persons become held to be virtually saturated with their sex which then invades their rational and spiritual faculties; this reached a pitch in eighteenth century Europe.”⁵² G. J. Barker-Benfield notes that gender distinctions “hardened” in England during the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁵³ Historian Isabel Hull refers to the impact of the growing emphasis on “civil society” in late eighteenth-century Germany: “Where once gender differentiation had ordered the private, nonstate world and created at most symbolic echoes in the public, it was now supposed to organize both. Thus as society swelled in importance, so did gender differentiation.”⁵⁴ Historians of the American and French Revolutions have reached the same conclusion. Susan Juster sums up their work this way: “An emerging ruling class insinuated itself into the crevices of power by claiming masculine prerogative over an effeminate ancien régime. In each case, the anxieties borne of peripheral status—anxieties that, at bottom,

were rooted as much in sexual as political insecurity—were resolved by a shrill association of manly valor among aspiring elites.”⁵⁵ Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, discussing the place of women authors as producers of nineteenth-century American fiction, notes that “liberalism relies on a binary model of sex and gender: liberal doctrine both creates and sustains a rigidified opposition between male and female bodies and subjectivities.”⁵⁶

The logic of the narrative that associated increased gender differentiation with modernity is evident, too, in the countries of the non-West, where it was either imposed by colonial powers, usually in the form of family law, or imported and adapted in local practice by those seeking to live up to Western models. Writing about nineteenth- and twentieth-century Iran, Afshaneh Najmabadi notes that “the heteronormalization of eros and sex became a condition of ‘achieving modernity.’”⁵⁷ There were, to be sure, differences in the experiences of postcolonial nations and their imperialist predecessors, but there were also important continuities, and a more rigidified gender differentiation was one of them.

Despite challenges from individuals and social movements, the sharp distinction between the sexes has endured, albeit with changes that are important to note. It is not change that I want to deny; it is the ahistorical equation in contemporary discourse of a reified secularism with gender equality—and the racism associated with that equation—that I think needs to be challenged. The current depiction of the evils of Islam in opposition to the unqualified good of the secular, with gender equality as its central feature, has served to distract our attention from the fact that sexual difference is an intractable problem for the nations of the secular Christian West, as it is for their counterparts elsewhere.

Plan of the Book

Since the current references to secularism presume that there are unchanging principles of gender equality at its core, I devote the first three chapters to challenging that presumption. By looking at the ways women in Western Europe, Britain, and the United States were associated with religion (chapter 1) and reproduction (chapter 2), and at how these activities were said to preclude engagement in politics (chapter 3), I summarize a huge scholarship that has long made that case. The aim is to remind us of the relevance of that work for current debates about secularism and, in so doing, to insist that secularism is a discourse with a history in which tensions and contradictions abound.

I then move away from that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century material to a moment when explicit references to secularism faded from view in the West, losing their political relevance in the context of the Cold War. In chapter 4, I argue that in the second half of the twentieth century, the old public/private distinction was dissolved in the realms of both religion and sexuality, putting into place concepts that prepared a new discourse of secularism in Western Europe and the Anglo-American world—one in which Islam took the place of Soviet communism as a threat to social order. In this new discourse, the secular and the Christian were increasingly considered synonymous, and women's sexual emancipation became the primary indicator of gender equality.

In the final chapter (chapter 5) I explore the complex uses of feminism and appeals to "sexual democracy" in the new discourse of secularism. The story is anything but straightforward and involves the insistence on sex as a public matter, and on women's sexuality (and by extension, nonnormative sexualities) as a right of individual self-determination. The emphasis

on individualism is a part of what Wendy Brown has termed neoliberalism's rationality; it is not the same as its nineteenth-century antecedent.⁵⁸ At the same time, the difference of sex and its heteronormative claims has not disappeared, confusing woman's status as a desiring subject (free to determine her choices, both amorous and reproductive) with her status as an object of (male) desire. The contemporary discourse of secularism, with its insistence on the importance of "uncovered" women's bodies equates public visibility with emancipation, as if that visibility were the only way to confirm women as sexually autonomous beings (exercising the same rights in this domain as men). The contrast with "covered" Muslim women not only perpetuates the confusion between Western women as subjects and objects of desire, it also distracts attention from (or flatly ignores) persisting racialized gender inequalities in markets, politics, jobs, and law within each side. But more than that, it suggests homogeneity on either side of the divide—as if all Western women or all Muslim women had the same experiences, the same outlooks, the same lives. By conceiving of these women in starkly oppositional terms, we fail to see the difficulties that sexual difference poses in many contexts, and we then underestimate or mischaracterize the challenges those difficulties present to the achievement of the (perhaps ultimately utopian) goal of gender equality.