

Title—Sex and Secularism

Author—Joan Scott

Year—2017

Categories: Gender, Islam, Secularism, Politics

Place: Western Europe (France, Germany, UK) and United States

Time: 1770-Present

Argument Synopsis:

There has been more attention paid to secularism lately as part of the ‘clash of civilizations’ rhetoric that positions Islam against the West. Secularization is known as the process by which European states are said to have brought organized religion under their control and justified their sovereignty in terms of Republican or Democratic theory. In its current framing, secularism seems to equate to freedom and gender equality while Islam seems to represent oppression. Especially in the post 9/11 period, secularism and gender equality became increasingly emphasized as the basis for Western superiority over all of Islam. Scott’s book attempts to examine the ways gender has figured into the discourses of secularism, from its inception in founding documents of Western democracies to its modern iteration. The book is not a social or intellectual history of secularism and its associated practices, rather it aims to reveal the place of gender equality in the discourse of secularism. In particular, Scott seeks to reveal how and when **women’s equality became equated with secularism**. To do so, she utilizes historical examples from France, Germany, the UK, and the United States to demonstrate the evolution of the discourse of secularism, especially since the turn of the century. She finds that the presumed natural difference between the sexes was the social foundation of modern Western nation-states, proving that gender equality and secularism are not intrinsically linked.

Separation of religion from state power is a modern Western norm, not a universal truth. Scott explores the way this separation became gendered, with the public space i.e. politics being gendered male and the private sphere i.e. religion being gendered female. This harkens to the longstanding **public/private distinction** found in much gender theory. Scott identifies how secularism reemerged as a powerful concept at the end of the twentieth century, she argues Islam essentially replaced Soviet communism as the West’s most pressing existential threat. Interestingly, Scott notes how in the discourse of secularism Christianity often ends up on the secular side of the divide, due to the linking of Christian practice to state sovereignty dating back to the Treaty of Westphalia. This framing connects to the longstanding practice of orientalism, where Arabs and Muslims are used as the other in the formation of Western values.

Scott reveals the colonial context to the modern discourse of secularism, especially in relation to ideals of gender equality. “There is a connection between the secularism discourses’ insistence on gender equality today and its anti-Islamic stance that has its roots in this colonial history.” (20) The civilizing mission was justified as a means of elevating Muslim women’s status, and as a justification for colonial rule. The colonial history continues to inform what is deemed ‘equality’, namely the conflation of public visibility of women’s bodies with emancipation.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Secularism as a process, not an eternal set of unchanging beliefs
- In post-Cold War era, discourse of secularism used to position Islam against the West in the ‘clash of civilizations’ based on degrees of gender equality
- Secularism as an essential weapon in arsenal of orientalism