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## AN AUTHOR MEETS HER CRITICS

### Around Joan Wallach Scott's *Sex and Secularism*

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017, hardback, 240 pages

#### ■ Comments by Kim Knibbe

Joan Wallach Scott's new book is an important intervention in debates that are taking place on many different fronts and play out again and again around the role of Islam. It provides the historical background to an argument that Scott and others have been putting forward with some force for several years now: that within the 'clash of civilization' trope that so often dominates discussions on the role of religion (or, more specifically, Islam), a false claim to a supposedly foundational link between secularism and gender equality is made. In what follows, I would like to compare notes between the arguments that Scott develops and a current project that I lead, looking at the ways secular and religious approaches to sexuality come together around issues of sexual health and sexual well-being in the African Diaspora in the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup> Thus, as Brenda Bartelink and Jelle Wiering do below, I extend and discuss some of Scott's arguments in relation to the Netherlands and to the discursive interaction between Dutch secularism and not only Muslim but also Christian 'others'.

As Scott argues, rather than providing a radical notion of equality from the start, historically secularism depended on a new take on sexual difference. Here, she draws on a wealth of feminist scholarship that is too often forgotten, not only in public debates about the role of religion, but also in scholarship on secularism and religion—particularly the way that the rise of the European nation-state depended on an articulation of the public sphere as the domain of men and the private sphere as the domain of women. Religion, associated with the private sphere and women, was thus never absent from the idea of the nation-state; rather, it was embedded within—if hidden from—public society in a particular way. To be sure, this arrangement varied from country to country, with the Netherlands developing a model of managing religious pluralism, called 'pillarization', which led to the formation of public spheres that were very much dominated by confessions and ideological orientations (schools, broadcasting companies, and newspapers specific to Protestant, Catholic, and socialist 'pillars').

These pillars are commonly thought to have crumbled during the tumultuous long 1960s in the Netherlands. The cultural, political, and sexual revolution that took place in the late 1960s and the early 1970s shook up the Dutch religious landscape and the stable society that had been formed after World War II (Kennedy 1995). During this time, the notion of the Netherlands as a 'guiding country' in terms of progressive politics was formed, based on key features such as openness about sexuality and a 'progressive' stance on same-sex relationships (Kennedy 2005). Since that time, the Netherlands has become internationally famous for promoting a

remarkably progressive and secularist approach to issues of sexual health. Notably, in the setting of development work, the Dutch approach to sexual health and reproductive rights is often seen as being in direct opposition to 'religious' approaches to these issues (Bartelink 2016). Within the Netherlands, Dutch national identity has become entwined with a self-image of being secular, progressive on women's rights and gay rights, and liberated from the religious past through debates on migration and the so-called failure of the multicultural society (Balkenhol et al. 2016; Mepschen et al. 2010; van der Veer 2006). This 'pro-gay' and 'post-feminist' national identity is constructed in contrast to the image of the Muslim/Arab other, who is depicted as a walking 'testosterone bomb' (in the words of the Dutch politician Geert Wilders), threatening the freedom of young, blond, short-skirted Dutch women (Sims 2016).

The contradictions in the assertion that (Christian) secularism champions women's rights are almost too easy to ridicule. These contradictions become apparent when looking at the voting record of Geert Wilders and his Party for Freedom (PVV), for example. Or by pointing at the behavior of his supporters, who famously chanted "let's put a penis inside her" during municipal consultations whenever a woman took the floor to stand up for the rights of refugees during the so-called refugee crisis (all because they wanted to defend Dutch women against Arab testosterone bombs, of course). Or noting the incongruity of a Christian Democrat politician stating that equality is a typically Christian value supporting equality between the sexes. "Look at the position of women," he said, apparently not realizing that this immediately discredited his argument (Keulemans 2017).

Yet at other moments, this exclusive association between (Christian-influenced) secularism and women's rights and liberation is less easily falsified. This is particularly the case around the topic of sexual well-being and sexual health that we are researching now. In this project, we do not look at politicians and opinion makers, but at sexual health professionals, educators, and religious leaders. How do professionals in these fields deal with the contradictions of sex and secularism? At first sight, it seems that the main actors in our research confirm the stereotypes. The Dutch sex educators that Wiering studies indeed believe that they are champions of women's rights by virtue of not being religious and also, interestingly, by claiming to be 'culturally neutral'. The religious actors that Brenda Bartelink studies, usually West African and Pentecostal, do in fact see the Netherlands as a cesspool of immorality and preach that women must submit to their husbands. However, as Bartelink will argue below, this first impression of a disempowering message of female submission needs to be contextualized within a more complex set of cultural and social forces navigated by women through Pentecostal conversion.

So there is a strong contemporary association between claiming to be secular and claiming to champion women's rights. There are also many well-meaning people who really are at pains to avoid being racist and sexist and genuinely want to better the fate of women and sexual minorities. One reason for this strong association is indeed, as Scott argues, the Orientalism embedded—sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly—within the various discourses of secularism. Like many public opinion makers, feminists do find it difficult to go beyond the stereotyping of religion, and in particular Islam, as oppressive to women. This is a debate within feminism that at least in the Netherlands is still ongoing. It is only in the last couple of years that more 'intersectional'/black feminist approaches have gained a strong position. This may have been helped by the paradox of PVV supporters suddenly claiming to be champions of women's rights, but also, quite decisively, by the publication of Gloria Wekker's (2016) book *White Innocence*.

Yet religion is often forgotten even within intersectional approaches, and when it is remembered, it is immediately associated with a conservative stance. It is important to recognize, however, that this association between religion and conservatism that is prevalent among secularists—feminists and otherwise—is not only the result of an implicit or explicit Orientalism.

Looking at Dutch attitudes toward Christian migrants, to the extent that these are recognized as a category, there is a logic at work that is internal to the religious-secular dynamic of the Netherlands and how the Dutch represent their own history to themselves: religion is something that they have left behind, that they have freed themselves of (Knibbe 2011; van der Veer 2006). Yet, historically, Christian actors can hardly be said to have only played the role of conservative opponents to women's emancipation and sexual rights. So how did religion (in general, not just Islam) come to be associated almost exclusively with a conservative position on issues of sex, gender, and family?

Here, Scott's reiteration of the historical process of linking women, religion, and the private sphere is useful as an entry point to understand how religious actors came to claim their distinctiveness and power mainly through issues that have to do with gender, sex, and family. For the Dutch context, it seems that, particularly in retrospect, emancipatory movements were considered anti-religious because their most vocal opponents were often conservative religious actors (e.g., in debates around contraception in the 1950s and 1960s and later concerning abortion). What is forgotten is that many of their supporters were in fact also religious. For example, there was a massive movement within Dutch Catholicism that developed a very progressive stance on sexuality, told couples that birth control was their own choice, pleaded against celibacy, and supported opening the priesthood to women (Knibbe 2013: chap. 2). Thus, similar to the dynamics on birth control and condoms in development work, the more extreme positions of both religious actors and secular actors have come to represent the whole range of possible positions within those two categories, producing polarizations around issues of sex and gender that empty the middle ground and obliterate nuance. This creates a dynamic whereby religious positions, in the eyes of secular actors, are associated with conservative stances on sexuality, and secular positions, in the eyes of both themselves and the more conservative religious actors, are associated with progressive, open, and amoral positions on sexuality (Bartelink and Knibbe, forthcoming).

This perceived opposition also puts women—or rather, women's bodies—on the front line of the polarization. Here, again, I found Scott's summary of what she calls the confusion between women as 'desiring subjects' and 'desired objects' useful in relation to how representations of Dutch history inform present-day debates and self-perceptions. An iconic moment within the history of the long 1960s was the first naked woman shown on television. This is one of the moments that are referred to as 'proof' that the Dutch have successfully broken with a religious/Christian culture of shame around the body. Why, one might wonder, is there no history of the first naked man on television? Perhaps for the simple reason that men do not, apparently, need to get naked to be taken seriously as liberated, emancipated subjects.

It is through these contradictions of sex and secularism that Scott's book provides an illuminating guide and helps us to ask new questions and do research that will hopefully also help to inform public debates. However, what Scott explores is very much a history of political debates, of influential figures. For our research, a question that we are also attuned to is whether the level of public debates is actually congruent with the practices and engagements that take place on the level of daily life, policy, and professional practice. What kinds of encounters and disjunctures emerge between religious and secular actors, religious contexts, and sexual health approaches? What new conversations develop from these engagements? What kinds of protection against critical scrutiny, but also missed chances, do the disjunctures between different contexts provide?

Finally, I offer a critical note as well, and in defense of all those well-meaning professionals who believe that a rigorously secular approach is the right approach, do not intend to be Orientalist and racist, but simply want to provide good services and sexual health education. Let us not forget that, especially in relation to voting rights and reproductive politics, many feminists did in fact develop the arguments for their causes and mobilize broader support through

appealing to secular reason, science, and the notion of equal rights for all—and they often were and still are ‘anti-religious’, or rather ‘anti-clerical’. But let us also not forget, with Scott, that new ways of dealing with sexual difference must be explored all the time and that the polarization between religious and secular approaches to sexuality may work against the aim of providing good services and education on sexuality and reproduction.

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#### ■ NOTES

1. For more on my current research project, “Sexuality, Religion and Secularism: Cultural Encounters in the African Diaspora in the Netherlands,” which is funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), see <https://www.rug.nl/staff/k.e.knibbe/projects>.

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## ■ Comments by Brenda Bartelink

Sexuality and gender are at the heart of contemporary European debates on inclusion/exclusion and diversity/difference. While religion, and Islam in particular, is highly visible in these debates, secularism is often seen as the neutral ground from which religious (and especially Muslim) others are called to account, ignoring the ways in which secularism intersects with gender, race, and class. Joan Wallach Scott's book is an important contribution to problematizing such assumptions. The book is focused on exploring the history of the polemical idea of 'secularism' in terms of how it has shaped contemporary normative notions of modernity, progress, and change. In doing so, Scott devotes ample attention to how secularism is constructed in relation to Islam as a racialized and gendered other. Christianity is mainly discussed in its entanglement with secularism. Scott points out that European Christianity is white and therefore a racialized construction. Yet her analysis motivates further investigation of how multiple forms of Christianity relate to secularism and how these unfold in growing nativism and the othering of migrants in contemporary Europe. In my own fieldwork on African Pentecostal Christians in the Netherlands, I encounter some conceptual and methodological problems that I would like to raise here.

I consider Scott's analysis of how emancipation and gender equality are normative in the discourse of secularism to be crucially important and highly valuable for the study of gender and my own field research. In line with what Brusco (1995) and Martin (2001) have argued for global Pentecostalism, Pentecostal praxis in Africa, as well as in the Netherlands, is characterized by a 'gender paradox' (Maier 2012). In Pentecostal churches, women are allowed access to positions of leadership and authority that were—and often still are—denied them in most Christian congregations. Yet these more equal arrangements within some Pentecostal settings also come with a strong emphasis on women's authority over family and domestic matters. This means that women, even in leadership roles, are often referred to as wives or mothers. The question outsiders often ask is, why are such strict gender roles acceptable for women? For African Pentecostalism, the ways in which Pentecostalism has transformed the ideals and praxis of masculinity in sub-Saharan African contexts appear to be crucial (Burchardt 2018; van Klinken 2012). In its teachings, Pentecostalism has focused on shaping new ideals of masculinity in which men are seen as responsible and disciplined heads of their family, faithful to their wives and taking care of their children. The Pentecostal 'break with the past' reshapes masculinity as rejecting practices of polygyny and multiple concurrent sexual relationships while embracing a new masculine role as priests in the nuclear family (Bochow and van Dijk 2012). Coming back to Scott's book, an important insight is that sexual liberation and gender equality are seen as synonyms in the dominant understanding of secularism. Indeed, the dominant secular understanding is that gender equality and emancipation are "traits presumed to inhere in individuals" (p. 169). This means that the otherness of African Pentecostal men is confirmed in how they promote the subordination of women, and the otherness of African Pentecostal women is confirmed by their submission to their husbands. The emancipatory strategies that women deploy when they opt for a Pentecostal marriage are mistaken for a "lack of self-determination" (ibid.). A consequence is that African Pentecostal women and men are not seen as emancipated and egalitarian and thus can never become fully and equally accepted as belonging to society.

Unraveling the particularity of the intersections between secularism, gender, and African Pentecostals leads to identifying yet another gendered (and sexualized) religious group living in Europe that is rendered unfit to become a full member of society. The othering not only of Muslims but also of Christians as people who are 'stuck' in traditional gender roles functions in "normalizing and naturalizing 'our' secular, Western way of life" (p. 175). This throws into relief

the question of exactly how secularism is constructed in its entanglement with, and contrast to, Christianity within particular national settings.

The Pentecostal churches in which I do my current fieldwork are located mainly in The Hague, a city that frequently features in the construction of the 'hypervisibility of Islam' (Jeldtoft 2013) by the Dutch media. This is reflected in media coverage of an alleged 'Sharia triangle'—three streets in which Sharia was claimed to rule instead of Dutch law—that turned out to be entirely made up by the journalist in question. In addition, there is frequent media coverage of young men who travel to Syria to join ISIS or other jihadi groups. A third example is the heightened attention paid to the influence of Salafi preachers in particular mosques or neighborhoods. While this coverage resonates with the analysis Scott makes about the otherness of Islam, in my field a more complex local dynamic unfolds. The implementation of local policies and programs targeting Muslim populations has reinforced among African Christians a sense of being neglected. The invisibility of Africans as a group and in particular as Christians stands in contrast to the hypervisibility of Islam. In my field, this leads to Pentecostal leaders expressing frustrations with the (local) government as well as holding the position that Islam in Europe is 'privileged' because of the funds invested in programs to counter violent extremism and promote more tolerant and progressive voices in the Muslim communities. My interlocutors see this as a threat to both Christianity and Pentecostal missions on the European continent (Knibbe 2011).

At the same time, a shift in the Dutch public and political discourse on migration from a single focus on Muslims to a focus on the problem of African migrants coming to Europe is emerging, and it includes a strong play on demographic anxieties among the general public. Gender is again at the heart of this debate. Former EU commissioner and former liberal party leader Frits Bolkestein (2018) recently argued that the introduction of contraception via development aid is the only viable solution to this problem. Muslims are constructed as the racial other of the European secular self, and Scott's argument that this otherness is of a different subtype than that of gender brings an important nuance to the analysis of how gender, race, and secularism intersect. Yet the question is how to arrive at an intersectional understanding of the different causes underlying the othered Muslim and the othered African, in particular since religion is underplayed with regard to the latter.

Finally, focusing more explicitly on gender and sexual difference, there is a matter that appears to be crucial to the study of gender and feminism. Scott notes in the introduction to her book that in scholarly research it is often not clear what gender equality actually is and that it therefore operates within the particular secular understanding of gender. Yet the question is, how can we know? This question also emerges from Ortner's (1972) analysis of the vicious circle in which woman's position represents her as 'closer to nature' while this same view is embodied in institutional forms that determine women. As Ortner argues, the same holds for social change, since "a different cultural view can grow only out of a different social actuality, a different social actuality can grow only out of a different cultural view" (ibid.: 28). So if we, inspired by Scott's important argument, question what constitutes equality in secularism, we must ask, can we know what equality is beyond the gendered and racialized version offered by current discourses of secularism?

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## ■ Comments by Jelle Wiering

Reading Scott's *Sex and Secularism* as a cultural anthropologist interested in the interactions of religion, sexuality, and secularism was a very instructive and enjoyable experience. The book sets out on a historical quest to explore secular understandings and arrangements that inform many of the key debates on religion in the contemporary Western world. In this book, Scott unravels the problematic gendered assumptions that these debates accommodate and sustain or even upon which they are based. *Sex and Secularism* hence takes up a critical view of the secular—in my view most notably employed by Talal Asad (2003) in *Formations of the Secular*—combines it with a Foucauldian, genealogical approach to the notion of secularism in the context of sexuality and gender, and, finally, incorporates an insightful feminist perspective, which, to add yet another flavor to the dish, draws inspiration from psychoanalysis.

Scott addresses a large geographical area, and she does so in quite a variety of historical periods. This enables her to describe larger processes and inequalities that have marked and shaped Western societies throughout history and up to the present time. My own research on Dutch sexual health organizations is limited to the Netherlands. In this context, I explore the intersections of religion, sexuality, and secularism, which means that the book touches upon most features of my research and provides multiple, interesting, and relevant frameworks and opportunities for comparison. I have structured this essay around two main questions, both of which I will elucidate with short fragments taken from my own research.

My first question builds on a comment taken from a section in the book that I suppose is not frequently referred to in the context of responses like this one. In the acknowledgments, we read that Scott's colleague Didier Fassin pointed out that what Scott was talking about was, in



his view, “a *discourse* of secularism, not a fixed category of analysis” (p. xii). Like Scott herself, I agree—and not just because of the obvious intended content of his sentence (i.e., that it is not a fixed category of analysis that Scott studies). I also appreciate his comment because it refers to Scott’s subject of study as *a* discourse of secularism, and not as *the* discourse of secularism; the latter phrase becomes the title of the introduction.

In the fieldwork I conducted among sexual health organizations in the Netherlands, I observed how many actors in society maintain their own interpretation of secularism. The Dutch secular state, the national secular sexual health knowledge center (Rutgers), the secular organizations teaching sex education at schools, and the teachers employed by these organizations all had their own conception of secularism, and these perspectives obviously varied. Some of these interpretations indeed mobilized the prevalent anti-Islam discourse that is highlighted by Scott. Some actors tried to convince me that they preferred to be more nuanced, pointing me to what they deemed to be the beautiful aspects of Islam. Some spoke about Christianity, and how they considered these Christians from the Bible Belt—an area in the Netherlands with many strict Protestants—to be hopelessly outdated. Some decided to refrain from referring to Islam, because they did not want to undermine the reputation of Islam even further. Others liked to refer to religious people, particularly to Buddhists, as people who are ‘airy-fairy’ (Wiering 2016). And yet others even asserted that religion, be it Christianity, Hinduism, or Islam, simply should not have a place at all in society: they maintained that religion should be illegal, and the sooner the better. All of these people identified themselves as ‘neutral,’ which, for nearly everyone in my research meant being secular.

Given this variety of interpretations of secularism in the Netherlands, I was quite surprised to read Scott’s statement that secularism in its recent usage “has had a simpler referent as the positive alternative, not to all religion but to Islam” (p. 1). The discrepancy regarding my observation of multiple forms of secularism versus Scott’s presentation of *the* secularism discourse puzzled me. In the Netherlands, which, of course, differs—and perhaps even more than I thought—from France and the United States, secularism is not merely constructed in opposition to Islam. I have noted how certain expressions of secularism also condemn Buddhists, pilgrims traveling to Santiago de Compostela, Christians, and probably many other religious groups. I recognize that, in public discourse, Islam is the religion that is condemned most frequently and most openly, but I maintain that this is still only one strand within the story of secularism.

These different notions of secularism raise a methodological question that seems relevant not only for the final chapter of the book, which discusses secularism in modern times, but for the book in general. The discrepancy between our findings made me wonder what criteria were followed to select the sources that would be included in the book, and which would thus be portrayed as being part of the discourse of secularism. Scott does discuss this in the introduction where we read that her approach “analyzes the ways in which the term has been variously deployed, and with what effects ... 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” (p. 4). However, most sources in the book do not discuss secularism or even mention the term. So it seems to me that the sources were selected because they met certain requirements that Scott implicitly considered to be typical for the secularism discourse. Such a selection process, I suppose, does necessitate presenting the reader with the particular (working) definition of (the discourse of) secularism that was upheld in the process of selecting input for the book. So to put all of this in a single question, what were the criteria that were used to select the material that could be used to describe and analyze what is referred to as *the* discourse of secularism?

My second question relates to a claim about secularism’s longing for the disappearing ‘public/private divide,’ which is made in the final chapter, “Sexual Emancipation.” We read that “in the new

discourse of secularism, the secular and sexually liberated are synonymous. The old distinction between public and private is erased; sex has become a public activity ('the personal has become political' was a slogan of second-wave feminism)" (p. 160). I think this description does capture a core message of most forms of secularism that I have encountered so far in the Netherlands.

Last spring, I partook in intensive training that enabled me to become a sex educator. This training continuously emphasized the 'normality' of the topic of sex. Also in my fieldwork more generally, I mainly spoke with people who were quite accustomed to talking about sex and were also quite eager to illustrate this by employing a very, let us say, 'explicit' vocabulary. Vaginas, penises, and orgasms all were put forward as 'normal' topics, which therefore could, but also should, be discussed openly and without shame. I would even assert that, in Dutch society, to experience feelings of embarrassment as a consequence of the topic of sex being raised is frequently associated with being religious, and particularly with being Christian (Schrijvers and Wiering 2018). Secular people, in this fantasy, have left backward, prudish religion behind and hence also shame, and have indeed become sexually ('sexually?') liberated.

What I do not understand yet, though, is what Scott suggests when she discusses the vanishing of the public/private divide. First, the precise content of the claim is not entirely clear to me. In the quote presented above, Scott advocates that this dismissal is part of the discourse of secularism, which therefore implies that it is an aspiration of secularism and hence not an actual feature of current Western cultures. Yet Scott later declares that "in the twenty-first century, the public/private divide has disappeared" (p. 181), which obviously is a bolder claim.

I would like to point out that even in one of the most 'sexular' settings I have participated in—secular training for sex educators—participants were instructed that some things should be kept private. I was, for instance, discouraged from speaking about my own sexual experiences and preferences in my upcoming sex education sessions because these were not considered suitable for public assessment. During those sessions, I observed that many students, in contrast to the teacher's encouragements, decided not to speak about sex. For them, I would say that sex—and also speaking about it—remains a private matter, not something to be discussed in a class.

Given these examples, I wonder whether we can genuinely speak of secularism's quest for a disappearance—not just a gradual process of erosion but an actual complete collapse—of the private/public divide when, even in the most 'sexular' settings, there appears to be some appreciation for a private sphere. The things people state in public discourses, for example, might very well differ from the practices they conduct. I therefore conclude with a rather broad question: how does Scott think we should understand these obviously gendered sex education messages in the context of a society where secularism prevails?

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## ■ Comments by Karin B. Neutel

In *Sex and Secularism*, Scott takes on the triumphalist claim that only secularism guarantees gender equality. She aims to undermine the discourse of a 'clash of civilizations' in which "secularism is associated with reason, freedom, and women's rights," while Islam, in contrast, is associated "with a culture of oppression and terror" (p. 3). Although the sources brought together by Scott as examples of such claims—the head of a French commission recommending a ban on headscarves, Inglehart and Norris's (2003) article on the issue, a French anti-Muslim organization, and a tweet by author Joyce Carol Oates—comprise perhaps not the most comprehensive or impressive set of examples, it is easy to agree with her assertion that this notion holds sway in certain sections of popular and academic discourse.

Her approach in the book is to discredit the claim of an inherent connection between secularism and gender equality by giving examples of sexist secularism—historical cases where gender inequality has been promoted, rather than undone, in the discourses of secularism. According to her own characterization, Scott's objective is "to 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" (p. 7).

The advantage of such a 'broad brush' approach is that any example to the contrary refutes the claim that secularism necessarily guarantees equality, and the combination of varied examples easily serves to weaken the idea that a connection between the two exists. It also has its limitations, however, since the outcome of such an undertaking cannot offer a balanced historical picture of the relationship between secularism and gender. It does not disprove that secularism can in fact argue for gender equality, nor does it assess the extent to which secularism has been relevant for the historical development of current ideas about gender equality. It focuses on the absence of the connection, not its presence.

While Scott in my view is successful in the first chapters of the book—showing the commitment to gender inequality in the discourses of secularism, including its foundational principle of the separation of church and state—it is less persuasive in its final part. Reflecting on this book from Norway, I find that Scott offers a welcome criticism of the essentializing narratives that can certainly be found in contemporary politics. The incompatibility of Islam with European or Nordic values, especially on the issue of gender, is a recurring trope. It is doubtful, however, whether many proponents of the claim that secularism uniquely guarantees freedom and gender equality would be dissuaded from their triumphalist views by Scott's work. The main reason for this is Scott's disparaging of the Western idea of gender equality, stating that "what counts as that equality is difficult to define because its meaning is secured largely by a negative contrast with Islam" (p. 3). Scott refers here to gender equality as part of the rhetoric of the 'clash of civilizations', but the criticism appears to be aimed at Western notions of gender equality in general.

Scott's perspective results from her narrow focus on sexual emancipation and sexual freedom as key to the monopoly on gender equality claimed in the 'clash of civilizations' (chap. 5). She cannot ascribe this focus to Inglehart and Norris, since for them, as Scott admits, the 'true clash of civilizations' is in terms of "women's access to jobs and education, the availability of abortion and divorce, tolerance for homosexuality, and values of individual autonomy and self-expression" (p. 157). According to Scott, others "went further, insisting that the fulfillment of sexual desire in any form was a basic human right," a claim that "became one of the mantras of the clash of civilizations polemic" (ibid.). Scott argues that this vision of sexual emancipation, one that requires women to bare their heads and their bodies, "is not the realization of a universal freedom but is instead a historically specific creation: a Western middle-class notion of what

it means to be free” (p. 181). This idea of freedom and equality makes sense only in contrast to Muslim women’s fate. Scott’s analysis here is plausible, but it seems less likely that she would reach the same conclusion about the centrality of the Muslim other if she had used Inglehart and Norris’s broader understanding of equality.

There is no doubt that the ‘East/West contrast’ underlined by Scott has been a feature of secularist discourse and still is today. Scott’s work certainly helps us to understand its discursive significance and problematic consequences. But by taking this contrast as *the* characteristic feature of secularism in relation to gender, the book renders secular feminism invisible as an internal critique against Western Christian or ‘secular’ sexism and disregards it as a possible source for understanding what Western concepts of gender equality might consist of. Perhaps for France, which is Scott’s main frame of reference, understanding secularism through the opposition of East and West can to some extent be justified: she notes “the extremity of the French case” (p. 181). But for a country such as Norway and other northern European states, which are often held up as ideal examples of secular gender-equal societies, the suggestion that gender ideals take shape predominantly in contrast to “an equally fantasized foreign ‘other’—the Muslim woman of the East” (p. 182) makes little sense. The fight for issues such as legal abortion, pregnancy and parental leave, and equal pay were no doubt tied up with conceptions of national identity. However, to deny that such attempts at equality in the West were informed by “the structural realities of the lives of men and women,” requiring instead “Muslim women’s purported abjection” (ibid.) to define them, seems not only far-fetched but also counterproductive.

In Scott’s view, secularism is apparently capable of producing many different hierarchical gender ideologies, but not a gender ideology focused on any meaningful equality. In this respect, it is a bit suspicious that Scott credits feminists in post-communist Eastern Europe as having insisted that “achieving equality is a matter of changing economic, political, and social structures” (p. 152). These feminists apparently do have a clear concept of equality, one with which they hope to counter the influence of Western gender ideology, characterized in Scott’s view again by a predominant focus on sexual freedom, which is dependent on a Muslim other. It is important to recognize, as Scott reminds us, that the ‘clash of civilizations’ rhetoric serves to mask Western secular gender inequality, but that does not seem enough to suggest that the West does not have any substantive ideals about the equality of men and women.

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## ■ Comments by Marian Burchardt

In the West, feminist movements demanding gender equality and sexual emancipation have long been movements of protest against state-sponsored patriarchy. But something has decisively changed in this confrontation as questions over the place of Muslims in Western societies have acquired greater prominence. Public debates now fashion gender equality and sexual freedom as hallmarks of Western democracy and modern civilization. Right-wing populists are especially vocal in these debates, and it seems that the strength of their support of gender equality is a function of their rejection of Muslims.

Joan Wallach Scott's book explores these dynamics from the perspective of secularism. It is part of a burgeoning field of studies critically interrogating the claim that secularism necessarily promotes, or is at least favorable to, gender equality and sexual freedom. Scott refutes this claim up front. As a historian, she is interested in showing how this equation is based on a false understanding of the historical record of modernity. Scott argues instead that, in different domains of social life, secularism has led to a sharpening of gender differences with the result that sex, understood as the Foucauldian contact zone of bio-politics and body politics, has operated as the main vector of power throughout modern Western history. In order to substantiate this claim, Scott explores domains of thought and practice beginning in the early nineteenth century, such as French Enlightenment thought and anti-clericalism, the discourses of the nineteenth-century science of biology, and the politics of gender and family at Europe's colonial frontiers. In these fascinating analyses, and agreeing with the best of historical work, she is able to show how the rise of modern capitalism, the modern state with its public sphere, and particularly modern colonialism depended upon specific sets of accentuations of gender differences. Male thinkers generally construed women as particularly sexual beings with a reduced capacity for rational thought and action and used such ideas to justify women's political exclusion. In an especially lucid discussion, Scott unravels the supposed continuity between liberty and gender equality, showing that the former does not lead to the latter in any substantive way. But what does it all have to do with secularism? I raise two objections—one theoretical, the other methodological—that revolve around this question and that form the ground of my respectful disagreement with the author.

First, Scott argues that she does not use secularism as an analytic category, as philosophers or sociologists usually do, but rather wishes to demonstrate how secularism was deployed in particular historical moments in diverse geographical settings, and to show "what was common to their invocations of secularism and its effects" (p. 6). However, contrary to this claim, Scott mainly explores political fields of gender inequality in which the term was rarely, if at all, used. Perhaps one source of the problem is that Scott takes France, where anti-clerical Enlightenment traditions were socially powerful, as a blueprint. While scholars have long unsettled the line of continuity between anti-clericalism and secularism that Scott draws, Modood (2010) in particular has forcefully argued that French and American secularism are not, *pace* Scott, paradigmatic for Western understandings of secularism but their opposite. When her discussion moves to the US, Germany, and other Western societies, Scott cannot cite any document where the word 'secular' is deployed—for the simple reason that it was rarely used or even unknown. In effect, Scott is forced to make analytical uses of the term 'secularism', but it remains undefined and unspecified, causing her work to fall behind the complex conceptualizations of Taylor (2007) and Casanova (1994). The result is that a wide range of changes associated with modernity—the rise of science, political rights, citizenship—are all equated with secularism. In other words, secularism is conflated with particular arrangements of power. This calls forth a host of problems. Secularism becomes an undifferentiated whole that organizes the way an undifferentiated 'we' sees the world. More dramatically, secularism becomes a 'discourse of secularism' whose actors and protagonists are

rarely pinned down and that remains mystical, if not fictitious. Indicative of this problem is the recurrent use of the passive form whereby time and again actors are eclipsed: secularism was fashioned in this or that way—but by whom? Closer examination shows that during the nineteenth century a discourse of secularism existed outside France, but only in British humanist circles. And in the US, the term is highly stigmatized even today. Moreover, the encompassing equation of secularism and modernity once again denies the historical role of ‘religious modernities’ that anthropologists have sought to unearth under the debris of universalist theories of secularization.

Scott does raise an intriguing point, however, on the links between secularism and Christianity. There has been an increasing interest in the shared genealogical trajectories of secularism and Christianity, with Marcel Gauchet’s (1997) famous rendition of Christianity as the religion that led to ‘exit from religion’. More recently, scholars have explored how discursive and institutional affirmations of secularism may actually go hand in hand with the continued privileging of Christianity in contexts of migration-driven religious diversity (Astor et al. 2017). Scott aims to trace these connections through the history of secularism discourse. Yet once again, because of the lack of an explicit conceptualization of secularism itself, these links remain unclear. In the introduction, Scott states that instead of being part of a religious-secular divide, in her research Christianity “was included on the secular side” (p. 18). The brief discussion of the Westphalia Treaty that follows points to the problem. Here, the treaty is supposed to have led to both the legacy of secularism and the tying of Christianity to state sovereignty. However, what would secularism mean in such an equation? In fact, the outcome of the European religious wars was precisely not secularism but confessionalization (Casanova 2009). Even in nineteenth-century Germany, the notion of a ‘Protestant secularism’ is a misnomer.

The great achievement of this book is therefore, in my view, not so much tracing the role of sex in secularism but rather showing how contemporary uses of sex as transfer points of political power have a history in which the lack of gender equality was routinely justified in sexual terms. Other books will have to do the work to show how gender inequality in the nineteenth century was actually different from gender inequality in the twenty-first century, and to demonstrate that not all forms of subjection are the same. There are, as anthropologist James Laidlaw (2014: 109) succinctly puts it, “degrees of freedom.”

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## ■ Response to Comments by Joan Wallach Scott

I am grateful for this rich critical engagement with my book. As I said in the introduction, the intention was to open a conversation, to provide details I did not have, and to figure out the extent to which my 'broad brush' made sense (or not) of specific historical details. Judging from these critiques, that aspect of the book succeeded. In what follows I will reply to some of the points raised by the authors, and then I want to raise some points that are strikingly absent from their comments.

Kim Knibbe asks whether public debates—we might say the theoretical arguments contained in the secularism discourse—are congruent with practices at the level of daily life. Do these abstractions, in other words, actually influence the way people behave? Are all such practices necessarily or inherently sexist? My answer is, of course, no: "It is important to note that the representation of the difference of women from men as an explanation for hierarchies of social and political organization is an idealized representation that doesn't necessarily correspond to the actual practices and beliefs of all women and men. It was a representation, moreover, that was challenged by legions of feminists and their supporters, who dismissed its premises as ill-founded and unjust" (p. 119). As Knibbe says, appeals to secular reason have been used (successfully) to advance women's rights. That is the case—as I note in the book—for the eventual triumph of women's suffrage. That is the case with the material she cites for the field of sexual health. But the larger question is whether these improvements are able to dislodge the hegemonic power of the gender divide, which is so entangled in secular modernity that it manages to resist displacement even as it succumbs to specific reforms. How to explain the tenacity of the difference of sex as the basis for inequalities, even as birth control and abortion are granted as women's rights? How to explain, these days, the long-tolerated inequalities of power in the workplace revealed by the #MeToo movements?

Brenda Bartelink suggests we pay more attention to the multiple forms religion takes in the othering of others, her case in point being the different treatment of Muslims and Christian Africans in the Netherlands. I would guess—and this is only a guess—that the difference between Islam and Christianity has something to do with these different otherings. Bartelink also reminds us that religion has an important capacity for formulating new and better ideals of masculinity (African Pentecostalism is her fascinating example). But Bartelink's main objection (like Karin Neutel's) is to my suggestion that equality is an open question, not easily defined. I think that equality is always variously and incompletely defined. We do not have a good historical example of complete equality. Are African Pentecostals, as she describes her case, an example of gender equality? Is the ending of polygamy or helping with the children the test of that equality? An example I give in my book is the reference to Alexis de Tocqueville's discussion of equality between women and men in his *Democracy in America*. There what counts as equality is women's willing consent to subordination to their husbands. Unlike 'savages' in 'uncivilized' places, these women buy into liberal contracts that presume their equality even as they accept their required submission. Carole Pateman's (1988) classic *The Sexual Contract* offers an incisive analysis of this phenomenon.

Karin Neutel misreads my arguments about equality to say that secularism cannot argue for it. I never say that. What I do say is, first, that historically modern Western nation-states rest their organization on gender inequality, appealing to a so-called natural difference of sex as their legitimating ground, and, second, that what counts as equality is hard to define. That is not a 'disparaging' of either secularism or equality; it is (like it or not) a fact of history. Moreover, I never say that secularism cannot be used to argue for gender *equality*. I cite the critiques of Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, and others to suggest that there was resistance to gender

inequality “across the political spectrum ... These critiques only underline the fact that [in] the politics of modern nation-states ... sharpened lines of gender difference were integral to the dominant vision that emerged” (p. 87). And in chapter 3, the demands for voting rights for women I recount are entirely based on appeals to secular ideals. The interesting thing about that story is the ways in which, despite important reforms, equality in the workplace and at home do not follow from newly won voting rights. Historically, equality has been used to refer to voting rights, equal pay for equal work, the absence of sexual harassment, the right to divorce, a vague notion of ‘autonomy’, and—most recently—sexual liberation. But the granting of one right does not guarantee the experience of another. That is why Inglehart and Norris’s list is incomplete; we can cite many examples of inequality that persist despite their list. I have to be convinced that Norway is an example of across-the-board gender equality, but I await your histories to demonstrate that to me.

Marian Burchardt and Jelle Wiering call my use of discourse into question. Wiering suggests that there are multiple discourses of secularism, and he is surely right. But I was interested in the roots of the one that now predominates, the one that inspires the ‘clash of civilizations’ polemic. Finding that it had a long history was an important way of getting beyond the present focus on Islam to its larger colonial and racist roots. Wiering asks about my selection process for thinking about the discourse of secularism. In response, I would say I was interested in the dominant view that prevailed from the nineteenth century on. Burchardt faults me for not citing the actual word ‘secularism’ in my many examples, and he is right about that. But I would suggest that the word itself did not have to appear to constitute a discursive field. Secularism was (to cite Judith Butler) “the condition of thought itself” for modernity. I am using the notion of discourse in Foucault’s sense. I would say that secularism is a discursive field that, in the apt characterization of Thomas Lemke (2007: 44), includes “the delineation of concepts, the specification of objects and borders, and the provision of arguments and justifications.” From that definition, the word ‘secularism’ does not have to be used all the time or, indeed, at all. It constitutes a discursive field, which is my object of study. For that reason, I think I was justified in concluding that it informed all those invocations of reproductive families, nations, races, and the like.

Jelle Wiering also misunderstands, I think, my comments about the end of the public/private divide. It’s not that there are not things about our bodies and our actions we do not publicly announce or display, but that in the twenty-first century, the idealized spheres of public/private do not map our social imaginaries. Long before this century, the family and sex were already matters of public regulation, but now those domains are understood to be public. Just look at the way women are now recounting their experiences of sexual harassment. The feminist slogan “the personal is political” is no longer confined to feminists.

My biggest surprise in reading these comments is their absence of attention to what I take to be the most original contribution of this book: my discussion of the ways in which gender and politics are interconnected, the ways in which one looks to the other for its legitimation. That is the discussion that ends chapter 3 and, again, the last chapter of the book. There I argue, following Freud and Claude Lefort, that the difference of the sexes, on the one hand, and democratic politics, on the other, are both characterized by an irresolvable indeterminacy. There is no ultimate explanation for the difference of the sexes and no concrete embodiment for democratic politics. Each relies on the other for certainty: the supposed natural difference of the sexes explains why men predominate in politics (and in many other spheres as well), and the reference to that natural difference as a justification for politics secures gender inequality—explaining it not as a constructed social inequality, but as a fact of nature. I argue that we have not done away with that relationship, and that in order to understand



persisting inequalities we need to understand the ways in which gender and politics constitute one another. I also argue that the very fact of these uncertainties, these indeterminacies, allows us to historicize questions of gender, of equality and inequality, and so of change. Therein lies some hope for the future.

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