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A REVIEW OF *SECULARISMS*

A Review of *Secularisms*. Edited by Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008. \$24.95. 405 pages.

The title provides the basic thesis of this book: there is not one universal or normative secularization process, but rather a diverse range of discordant secularisms. The “s” at the end is hardly new; it is common now to speak of nationalisms, Christianities, reformations, modernizations, and so on. This volume admirably brings this insight to secularism theory. The contributors to this edited volume are writing against what has often been pegged as a unidirectional process (from religious understanding to a demystified, secular world) that has been tethered to other universalizing processes (technological, political, and cultural, among others). Contributors offer multiple counterexamples, showing how secularism has not necessarily gone with the decline of religious practice, that it is not a discreet *ism*, that it is not coterminous with democratization or modernization. Contributors often seem to be suggesting how different loci contradict findings derived only from the traditional regions of study of secularism (the US and Europe), with a number using non-western contexts. There is also an abiding concern for what an editor calls “the woman question;” many, but not all of the essays consider gender in discussing secularism. The greatest strengths of this volume are its thoughtful, incisive theoretical grounding and its inclusion of multiple minority reports which taken together challenge conventional secularism theorizing as it has developed.

The volume is the descendent of a 2000 special issue of the journal *Social Text* on which Jakobsen (Director of the Center for Research on Women at Barnard College) and Pellegrini (Associate Professor of Performance Studies and Religious Studies) collaborated. The two have also collaborated on other works, including a cowritten book, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance*. The sixteen contributors to *Secularisms* come from a range of academic disciplines, including anthropology, history, religious studies, and political science. Interestingly, almost every article was subtitled, but the book itself kept to its one word title *Secularisms*. This is likely due to the challenge of relating the wide-ranging content.

Secularisms begins with a nuanced introduction by the editors, an essay which should be part of any graduate seminar on secularism. On the first page they ask how it occurred that “secularism as a ‘world’ discourse was also intertwined with one particular religion?” In particular, Protestantism and its ascetic ideal are often held up as crucial to secularism, and are connected to the modern project. They note that the secularism thesis, as it has developed, connects at least seven elements: rationalism, social-structural differentiation, freedom, privatization, universalism, and modernization and progress (5-6). These

elements are typically contrasted with their binary opposites, often creating an artificial conflict between the religious and the secular. Jakobsen and Pellegrini argue that a variety of religious revolutions have cast doubts on many of the traditional ways of understanding secularism; the old dichotomies fracture when applied outside of their traditional confines. In this volume they have collected thirteen essays that “confront the secularization narrative at its main points... the essays gathered here include challenges to the claim that secularism provides a coherent rationality... that secularism provides freedom from the constraints of religion... that secularization entails the privatization of religion... and that secularization produces gender and racial equality” (12). Jakobsen and Pellegrini highlight two trends that appear in the volume: “The first is to acknowledge that secularism is inflected by religions (and vice versa)... Such a move entails a shift from a singular, universal idea of the secular to the idea of multiple and varied secularisms” (16). The editors suggest that this will have further implications, helping to erode the erroneous opposition between religious and secular.

The volume is divided into three sections: (1) “Secular Interventions,” where seven articles treat primarily contemporary case studies with thick, theoretical analyses; (2) “Secular Relations: Micronarratives,” a collection of three historical essays; and (3) “Public Alternatives,” another short section of three essays that treats possible interventions in secular questions.

The first section could have perhaps been the book. Essays needle at the contradictions in secularism. For instance, Taha Parla and Andrew Davidson’s “Secularism and Laicism in Turkey” looks at how Kemalist laicism has often been treated as a form of secularism but, in reality, has helped to preserve, institutionalize, and prioritize forms of Islam. Other articles treat Iran and India. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan examines the debate over the uniform civil code in India, and the role of women. Rajan traces how different actors clash within the framework of a secular state. Afsaneh Najmabadi’s “(Un)veiling Feminism,” studies the rise of feminist periodicals after the Iranian Revolution, asking “How can we make sense of this bastion of Islamist hard-liners producing a lineage of feminist editors?” (39-40) Najmabadi is fascinated by how these two supposedly unlike groups coexist, especially since such a relationship cuts against much of secular feminist theory. Like other authors, Najmadi objects to a classical bipolarity, in this case the opposition between Islam and modernity. To accept the polarity “continues to produce Islam as exclusive of secularism, democracy, and feminism, as, in fact a pollutant of these projects” (53). Instead, the Iranian Revolution has enabled some forms of feminism. These essays decenter classical secularization theory, in part by displacing it from its locus classicus.

This “Secular Interventions” section also includes several essays on the US. Laura Levitt revisits Jewish secularism in the US, Tracy Fessenden writes on “Race, Religion, and the Progress Narrative of US Feminism,” and Robert Baird describes “late secularism.” In some cases, these authors accept part of the classical theories of secularization. Levitt finds that Jews have privatized religious belief in order to match an imposed ideal of religious diversity. Jewish modernization now allows for a reentry into public life, although how this will

occur remains a mystery, especially in light of the history of contradictions that contemporary Judaism has inherited. Fessenden's essay examines the connections between Protestantism and classical secularism, and the creation of imperialism as a product of these processes. She uses Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935). Gilman was an author who wrote against the women's sphere, has been described as a more secular inheritor of the vision of women's advocates like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and has been an influence on later feminists. Nonetheless, Gilman held her own unique narrative of religious progress, which was entwined with a civilizing narrative and racialist views of the time.

The second and third sections of the book were less helpful to me, and the overlay of secularism sometimes seemed forced, especially in the second section on micronarratives; ironically, rather than complicating secularism theorization, these essays seemed to argue that the theory was relevant to every topic and situation. For instance, in Angelo Zito's essay on footbinding in China, Zito uses secularism to address the shift in how missionaries understood footbinding, first as a sign of a cultural flaw and then later using a biomedical language. While this would reflect a significant shift, even if the sample size is only two missionaries, it is unclear how much the brief discussion of secularism—which occurs in the introduction and conclusion but not in the body of the essay—contributes to understanding missionary rhetoric about social reform, much less late Qing or Republican understandings of footbinding. Did Chinese adopt these rationales in their eventual rejection of footbinding? The essay does not tell us. Scholars have often provided more productive analyses of this time period with reference to theories about nationalism, early scientific narratives, or Chinese movements that emphasized an ideal of modernization. "Secularism" proper was certainly not an expressed concern of the time, in either English or Chinese, and it is not clear that it helps us to understand this question. Secularism theory also seems to be only marginally helpful in Molly McGarry's fascinating essay on the Spiritualism movement in late 19th century America. The essay highlights a significant movement which may indeed contradict perceived secularizing trends of the time, but it is not clear how much secularism theory contributes to the historical case study. These essays do provide some micronarrative analysis of secularism, although, as a historian, the theorizing feels forced. Is secularism helpful at the microlevel, or it is relevant only at broader levels of generalization? The third essay, by Geeta Patel, studies understandings of chronology and the recent millennium in India, challenging some of the arguments about how India has been secularized from outside.

"Public Alternatives," the final section, includes three essays. Tyler Roberts creatively argues that we must "'desantify' secularism, that is, to rethink and revise our practices of secularism in a way that opens new and different possibilities for religious voices in the public sphere" (283). "Toward Secular Diaspora: Relocating Religion and Politics," looks at Radical Orthodoxy, the movement most widely disseminated by John Milbank, and postmodern Jewish philosophy, which is exemplified in Stephen Kepnes, Robert Gibbs, and Peter Ochs. Roberts characterizes these approaches as "missionary Christians and wandering Jews," each seeking to advance or allow public expressions of faith.

Roberts presents these as diasporic responses to an integrating world. Kathleen Sands ("Feminisms and Secularisms") argues that first wave feminism, which was often overtly religious, can be differentiated from second wave feminism, which was secular. She provides an interesting discussion of how secular exceptionalism often argued for a constructed genealogy where secularism was the natural state and religion an abnormal growth. She finds that "the larger point is that feminist secularism, like all ideological secularism, is willfully amnesiac about its *religious* history" (318). Ranu Samantrai uses recent terror attacks in the US and UK to study secularism, but sees different secularisms competing in how to approach religious violence: some seek to wall off secular western states from alien intrusions, while others reject such a closing of borders. Samantrai is disturbed by tendencies towards isolation and the coercive stripping of religious identity. The article provides a striking close to the volume, suggesting how secularism is sometimes seen as inoculation and other times as disease.

The volume ends without a formal conclusion, which is perhaps appropriate given the open-ended nature of the volume: no final words can conclude this debate. This volume articulates many of the misgivings scholars have about secularism theory. It challenges the view that secularism is a Protestant creation thrust upon the world and proposes some academic interventions. Significant contributions include an analysis of secularism in a wide range of spatial and temporal locations, and an appreciation for how secularism interacts in complex ways with gender, ethnicity, and religious traditions. Nonetheless, I still found myself wondering if this effort to challenge traditional secularism theory is not a little bit like the exercise that asks student not to think of a pink elephant. Now we see secularism *everywhere*. It seems that these secularisms are relevant to every situation and context, albeit in the plural rather than the singular. How, having challenged some of the overdetermined aspects of this theory, do we avoid succumbing to the temptation to use it always and everywhere? This volume helps us to recognize the limits of the received theory and to see a broader range of secularisms.

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