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"Secularist Dreams" and "Women's Rights": Notes on an "Ambiguous Relationship"*

This article analyses the impact of the manipulation of the religious and the secular in women's rights discourses and practices. It problematizes the concept of secularization and desecularization in light of the recognition of the limits of modernity. It also addresses the possibility of a postcolonial and post-secularist discourse on human and women's rights, opening up the way for the recognition of the emancipatory potential of some forms of religiously inspired feminism. For this, it is necessary to consider the contribution made by various types of feminism to alternative understandings and practices from the point of view of an emancipatory and ecological interpretation of human rights.

Keywords: human rights; feminisms; social movements; religion; secularization.

We are in a historical moment in which feminism can be easily annexed to the project of empire.
Sherene Razack (2007: 7)

The issue of women's rights seems to offer a privileged position from which to observe the potential, limitations and ambiguities of the discourse and practices of modernity, particularly as regards two of its fundamental principles: secularization (with its reduction of religion to the private sphere) and human rights. The debate about the human rights of women is often dominated by approaches that seem to place even more veils on women (as much in the West as in the East), and in some cases these approaches have been promoted by other women influenced by a single model of feminism. This issue, which according to some authors dates back to colonial times (Ahmed, 1992), has acquired a sharper focus since 11 September 2001, particularly in Europe. It is especially visible in the interpretations and assessments made of the lifestyles of Islamic women, both inside and outside Europe, and consequently, of the whole Islamic population, whether migrants or residing in Muslim countries. According to these perspectives and opinions, Islamic women often constitute "the other of the other," that is, the most radically different of the different, the "resident" that is most "alien," to paraphrase Gayatri Spivak (2002: 47). It is worth analysing some of the posters that were used by right-wing parties in Switzerland during the referendum of 29 November 2009 concerning the construction of mosques (the famous "minaret case") in

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order to understand how the issue of "cultural alienness" is also associated with a sense of threat, and both are "hyper-ritualized" in the images that are produced of women. For example, one of the posters depicted, in the foreground, a veiled woman with a threatening gaze.[1]

But on this "stage" another question is also being played out, that of the "re-emergence" or "permanence" of the public impact of religion, since the roles that the different religions attribute to women (and therefore the conception that each one has of the fundaments and expressions of the human rights of women and the ways in which this framework of values affects their lives) are also being used increasingly as a weapon in disputes between different worldviews. It has become commonplace to attribute to "the religion of others" a failure to respect the rights of women, which thereby serves as a scale for measuring the degree of perfection of a particular culture, society and lifestyle.[2] Thus, "orientalist" (Said, 2004) invocations of "disrespect for the rights of women" are frequently used in the West as a "sign" of the socio-political and cultural "backwardness" of other societies, becoming one more pretext for interference that is not always grounded in human rights. For example, in a radio message broadcast on 17 November 2002, Laura Bush, addressing the American nation, stated: "Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror – not only because of our heartbreak for the women and children of Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan, we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us" (*apud* Hirschkind and Mahmood, 2002: 341).

On the other hand, Islam's rejection of the West often includes a repudiation of the supposedly "permissive" behaviour of "its women," considered one more sign of "moral decadence," frequently perceived as the result of secularization. On this subject, it is worth reading the comments of Akbar S. Ahmed (1992: 178) on the Western media, which he holds responsible for the dissemination and reinforcement of the "common stereotype of Western

[1] Cf. press news: http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,664135,00.html; http://www.publico.pt/Mundo/suica-mais-de-57-por-cento-da-populacao-votou-contra-minaretes-nas-mesquitas_1411922; http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,664337,00.html; http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2009/11/30/suisse-les-affiches-de-choc-de-la-droite-populiste-decryptees_1274290_3214.html. This topic requires much further research.

[2] On this subject, we may recall the words of the Cardinal Patriarch of Lisbon, D. José da Cruz Policarpo, who in January 2009, in the Auditorium of the Figueira da Foz Casino, in a talk with journalist Fátima Campos Ferreira, claimed, on the subject of Portuguese women involved in relationships with Muslims: "Be careful about who you love. Think twice about marrying a Muslim, think very seriously about it, because you might be letting yourself in for a great deal of trouble. Not even Allah knows where that might end" (http://ultimahora.publico.clix.pt/noticia.aspx?id=1356031).

women as promiscuous," confirmed, in his perspective, "by the reports of contemporary Western women visitors to Muslim countries." That stereotype offers a view of Western women "with their legs wide open, waiting for sex on car bonnets." According to Ahmed, "this is the sort of image which would agitate the mind of any Muslim father," and constitutes "an insult not only to Western but to all women" (Ahmed, 1992: 178).

But religion is also often invoked by women in both West and East as an inspiration for the defence of their rights. Does religion therefore hold some emancipatory potential for them? Might it be possible to use it as a tool of liberation and reconcile it with an emancipatory interpretation of human rights? And would these be, per se, rights of/for women?

This article analyses the impact of the manipulation of the religious and the secular upon the discourses and practices of women's rights, beginning by problematizing the concepts of secularization and desecularization in light of the recognition of the limits of modernity, as well as the ways in which they are used to place those considered alien to "Eurocentric" discourse "on the other side of the line" (Santos, 2007). It also addresses the possibility of a postcolonial and post-secularist discourse on human and women's rights that could ultimately lead to the recognition of the emancipatory potential of some forms of religiously-inspired feminism.

1. Secularization, desecularization and "the other side of the line"

Western societies seem to have awoken from their "secularist dream." Habermas spoke of a "post-secular society" (2005) and Berger (1999) of the "desecularization of the world." For some authors, secularization was itself an illusory or unfinished project, while for others it is now threatened by a revival of religious expressions that they consider to be alien to the dominant worldview in their geographic and cultural space.

These questions and realities challenge the Western world's perception of itself, as well as the paradigm of modernity as a project of emancipation, secularization and, more recently, multiculturalism. In fact, underlying all these references for European and Eurocentric identity is that which some authors, such as Kaufmann (1989: 34), consider to be in need of "demythologization" – that is to say, the deconstruction of the project of modernity itself. This would suggest that this demythologization involves the deconstruction

of modernity as a general theory and the recognition of the existence of different interpretations of secularization.

1.1. The deconstruction of modernity as a general theory and the various interpretations of secularization

Modernity emerged and imposed itself not only as a new phase of Western history, but above all as a global project for the "perfect society," based on the principles of a universal enlightened rationality as epitomised in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which constituted the inspiration for a radically new social order. Thanks to the social movements that sprang up in reaction to the industrial revolution and early capitalism, to liberal currents that affirmed the rights of citizenship in opposition to absolute forms of royal power, and to the "blood, sweat and tears" on which the first half of the 20th century was built, that new order ultimately led to the Declaration of Human Rights.

Modernity was also shaped by the legitimate desire for independence from religion and from Western European Christianity, structured upon a dual classification system that was itself dualist. On the one hand, there was the dualism between "this world" and "the next," and on the other, another dualism "in this world" between the "religious" and the "secular" spheres, in which the Church in fact brandished two swords – power over the "Hereafter" and religious power in this world. In modernity, therefore, the religious realm ceased to be an all-encompassing reality. The secular realm took over that role and religion had to find its place within it. Thus, the project for a universal rationality led to the separation of Church and State, which meant that the Catholic Church had to come to terms with the fact that its dream of Christendom would never return and that it was impossible to reconcile these two projects of universality: the project of modern rationality, which generated the notion of "citizenship by right," and that of the Church wielding an authority *urbi et orbe* over the secular world.

Secularized society generated unease in religious institutions, particularly as regards its project to relegate religion to the private domain. This unease is not exclusive to Christianity; indeed, it can be found in an even more pronounced form in Islam, particularly in sectors that view secularism as the product of modernity and, therefore, of the West. It obviously takes on more aggressive and radical contours in the various forms of fundamentalism –

whether Islamic or Evangelical[3] – which view secularism as their main enemy, due to its "anthropocentric worldview which places man and his unaided reason at the centre of the universe" (Zeidan, 2002: 207). However, there are also dimensions of secularization and ways of understanding and expressing it that deserve closer examination.

The concept of secularization is a controversial one that has been much debated. It initially referred to the separation of Church and State, and to the appropriation of ecclesiastical property by the civil authorities; however, it was later extended to culture, coming to signify its autonomy in relation to religious symbols (Berger, 1969). Wilson (1966: 149) defines it as "the process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose their social significance." Luckmann, in his work *The Invisible Religion* (1967), radicalizes this understanding of the secularization process, considering that it consists of a "loss of public relevance of religion." For him, self-expression and self-realization have become the "invisible religion" of modernity, as traditional religious institutions became increasingly irrelevant and marginal for the functioning of the modern world, with modern religion no longer inhabiting the temples. This insight was followed up by Niklas Luhmann (1977), who considers secularization to be a consequence of the reduction of religion to a voluntary element within the social system, which has itself ceased to be determined by religion or its substitutes.[4]

Taylor (2007), for his part, adds a third feature to the definition of secularization as the separation of religious and state institutions and as a distancing from religious practice. According to his perspective, the core of the secularization process, which leads him to speak of the present era as being "secular," lies in an "exclusive humanism" (*ibid.*: 19), which consists of "a move from a society in which belief in God is practically unchallenged and, indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others" (*ibid.*: 3).

Casanova (1994), on the other hand, points out that, in the 1980s, religion entered the public sphere, abandoning the place that had been attributed to it in the private sphere. He holds that, in this phase, there were few conflicts that were unrelated to religion, which

[3] For an in-depth analysis of the various trends within political theology (pluralistic and revelationist, particularly in Christianity and Islam), see the important text by Santos (2009).

[4] He is referring to Durkheim's conviction that religion, though banned from the modern world, would be replaced by a kind of "civil religion," as the whole of society would require rituals for the reinforcement of its values.

appeared in the form of social protests, struggles for justice and theories of the revolutionary role of religion (the various forms of liberation theology offer an example of this).[5]

This author, whose work *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994) is essential for the debate on secularization, believes that, to understand the nuances of this multifaceted phenomenon, it is necessary to separate the ideological critique of religion, which he considers typical of the Enlightenment, from the theory of secularization, and distinguish between the loss of functions traditionally assumed by religion in public life and its pure and simple privatization or marginalization. In his opinion, the differentiation and loss of the social functions of religion do not necessarily entail its privatization. Thus, according to Casanova, there are three different facets of secularization:

a) *Secularization as differentiation:* the recognition that the fusion of religious and political community is incompatible with the modern principle of citizenship; the loss of religion's compulsory character has led religious freedom to transform all religions into denominations, leaving aside functions that are not religious;

b) *Secularization as religious decline:* this thesis originated in the Enlightenment critique of religion, which envisaged the end of religion through loss of relevance; this, in Casanova's view, led some political movements and governments to impose secularization through State policy;[6]

c) *Secularization as the confinement of religion to the private sphere:* the specialization that resulted from modernity (i.e. the plurality of knowledges and consequent institutional segmentation) reduced religion to a sectorial option, which depends upon the individual's private conscience and choice.

However, according to Casanova (one of the first authors to make this claim), we are at present witnessing a "deprivatization of religion in the modern world" (1994: 5). That is to say, religion no longer accepts (if in fact it ever did) the "marginal and privatized role" assigned to it by theories of modernity and secularization. Indeed, religion has recovered its political role and its desire to influence social and public life. This challenges the

[5] For an overview of the various political and liberation theologies, see Santos (2009).

[6] In fact, this seems to have occurred in some African and Arab countries, where governments emerging from emancipation struggles and movements (mostly Marxist-inspired) tried to eradicate religion, on the basis of the "self-fulfilled prophecy" of the disappearance of religion due to its lack of relevance to a perfect socialist society.

Enlightenment view of religion as something from the private domain, destined to disappear.

Casanova's central thesis is problematic for some authors, such as Pollack (2003), who considers that it does not allow the relation and compatibility between individual and social responsibilities to be understood and regulated in such a way as to guarantee that freedom of religious expression does not undermine the secular structure and logic of the State. Moreover, the public or private role attributed to religion also depends upon the role that is (or is not) recognised for religion in general. For the Western world, the question appears to reside in the limits of secularization and of globalized modern society itself, in which, in the words of Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2009: 14), the reduction of the public space (i.e. the "depoliticization of collective life") is accompanied by a corresponding expansion of the space occupied by religion. We may ask, therefore, how the re-emergence of the religious ("desecularization") may be articulated with the paradigmatic reference to human rights (both "emancipated children" of that same social order) if we take into account the fact that secularized societies with elements of desecularization increasingly invoke their religious roots to draw the line that separates them from "others" that have different religious traditions.

1.2. Desecularization and "the other side of the line"

The expansion of the space of religion, and also of a Eurocentric argument based on religion, is manifested in the perplexity[7] often shown in the aftermath of violent events and breaches of human rights (such as terrorist attacks and murders, including the so-called "honour crimes" perpetrated against women). To some extent, we seem to be unable to "see the wood for the trees," for focusing upon such minority phenomena conceals the "normality" of daily life for most Muslims, particularly in Europe. These events also serve to justify reactions of estrangement and rejection of anyone that is perceived to be "different from us." According to Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007: 3), this distinction between "us" and "the others" has its roots in a form of "abyssal thinking," typical of modernity, which creates the illusion of the "impossibility of the co-presence of two sides of the line."

[7] Reactions of perplexity may range from the simple effort to understand what is happening to full-fledged xenophobia, particularly directed against Islam. See, for example, the statements made by Umberto Bossi, of the Northern League in Italy, who proclaimed, "Europe is and must remain Christian." For this and more documented examples, see Skenderovic (2006).

For Amartya Sen (2006) this process of classification along "civilizational lines" (involving antagonistic identities) is a form of "confinement," as it encloses people within one group, restricting them to a single identity, while simultaneously assuming that all human relations may be analysed from the perspective of relations between different civilizations. The categorization also stereotypes the other as someone that has to fit the representation that we make of him/her, including on the religious level.

The "other side of the story," the side of the Muslims in Europe, is thus largely unknown, or is subjected to a "hermeneutics of suspicion" that attempts to deconstruct what is considered to be an inherent aggressive tendency in the Islamic religion. This perspective grants no legitimacy to critiques of Western (i.e. "modern and secularized") lifestyles by Muslim intellectuals, when in fact the "Muslim question" in Western societies raises the problem of the limits of modernity, both as a "cultural border" as well as its "cul-de-sacs." Perhaps this is another reason for the defensive reactions that are often displayed against manifestations of "other voices," or "voices of others," and of "other religions" inside Europe.[8] This tendency reveals, among other things, the fear of the return of public expressions of religion, in general mixed with a conscious or unconscious vestige of a Christian understanding of the European identity. This, then, would seem to confirm Hervieu-Léger's thesis, according to which the typical European attitude to religion consists in "belonging without believing."

> This attitude entails a distant shared memory, which does not necessitate shared belief, but which − even from a distance – still governs collective reflexes in terms of identity. The Danish citizens who do not believe in God and never attend church, but who faithfully continue to pay the tax that goes to the Lutheran Church because they like to see religious buildings properly maintained, and the French citizens who are nostalgic for the beautiful church services of their childhood and complain about mosques being built in France while never setting foot in church until "the bell tolls" for them, illustrate how one can "belong without believing," the European counterpart to the expansion of beliefs without belonging. (2006: 3)

This "belonging without believing" seems to be perfectly compatible with secularization and is sometimes used as a pretext for the suppression and silencing of cultural differences in Europe. This might lead us to wonder whether "secularization" is not itself a type of

[8] Cf. the debate on the building of mosques in European capitals, mentioned above, which constitutes a good example of this fear of "non-European" religions (*Der Spiegel Spezial*, 2008). See also a televised debate, available online, between Tariq Ramadan and Yvan Perrin of the U.D.C., the party that received the most votes in the Swiss elections of 2006: http://sport-trops.com/marocfoot/2008/05/26/debat-tariq-ramadan-vs-yvan-perrin-emission-infrarouge/ (accessed 20 October 2009). On the dimension of the question in Europe, see Evans (2009).

"religion" for some states, whether it has not become an excuse to reinforce other forms of Eurocentricity with regard to peoples considered to be "on the other side of the line," and whether there might not exist an "Orientalization" of the religion of others. In fact, we might ask if the "post-Christian secularist hegemony" has not generated a new way of thinking and a discourse that justifies Eurocentric superiority by the fact that the European lifestyle is secularized, but which nevertheless results from the secularization of Christian societies. That is to say, might the distinction between public and private typical of Western modernity ultimately be a "local solution"? For Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "secularism (which should be distinguished from 'secularity') is as much a part of Christianity as the Christian religion. Secularism and the Christian religion were part of the same colonial 'package'" (Santos, 2009: 15).

Tariq Ramadan has pointed to the quasi-aporia generated by the (sometimes posthumous) identification of Europe with Christianity and/or post-Christianity. He insists that it is possible to be a "European Muslim" and stresses the need to "shape an Islamic-European identity out of the crisis" (1999: 101) – that is to say, to develop an identity that is capable of transcending the sense of exclusion that causes reactive attitudes. If that is impossible, and Islam is alien to Europe, then it is impossible to be Muslim and European at the same time. If this claim is based on an allegedly European religious identity (that is specifically Christian or post-Christian), then the success of the whole modern secularization project is at risk (since the references for the construction of identity continue to be religious).

This is, then, a complex game in which the argument of secularism is used to exclude or make invisible those that (often allegedly)[9] have a non-Christian religious identity. This generates a paradox. For while secularism is sometimes used in opposition to religion in general, which is considered to be a distinctive feature of "cultural backwardness" that is damaging to certain groups, at other times it is used to reinforce a (secularized) "cultural identity" which is, ultimately, considered to form part of a particular religion, which, for its part, having been relegated to the private sphere, is now invoked in the public sphere (often

[9] I remember hearing Abdourahman Waberi, an African writer born in Djibouti, say, ironically, that he had discovered his Islamic identity when he arrived in Europe and was told that he was Muslim. Waberi said this at the Networking European Citizenship Education (NECE) conference on "Rethinking Citizenship Education in European Migration Societies: Political Strategies – Social Changes – Educational Concepts" (Lisbon, 26-28 April 2007). To access his personal page: http://waberi.free.fr/index00.html.

by secular authorities) to reduce some people (particularly women) once more to the private.

2. The pretext of women's rights

These questions are reproduced in discourses about the rights of women, assuming specific contours and generating what Razack (2004 and 2007: 5) describes as "the eternal triangle of the imperilled Muslim woman, the dangerous Muslim man and the civilized European." This triangle may be present both in state discourses designed to reject external signs and cultural traces of the "alien," and in acritical campaigns by feminist groups against human rights abuses. In both cases, although in different ways, the result may be the reproduction of the stereotype that attributes the private domain to women. And, as we've seen, the relegation of religion to the private sphere was the desired aim of the secularization process. In the era of post-secularization, the "religion of others" is assigned to the private sphere also through the relegation of women, once more, to that sphere. And consciously or unconsciously, that strategy is often justified by the supposed desire to defend their rights in the public sphere. Let us analyse some examples of this strategy, in particular the arguments used by President Sarkozy against the use of the burka in France, and those presented by Norwegian feminist movements against forced marriages, analysed by Razack (2004).

In 2009, on a visit to Drôme, more specifically to the Chapel of Vercors (symbolic site of the French resistance during World War II), Sarkozy made a speech in which he praised the love of the fatherland and French values. The speech included a passage in which he referred to the incompatibility of the burka with France. After describing France as a pluralist country, where diversity reigns, Sarkozy invoked what he believed to be common to all French people: "the profound unity of our culture, and, dare I say it, of our civilization" (*ibid.*: 3). For him, the French view "Christianity and the Enlightenment as two sides of the same civilization of which they are the heirs" (2009: 4).

Despite adding that to be French is "not to let oneself get enclosed in a religion" (2009: 4), he did not refer to religious pluralism, which permits the coexistence of different religions, but rather to a pluralism of ideas that include atheism, Christianity and secularism, which he defines as "the respect for all faiths and the neutrality of the State," at the same time as he notes the respectability of all religious sentiments "that come from the depths of time" (*ibid.*: 7). What Sarkozy identifies as tolerance, proper to the French nation, leads him

to say, "therefore, dear compatriots, anyone that comes to France with the intention of provoking violence and hatred against others shall be expelled" (*ibid.*: 7).

It is in this context, in which he describes being French as "adhering to a form of civilization, to its values and customs" (*ibid.*: 5), that Sarkozy makes his declaration concerning the use of the burka and its incompatibility with France:

> France is a land of liberty and equality. France is a country of emancipation where each can aspire to better himself in accordance with his talents, merits and hard work. France is a country where woman is free. France is a country where the Church is separate from the State, where the beliefs of each one are respected. But France is a country where there is no place for the burka, where there is no place for the subjection of women, for whatever reason, or under whatever condition or circumstance. (*ibid.*: 5)

The analysis of Sarkozy's speech suggests that the question of women's rights has been appropriated to support a way of thinking that might be described as "neocolonial" or – to use the terminology of Aníbal Quijano – under the cover of an epistemology marked by "coloniality," i.e. by the "imposition of a racial/ethnic classification of the world's population as the cornerstone of this pattern of power," which "operates on all material and subjective levels and dimensions of daily social existence and on the societal scale" (2000: 342). The subject of women's rights, here a pretext to prohibit the use of the burka, is used as a weapon of cultural attack, whose objective seems to be to affirm the supposed civilizational superiority of the West (in this case, more specifically, France). We should note that the question of religion is also used as a criterion for distinguishing between "those that are inside" and "those that are from outside"; there is no reference to a religious pluralism that includes Islam, but rather to a pluralist secularism that has to respect the religious values of Christianity (those that "have come from the depths of time"). Hence, secularism and Christianity, two sides of the same coin with regard to French identity, are invoked in order to render the women that use the burka invisible, in other words, to assert that there is no (public, visible) place for them in France.

Let us move on to the second example, invoked by Razack (2004) in her analysis of how some Western feminist movements and personalities have perceived "the situation of Islamic women," revealing, as we have seen, the existence of a triangle that perpetuates the idea of the Islamic woman in peril at the hands of dangerous Islamic men and the solidarity of "civilized" Europe. According to Razack, this is the assumption that underlies the debate between feminist groups and currents, particularly in Norwegian legislation concerning

forced marriages.[10] I shall not linger on that legislation any further than to examine Razack's critique of Western feminists, whom she considers to "have begun to share conceptual and political terrain with the far right" (*ibid.*: 130). From her point of view, on the one hand they have allowed themselves to be beguiled by the "culturalist" discourse concerning violence against Islamic women, as if this were something particular to a given culture; and on the other hand, they support stricter immigration controls as a way of supposedly protecting Muslim women and girls from forced marriages, since, in accordance with the interpretation given by reports carried out in Norway, quoted by the author, these occur as a consequence of the fact that immigrants "marry within their own cultures" (*ibid.*: 135). Razack considers this type of approach to be racist as it "is simply assumed that marriages contracted with partners of the same ethnic background who live outside Norway *necessarily* involve coercion" (*ibid.*: 136), and no attention is given, for example, to the percentage of native Norwegians that also marry amongst themselves, both inside and outside the country.

The question raised by Razack (who is herself of Muslim origin, and a feminist) is whether it is possible to reconcile the struggle for women's rights with a view that does not fall into what feminist and postcolonial studies call "the colonial universalism of Western rationality," as if there was a single model of human development and progress, also from the point of view of human rights, and, more concretely, women's rights.

This involves, once more, the whole debate concerning the "Westernization" (or otherwise) of the discourse (and practices) of human rights and women's rights, and that which some authors have designated as the "imperial" nature of some forms of feminism that conceive the Western model as the only possible reference for the emancipation of women, thereby 'ghettoizing' feminists of the Third World (Mohanty, 1991; Spivak, 1994).

But also inscribed in this, though perhaps in a more subtle way, is the reference to religion as a mechanism for reinforcing the culturalist interpretation. Thus, according to Hege Storhaug, in his book *Human Visas: A Report from the Front Lines of Europe's Integration Crisis*, based on a report submitted by the Human Rights Department of the Norwegian Parliament and cited by Razack, the problem of forced marriages lies in the persistence in non-Western societies of the idea that "the individual's worth is entirely dependent on religion, clan, caste, and class" (*apud* Razack, 2004: 135). The culturalist

[10] Razack (2007) also analyses the existence of this "triangle" in the debate that occurred in Ontario, Canada, known as the "Sharia law debate."

interpretation, in which religion constitutes an important part, ignores women in their concreteness – for one, because it refers to a stereotype, which does recognise each concrete case as unique; and secondly, because the cultural attack on "a community already fearing for its cultural survival", in the words of An-Na'im (2000: 2), concerning the analysis of this situation in Great Britain, leads to the tendency to "reinforce the very practices that those on the outside are seeking to change." This reinforcement is, once more, "bad news" for women.

Therefore, this raises the fundamental question of knowing whether a simultaneously postcolonial and post-secularist feminist discourse is possible – that is, one that defends the rights of women without falling into forms of racist feminism. What, then, would be the place of religion in such discourse?

3. Religion and women: public space and private space

Considerations of women's human rights in the context of religion and secularization cannot afford to underestimate the complexity of the subject, for religion plays a diversity of roles in different societies, and indeed, has played different roles within the same society at different times. Such a consideration also involves trying to get beyond the colonial discourse on religion and secularization, as well as attempting to articulate both with the rights of women, particularly those from "the other side of the line." However, whether this line be geostrategic or mental, from this perspective, religion may also perform a number of different functions, and questions concerning secularization tend to be raised in ways that challenge Eurocentric mental schemata. In fact, as was said at the beginning, the question of the rights of women offers a privileged vantage point for studying the limits and potential of discourses about secularization and human rights. Feminist pronouncements about women's rights from "the other side of the line" (in which women are the protagonists rather than the object(s) of the discourse) may offer a privileged site for examining one of the foundation stones of the real and/or imaginary construct that is Western secularism: the dichotomy between the public and private, particularly as regards the relegation of religion and its impacts to the private sphere (i.e. its depoliticization).

Both secular feminists in Islamic countries and Islamic feminists[11] recognise that religion may be used to legitimise the subjection of women. As an example of the former, we might recall, for example, the work of Mernissi (1987, 2001), one of the pioneers in the analysis of the bias in the interpretation of the Koran, who denounced the political use of the sacred texts and of the *Hadit* for the purpose of female subjection. The latter may be illustrated with the work of Barlas, who holds that "the Koran is not a patriarchal text" and that it "opens up the space for Muslims to develop a theory and practice of sexual equality" (Barlas, 2006: 2).

However, secularist forms of feminism in Islamic countries have been criticised from two very different directions: nationalists and Islamic feminists. In different ways, both of these consider that secularist feminisms represent a concession to the West (see, for example, Razack, 2007 and Asad, 2003). Squeezed between the nationalist aspirations for liberation from colonial empires, which they shared and embraced, and the accusation of "importing" Western concepts, secularist feminists in countries such as Egypt won a place for women in the public worlds of work, education and politics (mostly as voters); however, they seem to have been unable to persuade governments (even those governments that have emerged out of independence movements and are socialist in orientation) to acknowledge equal rights for men and women in the domain of family law. It appears that the private rights of women have been the price to pay for social peace with more conservative sectors, for whom change in this area is something "unnatural" (Badran, 2009: 31).

On the other hand, secularist feminists are also accused of complicity with orientalist representations (Barlas, 2006), both for confirming stereotypes that dichotomize Islam and feminism, and for sometimes falling into the same generalizations that result from a "global feminism." For example, the use of the expression "the status of women in Islam" has been criticised, given the immense diversity within Islamic countries (Chowdhury, Farsakh and Srikanth, 2008: 446).

The emergence of Islamic female emancipation movements in the 1990s seems, then, to constitute largely a reaction to the incapacity shown by secularist Islamic movements in resolving what appears to be the fundamental problem for women: family law. Islamic feminism challenges the dichotomy between the public and private and the effectiveness of

[11] "Secular feminism" refers to a secular social movement, and "Islamic feminism" to a movement of religious inspiration (Badran, 2009).

the struggle for women's rights and/or state policies of regulation of those rights for their actual emancipation. Therefore, it is in private life that the "political destiny" of women's rights is played out on a daily basis. Badran (2009) considers it impossible to alter this state of affairs without returning to an emancipatory interpretation of the texts of the Koran, in which patriarchal discourse and law are allegedly based. From her point of view, this means that the kind of feminism that is effective for Islamic women is, increasingly, Islamic feminism, i.e. that which seeks in the Koran a lever for the liberation of women, as it is the Koran that is invoked to justify their subjection. In this process, the dichotomy between public and private is once more questioned, as it also was in Western feminist movements. Religion is a tool of patriarchal politics which oppresses women in the private space. But it is in that private space that an emancipatory interpretation of religion may undermine the public-patriarchal political order. Women's private roles, particularly as educators of their children, have a public impact; and while they may of course reproduce a prescriptive social order, they may also "stretch the limits", to use the words of Mir-Hosseini (1996), becoming sites of an appeal to gender justice. It is on this side that many Islamic feminists have invested, for it is the "last redoubt" of their subjection. A revolution on the private side will have public impact, and therefore its appeal is political.

4. Open issues

As we have seen, the intention to protect the rights of women by manipulating the question of the "veil" or "burka" in the Western world may effectively reinforce women's confinement to the private space, with the corollary that it also renders their religion invisible. We have also seen how this may be one of the collateral and contradictory effects of a Western feminism with universalist pretensions, which made the struggle against women's confinement to the private sphere one of its main causes (in its second wave), and discovered its political import in the process. The ongoing debate seems to indicate that we are on dodgy terrain, with arguments that are often contradictory or dogmatic. Thus, there is a need for a more complex dialectical thought process in order to avoid falling into new reductionisms with destructive consequences, above all for women. This means that new questions need to be raised and some assumptions need to be questioned.

If the presumption of the universal and abstract nature of human rights, even for women, is unaccompanied by a complex political framework, it may run the risk of ahistoricism, resulting from an abstract universalism that is blind to the historical circumstances that influence the way in which these rights are applied differently in different times and places – or indeed at the same time. The first question that we might raise is whether the "universality of human rights" of women might not constitute a "false universality"; in other words, if the "very postulation of the universal" may not constitute an "operation of censorship" which, in enunciating itself as such, codifies the exclusions through which it is produced, as Judith Butler has suggested (2002: 48-49).

However, the postmodern and postcolonial problematization of the universal character of human rights in the name of respect for cultural and religious diversity and the need to avoid false generalizations may run the risk of obtaining the opposite of what is desired; according to Moller Okin (1997), it may slide towards a toxic multiculturalism that "harms," because it is based on the assumption (although not explicit) that cultural traditions are static and self-legitimising, even at the cost of women's rights.

It might be useful to seek a "narrow way" to a discourse on the human rights of women that neither eliminates those rights in the name of an acritical multiculturalism, nor erases women's reality and the violations of their rights in the name of an abstract notion of "human being." For this, it may be necessary to respond to the greater challenge of defending a postmodern approach that criticises both Western universal rationality and relativism – which threatens human rights, and here, concretely, the human rights of women.

It is obvious that the reference to the secular or the religious does not, by itself, indicate whether the social and intellectual movements for women's rights are truly emancipatory; all depends on their consequences for everyone involved. Moreover, it is difficult to address the place of secular or religious feminisms in the struggle for women's rights without considering another issue, namely the relevance of a public space of debate. We might ask if this might not be a space where hybridization and "contamination" (Appiah, 2006) are possible, given the unrealistic nature of the discourse of the immutability and impermeability of cultures. We live in "border zones" (Santos, 2007) in which an "ecology" of emancipatory experiences, both secular and religious, might be produced (Santos, 2006). For this to happen, we must accept that the public space is not a "pre-established, immutable

arena," and face the need to redefine "its frontiers, and its normative values" (Göle, 2007: 5). Might there be a future for the proposal put forward by this Turkish author, resident in France, according to which public space, particularly the European, may be imagined as "as an ethical and physical frame that enables us to develop a common civility drawn from liberal pluralism as well as a plurality of religious experiences" (*ibid.*)? Only the (near) future will tell.

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