

Women and Religion

THE ASSOCIATION OF WOMEN with/as religion was a hallmark of the secularism discourse. Writing in 1908, the French suffragist Hubertine Auclert refused the idea—regularly used to deny women the vote—that enfranchising women would mean more votes for the church party. The idea that religious sentiments disqualified women was “a bogeyman, as imaginary as the ones used to scare little children.”

Why are believing women treated more strictly than believing men? Men aren't asked for their philosophical ideas when they are given a ballot: priests, pastors, rabbis are treated no differently than free-thinkers.¹

The attribution of innate religious sensibility to women as a group, she argued, was a pretext. Religious men were allowed to vote because they were men; women were denied the vote because they were considered inferior beings. The hypocrisy of self-proclaimed secularists on this issue infuriated her: they were perpetuating religious teachings about women's inferiority even as they refused the suffrage to women because of their supposed religious attachments. Auclert insisted that

their hypocrisy extended to their toleration of forms of religion even more oppressive to women than Christianity. In Algeria, she wrote in her 1900 book, *Les femmes arabes en Algérie*, the recognition of Qur'anic law for matters concerning the family, marriage, and sexuality perpetuated the degradation of native womanhood. If French women were to be allowed to participate in the "civilizing mission" as citizens, they would bring enlightenment to French administrators and so to Algeria. As it was, the denial of the vote to "cultivated white women" while it was granted to "savage blacks" undermined the secular mission.² "To secularize France is not only to cease paying for the teaching of religious dogmas, it is to reject the clerical law that follows from these dogmas and that treats women as inferior."³

Auclert put her finger on the problem I address in this book: the fact that the discourse of secularism, despite its promise of universal equality, made women's difference the ground for their exclusion from citizenship and public life more generally. But I will suggest that it was not, as Auclert insisted, because religious ideas about women were left in place. Instead, the apostles of secularism, in France and elsewhere, offered what they took to be entirely new explanations for women's difference from men, rooting them in human nature and biology rather than divine law. Gender difference was inscribed in a schematic description of the world as divided into separate spheres, public and private, male and female. In fact, in this context the association of women with religion was not a relic of past practice but an invention of the discourse of secularism itself.

The notion of sharply differentiated spheres represented the public/private opposition as both spatial (the home and the church as opposed to the polis and the market) and psychological (an interior realm of affect and spiritual belief as opposed to the exterior realm of reason and purposive action). Public

and private were, like a heterosexual couple, portrayed as complementary opposites. The world of markets and politics was represented as a man's world; the familial, religious, and affective domain was a woman's. Woman's role was to fill the void left by competitive individualism, to offer the moral glue that could cement individuals together in a national enterprise. Sexuality figured on both sides of the equation: women's morality must tame men's aggression; men's reason must bring women's passion under control. Sometimes—in what Elizabeth Hurd characterizes as Judeo-Christian secularism⁴—this meant that women's propensity to religiosity was seen in a positive light (the United States, England); in other instances, the attraction of women for religion was construed by secularists as dangerous (France, where laicism was the ideology, being the prime example). But either way, the sexual division of labor was taken to be the crux of the religious/secular divide. The counterpart to the reasoning male citizen was a woman whose piety was at once a brake on and a manifestation of her inclination to excessive sexuality. In this scheme of things, religion was privatized and feminized at the same time.

This was, to be sure, an idealized representation that universalized bourgeois norms and practices. As such, it excluded the lives and activities of multitudes of women, many of whom worked for wages, did not marry, and—if they did—exercised important influence inside and outside their families; it also excluded the lives and activities of those men who, for various reasons (race, dependency, lack of property), were deemed not to fit the category of the rational, abstract individual. Social historians have richly documented the distance between idealized norms and lived experience. But my point is that idealized norms still matter, not only in the expectations set for individual subjects, but because they set the terms for law, politics, and social policy.

Hurd has described two ways in which the regulation of the relationship between religion and politics has been conceived. The first, which she calls laicism, takes a strong stand about the absolute need to exclude religion from politics. The second, which she labels Judeo-Christian secularism, is more accommodating. It holds that the Judeo-Christian tradition provides the basis for the values of secular democracy.⁵ The differences stem from the fact that in the nations of the Christian West, the versions of secularism differed depending upon the particular form taken by organized religion in relation to state power. Catholicism presented the greatest challenge to emerging nation-states; it was represented as an international force that undermined popular allegiance to the nation. Catholicism's hierarchical, patriarchal, and dogmatic ideology was denounced by secularists as antithetical to liberal values of individual freedom and belief. In states with Catholic majorities (France, for example) secularism was synonymous with republicanism and defined as anticlerical, an effort of male reason to salvage female credulity from the seductive wiles of Jesuit priests. At the same time, even in the stricter laicist regimes, there were nods to religion as a guarantor of morality and to women as the embodiment of the moral dimension of religious teaching and thus as the guardians of social cohesion and stability. Notes one historian, "most of the men who tried to separate the Churches from the State, wanted to make society more Christian even while they made the state more secular."⁶ Properly tamed, religion could become an aspect of the national patrimony and an instrument of colonial rule. In states that were predominantly Protestant, in contrast (the United States and parts of Germany, for example), secularism was presented as an aspect of the Christian tradition, defined as the liberal alternative (the right of individual conscience), not only to Catholicism but to the oppressive religions of "the

Orient." Even as Protestant "free thought" seemed to provide openings for feminist claims, its proponents, for the most part, insisted upon gender distinctions based on the idea of separate spheres. Men were in the world, women at home, and this according to the laws of nature. Churches were subordinated to state law in different ways in different countries: disestablishment in the United States; establishment of a single state religion in England; redefinition of what counted as a legitimate, tolerated religion in France. There were also variations in things like state maintenance of church buildings, state certification of clerical competence, surveillance of educational curricula, and observance of religious holy days as state holidays. In all cases, however, the association of women with religion was the same. And the purported decline of religious influence over the course of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth did nothing to alter the way in which the relationship between women (emotional, inclined to superstition) and men (reasonable, practical) was conceived. If anything, religion was depicted as an increasingly feminized affair, an experience apart from and outside of history, identified this way not only by those who had little use for it but also by those who sought its consolations.

French Anticlericalism

The French Revolution was a critical moment in the reordering of the relationship between church and state. The role of the Catholic Church in legitimating the monarchy meant that a stark opposition between the religious and the secular structured revolutionary discourse and institutions. When it was permitted, religious practice was regulated by the state, which paid wages to priests who swore allegiance to the new regime.

Although the association of women and unreason was evident much earlier, it was the Revolution of 1789 that established the link in republican political discourse between women and religion. Writes historian Paul Seeley, “the Revolution’s embodiment of the citizen as a rights-bearing and confessionally neutral male depended on a derogatory identification of religion with the female.”⁷ Like the female sex, religion was considered the source of the irrational and the violent; it was also the domain of the traditional and the hierarchical.

Historian Olwen Hufton noted that the actions of counter-revolutionary women in peasant villages, those who defended nonjuring priests and clandestinely practiced Catholic rituals for baptisms and burials, “provided the evidence for the politicians of the Third Republic [almost a century later] to withhold the vote from women.”⁸ During the dechristianizing campaign in year II of the revolution, the example of resistant village women became synonymous with women in general. So, while one comment from a *représentant en mission* was directed at a specific group of women (“And you, you bloody bitches, you are their [the priests’] whores, particularly those who attend their bloody masses and listen to their mumbo-jumbo”),⁹ another extended the condemnation to women as a whole (“Remember, it is fanaticism and superstition that we will be fighting against; lying priests whose dogma is falsehood . . . whose empire is founded upon the credulity of women. These are the enemy”).¹⁰ In this view of things, women were the knowing consorts or the inevitable dupes of treasonous clerics. In either case, it was the greater emotional vulnerability of their sex that accounted for their actions. The opinion of a Dr. Moreau, writing in 1803, was widely shared: “Women are more disposed than men to believe in spirits and ghosts; . . . they adopt all superstitious practice more readily; . . . their prejudices are more numerous.”¹¹

Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, there was in France an intensifying struggle between clericals and anticlericals in which the question of women figured prominently. Secular republicans adorned their city halls with busts of Marianne (an idealized classical feminine figure)¹² in the same years that church authorities revived the cult of the Virgin Mary; historians of the Middle Ages produced what Zrinka Stahuljak calls “pornographic archaeology”—accounts of the perverted sexual escapades of supposedly celibate priests and nuns—even as Catholic recruitment of women religious grew by leaps and bounds.¹³ The opposition between rational patriotic republican men and their unreliable, unreasonable women usually invoked statistical evidence on its behalf. And it is certainly true that the French Catholic Church drew increasing numbers of women to religious congregations and lay charitable activity over the course of the century. The ratio of men religious to women religious changed dramatically, from 3:2 in 1803 to 2:3 by 1878; and the number of nuns increased tenfold from about 13,000 in 1808 to 130,000 by the end of the century. Well after the removal of clerical teachers from public schools in the 1880s, the religious education of young children, particularly girls, remained in the hands of Catholic sisters. And the church recruited large numbers of married bourgeois women to its philanthropic associations, making (in the estimation of one historian) the “charitable lady . . . among the most ubiquitous public figures in the 19th century city [Paris] that most epitomized the modern age.”¹⁴

Voluntary charitable activity, although performed in public, was considered an extension of women’s familial and domestic role. The recruitment of women for this work was, to be sure, the result of a concerted effort on the part of church authorities to undermine the secularists, but it succeeded by appealing to exactly the image of women the secularists endorsed—one that

emphasized their subordination to male authority, their role as agents and reproducers of morality, their self-sacrificing, caring maternal instincts, and their intuitive spirituality. It was in those terms that nineteenth-century bourgeois Catholic men described their faith—as inspired by the women in their lives. Both devout Catholic men and skeptical republicans, Seeley writes, “affirmed their political and religious identities by tying Catholic faith and ritual to a private female sphere.”¹⁵ In an odd inversion of causality, the stereotyping provided by republicans may well have helped to produce the very alliance they most feared. At the very least, it did little to counter the terms of the church’s appeal to women. But that may have been beside the point. Importantly, the anticlerical portrayals of the religious inclinations of women worked to equate masculine identity with republicanism. On the one hand, anticlericals called upon republican husbands to turn their wives away from priestly influence; on the other hand, the depiction of women as inherently superstitious confirmed the natural division of labor between the sexes and justified the inequality that followed from it.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the writings of Jules Michelet, the great historian of the French nation and an ardent anticlerical. Michelet was born in 1798 in the waning days of the French Revolution; he died in 1874, in the early years of the Third Republic. In addition to vivid histories of the lives of kings and courtiers, revolutionaries and their enemies, he wrote inflammatory moralizing treatises on love, women, and the family, as well as denunciations of the perversities and evils of priests, confessors, bishops, and other representatives of the Catholic Church. In his quest for knowledge about women and their bodies, he attended lectures on gynecology and embryology at the Collège de France, and he obsessively monitored his young second wife’s monthly rhythms with the persistent

attention of an experimental scientist. His writings on these topics drew criticism as well as praise, and I don't offer them as evidence that all of France shared his opinions.¹⁶ What they do illustrate is the way in which a great historian associated women and religion in secularism's polemical campaign.

Michelet's writings on women, the family, and the church were directed at husbands. *Du Prêtre, de la femme, de la famille* (1845) opens with a shocking announcement. "It was generally thought that two people were sufficient for a marriage, but that has changed. The new system . . . has three constituent elements." These are "the man, strong and violent; the woman, a creature weak by nature; the priest, born a man and strong, but who wants to make himself weak so as to resemble a woman . . . and so interpose himself between them."¹⁷ As result of this invasion, "our wives and our daughters are raised and governed by our enemies" (14). These enemies are at once political—they represent the past and so are obstacles to progress—and personal: they are adept at the art of seduction, in effect cuckolding husbands whose distractions at work have made them strangers to their wives and children (309).

Most of the book is devoted to accounts of the machinations of priests, starting with Jesuit confessors in the sixteenth century, tracking the "ardent" letters exchanged between these men and the women they counseled, and ending in the nineteenth century, when the sons of peasants replaced the learned men of the religious orders of the past. If in the seventeenth century the likes of Fénelon and Bossuet charmed and seduced with their cultured intellects, the curés of the nineteenth century practiced the cunning and perseverance of the peasant cultures from which they came. In both cases, confessors manipulated the "soft and fluid natures of women," appealing to their passion, love of children, and need for affection. Intoning the

language of devotion, they, in effect, became lovers: “you can’t always tell who is speaking, the lover or the confessor” (69). In Michelet’s fantasized scene of seduction, the two achieve an intimacy denied the rightful husband. In a dark corner chapel of the church, “this emotionally agitated man, this trembling woman, sitting so close to one another, talk in hushed voices of the love of God” (214). She is “on her knees,” with head bowed before the priest as he listens to her confession. Learning her most intimate secrets, those unknown even to her husband, he achieves mastery, and thereby “recovers his manhood . . . and while she is weak and disarmed, he lays upon her the heavy hand of a man” (228). The relationship deepens and, inevitably, “for the soul to be truly yours, one thing is lacking . . . the body” (271). But the “voice of concupiscence” (270) is seemingly deflected by the priest onto love for God. “How fight against a man who disposes of paradise, and beyond that, hell, to make himself loved?” (279). How, in other words, claim power from this man who will go to any lengths to dispossess the republican husband of his wife? And, by extension, how rescue the secular state from the authority of the church?

In Michelet’s stirring account, the man of God has insinuated himself into the republican husband’s private domain of sex and family. Even if the conquest is only spiritual (and this scene conjures much more), the husband is compromised. The priest now has knowledge of the intimate details of the marriage, and “of your most secret weaknesses,” which he most certainly shares with his colleagues. As he passes you in the street, humbly nodding at you, Michelet tells his reader, he turns away and silently laughs—such is the imagined humiliation visited on the husband betrayed (230). Himself less than a man, the priest nonetheless succeeds in emasculating the legitimate head of the household.

The priest who achieves his manhood in the company of other men's wives is a problematic figure. The celibate life is artificial ("absurd, impossible," against nature [27]) and the demeanor of these men (in skirts) is feminine. "The tactics of the confessor weren't all that different from those of a mistress" (34): they practiced tender flatteries and the arts of innocence (47); like women, Jesuits loved children (37). Fénelon, Michelet tells his readers, was "as delicate as a woman," tender and penetrating at the same time (142). Having studied women closely, these men become like them, crossing gender boundaries in unacceptable, even dangerous ways. The danger has many aspects, including the priest's "hatred" for women's natural roles as wives and mothers. He wants them only as lovers, lovers of God; for Michelet, this means the embrace not of life (with all of its reproductive possibilities) but of death (277, 241, 334). As the husband's rightful place is the defender of life, so the priest represents its mortal antithesis.

The full implications of this conquest of women for the church are nowhere more evident than in convents—the negative counterparts to the family home. There "the heart of a woman, of a mother, the invincible maternal instinct, which is the foundation of a woman, betrays itself" (253). The betrayal comes not only from the celibate life, but from its violations. Lurid stories of sex between priests and nuns detail aborted pregnancies and murdered babies, buried in clandestine graveyards. Ruled by the figure of a monstrous lesbian—a tyrannical woman, a devil incarnate, who imagines she can govern like a Bonaparte (260)—the nuns suffer enormous deprivation. Only the intervention of a male confessor alleviates their pain—restoring, in Michelet's depiction of it, something akin to an appropriate gendered division of labor. "Far from being opposed to the confessor in this place, my wishes

are with him . . . in this hell, where law never penetrates, he is the only person who can offer a word of humanity" (260). Here the fraternity of men, representatives of the law, overcomes the nightmare of a domestic scene ruled entirely by women. The analogy is evident: only state rule can hold back the excesses of an unfettered religion. It is not the abolition of religion but its regulation (its "penetration" by state law) that is required.

What can be done to reclaim women for their husbands? How can the secular men to whom Michelet appeals turn their wives away from the lure of the church? The reasons for their inaction are clear: "victims of the division of labor, often condemned to a narrow specialization," modern men have become strangers to their wives and children, leaving the affective terrain to the Jesuits (301). But it is imperative that they now take heed: "Secularists, as we all are—magistrates, politicians, writers, solitary thinkers—today we must do what we haven't yet done: take in hand the cause of women" (xxiv). The "cause of women" is not their emancipation in political terms; rather, it has to do with acquiring intimate knowledge of the kind science offers. This knowledge reveals that woman is weak: she "is a sick person . . . a person wounded each month, and who suffers almost continually from the wound and its scar."¹⁸ Effectively and repeatedly castrated, she is the victim of a cyclical biology that men are spared.

Men's time, for Michelet, is the linear time of history; women's, the time of eternal repetition. "History, which we so stupidly decline in the feminine, is a rude and savage male, a sunburnt, dusty traveler, Nature is a woman."¹⁹ To rescue women from the lure of the church was not to alter their nature but to bring their difference into line with the needs of the republican state. Michelet appealed to husbands to change things by regaining control of the private side of their lives, studying

their wives to better manage them. This control would be aided by laws against the clergy (which he consistently advocated) but also by implementing laws already in place—civil laws (based in France and elsewhere in Europe on the Code Napoléon), which made the family, and the father’s supremacy within it, the cornerstone of secularizing nation-states. In this way the superiority of state regulation was established as natural and, reciprocally, the subordination of women to men was naturalized.

Michelet’s call to action required concrete changes, but it also firmly secured the representation of women’s leanings to religion as a persistent danger to the republic. This representation was evident well into the twentieth century, in socialist and syndicalist as well as parliamentary rhetoric. Republican legislatures repeatedly rejected bills for women’s suffrage on the grounds that the female vote would inevitably enhance the power of the church. In 1922, the radical and anticlerical senator, Alexandre Bérard, argued that enfranchising women would be “sealing the tombstone of the Republic.”²⁰ But at the same time, educational authorities debated the wisdom of removing religion entirely from girls’ training. Françoise Mayeur reports that the 1880 law named for its sponsor, Camille Sée—a law aimed at replacing convent educations with public schools—called for including in the new curriculum the advice to teach girls their “duties toward God,” presumably to provide them with the moral instruction they would transmit as mothers. The provision remained in place until 1923, Mayeur tells us, and then was only briefly rescinded.²¹ We don’t know how closely the new generations of republican teachers adhered to this advice, but it is telling nonetheless. In the eyes of some legislators and academics, lessons about God were apparently acceptable when transmitted by lay teachers, unacceptable

when they came from the clergy.²² Indeed, belief in the complementarity of the sexes was included in the curriculum with or without reference to God; women must be prepared to offer the moral and spiritual guidance that was the vocation of their sex. All of this suggests that the attribution of (dangerous or benign) religiosity to women was firmly in place in the discourses of republican France. It would take many generations of feminist objection such as Auclert's to unsettle, if not overturn, what had become an article of secularism's faith.

*Protestant Secularism in the
United States and Germany*

Writing in 1888, Philip Schaff, a professor of church history, explained that the American Constitution was a preeminently Christian document:

The First Amendment could not have originated in any pagan or Mohammedan country, but presupposes Christian civilization and culture. . . . Christianity alone has taught men to respect the sacredness of the human personality as made in the image of God and redeemed by Christ and to protect its rights and privileges, including the freedom of worship, against the encroachments of the temporal power and the absolutism of the state.²³

Schaff's thinking was not exceptional. The work of historians John Lardas Modern, Susan Juster, Seth Moglen, and Brian Connolly show the extent to which discourses of secularism infused American Protestant thought from the 1760s onward. "America's God," Modern writes, "was not simply a theological product, but also a political effect of secularism."²⁴ (Here he echoes Max Weber's earlier assertion: "The separation of

the ‘private sphere’ from the ‘official sphere’ is carried through in the church in the same way as in political, or other, officialdom.”²⁵) While Juster focuses on New England Baptists around the time of the revolution, Connolly on antebellum discourses of incest, and Modern on a variety of groups (Unitarians, liberals, evangelicals) in the 1850s, all maintain that despite the rhetoric of separation and the legal fact of disestablishment, there was no sharp break between “the religiosity of Protestantism and the secularity of the democratic nation-state.”²⁶ In fact, the climate of secularity, with its attention to the political and technical agency of humans, as well as to the power of human reason to reveal “fixed laws,” could work, according to Modern, to distinguish “true religion” from false. Connolly notes that in the arena of law, biblical prohibitions of incest were gradually replaced by prohibitions “grounded in natural law.” Judges often saw no contradiction in replacing God’s sovereignty with natural law discerned by reason, even as they insisted on Christian moral principles for sexual conduct and marriage. Writes Connolly, “The secular did not so much replace the sacred as it emerged alongside it.”²⁷

The important point for my argument is that these discourses of secularization brought with them new attention to gender difference and, as Philip Schaff’s comment (cited above) suggests, it was a difference entwined with a racialized view of religion. In Juster’s account, the first impact of politics was to raise the issue of the masculinity of the clergy. When, in earlier years, New England Baptists were a marginal dissenting sect, she says, women participated in church governance and theological debates, and were generally considered the equals of men. In the political crises leading up to the revolution, however, “the feminine nature of the church became a cause for concern among the evangelical leadership. . . . A politically vigorous and socially respectable religious society needed a

more masculine image, and hence we see the emergence of patriarchal language and structure in Baptist churches after 1780.²⁸ As New England Baptists made a bid for the mainstream, siding with the patriots against the British, they took up the political language (of autonomy, independence, and virility) that would become the revolution's legacy. In what Juster refers to as "an almost archetypical reenactment of the Weberian evolution of a marginal religious society with charismatic origins to a rationalist, bureaucratic institution," the governance of churches moved from collective participation of women and men to "standing committees composed exclusively of men."²⁹ Once acceptable, interventions by women in doctrinal discussions became a sign of their "disorderliness," and trials of women so accused became more frequent by the turn of the century. Women's presumed propensity to disorder disqualified them from church governance even as it secured a vision of men as rational leaders. By 1810, a prominent denominational publication could state as entirely noncontroversial that Baptist churches "take for granted, that the duties and privileges of females in a Gospel Church differ from those of males."³⁰ "The politicization of religious dissenters in the revolutionary era," Juster concludes, "came about through a fundamental renegotiation of gender relations within the evangelical community. The political capacity of the evangelical clergy, in other words, did not (could not) fully emerge until they had essentially defeminized the evangelical polity and reclaimed for themselves a more masculine identity."³¹ Significantly, as the masculine/feminine binary came to structure mainstream politics and the churches supporting it, prophetic visions of gender equality emerged from outsider religious sects, often led by women—and this is true not only in America but in Europe as well; such figures as Johanna Southcott, Mother Ann Lee, and Jemima Wilkenson were proponents of

gender equality who did not take their lessons from secularist teachings.³²

Moglen's work on Moravians in eighteenth-century Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, echoes Juster's findings about Baptists. In the early part of the century, in this charismatic, marginal religious movement, "women exercised an exceptional degree of leadership, both social and spiritual."³³ In 1760, as the leadership sought to accommodate criticism from outside the community, and to become more acceptable to political authorities, a new set of practices was introduced: "women were reinserted into the structure of the patriarchal family—and they lost most of the forms of power, leadership, material autonomy . . . that they had enjoyed in the first two decades of the city's history."³⁴ For Moravians, in other words, the process of secularization meant "radically reducing women's leadership and imposing sharp new forms of gender asymmetry and inequality."³⁵

Modern writes about the 1850s, by which time disestablishment had weakened clerical institutions, making religion "the exercise of one's freedom in private" and secularism—with its connection to "machines and mechanized circulation"—an integral aspect of religious belief.³⁶ (Here, already, is an exception to the linear narrative of modernity that saw secularism as a replacement for religion.) Ann Douglas notes increasing competition among churches, anxieties about clerical impermanence in a new market-oriented star system, and the rise of sentimentalism as symptoms of "the feminization of American culture" in the nineteenth century. In her account, the lady and the clergyman form an alliance against what outsiders note was diminished public authority of the ministry.³⁷ Modern is less attentive to gender issues, but he does note the existence of a "trope of 'female influence,' with multiple valences, all stemming from the purported "natural qualities of women."

These qualities were thought to make women more prone to seduction by evil forces but also more open to the workings of the Holy Spirit. Their influence could be either benevolent or deceptively dangerous.³⁸ It could be the basis for their subordination or for claims to women's rights.

Whether rhetorically or in practice, whether understood positively or negatively, women had become synonymous with religion by the mid-nineteenth century. Douglas offers many examples: the clergyman who writes to women that "religion is far more necessary to you than [to] self-sufficient men. In you it would be not only criminal, but impolitic to neglect it."³⁹ Yet it is precisely because men were not self-sufficient that they needed women's spiritual influence. The assertion of male superiority (in men's texts) made it possible to acknowledge the need for affective sustenance from women without admitting that men lacked it; women were more likely to point explicitly to their compensatory role. So it was that Eliza Farnham argued that women must reform men who were too committed to "position, fortune and connections"—the trappings of the "outer life."⁴⁰ And Sarah Josepha Hale wrote in 1830 of the wife's spiritual role as a corrective to the materialist values of her competitive-minded husband.⁴¹

Douglas notes that upper-class women and the clergy joined forces in the course of the nineteenth century to assert their emotional indispensability—through prayer and sentimental literature they performed a "redemptive mission" for society.⁴² So pervasive was the association of women and religion, so overwhelming the presence of women in religious institutions, that the end of the century saw a move to promote a more "muscular Christianity" that would bring men back to the fold. The movement was more symptomatic than successful. It neither challenged gender stereotypes (granting, as it

did, the muscularity of masculinity in opposition to the soft sensibility of femininity), nor dislodged women as the overwhelming presence in America's churches.

If, as Modern maintains, the secular imaginary "inflected how a range of Protestant subcultures felt themselves to be truly religious," it also brought with it a vision of separate spheres—private and public—that insisted on sharp distinctions between the capacities and sensibilities of women and men.⁴³ This was as true in the case of those eighteenth-century Baptists, who briefly claimed masculine prerogatives for the church and punished "disorderly women," as it was for the "feminized" nineteenth-century Protestant clergymen, who counted on the influence of women to sustain them and to nurture the religiosity that was considered (by clerics and politicians alike) the source of national morality in husbands and children.

The gendered division of labor was presented by these clergymen as a defining mark of modernity. In the teachings of liberal political theory, too, women's supposed innate preference for sentiment led them to voluntarily take up their domestic roles and in this, according to Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, they were symbolically associated with freedom of individual choice. "Within sentimental liberalism, the home is not simply an escape from the pressures and exigencies of market competition; rather it is the highest political good for both men and women: home is the location where freedom is ultimately instantiated."⁴⁴ Freedom in the sense of affective choice and fulfillment, experienced outside the constraints of politics and the market.

Christianity was a guarantee of this freedom, as was evident in contrasts to "others"—to vagabonds, slaves, and the unbelieving poor within the country, and especially to places where foreign religions prevailed. Connolly describes the way in which the antithesis between American matrimonial laws and so-called Hindoo marriages became a site for the consol-

idation of a homogenizing vision of national identity in antebellum America. While American marriage was depicted as consensual and subject to the rule of law, "Hindoos" were presented as hopelessly entrapped in primitive religious dogma and tribal kinship arrangements. This was said to be evident in the exploitation of girls as child brides, in the "barbaric" practice of widow immolation, and in the murder of unmarriageable daughters, to name just a few of the outrages described by missionaries and other visitors to those exotic lands. Representations of "the Hindoo," Connolly says, "did the work of making the Indian subcontinent wholly inscribed in religion."⁴⁵ Often it was Muslims who represented the antithesis of (Protestant) American freedom. When Thomas Jefferson used the hypothetical case of followers of the Qur'an to demonstrate the universality of the First Amendment's toleration of minority religions, he was reviled as a follower of Muhammad himself, therefore unfit to be a president of the United States!⁴⁶

A similar movement, ascribing modernity to civilized Protestant practices in contrast to the perpetual barbarities of Islam, has been described for the German state of Baden in the mid-nineteenth century. Historian Dagmar Herzog cites any number of dissenting ministers (apostles of free thought) who made the same claim. "What a beautiful lot, what a glorious sphere of activity women now have within Christianity and in comparison with those in the Orient and outside Christianity," said one.⁴⁷ Another celebrated "how the Occidental man brought trophies of victory to pay homage to the woman of his heart, while the Oriental man maintained the woman and maiden under an offensive yoke of slavery and did not allow her to recognize her own dignity."⁴⁸ Polygamy was an especially odious form of enslavement according to these German ministers, as it was for the US government, which

granted freedom of religion to any number of Protestant sects but declared Mormons' practices unacceptable, despite the First Amendment (or, if Schaff's view was representative, because of it).

Another way the Protestant and the secular were equated was in contrast to Catholicism.⁴⁹ Here the antipathy was shared with French anticlericals, though from a different vantage. In the United States Catholicism was depicted as a false religion (as was Mormonism), its theological prescriptions denying the God-given powers of individual human reasoning to apprehend the true religion of Christ.⁵⁰ And there were warnings, just like Michelet's, from those Baden-dissenting ministers about the dangers of the confessional. Under Catholic dominion, women became "prostitutes for the servants of Rome," their husbands cuckolded by priests. The message was clear: "Those parents to whom the purity of their daughters is dear, are forced to forbid them to go to confession."⁵¹

Protestant secularism championed individual freedom even as it endorsed an asymmetrical division of labor between women and men. That apparent inequality was explained as the result of women's voluntary labor at home, their recognition that submission to a husband's authority was a consequence of the laws of nature and so in the best interests of domestic and social harmony. Alexis de Tocqueville, contrasting French aristocrats with American democrats, offered the observation that democracy in America was marked by women's "voluntary sacrifice of their will . . . freely accepting the yoke rather than seeking to avoid it."⁵² Writes Modern about the thinking of nineteenth-century American evangelicals, "to become truly religious . . . was not to turn away from the world, but to cultivate a reasonable attitude within it and an attentive disposition toward it. To become truly religious, then, was to

coordinate one's attitudes and behaviors with principles essential to the maintenance of civil society."⁵³

Of course, and importantly, the association of Protestantism with ideals of individual freedom opened space for feminist claims for a more egalitarian vision of the relationship between women and men. Even within the terms of sentimental domestic ideology, the power of women's love could motivate certain forms of female public agency (authorship, as Dillon points out, but also antislavery, prohibition, and other morally driven movements), thus calling into question the reality of the idealized public/private distinction at the same time that it was invoked to justify unaccustomed political activity by women.⁵⁴ But those were minority efforts on the question of women's rights. The dominant vision of unequal gender complementarity remained in place, as did the idea that religious oppression was located elsewhere. To this day, anti-Muslim polemics underplay the Christian dimensions of secularism, which have nonetheless become part of the epistemic heritage not only of America but of "the West."

Colonial Exports; Postcolonial Imports

Historians of imperialism have documented the ways in which the "civilizing mission" involved the imposition of Victorian standards of domesticity, ideals of nuclear family households, and the separation of spheres on populations with very different forms of social organization. The role of Christian missionaries as agents of colonial domination is also well known. In the process of imperial expansion, European states negotiated protection for their religious emissaries with local rulers, developing theories of minority religious rights in the process. Saba Mahmood points to the development of a shared

“sentiment of Christian fraternity,” even as “the West came to understand itself as resolutely secular.”⁵⁵ But it was in the area of what came to be known as “family law” that the association of women and religion was most clearly articulated in the colonies, and with lasting postcolonial effects. The process was a complicated one and it antedated the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

The modernization of the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century was an effort by reformers to introduce capitalist development and bourgeois ideology, inspired by contacts with Western European countries and the study of Western law (the Napoleonic Code particularly). It involved, among other things, the transformation of shari‘a law—“a repertoire of precedents, cases, and general principles, along with a body of well-developed hermeneutical and paralogical techniques” into a standardized, modern code.⁵⁶ We might say, as Modern and Connolly do about American Protestantism, that in this way shari‘a was secularized. The new code established previously unknown distinctions between criminal, commercial, civil, and family law. Joseph Massad tells us that Egyptian jurists, looking to models in the West, standardized aspects of this family law.⁵⁷ In the process, notes Wael Hallaq, they eliminated the different schools of interpretation to which women had in the past applied for redress.⁵⁸ Muhammad Qadri Pasha was the first to designate family law as “personal status law” in 1893. Another Egyptian jurist, Abd al-Razzaq Ahmad al-Sanhuri expanded personal status law to include non-Muslims; his writings became the basis for civil codes in a number of Arab countries (including Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Libya). Sanhuri’s goal was to maintain shari‘a even as it was modernized. That was accomplished above all by introducing a sharp distinction between the sexes, identifying women with tradition, men with the forward movement of history.

Writes Massad: “What this project in fact intended was the new invention of Arab women (following European nationalist examples) as custodians of tradition and managers of the nation’s moral life and that of its future generations.”⁵⁹ This might involve equipping them with a modern education and with knowledge of home economics and hygiene, but it nonetheless “enforced asymmetry in duties and rights” for women and men.⁶⁰

The distinctions established in these codes were retained, reinvented, or borrowed by imperial powers in Arab lands after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, and elsewhere. Law, writes Hallaq (about British rule in India), “was simply more financially rewarding than brute power. . . . The plan . . . rested on the assumption that local customs and norms could be incorporated into a British institutional structure of justice that was regulated by ‘universal’ (read: British) ideals of law.”⁶¹ Since personal status law seemed irrelevant to imperial conquest—“the construction of states *qua* states in the lands of Islam was not their aim”—it was initially left aside in the restructuring that took place.⁶²

According to Janet Halley and Kerry Rittich and their collaborators, colonial expansion treated the spheres of the family and the market as separate juridical domains: family law and contract law.⁶³ Family law was theorized as an autonomous field by the nineteenth-century jurist, Friedrich Carl von Savigny, “and carried around the world as part of the influence of German legal thought.”⁶⁴ It was an aspect of the rationalizing of legal practice. Contract law pertained to public market transactions and was defined as universally applicable; family or personal status law dealt with what was taken to be local custom (most often religious practice), as it addressed the private sphere: sexual relations, marriage, divorce, and children, but not property ownership, which was deemed a matter of

contract law. Men were defined as the only legitimate property owners, even in situations (as in the India described by Indrani Chatterjee) where women had traditionally administered family wealth; regulation of all that involved women was left to family law (usually understood to be governed by religious belief and practice), now codified separately, distinct from all the other relationships with which it had once been entwined.⁶⁵ Mahmood writes that in the former Ottoman territories “colonial powers subjected pre-existing religious differences to a new grid of intelligibility. Under colonial rule, minority identity (bestowed by the state) became, paradoxically, sutured to a private attribute (religion) toward which the state claimed to be neutral.”⁶⁶ In this way family law referred to (and in fact created) a domain distinct from men’s public civic and market activities, “a privileged place in the regulation of the private sphere (to which the family, religion and sexuality [we]re relegated”).⁶⁷ Following the discourse of secularism, religion, along with women, became the quintessential “other” of the secular (markets, property, contracts, politics, civic and criminal law).

The work of many scholars shows how this gesture to what was taken to be tradition in fact involved a rewriting of history—a new logic superimposed on older practices. The designation of family law as a separate realm did not leave “tradition” intact; rather, it involved transformation through processes of codification and standardization. What had once been an integrated set of social behaviors (family and property, for example, were inseparable), regulated according to local interpretation of specific circumstances, were now separated and subjected to different but formally defined legal jurisdictions. For example, Judith Surkis shows how the desire to free Arab-held lands for settler acquisition led the French in Algeria to circumscribe Muslim law to family matters, matters that,

however, now excluded the previously intertwined realms of family, inheritance, and collectively owned property.⁶⁸ As Halley and Rittich put it: “The standard narrative—in which local powers entered into the colonial relationship holding their ancient, usually religious, Family Law as their most sacred ground—seems again and again to be a little skewed; so often, the coherence of tradition comes *later*.”⁶⁹ If the narrative of tradition was established after the fact, the effect of the colonial designation of family law as the autonomous purview of local religious authorities was nonetheless enormous. Family law came to be identified with “tradition” (as the embodiment of the authentic cultural heritage of the colonized), and so with anti-imperialist nationalist aspirations. Those aspirations became synonymous with “customary” (timeless) practices of religion, sexuality, the family, and women—practices that, in fact, were most often the result of colonial interventions.

“The ‘woman question’ . . . became the fault line along which men and women negotiated ethnic boundaries, cultural identity, and social transformations,” writes historian Beth Baron of debates between so-called secular modernizers and religious traditionalists in Egyptian nationalist movements.⁷⁰ Mahmood notes that in postcolonial Egypt, separate family laws imposed by the British have come to signify the political and cultural identities of different religious communities, as if they long antedated British intervention when, in fact, they are the product of it. This has meant that interreligious conflict (between minority Christian Copts and majority Muslims) “often erupts on the terrain of gender and sexuality.”⁷¹

Massad describes the complicated relationship between modernity and tradition—conceived in terms of time and space—in the articulation of Jordan’s postcolonial national identity this way:

[W]omen, as residents of the private domestic sphere, and Bedouins, residents of the nonurban desert, signify, through their spatial locations, a temporal location, that of tradition, whereas men, considered as residents of the public sphere, and urbanites, through their spatial locations, signify the temporal location of modernity.⁷²

In this division of labor, women (and Bedouins) are represented as embodying timeless tradition, while men represent the forward motion of history. More broadly, Halley and Rit-tich point to the ways in which family law

played a role . . . in the ideological war waged between colonizer and colonized: stigmatizing the antagonist's *family* was one way to consolidate national legitimacy. . . . Thus Western legal minds have sometimes attached their universalizing ambitions to women's equality, affective marriage, and the nuclear family, and decried the subordination of women and the instrumentalisms of the patriarchal family that they saw in the populations they subjugated. . . . Nationalist, feminist, and cosmopolitan legal elites in the colonized world could find themselves in a bind: they now had Family Law in the form of tradition, and tradition as the marker of residual local legal authority; putting their nationalism, feminism, and/or cosmopolitanism into legal form—modernizing—would lay them open to charges that they were Westernizing.⁷³

Reading Frantz Fanon on the question of veiling provides insight into the difficulties of articulating a position of modern anticolonial revolution—how to redeem the “Orient” without reproducing its Western signification? The French colonists had long figured their domination as an unveiling of Algeria's women, as “penetration” beyond the boundary established by

the veil. During the Algerian war (1954–62), French women settlers staged unveiling ceremonies for Muslim women to identify their liberation with the French cause. At the same time the Algerian resistance used the veil to disguise its fighters, and it sent women dressed in Western clothing to bomb French sites. “In the beginning, the veil was a mechanism of resistance,” Fanon wrote of the Algerian National Liberation Front, “but its value for the group remained strong. The veil was worn because tradition demanded a rigid separation of the sexes but also because the occupier was *bent on unveiling Algeria*.”⁷⁴ Here the very identity of a liberated Algerian nation depends—literally and figuratively—on the treatment of its women as defined by religious precepts that had come to serve as a mark of its cultural particularity.

How remain true to some aspect of local religious heritage and at the same time create a modern nation-state? Retaining family law at once provided a solution—a way of dealing separately with majority and minority religions—but also presented a challenge to the sovereign authority of the newly created states. Even when religious law was adopted or deferred to, however, “tradition” was not untouched; rather, it was an adaptation of an already codified shari‘a to new circumstances. In country after country, modifications of family law established the supremacy of the husband in a nuclear family household and the equation of nationalism with masculinity. Massad indicates that in the Jordanian family law enacted after independence in 1947, revised in 1951, and again in 1976, “there is a discrepancy between the rights and duties of men and women not only toward the state but also toward each other as subjects of the state.”⁷⁵ Hallaq cites a study of 1957 Moroccan family law that “convincingly argues that the so-called reforms in that country have indeed produced a consolidated patriarchal hold within a reinterpreted field of the

Shari‘a, while simultaneously undermining the intricate guarantees and multi-layered safety nets that the Shari‘a had provided in practice before the dawn of modernity and its nation-state.⁷⁶ Here it is the demands of modern state-making, and with it secularism’s introduction of new classifications of separate spheres—not the hold of traditional Islam—that explains new forms of women’s subordination, forms that (as we shall see in chapters 2 and 3) are not unlike those associated with the emergence of European nations. Both Hallaq and Massad note that gender inequality is not unique to postcolonial nations but a feature of modern nations, new and old, West and East.⁷⁷

Attempting to disentangle the attribution of the subordination of women to the traditions of Islam and the association of feminism with Westernization, Kumari Jayawardena insists that it was the introduction of capitalism and certain bourgeois ideologies—the result of imperialist domination—and not opposition to Islam (or other Eastern religions) that led to the rise of indigenous feminisms in the Third World. Her 1986 study, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, calls attention to the ways in which “the creation and assertion of a cultural identity was itself dialectically related to the growth of imperialism.”⁷⁸ In case after case (Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Afghanistan, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, the Philippines, China, Vietnam, Korea, Japan) she links feminist movements to national liberation struggles that were motivated by anticapitalism as well as by anti-imperialism (the two were linked), but that were also limited (as were their Western counterparts) by liberal notions of rights. “The women’s movements in many countries of Asia achieved political and legal equality with men at the juridical level, but failed to make an impression on women’s subordination within the patriarchal structures of family and society.”⁷⁹ This subordination may find some of its

justifications in religious teaching, she argues, but it is an effect of modernity, not of the stranglehold of tradition. Indeed, the position of women in family law is itself the product of secularizing influences.

And yet, all of this scholarship notwithstanding, women's subordination in postcolonial nations is regularly attributed to unchanging, "traditional" religious practice—these days Islam is the primary culprit. In this connection, Massad cites a 2003 report on "Arab Human Development" from the United Nations Development Program: "Most Arab personal status laws, with regard to Muslims and non-Muslims alike, are witness to legally sanctioned gender bias. This stems from the fact that personal status statutes are primarily derived from theological interpretations and judgments. The latter originate in the remote past when gender discrimination permeated society and they have acquired a sanctity and absoluteness in that confused area where the immutable tenets of religious creed interact with social history."⁸⁰ Or, as Joyce Carol Oates put it more simply, "the predominant religion of Egypt" was responsible for violence against women during the summer protests of 2013.⁸¹ These refusals of history have to do, I think, with the persistence of the discourse of secularism—or, more specifically, with its contemporary reactivation. In that discourse, there is a powerful association between religion and women: they are religion's embodiments, its protagonists and its victims. For nineteenth-century Western secularists, it was "our" women who were thus represented; today it is those "others" in the (Middle) East. The "us" versus "them" contrast provides evidence for the triumph of Western freedom over the ever-lagging "Orient." But in the twenty-first century, as in the nineteenth, the identification of women with/as religion is not the product of timeless religious teaching; it is, rather, an effect of the way the discourse of secularism has organized our vision of the world.