BOOK REVIEWS

The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism, by Mayanthi L. Fernando. Duke University Press, 2014. 328pp., \$99.95. ISBN-13: 9780822357346.

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Approaching the Study of Secular Power and Islam

Introduction

It is customary to refer to the diversity of Islam in the West. As to the scholarship on this topic, it has been arguably less diverse for a while. As more recent reviews of the field reveal, however, this is clearly not the case today (Cesari 2015; GhaneaBassiri 2012; Nielsen 2017). In fact, a remarkable increase in research output can now be observed. This increase is not only paralleled by an extension of the empirical fields of research but has also led to greater differentiation between the questions and the approaches, and perhaps to a certain fragmentation. The publication of *The Republic Unsettled* by US anthropologist Mayanthi Fernando is an excellent example of this differentiation process. Subtitled *Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism*, the study addresses a host of issues familiar from the literature on Islam in Europe and, more generally, in the West. In terms of its approach, however, it diverges from many of these studies and raises new and important questions. Three features situate the book within the broader scope of study.

At the most general level, Fernando differs quite simply by paying such attention to analyzing secularism in her study about Muslim French. This

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Talal Asad

may sound like an improbable statement to make. After all, references to secularism abound in the field of Islam in the West and this holds particularly true for France. For Fernando, however, “the object of study” is – or rather, ultimately became—“secular-republican power” (26). Importantly, this focus followed directly from her objective of studying Muslims in France. She reports that she had initially “imagined a more classic ethnography of Muslim French life, in which my object of observation and object of study were one. It was precisely close attention to the experiences of my Muslim French interlocutors that led me to widen my analytical lens, turning it toward the source of their often tenuous predicament – namely, the secular republic’s discourses, institutions, and political and legal practices.” (25) This decision, she continues, led her to write a book which is first and foremost about the French republic, a fact she explains as follows: “To attempt some kind of symmetry would miss the point, for my analytical focus proceeds from the situation on the ground: the secular republic interpellates subjects in asymmetrical ways, displacing the burden of its immanent contradictions onto Muslims and turning Muslims into a national problem, not vice versa.” (26) This particular relationship between the “object of observation”—Muslims—and the main “object of study”—“secular-republican power”—constitutes one distinctive feature of this study if we situate it in the research field of Islam in West (25f.).

Needless to say, the statements by Fernando quoted above imply a strong claim. Namely that the secular context of France needs to be approached and studied anew. What, one wonders, is innovative in Fernando’s approach compared to previously existing scholarship on *laïcité*? Fernando herself positions the study apart from French scholarship by emphasizing that her story of secularism is one of the “imbrication of religion and politics rather than their separation” (20). Contemporary French scholarship assumes that secularism is, fundamentally, about the separation of state and religion and that it is separation—even if this principle has been realized differently over time, amended, or simply ignored—which enables freedom. In contrast, Fernando’s basic view of secularism, based notably on Talal Asad’s work, is that it is “a sustained project of governmentality” and aims at “cultivating properly religious (and secular) subjects” (20). Now, it would not be correct to portray French scholarship in general as defending the opposite view that separation, as the condition of religious liberty, is constitutive of secularism. Raphaël Liogier, for example, has approached *laïcité* as normative and interventionist (2006). Nevertheless, Fernando’s decision to conceptualize secularism as imply-

ing systematic state intervention in religion certainly sets her apart from the majority of studies in the field and opens up a new perspective which merits our attention. Third and finally, Fernando's study opens up a new perspective on the broad debate about whether and how secular politics can be rendered into models or types, whether national or others. This debate is old but ongoing, and continues to generate important insights (see, for example, Baubérot 2015; Bowen *et al.* 2015; Koussens 2015; Portier 2016). As we shall see in more detail below, Fernando's approach – emphasizing notably the instability, fragmentary character, tensions and contradictions of French secularism—seems to have discarded some of the basic assumptions underlying this debate and this is another point to be investigated.¹

The Republic Unsettled

Before delving into the discussion, a short summary of the book is in order. Mayanthi Fernando's study is primarily upon fieldwork conducted in the early 2000s in Paris, Rennes and Nantes, Fernando's interlocutors are mostly “children of immigrants from the Maghreb”, and to a lesser extent, “young people of West African descent, white and Antillean converts to Islam and older first-generation immigrants”; many are highly educated. They live a “publicly engaged religiosity”; they are “women and men committed to practicing Islam as French citizens and to practicing French citizenship as pious Muslims” (12f.) Fernando uses the neologism “Muslim French” to designate them. As she points out, the term is “linguistically awkward, just as the identity it describes does not fit easily into the conventional imagination” (15). In six chapters, three field notes and an epilogue, Fernando develops a complex analysis of the reasons, which make this identity a difficult fit.

The first chapter outlines the context of the “French Islamic Revival” and the “generational shift” from ethno-cultural to “religious forms of identification” which started in the wake of the activism by North African

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1. Another related feature could be added here, namely that Fernando, in opposition to Hurd (2008) and Jakobsen & Pellegrini (2008), also declares herself to be “unconvinced of the analytical purchase of pluralizing secularism.” The “shared normalizing force” of secular power, in Europe and the United States, would get lost by such a move (23). However, given that Fernando constantly speaks of secular-republican power, her analysis in fact participates, even if only to a limited degree, in the particularization of secular power.

immigrants and children often known as Beur movement (37). Against this background, Fernando investigates how Muslim French claim citizenship and how these claims correlate with diverse reimaginations of France. Fernando argues that these claims need to face up to the “unrelenting power of a dominant discourse” which rejects the notion that French and Muslim can be one (62). The following chapter investigates politics of recognition, which, according to the author, constitute one of two dominant modes of politics alongside the “assimilationist republican framework of integration” (90). Fernando problematizes these policies of recognition—or diversity politics (109)—in relation to the “right to indifference” which Muslim French demand in various forms. While the latter aspire to become unremarkable and ordinary, the politics of recognition construct Muslims as essentially different from the normative majority, and produce “inequality and subordination” (95). In chapter three, the focus turns towards state initiatives aimed at transforming Islamic tradition and Muslim sensibilities, examining both the *Conseil français du culte musulman* created in 2003, and the *Institut des cultures d’Islam*, created in 2006, in Paris. These initiatives aim to “separate Islam from politics as well as to bifurcate Islam into the discrete domains of religion and culture” (109). Fernando emphasizes that the double imperative of secularism—separation and regulation of religion—produces multiple slippages between race, religion, and culture (143).

Debates about the Islamic headscarf and its prohibition are at the center of chapter four.

The author argues that the women concerned “occupy a no-man’s-land of discursive and legal unintelligibility” (173). One reason for this is the conceptual opposition between freedom and authority, which leads Muslim women to construe the headscarf as choice and not an obligation. This, in turn, enables “lawmakers to argue that restricting headscarves in schools does not constitute a violation of religious liberty” (173).² In chapter five, a number of secular Muslim women, both exceptional and exemplary, occupy center stage. Fernando uses their cases—most prominent among them Fadela Amara—to reflect on “the discursive necessity of commensurable difference to republicanism” (191), which follows from the latter’s claim to universality. Emancipated secular Muslim women serve as the very proof of this universality, argues Fernando. In the last chapter, Fernando examines how tolerance is reasoned in debates on homosexuality, homophobia and Islam in France and in the broader Euro-

2. See below on this point.

pean context. Challenging claims that Muslims benefit from tolerance while being themselves reluctant when it is their turn to manifest solidarity with marginalized groups, the author reframes this debate, concentrating on the fundamental question, inherent in liberal discourse, of where to draw the boundaries around tolerance (233).

Approaching the study of secular power

The Republic Unsettled is an extremely stimulating and thought-provoking study of Islam and secularism in the French republic. Many chapters outline new perspectives on various aspects of this much-debated issue. Given the limited scope of this review, the focus here is confined to its “inquiry into dominant modes of secular-republican power” (21). Drawing notably on Talal Asad’s work, the author proposes a conceptualization of secular power in France which merits attention not only as a contribution to studies of France, but also as a case to think through methodological issues of the study of secularism more generally.

To put it simply, I would say that these issues have to do with (i) how we gauge the efficacy of secular power and its impact upon Islam; (ii) how we conceive the unity (or lack thereof) of secular power and the latter’s susceptibility to be conceptualized as an order with regular features; (iii) how we conceive concepts—e.g. “religion”—and their potential role as central means of secular power and, at the same time, its signposts which allow us to map this space of power.

Indeed, Asad’s reconceptualization of secularism as a form of “political rule, rather than a space-clearing arrangement that institutes legal and political neutrality” (20), raises a number of questions which arguably have only started to be answered in empirical studies. In the following discussion, I will briefly discuss three such questions. The first question refers to the aims of secular rule and its effects, here on Islam and Muslims. Once we abandon the idea that secularism is simply about religious freedom and neutrality and rather define it as a prescriptive project based on normative ideas about religiosity, the question arises how this prescriptive project is realized—or fails to be so—in the context of liberal democracies? How is this prescriptive project translated into specific policies in a given context? What are the effects of these policies and what kind of criteria do we use to gauge the efficacy of secular power? And, ultimately, is this kind of secular power in France changing Islam and Muslims and where can this be shown to happen? Considering the by now quite long history of currently applied secular policies, this last question needs to be asked more often. Note that the context which is directly cov-

ered in Fernando's study extends, typically, over almost four decades to the early 1980s (37). Policies described here have been debated, sometimes continuously, for more than two decades now. Considering these facts and the claim that secular power seeks to reshape Muslim subjects, the question about its effects merits close investigation.

The second question to be examined here relates to what can be called the unity and internal coherence of secular rule. There can be no doubt that secularism, as approached by Asad, is complex and analytically challenging. Asad had famously argued that "because the secular is so much part of our modern life, it is not easy to grasp it directly. I think it is best pursued through its shadows, as it were."³ Considering this statement, we seem to have moved a long way from the erstwhile models—often national ones—of relations between state and religion. In light of this, I want to ask how the above notion of secular power's complexity is applied and further elaborated in the empirical context of France. I want to discuss how Fernando conceives of French secularism in terms of its unity and how this unity—or, rather, the lack thereof—relates to the stability and regularity of secular power.

Finally, the third and last point concerns the supposedly constitutive relationship between religious freedom and secularism. Critical scrutiny of this relationship is crucial to recent studies of secularism, and this applies very much to Fernando's work. Here, however, I am not so much interested in the gist of this criticism, but rather in the approach which is chosen. This approach basically assumes that secular politics maps onto a neatly structured configuration of concepts. Here, this refers notably to religion, culture, race, and belief. I will thus use her critique of the relation between secularism and religious freedom as a case to address the methodological question—whose relevance far exceeds this case—how conceptual approaches can contribute to the study of secular power.

(i) Fernando dissociates secularism from neutrality and complicates its connection to the notion of separation between state and religion. While secular government aims to separate religion and politics "and to make Islam private" (21), these attempts invariably lead to state intervention in religious matters. Put differently, Fernando makes the important argument that secularism cannot be reduced to the privatization of religion. Rather, it implies two competing "imperatives", i.e. privatization and regulation (21, 143). However, these two imperatives are not of equal weight. As privatization cannot be accomplished without intervention, the "sec-

3. Asad (2003:16). This statement is quoted in shortened form by Fernando (5).

ond imperative of regulation constantly undoes the first imperative of separation” (143). Although one might think that this is a “contradiction” (143) or “undermine(s) the project of secularization” (23), the author argues that state intervention is indispensable to the operation of secularism. As to the constant deferral of separation, it simply reproduces the need for the reform of Muslims and is not an indicator of the failure of secularization. Fernando states categorically: “The confusions and con-fusions that secularization produces continue to figure the Muslim as a subject in need of secularization. That project is never finished, which is precisely what constitutes its regulatory force.” (23, cf. 143)

In this perspective, the “regulatory force” of secularism—said to “profoundly disrupt (...) Muslim life” (6)⁴—is thus neatly disjointed from realizing its assumed aim, namely the separation and privatization of religion. In this perspective, secular politics always seem to win, whatever the outcome of concrete measures may be. However, a very different perspective on the efficacy of secular power is adopted in the study of the hijab controversies (1989-2004). Reflecting on the change of attitude between 1989 and 2004 and the increasing support for banning headscarves, the author offers a conventional explanation. She refers to a decline of the “normative disciplinary authority of the school” (179) and to problems such as “underfunding, overcrowding, and decentralization” (180). The headscarf signals, from this perspective, “the waning of that (normative disciplinary—F.P.) authority and the school’s inefficacy in disciplining citizen subjects” (179), triggering a response in the form of prohibition.

How does this argument about the state’s failing disciplinary power relate to the author’s idea that the “regulatory force” of secularity is not undermined by its inability to accomplish the transformation of Islam? Put differently, how does this notion of “regulatory force” allow us to think about widespread concerns about the decline of the republic? Responding to these anxieties, the author writes further on that the prohibition of headscarves in schools served to restore the republic’s authority and reassert its sovereignty (204f). But what about the “real effects” of this law on Muslim subjects (204)? Does the difference, one wonders, between an act of exclusion from school on the one hand and the successful transformation of Muslim subjects in school on the other matter to secular power, and how might this be integrated into research?

(ii) Fernando not only considers that secular-republican rules contain

4. Elsewhere, however, she says of the “secular French republic” that it “has significant effects on the subjects it regulates” (11f.).

“intractable tensions” (21), one example of which concerns the double imperative—i.e. to privatize religion and to intervene in the field of religion—described above. In close relation to this, she emphasizes repeatedly that secularism is “inchoate and fragmentary” (12) and “has never been a unified or stable formation” (10), referring to “the instability and disunity” of the secular republic (5) and the “tenuousness” of “secular-republican unity” (6). Fernando’s claim that secular power lacks unity and stability connects to different arguments. For one thing, it is based on the fact often mentioned that the arrangements of secular rule in France—both in metropolitan France and the overseas territories—are much more complex and heterogeneous than the reference to the “law of separation” of the Churches and the state (1905) might suggest.⁵ There are, for example, various kinds of state support for some religious institutions, as well as subsidies for a substantial system of private religious schools (10f.). This claim is also directed against those who portray Muslims as disrupting the otherwise coherent edifice of the secular republic (5). Fernando’s focus, by contrast, is on “tensions not so much generated as precipitated by the presence of Muslim French” (6). Finally, the thesis about France’s inchoate and unstable secular rule is part of a reflection on the relation between the disunity of power and its efficacy. Here, Fernando, “draw(ing) on theories of sexuality”, argues that “the fragmentary and unsettled nature of republican secularism likewise does not diminish its power but rather enhances it through a continual process of reiteration, rearticulation, and regeneration” (12).

These are important and highly interesting claims. In particular, Fernando’s shift of focus on how Muslims “unsettle taken-for-granted ideas, practices, and norms, exposing the instability and disunity, the contradictions and confusions, and the production and forceful performance – the seams –of the secular republic” (5). For this reviewer, the initial question raised by this set of claims is simply how important fragmentation, inchoateness or instability really are as attributes of secular power as it is conceptualized here? Considering the concrete cases studied by Fernando, one is struck by the fact that the analysis often emphasizes the regular and predictable manner in which secular power functions; in important

5. These arrangements are also, in a number of cases, not simply exclusive to France as is sometimes claimed (on this see Bowen 2007). On the possibilities and difficulties to generalize from a national case study to the European level see also the review of Reva Jaffe-Walter’s *Coercive Concern: Nationalism, Liberalism and the Schooling of Muslim Youth* by Sidsel Vive Jensen [CIS 11.1 (2015) 131–132].

aspects, it is described as a stable and encompassing structure. This suggests, I would argue, that the unity of secular power—from the author's perspective, its coherence—should be distinguished from whether it functions in a regular and comprehensive manner. While secularism may be plagued by tensions and contradictions, it is also described as a comprehensive structure which displays a high degree of regularity. Some quotations may serve to illustrate this claim.

Indeed, the analysis of secular-republican power refers in important ways to mechanisms of power which are described as regular and encompassing. One example is the author's reference to "the intractable bind of being Muslim French in a society that continually marks Muslims as not French and French as not Muslims" (67) or "the dilemma of how to be Muslim French in a world in which Muslim means not French and French means not Muslim" (37). The discursive opposition, mentioned above, which is established between freedom and religious authority, between emancipation and discipline, and individuality and the norm, is another example. As this system of oppositional concepts structures French debates, Muslim women are simply unable, so Fernando argues, to defend the headscarf as a freely chosen religious duty entitled to the legal protection offered to religions (see below). As to the identification of "religion", Fernando writes that "determining the signs of religion's presence is a slippery and always incomplete task" (22). In her analysis of policies, she also refers to the "blurring of boundaries" (135, 144), notably between religion, culture, or politics, the "slippages" (139, 140) between these categories, or the "confusions and conflations between race, culture, and religion" (138). Importantly, however, the essential meaning of these categories— i.e. religion, culture, politics or race – appears to be unambiguously clear in this study. Although these categories cannot always be easily applied to Islam and Muslims, this does not render their meaning obscure, nor is it apparent how this difficulty would change secular politics. Rather, these policies appear to be significantly determined by history, both in their aims and in their inherent problems⁶. Thus, the state's interest and intervention in Islamic institutions is presented as part of "this long secular project of transformation and, unsurprisingly, Christianity constitutes religion prime, against which Islam is compared and into which Islam is being transformed" (133). As to the outcome of this secular project, the author refers to the precedent of

6. Fernando distances herself from "discounting" "the constantly evolving nature of French politics, law, and public discourse", adding that she is "nonetheless interested in the structuring logics of French republicanism and French secularity." (7)

colonial Algeria and, more generally, to the “North Atlantic imagination of Islam as neither properly religious nor properly political” and claims that “(p)redictably, then, contemporary and historical attempts to secularize Islam and turn it into a proper religion (...) reproduce Islam as a failure” which is incapable of conforming to the conceptual boundaries described (140). The work of identifying “religious signs” is often difficult, but there are important exceptions to this difficulty. According to the author, it is “entirely unsurprising” that the Stasi Commission invited “only two women in headscarves to its hearings, only on the very last day, and only as an afterthought”; the meaning of this much debated religious sign was not ambiguous in a context characterized by “ontological fixing (...) and radical disindividuation of Muslims in France” (49). These examples, I think, suffice to show that regularity and comprehensiveness are important features of secularity, and furthermore that these aspects are enabled by the stability of the conceptual matrix of secularism and French imaginations of Islam. Based on this stability, secular power, its internal contradictions notwithstanding, is conceptualized here in a clear-cut manner.

(iii) The category religion – or, rather, the discursive cluster constituted by the notions religion, belief, conscience and practice—can be seen as one element enabling this regularity of secular power. This discursive cluster is subjected to genealogical critique, and importantly, the author rejects the crucial connection between secularism and the protection of religious freedom. While this criticism is, as I said, important in itself, analysis of the discursive cluster “religion” also raises a general question about what kind of analytical role such discursive structures can play in the study of secular politics? More particularly, I want to draw attention here to the issue of complexity when defining discursive structures such as the cluster “religion”: How much complexity is necessary to turn them into a tool which can be applied—usefully—to an empirical context as vast and diverse as France?⁷ This question is triggered by what strikes the reviewer as the insufficient complexity of the discursive cluster “religion,” but of course its importance transcends this particular case.

Fernando develops the argument about religious freedom as part of a new reading of the headscarf debates in 2003/04. A central argument here is that the prohibition enacted in 2004 could not be challenged “via a defense of religious liberty” (146). The reason for this goes back to a specific understanding of how “conscience” or “belief” relate to “prac-

7. Fernando writes that her study is not “a classic ethnography of France in all its diversity. It is instead, an inquiry into dominant modes of secular-republican power” (25).

tice,” which supposedly not only permeates public discourse in France, but also both French and European law. In this understanding, belief is considered to be “the authentic site of religion,” whereas practices are “a contingent expression of belief” (166). In this perspective, “banning a practice like veiling does not constitute a violation of religious liberty” as neither the practice nor its disappearance affects the individual’s conscience (165). According to Fernando, this thinking directly shapes the “dominant” logic in French debates, where proponents of the prohibition did not try to justify why “religious liberties must sometimes be curtailed in the name of public order”, but maintained that the ban on headscarves was *not* “an attack on religious liberty at all” (165).

What the “dominant” notion of religion is in modern France and what understanding of the relation between practice and belief it implies are questions that cannot be properly addressed here.⁸ However, it is worth emphasizing that the supposed dissociation between the hijab ban on the one hand and the problematic of restricting religious freedom (and justifying restrictions) on the other leaves the reader wondering what to make of the abundant references to religious freedom in debates, since 1989, about the headscarf (and in other debates about other Islamic “practices”)? Why so much fuss—then and now⁹—about the headscarf if its prohibition, in the dominant view, was not “an attack on religious liberty”?

Whatever one makes of the conceptual claim about “religion” (166), it is clear that this conceptual cluster “religion” functions in a more complex environment—and calls for a more complex analysis—and does not simply marginalize or eliminate references to diverse and changing notions of religious freedom. Moreover, given the numerous references to the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights and their interpretation of practice and belief, it would have been useful to mention, at least, that the practice of wearing a headscarf is not simply excluded from the scope of religious freedom as understood by the Court. This, unfortunately, is what the analysis leads the reader to believe (164–167). The court has ruled on a number of cases from France, and significantly the issue highlighted by the author about how to recognize the headscarf as a religious obligation which is freely chosen has not been relevant. Mostly, the Court *assumed* simply that a restriction on wearing the headscarf constituted an interference with the right to manifest

8. For a short overview of the current context see Rolland (2005).

9. For a study of more recent controversies around the headscarf at the workplace, see Hennette Vauchez and Valentin (2014).

one's religion, protected by article 9 of the European Convention. It *then* examined whether this interference met the provisions of 9 (2): "Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others." Importantly, as in many other cases, the Court did *not* pronounce in general terms on the "religious" status of the practice in question (see, e.g., *Şahin vs. Turkey*, which is quoted in the later cases brought to the Court by Muslim French women). As to the face veil, the Court declared in 2011, again in a case from France, that for certain Muslim women it constitutes without doubt a practice covered by article 9.

All the above does not, of course, simply negate the necessity to consider the concept "religion". It does show, however, that secular politics do not necessarily map directly onto a configuration of concepts as is supposed here. The more general question this raises is thus how we think about the semantics of concepts, their ambiguity or definiteness, and their potential role in the analysis of secular politics.

Conclusion

New approaches in the study of secularism—"the critical study of secularism", as Matthew Scherer calls it "tentatively"—have considerably broadened the perspective from which relations between Islam and secular power are examined. This development implies a risk that has been pointedly described by Scherer in the following manner:

It may be that "the secular" is approximately coextensive with "the modern" as the site and condition of almost everything in the world today, but something seems to be lost in extending the category in this way, in much the same way that something is lost through the inflation and over-extension of once precise categories of analysis—such as "capitalism" and "neo-liberalism" [...].

While these concerns are intelligible, the problematics raised by adopting this broad perspective on secularism are of a quite different nature in the context of the empirical research examined here. These problematics are not related to overextension and the fuzziness of analytical concepts of secularism. Generally speaking, what is thematized in the points made here is how this new approach to secular power can be operationalized in a given context and what kind of difference it ultimately makes for our understanding of secular politics. This is the issue when secularism is described and qualified as unified, stable or regular—or not; when the effects and efficacy of secular

power are measured; when identifying the conceptual grammar of public speech and analytically linking it to the functioning of secular power. These problematics are clearly of a localized nature, they require precise interventions and promise immediate returns for the study of secularism.

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