
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Secularism and the Muslim Women Question: A Critique of Secularism as a Frame of Reference for Gender Equality

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| ABSTRACT

The study of the theories of secularization has been marked by extensive debates about the shortfalls of religion and its inability to keep up with theories of gender equality. In these debates, considerably less attention has been given to the theoretical premises associating secularism with gender equality and the implications of their interrelation. The present paper seeks to undertake a re-examination of secularism as an emancipatory frame of reference for women, particularly but not exclusively Muslim ones, by exploring the concept within its complex and changing contexts and in light of recent feminist critiques of its narrative. It also aims to investigate the problematic positionality of Muslim women in the secular discourse as a way of shedding more light on the limitations and ideological contradictions of the premised interdependence between secularism and gender equality. The paper proposes that more effort needs to be made to recasting the secular narrative on gender equality and the place of Muslim women within it. Consequently, it seeks to bring more scholarly attention to the gender dimensions of secularism and its renewed significance as a political, social, and cultural force that impacts Muslim women's lives in the West and Muslim majority societies as well.

| KEYWORDS

Secularism, Islam, gender equality, Muslim women, the veil, secular patriarchy.

| ARTICLE DOI: [10.32996/jgcs.2022.2.1.6](https://doi.org/10.32996/jgcs.2022.2.1.6)

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing interest amongst cultural theorists and sociologists of religion in studying the relationship between secularism and gender equality. This interest marked a shift in the study of gender equality from focusing on the critique of religion to the critique of secularism which is often presented as the cornerstone of gender equality. The aim of these studies is to review and rethink established theories which present secularism as a consistent frame of reference for gender equality, in order to gain a better understanding of the nature of the relationship between the two. Past critiques of secularism, which were typically confined to the secular-religious dichotomy, failed to question secularism as an independent normative frame of references for women's rights issues. This tendency was justified by the strong interplay between patriarchy and religion, which encouraged the assumption that once the religious based gender perceptions are secularized, patriarchy will lose its basis, thus make more room for gender equality.

Re-reading the interrelation between secularism and gender equality aims to contribute to the discussion on the extent to which gender equality is a secular phenomenon, which is one of the main questions of this paper. It investigates the premises of the theory of secularism in relation to gender equality, exploring the major theses suggested by theorists and the arguments they made to support their claims. Understanding the nature of the relationship between the two and the reasons why gender inequality persists in new forms in secular societies helps explain the inconsistencies and limitations of the secular narrative, and opens up prospects for recasting this relationship in a more consistent form. The central idea is that gender equality is a complex phenomenon in which the cultural, the political, economic, and even the psychological come together to produce it, and despite the strong influence of religion, assuming that secularization alone can eliminate inequality is questionable.

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Reconsidering the interrelation between secularism and gender equality allows for investigating the validity of the secular theory and its capacity to work as a frame of reference for women from different cultural and ideological backgrounds. It also allows for the re-examination of the premises of secularism regarding gender equality by exploring its ability to resolve different gender equality issues. Moreover, it helps accommodate secularism in new cultural and political environments which are not familiar with it or view it as a threat to religious identity, by presenting secularism not as a project of westernizing culture and gender relations, but as a rationalizing project that aims at enhancing the different aspects of identity and society rather than just oppose them. Most importantly, it helps redefine secularism not as a concept that draws its meaning in opposition with religion, but as an independent epistemic concept and mode of governance that, as part of modernity, is inclusive of religion through the process of rationalization.

This paper highlights major theories framing the debate about secularism and gender equality. It begins with a broad analysis of the theory of secularism, its historical development, and the recent critiques of the secular narrative about religion and modernity. It explores the meaning of secularism, historically and within the Western context where it emerged. This quest aims at establishing a clear conceptual framework for this phenomenon which is constantly evolving and changing in terms of its ideological and epistemic aspects. This paper argues that understanding secularism in the modern context cannot be dissociated from the ideological conflict between secular/religious and east/west imagined binaries. This explains why the public perception of secularism is ideologically oriented and constantly deployed to serve political agenda. However, the concept of secularism is still being negotiated in the intellectual, political, and public circles, and it is fair to say that it is not exclusively confined to anti-religious orientations since its meaning is increasingly being challenged.

The paper also focuses on the challenge which Muslim women present to the secular narrative on gender equality and the reasons why they could not fit into it. Muslim women complicate the secular reading of gender equality as they show that it is still operating within the secular/religious dichotomy which refuses to recognize any form of female expression or agency outside the secular frame of reference. The presence of Muslim women in Western societies also challenges the universal claim of the secular narrative, showing that it is unable to accept and assimilate forms of female expressions that did not emerge from the Western secular context. The analysis of the secular discourse on Muslim women highlights the role which ideological biases play in building the secular narrative on gender equality. Finally, this paper attempts to fill the gaps in the secular reading of gender equality in order to improve its narrative by making it more consistent with societies that are still new to the process of secularization.

2. Understanding Secularism

Secularism is a concept that emerged and developed to describe changes in religion's relationship with culture, society, and politics in different historical contexts. The complexity of the concept results from the fact that its meaning developed through history in an interactional relation between its theoretical perceptions and its different practical implementations, which have constantly impacted the epistemic and ideological connotations of what people mean when they use the term secularism. This section aims at exploring the theoretical aspect of the concept by tracing the historical development and trying to understand its complexity. It provides a general review of modern discussions about secularism in order to break with traditional dominant views on the latter as an antithesis of religion and to challenge the reductionist conceptions of the concept. It also aims at making conceptual distinctions between different categories of secularism, such as the difference between secularism as a theoretical frame and secularization as a historical "modernization" process, or between different definitions of secularism arising from a long history of interaction between religion, society, and politics in different secular societies. It also explores the concept not only within its political dimension but in its epistemic and philosophical capacity as well.

At its inception, and before becoming an established concept in Western thought, the term secular was used to distinguish between what is sacred or belongs to the religious sphere and what is worldly which was not under the influence of the church or religion in general (Zuckerman and Shook 2017, 23). The concept emerged in the historical context in which every aspect of life was under the influence of religion. The aim at first was to allow for a non-religious space and to liberate different aspects of life from religious authority, but over time, the worldly spheres became gradually autonomous and diverse to the extent that religion itself became defined as one of the spheres. In other words, the religious sphere was institutionally and culturally overwhelmed by the secular sphere and consequently became subject to its control. In fact, the differentiation between the sacred and the worldly had existed even in non-Western cultures, and even before the term secular was coined, reflecting a new consciousness in human history that began to distinguish between myth and science, God and the monarch, religion and politics, etc. (Olson 2009, 125).

The ambiguity of the meaning of secularism derives from the fact that the boundaries between the worldly and the religious spheres have always been shifting, leaving the meaning of what is "non-religious" or located outside the religious sphere undetermined. However, the roots of secularism can be traced back to the historical point when people conceived religion as a category or a domain, i.e., not the sole source of meaning, legitimacy, and power, and one of many possible forms of institution. This process had emerged in Western history when the church started losing monopoly over various cultural and social aspects,

leaving a growing margin for a non-religious space. In this sense, secularism is part of a privatization process that started giving autonomy to different aspects of life and defining each domain with no reference to religion.

The secular is derived from the Latin word "*Saeculum*," which means worldly or temporal. It was first used by the church to refer to the clergy who do not live the monastic life vis-à-vis regular clergy (Hurd 2008, 13). The French synonym of the word secularism is referred to as "*Laïcité*" or *laity* in English, which comes from the Greek word "*Laos*," meaning the common people, and was also used by the church to refer to the people in the parish or the subjects of the church in general (Robert and Pena-Ruiz 2010, 123). In this context, secularism was not the antonym of religion but only a religious word used for functional purposes, not ideological ones. The term later evolved to make a distinction between the properties of the church and the properties of the state, noblemen, or even the common people, especially after the Protestant reformations when the Latin term "*Saecularisatio*," which means secularization, was used to describe the confiscation of church property and land by the state, giving the term negative connotation (Salvatore 2016, 215).

The notion of secularism flourished during the Enlightenment period as a result of the conflict with the church and became associated with the forces which defied the former's spiritual and worldly authority. However, it was not until the 19th century that the tendency to limit the influence of religion on a specific or all aspect of life was labeled under the rubric of secularism which was first coined as a philosophical concept by George Holyoake in 1851 (Vold 1975, 53). The concept was subsequently used not only as an ideological label for social and political movements which hold a positive stance toward the separation of the religious and the worldly but also to describe the recession of religion in different aspects of life, such as the decrease in the social importance of religion, the transference of educational institutions from church to state authority, the separation of religious and political institutions, the privatization of religion by reducing the religious expressions to the private sphere, neutralizing the state in religious matters, etc.

In modern times, the concept of secularism expanded drastically, stimulating a significant body of studies and debates which either try to underpin the ultimate meaning of the concept, re-examine its fundamental premises, or observe its implications. In fact, after the "revival of religion" as a social and political force, secularism induced a revisionist movement questioning its assumptions, mainly the notion that religion should be excluded from the public sphere due to its negative impact on social and political order, and most importantly the notion that religion, which is conventionally identified with the supernatural, the irrational and the regressive, is in decline under the pressure of the scientific, the rational, and the modern. The debates invoked by this intellectual wave began rethinking the place of religion in the modern world and the explanatory capacity of the theory of secularization since it was clear that religion is not in decline.

The new generation of social theorists, including Casanova, argue that secularization does not necessarily entail the decline of religion or the regression of its social and political influence but the reduction of its ability to encroach on other spheres, allowing each one to have what Weber calls "internal and lawful autonomy" (Weber 1946, 328). Secularization, in this sense, describes the process of social differentiation, which acknowledges that different fields such as science, politics, and economy have their own set of internal laws which explain and govern them with no relation to religion. For instance, religious institutions nowadays, even in most religious societies, recognize the authority of specialists in natural sciences and that those sciences lie outside their area of expertise and even try to cope with their discoveries. It is true that recognizing the autonomy of human sciences and adapting to their development was more difficult due to the overlap between those fields and the subjects which religion addresses. Nevertheless, the conflict between the two, which is understood within the secularization paradigm, does not mean that the process of differentiation between those spheres is not taking place, as those fields gradually evolve outside religion (Casanova 1994, 20). This forces the latter to keep up with their progress and constantly claim relevance by adopting their discourse, which implies a form of recognition of the autonomy of the laws within which social and human sciences operate.

The definition of secularization as the functional differentiation between different spheres liberates the theory from the ideological load of the Enlightenment critique of religion which prophesied the decline or even the disappearance of the latter. Accordingly, limiting the meaning of secularism to the differentiation thesis allows for the inclusion of a large section of religious people under the rubric of secularism. In other words, it means that people can still maintain their religious beliefs, which serve social and spiritual purposes, and at the same time, identify as secular, as long as they recognize the boundaries between the spheres and embrace "God-given" reason as a frame of reference in worldly matters rather than faith or scriptures. Moreover, dissociating secularism from its ideological anti religiousness inclinations removes the confusion which blurs the difference between secularism and atheism and transforms secularism into an inclusive theory that is neutral in matters of religiousness and non-religiousness or belief and disbelief. In this sense, secularism does not necessarily mean the decline of religion or religiosity but the recession of the religious authority from other spheres regardless of whether the rates of church attendance decrease or increase. In fact, the persistence of religion to stay present in the public sphere and the resistance to its privatization is in itself a result of secularization or rather a reaction to it as people have become more aware of the functional boundaries between religion and other spheres,

thus keep insisting on the social, ethical, and spiritual importance of religion. Not only that, but they also seek to adapt to secularization by replacing the privatization of religion with its individualization, which means embracing religious tolerance and recognizing that religion has become a matter of individual choice regardless of whether it stays private or public.

Secularism can be looked at from different angles, one of which regards it primarily as a matter of sociocultural consciousness measured by the weight of religion in each society, and the other reduces the notion to institutional and legal procedures, which also vary from one country to another. In this respect, it is worth noting that secularizing consciousness does not necessarily mean that religion should disappear from society but means that people do not confine their identities to their religious group or define their social and political interests on the basis of their religious affiliation. Additionally, the different political approaches to separating religion and politics have led to creating a variety of secular models which either go soft on religion by allowing it to play a role in public life or adopt a hard position prohibiting any form of religious presence in the public sphere, as in the French case. The study of secularism, therefore, should take into consideration both the socio-cultural and the political context within which religion operates in each society. This consideration should also account for the specificities of each society in order to form a comprehensive understanding of secularism, not only in its theoretical aspect but in its different implementations, which make each case different from the other.

The study of secularism in its historical context and within its Christo-European environment may lead to generalizations and assumptions that are not always applicable to other religious traditions of non-European societies. In fact, the important question of whether there is one form of secularism has been widely debated by many scholars who presented different views on the matter. Charles Taylor, for instance, argues in his referential work 'A Secular Age' that although Muslim societies do not operate within institutional and functional differentiation as the political and religious spheres are still interdependent, there are other elements of secularism that are not alien to Islamic societies. For example, he states that in these societies, religion and belief have become only one option amongst others and that the rise of politicized religion, which emerged as a reaction to the modernization process, is in itself a proof of the wide secularization of these societies (Taylor 2007, 3). Casanova supports this notion by stating that, unlike in Western Europe, secularization in the Muslim world may be accompanied by religious revival, not religious decline. He also argues that the position on Islam today as incompatible with secularism resembles the 19th and 20th centuries' position on Catholicism in the Western Protestant discourse, which was portrayed at the time as immune to secularization (Casanova 2006).

3. Is Gender Equality Secular?

A significant amount of literature has discussed the interrelation between secularism and gender equality, most of which have expressed the need to re-examine established ways of thinking about gender equality as an inevitable outcome of secularization. According to these writings, there is an urgent need to start reading the theory of secularism from a gender perspective to see whether it has in any way impacted women's lives differently compared to men. Although it is widely believed that secularism has improved women's lives and played a significant role in advancing their rights, studies argue that secularism and gender equality are not necessarily interdependent. Evidence from history suggests that gender equality has not always been of interest in the secular narrative and that secularism has not always been at odds with patriarchy. That is not to say that gender equality cannot be achieved under secularism but to explain that gender inequality as a product of the patriarchal system should be examined within the secular frame as well. The literature on recasting the interrelation between secularism and gender equality provides a deeper understanding of how the notion of gender equality is constructed within the secular narrative by examining its manifestations, contradictions, and limitations. It also allows for shifting the focus of academic research from religion as the sole source of gender inequality to secularism, showing that patriarchy can transcend the religious frame of reference to the secular one and adapt itself to it.

One of the earliest theorists who problematized the relation between secularism and gender theory was Linda Woodhead, a British academic specializing in the sociology of religion, who argues that theories of secularization have not been investigated from a gendered perspective. Her proposal aims at challenging the normative masculine narratives of secularization by bringing attention to women's distinctive experiences in secular societies (Woodhead 2008). She adds that it is worth studying forms of secularism that are illiberal and in direct opposition to freedom of choice, especially of religious minority groups, which are often perceived to be more patriarchal. These types of secularism justify the exclusion of these groups on the grounds that their views and practices are religion-based, thus not compatible with the culture of the majority and its secular beliefs. However, although her work provides significant insights on the theory of gendering secularism, she focuses on the Marxist approach, which is used to investigate the impact of modernization on women in industrial societies, thus limiting the impact of secularism to the economic perspective. In the cultural part of her critique, she disregards the cultural impact of secularism and reduces the latter to an illiberal political ideology, ignoring how secularism, as a historical process and a rational paradigm, operates at the cultural level and impacts the patriarchal system which shapes people's perceptions about gender differences in societies around the world.

Another researcher who has contributed to gendering the secular debate is Niamh Reilly, a professor of Political Science and Sociology at the National University of Ireland. Reilly has expressed in a number of her articles the need to reconsider secularism as a normative feminist principle. She argues that the "orthodox" secularization thesis is no longer valid and that the narrative of a single model of modernity where religion gradually diminishes from the public sphere, leaving room for more progressive secular gender equality values, is no longer defensible (Reilly 2011). In her work, she focuses on what she calls the contradictions of secularism which, she argues, have failed to regulate religion effectively. However, although Reilly's approach adopts a more open way of dealing with religion and its presence in public, she does not focus enough on the impact of this new reading of secularism on the question of gender equality. She also does not provide an alternative reading of secularism apart from arguing that it failed to abolish religion and to deliver its promises on women's rights issues.

The American historian Joan Wallach Scott, who is known for her work on gender history, has written many works in which she questions all the assumptions that link secularism with sexual liberation and gender equality. She provides an account of the relationship between secularism and gender equality in French history, arguing that improving the status of women was absent from the concerns of the early secular movements. She adds that although religion is often perceived as the primary obstacle in the way of gender equality and that women's rights have flourished in secular societies, there is no actual historical connection between secularization and the promotion of equal rights between men and women. She puts forth that the binary distinction between the secular and the religious, which is often used to attribute all that is negative to religion regarding gender inequality issues, is based on an ideological bias that fails to recognize that gender inequality can exist in secular societies as well. She uses the headscarf affair in France as the framework for analyzing how the French model of secularism has been heavily challenged when it failed to reconcile its own perception of women's emancipation with Muslim women's cultural claims (Scott 2007). Although Scott's contribution to the debate on secularism and gender equality is unique, it focuses primarily on the French model, which is often perceived as radical and thus marginal in the broader spectrum of secular societies.

The British sociologist Kristin Aune has also expressed similar views to Scott's, stating that secularism is not always good for women, especially religious ones, for it excludes them from the public sphere. The main concern Aune expresses with regard to the secular readings of the gender equality question is that it puts the latter against religious freedoms which establishes a problem for women who, in many societies, have always been the most religious of the two genders. She explains that the current controversies over women's bodies, religious dress codes, women's agency in religion, etc., exemplify the challenge of establishing a clear relationship between secularism and women's rights in Western societies. Aune suggests reconsidering the old ways of thinking about the role of religion and women, which always assume that the latter are victims rather than autonomous agents who choose to express this agency within the religious frame (Aune 2017). Aune puts forth that we should not single out religion when looking at gender inequality issues. Instead, we should use an intersectional analysis that considers what constitutes gender inequality in each socio-cultural context. In her opinion, using this approach will show that gender inequality is a product of secular societies as well.

As Aune's critique focuses on Muslim women's rights in secular Western societies, Saba Mahmood tries to shift the discussion to the interrelation between secularism and sexual difference in the Middle East. Mahmood, a Pakistani-American anthropologist, argues that despite the fact that gender inequality has been legitimized on religious grounds, it cannot be understood in religious terms alone. Any attempt to understand the nature of gender inequality must take into consideration that patriarchy can very well exist in modern secular societies as well as religious ones. In her critique, she addresses the premise of secularizing sexuality and its impact on gender equality. She states that recognizing the difference in perceptions about the sexual difference between Western and Muslim societies is essential in understanding the crisis of secularism. Sexuality is differently constructed, managed, and represented in Muslim societies as in Western ones. The secular view that regards sexuality as a frame for expressing women's liberation from religious taboos and norms is not always accurate and does not take the cultural context of each society into consideration. In fact, this view produces a simplistic understanding that positions sexuality between an oppressive religion and liberating secularism and encourages a reading of secularism that imposes one model of women's liberation, resulting in reproducing the same patriarchal practices, only with a secular facade; this time (Mahmood 2013). Mahmood's account, however, reduces the debate over secularism and gender equality to the sexual difference and problematizes the theory of secularism without providing alternative readings of the proper way to manage sexuality and gender difference in post-secular societies.

Other studies have also suggested that secularization is not always synonymous with gender equality. Katja M. Guenther, a professor of gender studies at the University of California, argues that patriarchy is a powerful system that can survive without religion. She adds that sexism and misogyny are not religious constructs but a cultural system that goes beyond the limits of religion. She elaborates by stating that women in secular movements are also subject to the male-dominant culture and sometimes even sexual misconduct from men who seem to hold the secular conviction that sexism is rooted in religious belief and will disappear in the absence of religion (Guenther, 2019). A similar argument appears in the work of another American scholar and women's rights activist named Ashley F. Miller as she states:

"Religion's move in the direction of patriarchy does not mean that religion was the cause of patriarchy. While it is now a tool for the continuation of male domination, it is possible, even probable, that changes in religion from fertility goddesses and polytheism to male-headed monotheism reflected a change in the culture rather than a change in religion ... Religion developed as a function of the culture, not the other way around. Patriarchy uses religion as a tool for self-perpetuation, and so the fight against religion in the name of feminism is a logical one, but when you take religion away from the culture, you are still left with a patriarchal system." (Miller 2013, 214-215)

Miller's main point is that patriarchy can be secular too. She argues that as important as it is to face the subjugation of women in the name of religion, it is important to keep in mind that patriarchy is capable of reproducing itself on secular grounds through invoking various arguments, including scientific ones, to normalize the social inferiority of women.

Vivienne Wee, an anthropologist from Singapore University, has also called for recasting the established assumptions about patriarchy as essentially religious and equality as secular. She argues that even in secular societies such as China and Singapore, patriarchy re-justifies itself through new hierarchies which use no reference to any divine notion. She suggests that patriarchy should not be looked at from within the binary logic of the 'religious right' versus the 'secular left,' which she believes are not in a straightforward opposition, but instead, we should simply examine patriarchy from an analytical frame which places equality versus hierarchy (Wee 2006). The "secular patriarchy" theorist, however, does not explain the nature and the structure of patriarchy in modern secular societies other than claiming that it is not religious in nature. She does not provide a clear definition of secular patriarchy as she defines it passively by focusing on what it is not rather than what it is.

Alberta Giorgi, an Italian researcher from the University of Bergamo, states that although gender equality is considered to be central to the contemporary narrative of secularization, the relationship between gender, secularism, and religion is complex and ambivalent one. She believes that rethinking the relationship between secularism and gender should account for women's experiences with secularization and not take men as the norm. When religion was considered to be declining, women's religiosity remained stable and religious women played a significant role in the feminist movement of the first wave, suggesting that the fight for women's rights was not necessarily integral to the process of secularization. She adds that secularization does not always guarantee women's rights, although today, women's movements are at the forefront of that process. Giorgi argues that women were marginalized in the early phase of secularization because they were associated with the private and the religious, which are considered to be strictly separated from the public and the political. These binaries, she believes, are disappearing today as women's movements are growing more diverse and inclusive of different backgrounds, blurring the lines between those binaries and adopting a broader approach that accounts for the intersectional nature of their cause (Giorgi 2016).

Following this debate on the need to recast binary analytical categories, Linell Cady and Tracy Fessenden, professors of Religious Studies at Arizona State University, offer a gendered critical reading of the public-secular and the private-religious divide. In their work, they explain that although the secularization process brought reforms related to women, such as access to education, work, and politics, the privatization of religion reinforced the position of religious patriarchy in the private sphere, the domain of sexuality, and the opposite gender, where women who assumed the role of the "guardians of tradition," remain hidden from the reach of secularism. The privatization has given religious patriarchy the opportunity to regulate gender and sexuality freely and under the protection of secular law. Cady and Fessenden use examples from Muslim countries such as Egypt and Bosnia to argue that secularization of the public sphere alone allows for institutional reforms but does not extend to a culture that is likely to survive the changes in the legal and political systems. Instead, allowing religion to play a role in the public sphere will expose its contradictions under the pressure of cultural and political differences. Henceforth, in an open secular environment, religion will undergo an internal process of secularization, which forces it to replace its limited religious discourse on matters of gender and sexuality with a broader discourse about morality (Cady and Fessenden 2013).

Rereading the relationship between gender equality and secularism is an attempt to understand the extent to which the notion of gender equality is deeply rooted in the theory of secularism, as well as explore its possible limitations and contradictions. A major conclusion that can be drawn from the literature is that the interrelation between secularism and gender equality must be recasted in a more coherent narrative that neither assumes that gender equality is a natural outcome of secularization nor does it assume that it cannot be achieved without this secularization. In other words, in an ideal secular world where religion declines or even disappears, there is no guarantee that women will be equal to men since inequality between genders is built on a complex socio-cultural, economic, and political structure that includes religion but extends further than it. Another point is that secularism must rethink its narrative on gender equality in light of the re-evaluation of the decline of religion thesis because failing to see religion outside its oppressive authoritarian capacity will always put secularism in conflict with it, which affects the position of religious women in secular societies. This postulation has surfaced in the critiques of secularism as a result of the growing presence

of Muslim women in secular societies and the challenges their assertive identities create for the secular narrative about gender equality.

4. The Muslim Women Question

The growing interest in the status of Muslim women in both Western and Muslim-majority societies has brought secularism to the center of the debate about the challenges posed by this increasingly visible group, forcing theorists to rethink many assumptions about the relationship between secularism and gender equality. In fact, the headscarf affair in France made Muslim women commonly associated with secularism, so it became hard to disregard the correlation between the two. Prior to this point, the secular feminist theory, which was rooted in the tradition of the enlightenment critique of religion, dealt with religious women, who relatively constitute the majority of religious people worldwide, as a pre-modern phenomenon that is destined to diminish with growing modernization. Religion, in general, was viewed as a threat to gender equality, and religious women, particularly but not exclusively, were perceived as victims of its harmful impact. Feminist theorists, however, realized that the role of religion in women's lives is more complex than what the secular narrative suggests and that women can practice agency within religious frames the same way they do within the secular one.

The presence of Muslim women in the discourse of secularism precedes the headscarf controversy in France. In fact, this discourse, being a construct of its own context, has long been subjecting Muslim women to an ethnocentric emancipatory account framed by the "clash of civilizations" thesis. Many theorists, including Niamh Reilly, argue that the image of Muslim women is being constructed from a West versus Islam binary perspective, which objectifies them as victims without agency and legitimizes speaking on their behalf. "Western" religious women, on the other hand, are not necessarily perceived as victims of their religion but rather as autonomous subjects negotiating complex intersectional identities. Muslim women can also be primary targets of anti-Muslim prejudice and discrimination, being the most visible representation of their community and thus an embodiment of their "dangerous" culture. Reilly adds that fundamentalists also often capitalize on this West/Islam binarism to argue against secularism on the grounds that it is essentially intolerant to the rights of Muslim women, leaving the latter with one possible option, which is to defend their identity against the hegemonic and postcolonial Western secular values, thus reducing the whole gender equality movement to Western agenda (Reilly 2017). Reconsidering the binary logic within which this secular discourse operates, seeks to liberate Muslim women from the double discriminatory positions of both (i) the oppressive aspects of their culture within which they struggle to assert agency and (ii) the patronizing secular narrative which denies them that agency and tries to impose on them one model of emancipation.

Judith Butler, the famous gender theorist, also criticizes the binary framework within which secularism operates, which tries to reduce the issue of Muslim women to an Islam vs. West perspective. Secularism, in this sense, is instrumentalized against Muslim women who cannot be secular, modern or free, and religious at the same time. She suggests that secularism which turns into a form of absolutism and dogmatism, regards Muslim women's choices on how to use their freedoms and sexuality as regressive because they fall outside the trajectory of the secular. Muslim women, as a result, become a symbol of Huntington's clash between the West and Islam, and the 'triumph' of the former is measured by the extent to which these women are secularized. Butler argues that sexual freedom, in particular, which is portrayed as the embodiment of secularism, is put in opposition with religious freedom, which makes the only way to liberate women is to deny them their religiousness. She suggests a unified framework in which secularism does not derive its definition from opposing one religious tradition but recognizes the diversity of its forms, as well as recognizing its capacity for diversion and turning to an ideological instrument of coercion in the name of women's liberation (Butler 2008).

Joan Scott offers an analysis of the way secularism is central in the Western discourse about Muslim women. She argues that the association of secularism with gender equality was a reaction to the growing visibility of Muslim women who forced Western societies to reconsider the role of religion in the public sphere, thus making them believe that they are losing control over organized religion after assuming that they had it under control. Scott asserts that religion here means Islam in particular, which is portrayed in the clash of civilizations thesis as the new threat to the West after the fall of Soviet communism (Scott 2018). The meaning of secularism shifts in accordance with this new narrative, and Muslim women present an opportunity to bring religion under control in the name of gender equality. Therefore, it was important for ideologically oriented women's rights discourse to maintain its secular Western identity in contrast with Islam and Muslim women by particularly focusing on issues such as sexual freedom, which is a critical issue in Muslim societies, but not on economic equality, political representation, misogyny, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and other issues which take place in secular societies as well, thus do not make Muslim women stand out.

The utilization of gender equality in the discourse of secularism is about the articulation of the sovereign and superior identity of the West vis-à-vis Islam in the post-Cold War world. Prior to this time, this association of secularism and gender equality was irrelevant since the Soviets were secular too, and they granted women equal rights under the law and encouraged them to

participate in public life. To maintain the contrast with communism, the meaning of secularism was associated with religious tolerance and freedom, as well as an endorsement of the Christian dimension of Western identity, both of which were indications of the superiority of the liberal West over the communist threat. After the Cold war, the quest to adjust the discourse of secularism on gender equality shifted to assert contrast with Islam, painting Muslim women as representatives of dangerous religious values that threaten to undermine Western values and as victims of their oppressive religion. These women were expected to conform to Western secular norms of gender emancipation in order to be integrated. Here the meaning of emancipation is no longer the removal of obstacles in the way for women to exercise freedom of choice and self-determination but to conform to the Western norms of sexual and gender relations (Scott 2018).

Susanna Mancini, a feminist critic and Professor of Comparative Constitutional Law at the University of Bologna, has expressed similar views arguing that Muslim women are being subjected to what Adorno and Horkheimer called "the phenomenon of false projection" (Mancini 2017, 182). That is to attribute to these women's projections of Western culture, which the latter seeks to dissociate from itself, which is patriarchy in this particular case. This discourse is not motivated by gender equality concerns. In fact, it is a secular response to the growing presence of Muslim women, which challenges the dominant gender and sexual norms of Western culture. Depicting Muslim culture as essentially oppressive to women aims to establish a contrast with Western culture, leaving Muslim women with only the option of renouncing their regressive culture and its most visible symbols, such as the veil. Mancini asserts that although this discourse uses feminist language, it is not committed to equality but to conformity, as it refuses to recognize that Muslim women can resist patriarchy using their cultural tools the same way Western women do within their patriarchal culture (Mancini, 2012). Those tools equally include veiling and unveiling, which are both conscious actions through which women assert control over their bodies and sexuality and reject being forced to fit in one paradigm of sexual representation.

Like Mancini, Vanessa Badham, who is another feminist critic, has gone further to criticizing the definition of sexual emancipation, in the Western secular discourse, as the primary indicator of gender equality. Badham argues that this discourse originated in a period when women's sexuality was censored, and fighting against traditional norms of sexual behavior was an act of defiance against patriarchy and a means of achieving equality. However, feminists of the new generation desire to establish sexual boundaries because they feel that sexual liberation has become an excuse to sexualize women. Patriarchy, she explains, has reframed women's liberty to have sex with multiple partners and outside marriage as sexual availability. As a result, women find themselves sexualized in many situations by men who treat them as potential sexual mates. Badham puts forth that the ability of patriarchy to adjust to women's new forms of expression and resistance tools makes the association of sexual freedom with gender equality inconsistent (Badham 2018). The image of the Western woman who openly enjoys her sexuality as a means of asserting gender equality is no longer appealing to the new generation of feminists who think that this image should be regarded with relativity and redefined in response to new forms of patriarchy.

In the case of Muslim women, secularism and sexual emancipation again become the core of gender equality. By definition, liberated women are secular women who conform to established Western sexual norms of uncovering their bodies and demonstrating femininity which makes them sexually normal. Hence, sexual emancipation liberates the sexual experience of women and creates sexual diversity, which is fundamental to open and democratic societies. The veil, in this sense, is a rejection of Western norms of emancipation and a sign of regression to the norms of their submissive culture, regardless of whether they coarsely or willingly make the choice of wearing it. Scott argues that this contrast between sexually liberated and sexually oppressed women is a construct that reproduces the West versus Islam opposition in a gendered language. She adds that before this ideological confrontation with Islam, many French feminists were critical of the voyeurism and exhibitionism of women's bodies in French society, arguing that it reduces them to objects of male sexual desires. But in the midst of the headscarf affair, those feminists had to confront this obtrusive culture by reasserting the visibility of women's bodies and the association of sexual liberation with gender equality (Scott 2018). This instability of the meaning of sexual liberation has contributed to the controversy about the headscarf and the status of Muslim women in secular societies.

The headscarf debate marked a turning point in the understanding of secularism and sexual freedom, developing into an ideological conflict that aimed at drawing boundaries between Islam and the West. The attack on Muslim women's dress was a statement against their defiance of secular rules of engagement with the opposite sex in the public sphere. Nuns were excluded from the attack because they belong to a private and marginal group that does not aspire to be part of the public sphere, while Muslim women are engaging in public life and bringing their gender values to schools, universities, workplaces, and streets, etc. (Guenther 2019). Joan Scott argues that the display of women's bodies is no more a guarantee of equality than the covering of those bodies is because the sexual difference is still a concern in both cases, and women are still dealt with as "the sex" not as abstract individuals the way men are dealt with. However, she adds, the secular stance on the veil maintains that uncovering bodies is what ensures equality between men and women because it shows that they are both treated the same, forgetting that sexual difference will always be an obstacle to sameness, regardless whether women uncover or cover their bodies (Scott 2019).

That is not to say that there is no difference between secular and religious societies in the way women are perceived and treated, but to claim that making religious choices with regard to sexuality subjects women to patriarchy and deprives them of the agency is not accurate. The secular concept of agency strictly defines it in relation to freedom from religion, which makes any belief or practice within the religious frame always looked upon with suspicion even if it is claimed to result from free choice. The secular argument states it is not enough whether a woman chooses to conduct her sexuality the way she pleases but how this choice is constructed in the first place. That is to say that women's choice to embrace "backward" religious values which encourage the sexual segregation of the sexes cannot derive from free choice unless it is the result of false consciousness or social and cultural pressure motivated by religion and tradition. This position is reinforced by the history of the struggle for emancipation in Western societies, particularly in the 1960s when revealing clothes such as the miniskirt were signs of freedom and empowerment of women against patriarchy, which the headscarf debate brought back to mind. Scott reacts to this position by arguing that there is no complete self-determination neither for religious nor secular women and that culture and society exercise different forms of pressure on women to conform to certain norms of dress, whether in the name of values or fashion, such as the case when women make the choice of wearing high heels and heavy makeup (Scott 2013).

The secular disapproval of headscarves is a response to the encroachment of religion on the public sphere, which destabilizes the private-public order and threatens the privileged status of secularism in public. Accordingly, the discourse of gender equality in this context is employed as a strategy to maintain the boundaries between the private and the public and to retain the secular public image of women regardless of their status vis-à-vis men. Alev Cinar, a Turkish researcher on Women's Studies and Professor of Political Science at Bilkent University, argues that the secular discourse is more concerned with the secular image of women in the public sphere than with their actual presence in it. She adds that in the midst of the headscarf debate, less attention was given to women who wear it compared to the attention which was given to voices that criticized those women, including voices of women who left Islam and who were used to reinforce the image that the Islamic culture is toxic to women. The secular discourse on Muslim women also condemns the practice of veiling without understanding its motives or what it represents for those who claim they chose to wear it, for their voices threaten to undermine secularism; therefore, they should be ignored (Cinar 2005). Consequently, secularism becomes a tool for monitoring women's dress and agency, allowing the latter to be expressed solely within a secular frame.

The headscarf is also criticized in the secular discourse for naturalizing the sexualization of women in the public sphere by covering their bodies from men, thus reaffirming the male sexual dominance in the public sphere. Cinar argues that concealing sexuality is not practiced by Muslim women exclusively, for it was tried by leftist feminists in the 70s when their refusal to wear makeup and tight clothes was used as a protest against the male sexual privilege in the public sphere. She adds that the reason why concealing sexuality by leftist feminists was seen as a strategy of resistance against the sexualization of women but not when Muslim women used it was because, in the case of the latter, it was justified within a religious frame of reference, not a secular one (Cinar 2005). Therefore, the rejection of the headscarf is an attempt to limit the authority of religion in determining the norms of the public sphere and a reassertion of the exclusive right of secularism to dictate the norms of publicness. In this context, the core of the dispute is not sexual neutrality of the public sphere or gender equality but to make sure that Muslim women conform to the secular norms of publicness and assimilate with their French counterparts.

The Muslim women question challenges the association made between secularism and gender equality and explores the limits of the secular frame of reference as being the only frame within which women can be emancipated and that patriarchy is exclusively the product of the religious frame of reference. It also seeks to highlight the ideological components of the secular narrative regarding gender equality and how secularism can be employed as an ideological tool against women using gendered language. The Muslim women question also challenges the universal claim of secularism by showing that when it is applied to women outside the cultural context where it emerged and developed, it falls into contradictions and fails to assimilate those women into its narrative without being dismissive of their alien identities. This allows for recasting the theory of secularism outside its Eurocentric context and making it more compatible with the cultural and political environment of Muslim majority societies. That is not to say that in Muslim majority societies, all women are religious, but religion is the dominant frame of reference within which gender relations are constructed, which makes the understanding of the local socio-cultural context very important to the success of any attempt to promote gender equality.

5. Conclusion

This paper provides an extensive review of the major debates problematizing the relationship between secularism, gender equality, and Muslim women. These debates emerged as a response to a long-established reading which sees secularism as the cornerstone of gender equality and the precondition for its actualization. As this paper investigates this claim, it also tries to provide a re-examination of the concept of secularism and its development through different historical and cultural contexts, as well as its gender interrelation. The paper also critically evaluates the validity of this interrelation based on the arguments of scholars and theorists who deconstructed its fundamental claims and highlighted its ideological connotations. Later, it narrows the scope of

analysis to evaluate the experiences of Muslim women with secularism and the extent to which the latter's narrative of emancipation is able to assimilate women with non-secular identities. The study generally recognizes the complexity of the endeavor to develop an analytical frame that would reconcile secularism, gender equality, and Muslim women in one narrative. The unfixed nature of secularism makes it difficult to capture as a concept, especially in relation to the evolving meaning of gender equality and the problematic situation presented by the growing assertion of Muslim women on their identity, which all create the need to recast traditional ways of thinking about secularism as a frame of reference for gender equality.

The attempt to understand the relationship between secularism and gender equality begins with understanding what secularism means first. The complexity of the notion of secularism derives from its long history in which the term has evolved to refer to a variety of meanings to the extent that they can sometimes be contradictory. The contemporary meaning of secularism has settled on three basic notions. First, it is the belief in the decline of the social importance of religion, as people become less inclined to seek religion as a source of meaning and morality and become more dependent on reason and science. Second is the belief that religion belongs to the private sphere and should not play any role in public life, which is the precondition for democratic societies. Third, the differentiation of secular spheres, such as politics, science, and economy, from the religious one, and the belief that each sphere is autonomous and derives its norms from within. The concept of secularism can also be subject to ideological employment as well, in which case its connotation can only be understood by reading the political context and the conflicts which it serves. Secularism as an ideology becomes a dogma that focuses on eliminating religious presence from society even if it leads to clashing with democratic and liberal values.

In relation to gender equality, scholars have recently begun to read the theory of secularism from a gender perspective. The assumption on which this academic endeavor was premised is that secularism evolved in a male-centered history and that most theorists do not consider gender differences when they study secularism. Failing to account for the differences in the way women and men experience secularization, and maintaining that structures of inequality are products that survive in religious societies alone, have reinforced the belief that secularism does not need to be investigated from a gender equality perspective. Scholars challenge this claim arguing that gender inequality can also exist in secular societies and that the presumed interrelation between secularism and gender equality must be reconsidered. They add that gender inequality is an issue that cannot be understood through religious terms alone and that recasting the theory of secularism and its narrative on women's emancipation must be given more scholarly attention. The aim is to explore the aspects of secularism that may not be compatible with gender equality and to criticize the former's ideological deviations, which justify discriminating against women on the basis of their religious affiliations. This critique also aims at understanding the reason why the secular narrative on gender equality has been heavily challenged by the increasing presence of Muslim women in Western societies.

The Muslim women question provides an analysis of the way the discourse of secularism on gender equality is constructed within a specific socio-cultural and ideological context that is constantly changing. The inability of this discourse to assimilate Muslim women challenges the claims of its universality and reveals its limitations and contradictions. Being aware of these limitations allows for recasting the theory of secularism in a way that takes into consideration the cultural and political contexts of the new societies which seek to accommodate it. In Muslim majority societies, in particular, rereading the relationship between secularism and gender equality is imperative since it is still considered alien to culture, and women's rights are still negotiated within the secular/religious polarization, which the ideological reading of secularism contributes. Nevertheless, the focus on Muslim women does not disregard women of other identities but aims to highlight the critical aspects of the secular discourse and experience, which helps develop a complex understanding of the theory and foresee the prospects of promoting it in Muslim societies.

Funding: This work received no external funding.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

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