BEING RELIGIOUS AND BECOMING SECULAR IN IRELAND AND FRANCE:
RESCALING SECULARISATION THEORY

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Introduction

In April 2010, Premier Jean Charest introduced a bill to Quebec’s national assembly outlining a basis by which face coverings would be banned in government buildings. Introducing the legislation contained in Bill 94, Charest stated “The principle is clear. Two words: uncovered face.”¹ The legislation received support across the assembly, with his cabinet colleague Christine St-Pierre describing religious face coverings as “ambulatory prisons.”² Some other deputies stated that the legislation did not go far enough. Québec’s wishes to ban full face coverings in public spaces and government properties is an intervention in a much larger debate about what it means to be religious in public. Being religious in public is a test of the sovereignty of the state in its dealings with groups of its residents. Veiled Muslim women are a challenge to representations of being religious in public and this paper illustrates how some subjects become secular and how others remain religious. It challenges the homogeneous view of being religious in European public space. It is about geographic scale and how secularisation works on different groups of people in Europe within these different scales. It draws on (1) the work by Talal Asad³ on what is understood by human rights; (2) the work of Judith Butler⁴ and secular time; and (3) the work by José Casanova⁵ on public religion and secularisation.

In examining being religious and how we become secular, this paper brings together ideas about how veiling works in different European countries and how public space works in these various contexts. In Ireland, where veiling has been an important part of Catholic consciousness in public since the nineteenth century, there is little discussion about the place of veiled women in public spaces. As the French parliament moves closer to a ban on specific forms of face covering in public and private spaces, the French understanding of religion in public space is entirely different from Ireland’s. The paper will outline how the covering of women’s faces in public space is treated in both countries. It will frame these in a broader literature on religious subjectivity, particularly religious subjectivity in public. Finally, the paper will propose how religious subjectivities in a European context can be reframed through the lens of geographic scale.

² Ibid.
Veiling in France and Ireland

At first sight Ireland and France appear similar, both being governed by European Union regulations and common values. Both are bi-cameral parliamentary democracies with a tradition of Catholicism. As recently as 2008, 94 percent of people in Ireland who named a religious denomination stated that they are Catholic. In France, this figure stands at 88 percent of those that stated a religious denomination.\(^6\) Their histories are also intimately linked. The 1789 revolution at the Bastille inspired a group of Irish rebels who sought French help nine years later. The men and women of the 1798 rebellion declared themselves republican in tradition. Earlier in the eighteenth century, men and women travelled to France from Ireland to study for the religious life when Britain’s government in Ireland imposed restrictions on Catholic practice. The Republican tradition is evident in both countries although developing in quite different ways during the nineteenth century. Ireland’s literary heritage has always had an outpost in France, culminating perhaps in Samuel Beckett’s legacy in both nations. In their responses to the migration of people from outside of Europe to each country, the two countries diverge. It is in the responses to the immigration of Muslims in particular that we see crucial differences between the two nations. While common frameworks on migration and security through the European Union bind both states, being a migrant in Ireland is very different from being one in France. Differing understandings of ‘public’ citizenship in France and Ireland and how these understandings regulate ‘private sphere’ religious activity is important to note. Changes in conceptions of ‘public’ citizenship in Ireland and France articulate changes in people’s practice in often quite mundane ways. In this, I am drawing on Asad’s reference to the “grammar” of the concept rather than its empirical investigation.\(^7\) He states that the secular is a concept that “brings together certain behaviours, knowledges, and sensibilities.”\(^8\) Overlaps between the sacred and the secular in both states are contingent upon each other. Recognition of this contingency is the grammar of secularism and it refers to how these overlaps are reflected in policy and practice. In the next section of this paper, I examine the broad outlines of policy responses to immigration in general, and veiling in particular, in France and Ireland.

The ‘problem of the veil’ in France

Since the late 1990s, there have been a number of developments in the fields of migration and public policy in France. During the 1998 World Cup tournament and following the success of the French soccer team, with players whose family background was African, public consciousness about migration and what it means to be French was heightened. France had hosted the tournament and had done so successfully. The French government’s Youth and Sports Ministry made efforts to create a longer legacy by linking youth in poor areas with their citizenship. It provided funds to promote intra-ethnic solidarity among local sports associations.\(^9\) Mainstream media questions arose about where these men had come from in France and a rising political consciousness amongst the players themselves ensured that being black and being French was foregrounded. One of their finest players, of Berber descent, confused the picture for the mainstream French press further. Zinedine Zidane is French, with Algerian Muslim parents but

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\(^7\) Asad, 25n.

\(^8\) Ibid., 25.

is not black African. Later in 2001, following the attacks on New York’s World Trade Centre, and France’s subsequent reluctance to engage in overt military action, what it meant to be Muslim in Western Europe changed. Jocelyne Cesari traces these changes as part of broader “accommodations” of Islam within Western Europe in that post 9/11 period.

In 2005, Parliamentary and public deliberation about French identity was again brought to the centre of French life with extensive clashes between residents and police following the death of three French men with an African background in the Parisian suburb of Clichy-su-Bois. This uprising in the suburbs was not the first to have occurred but responses to it reflected ambiguities and overlaps between what being French means and what being French and Muslim means. For the most part, the reporting of these riots was characterised as a response by disenfranchised generations of French men of North African and Arab background. Radical imams in suburban community buildings were seen as key actors in an assumed communitarianism.

The specific attachment of an essentialised ethnicity to religion in these events is important when understanding why the veil retains a symbolic importance to the French state through which the problems of the “banlieues” have been debated. In fact, in public debates, the socio-economic dimension has been ignored in favor of a purely ideological polemic.” In a return to the 1998 World Cup, ex-France player Lillian Thuram criticised then interior minister Sarkozy for speaking poorly of Thuram’s Parisian suburbs.

In these and other moments of public deliberation, it is an insufficient socialisation into the ‘national culture’ that is thought to be important. Criticisms after the 2005 riots from both the left and right, focused on the deficiencies of socialisation by the French state and the family unit. This was a crisis of unity in which the Republic was unable to enforce its ideal on a section of the population that refused the legitimacy of the state. Butler examines this patrilineal relationship that exists in French politics and links them to the dominant conception of participation for French citizens. She states that the dominance of what it is to be French is threatened by the lack of a father figure “to the extent that heterosexual marriage maintains its monopoly on reproduction, it does so precisely through privileging the biological father as the representative of national culture.”

Following the 2005 riots, a specifically-understood republican ideology, “which separates public and private spaces and determines appropriate behaviour for the former,” became the binding principle for this national unity. The allocation of specific cultural and social rights is also tempered by this masculine conception of public participation since “the theories of psychological development that produce the patrilinial conditions of national

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14 Ibid.
16 Butler, 8.
17 Ibid.
culture constitute the ‘norms of adulthood’ that precondition the substantive rights of citizenship.”

Rights of citizenship concerning who is and is not French can be seen through this lens. In the French Republican tradition, matters of the state are played out in public; matters of faith and religion are relegated to the private sphere. The Republic supersedes both in that it binds the private and the public in a national culture. Wallach Scott has brought the two together in characterising France’s response to the problem of the veil as an inadequate state socialisation process where both Muslim women and men give insufficient regard to the power of public reason. In this respect, it is not accidental that restrictive public practice is focused on the burqa and the niqab. It is an intervention by the French state into the norms of adulthood and a homogeneous understanding of being religious in French society.

The Stasi report of 2003 was an investigation reporting to the French president on the application of the Republic’s principle of laïcité. It opens with the statement “La laïcité est constitutive de notre histoire collective (Laïcité is constitutive of our collective history).” One of the outcomes of the publication of the report was the enactment by the French government of Law #2004-228. This law was meant as an application of the principle of “the separation of church and state, the wearing of symbols or garb which show religious affiliation in public primary and secondary schools.”

Building on the 1905 legislation to legally separate the state and religion and coming at the end of a period of in-migration, the law specified the principle of laïcité in public schools. The new law did not particularly mention Muslim symbols or clothes worn in schools but its proposal and adoption came at a crucial point in the French state’s understanding of religion in public spaces.

In September 2010, the French parliament committed itself to an extension of a ban on face-covering scarves and the burqa in other public spaces. In the Netherlands, the formation of a new coalition government in late 2010 depended upon agreement on a policy to ban facial coverings and the burqa. In early 2010, the Danish government proposed a restriction on the public wearing of the burqa. In a broad effort at state-sponsored secularisation, Turkey does not allow the wearing of headscarves in schools and other public buildings. So why is there a ban in these countries and not in others? What do these laws and proposals tell us about being religious and becoming secular in public space?

**Veiling in Ireland**

In the mid-1990s, the Republic of Ireland became, for only the second time since independence in 1922, a country of net inward migration. From 1996 onwards, large numbers of Irish nationals returned to Ireland from countries traditionally thought of as destinations: Canada, the United States, Great Britain and, to a lesser extent, Australia. As the economy continued to

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18 Ibid.
22 Katy Hayward & Kevin Howard, “Cherry-picking the diaspora” in *Immigration and social change in the Republic of Ireland*, ed. Bryan Fanning (Manchester: Manchester University
Over such a short time-frame, this migration changed the understanding of what it meant to be Irish in Ireland and Ireland’s place within networks of global capital. The table presented below shows these changes in migration and composition for the period 1990 – 2010.

Table 1: Estimated Net Migration (Persons in Thousands) by Year, Origin or Destination and Country.

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With people from other European, African and Asian countries coming to work and live in Ireland in greater numbers, the composition of schools and communities changed. In 1998, Alex was the fifty-ninth ranked name for a boy born in Ireland, moving to tenth in 2008. Zuzanna was the 695th most popular name for a girl in 2005; by 2008, it ranked eighty-fifth (CSO: 2010). While the 1970s had seen small numbers of people with specific professions entering the Irish labour market (e.g. medical personnel), the scale and type of the migration of the 1990s and early 2000s has influenced the ways in which public services were delivered. In the 2006 census, of the 4.17 million people usually resident in the state, about 2 percent held an African or Asian nationality and about 6.6 percent held a nationality of an EU state. The religious composition of the population also changed in this period with larger numbers of Muslims and Orthodox Christians now resident in Ireland when compared with previous decades. Eighty-seven percent of the population in 2006 self-identified as Roman Catholic. While this proportion of the population being Catholic has declined slightly in recent years, the intertwining of being Catholic and a homogeneous Irish identity remains evident.

Migration did not bring difference to Ireland. Nor would it be accurate to portray veiling as a problem that migrants brought with them to Ireland. Until the recent past, there was a high public visibility of veiled women, specifically Catholic nuns as members of religious orders. Religious sisters of these orders and congregations were prominent in hospitals and primary schools until the mid-1970s, when the numbers of nuns began to decline. These orders have had a history in healthcare and education, establishing nursing homes, hospitals, reformatories, asylums and institutions for single mothers and their children throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While there is no aggregate for the number of personnel prior to the 1970s, hundreds of thousands of people born in Ireland would have been educated by sisters of religious orders since their establishment in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Since the 1970s, many orders have decided to discard the veil as part of organisational and theological change processes.

Within this context, the identification of veiled women in Ireland means something very different from many other European countries. The veiling of women has a socio-historical meaning in Ireland that makes it difficult to contrast with it with the situation in France. A small number of examples can illustrate this difficulty. In early 2008, a school principal sought guidance from the Department of Education and Science about some pupils wearing the hijab in his school. Later that year, the principal of another school called for clearer direction from the state’s education policy makers regarding the hijab. The government’s Minister for Integration was set the task of providing such guidance. Since 2001, and before its closure in 2008, the government-funded National Consultative Committee on

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26 Enda McDonagh, “Church-State Relations in Independent Ireland” in Religion and Politics in Ireland at the turn of the millennium, ed. James Mackey & Enda McDonagh, (Dublin: Columbia Press, 2003), 43.


28 Tom Inglis, Moral monopoly: the rise and fall of the Catholic Church in modern Ireland (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998), 223-231.
Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI) reported on a half-yearly basis the number of reported incidents “related to racism.” There is no aggregation of these data across time but in its final report in 2008, the Committee reported that:

A young student attending secondary school in Navan, Co Meath was sent home from school for wearing a hijab to school. According to the school principal, the young student was not adhering to school uniform policy. The NCCRI contacted the schools and forwarded guidelines on wearing the hijab.

Following this incident, the NCCRI contributed to the Department of Education consultation on school uniform policies. In 2008, the Department of Education and Science and the Minister for Integration issued their recommendations arising from the consultation process:

1. The current system, whereby schools decide their uniform policy at a local level, is reasonable, works and should be maintained.
2. In this context, no school uniform policy should act in such a way that it, in effect, excludes students of a particular religious background from seeking enrolment or continuing their enrolment in a school. However, this statement does not recommend the wearing of clothing in the classroom which obscures a facial view and creates an artificial barrier between pupil and teacher. Such clothing hinders proper communication.

3. Schools, when drawing up uniform policy, should consult widely in the school community.
4. Schools should take note of the obligations placed on them by the Equal Status Acts before setting down a school uniform policy. They should also be mindful of the Education Act, 1998. As previously mentioned, this obliges boards of management [the governance structure for each primary school] to take account of ‘the principles and requirements of a democratic society and have respect and promote respect for the diversity of values, beliefs, traditions, languages and ways of life in society.

The document went on to state that “It seems clear that, where schools have permitted the wearing of the hijab in a colour similar to the school uniform, no problems have been encountered.” It cannot be doubted that some Muslim girls have experienced and continue to experience ill-treatment from wearing a hijab in school but, apart from the guidelines above, which discourage facial views being obscured, there is no Irish policy discussion about face-covering in schools or other places. The creation of “an artificial barrier between pupil and teacher” is the way in which the hijab is particularised in the Irish context. “Proper communication” is so broad an idea that one could argue that it might also be hindered by other factors such as educational capability or language. So how do we make sense of veiling in Ireland?

The state’s immigration and integration policy has been disinvested in recent years with the denudation of several

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31 School uniforms are worn by the vast majority of students in Ireland.
33 Ibid.
government agencies connected with intercultural or human rights remits. The Equality Authority’s funding has been cut, as has that of the Irish Human Rights Commission. Community development organisations are being integrated into state-controlled structures. An Garda Síochána, the Irish police force has, as a strategic goal for 2010, a commitment to “enhanced data on racist incidents with a view to increased detections.” In 2007, an Irishman from a Sikh background was denied his right to wear a turban as a member of the volunteer-based reserve police force. Racist incidents involving Irish people from non-white backgrounds and non-Irish nationals occur but there is no structured way to measure them across time. In the medical field, the Irish Medical Organisation (the representative body for most non-nursing medical staff) last expressed an opinion about the wearing of the hijab in 2006. The IMO supports the wearing of the hijab, with the appropriate care to be taken in sterile situations, such as operating theatres. There is some evidence to suggest, then, that the various forms of veiling remain unproblematic from an institutional viewpoint. There is very little public discussion on what the covering of one’s head or face for religious reasons means for being a citizen of Ireland. Why is the Irish state not so concerned about the wearing of the burqa or the niqab in public places when the French is? What conditions arise whereby the French state deems it necessary to promote legislation that seeks the prohibition of face covering in certain situations but the Irish state does not? In the next section of this paper, I want to expand on what I mean by secularisation in a European context.

The Secular Citizen

The French and Irish states’ constructions of being religious in particular public spaces are political acts. They are related to what is acceptable as public behaviour and what is considered private behaviour. The states’ legislative measures and guidelines are acts of political discipline. They are processes of governmentality or “the organized practices (mentalities, rationalities, and techniques) through which subjects are governed.” This will be familiar from Foucault’s essays on biopolitics, although what follows attempts to rescale accounts of these biopolitical acts. Secularisation processes are groups of these acts of discipline and they reorganise practice across space and time. States and their formation have played a necessary role in this reorganisation. In this next section, I want to examine how different conceptions of citizenship might help to answer these and related questions.

Differentiation and privatisation

José Casanova’s work on public religions in the modern world builds on the analysis by Luhmann amongst others. He accepts that secularisation is irreversible but that as a process it has run its course. For Casanova, the differentiation of our lives into distinct institutional domains affects religion too but does not lead to its disappearance. He states that the Christian quest for salvation is instead withdrawn to the private sphere of the self and that “since the individual’s social existence becomes a series of unrelated performances of anonymous specialized social roles, institutional segmentation


38 Casanova, 35
reproduces itself within the individual’s consciousness.”

This involves the separation of the secular from ecclesiastical control and the creation of one or more publics. Hence, we see the emergence in Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of many publics. Markets and state bureaucracies continue to function ‘as if’ God did not exist, that is, they are no longer dependent upon a collectively-held belief in a deity. In this way, secularisation is the separation of the religious domain from others. These institutional segments have an autonomy derived from their human creation. There arises a general understanding in some of these segments that the intervention of the Holy Spirit will not mean a successful outcome to a business meeting (but effective presentation methods will). Drawing on the work of Weintraub, Casanova outlines a typology for the ways in which distinctions between private and public domains can be made. These work across different geographic scales. Analytically, however, there is a problem with conflating these scales for all of these domains.

The undifferentiated public space presented in many analyses of the private and public domains leads to further confusion about the secular. Two of these private/public distinctions create divisions between the market on the one hand and the undifferentiated concepts of the family and the citizen on the other. The market (approached now by citizens of sovereign states) becomes increasingly important as a space of interaction; the family and the household are private. The privatisation of religion and affect is reorganised into one or more domains. The reorganised practices are in our families and communities, in the legal system and of course in church administration. Our self-presentation and our orientation to others in space are present in these practices as is evident from the discussion on veiling above. We bring certain parts of ourselves to the public world, the worlds of business and law. The passions of faith are exercised in private; they are not brought to bear on important public deliberations. Secularisation is as much about the creation of this private/public distinction as it is about noting trends in church attendance.

**Public reason and scale**

Elaborating a secularisation process that takes into account the local and the contingent rescales secularisation. It means adjusting the relationship of people to state legitimacy and a flattening of understandings of secularisation processes. Marston et al., in attempting to rethink ontologies of geographic scale, assist the required adjustment of secularisation processes. Instead of focusing on how people are reorganised through this regulation or that law, they seek to bring a contested concept into a non-representational frame. Marston et al. revisit contemporary literature on the “scaffold” of scale. In advance of a critique of this literature, they find mainstream accounts of scale inadequate because they seek “a foundational hierarchy – a verticality that structures the nesting so central to the concept of scale,

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40 Casanova, 36.
41 Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy” in Habermas and the Public Sphere, ed. Craig Calhoun, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 128-132.
43 Casanova, 41-43.
44 Ibid, 42.
46 Ibid, 418.
and with it, the local-to-global paradigm."

The reviewed accounts of geographic scale obscure power relationships because they prioritise the institutional relations of the global over the multinational, the regional and the local. In their critique of current geographic analyses, Marston et al. argue that the local is always subsumed into the relations and the practices of the next scale up because:

It is bound to reproduce a small–large imaginary and with that, pre-configured accounts of social life that hierarchize spaces of economy and culture, structure and agency, objectivity and subjectivity, and cosmopolitanism and parochialism; and it cannot deliver engaged and self-reflexive accounts of social life.

One of these pre-configured accounts of social life is the way in which religious people are reorganised in secular spaces across Europe and elsewhere. Veiled Muslim women living in Europe are placed in hierarchized spaces of culture: their subjectivity is reorganised within relations between a European identity and other Muslim spaces. For Marston et al. this hierarchical conceptualization of scale is a “classic case of form determining content.” In their analysis they propose instead a flat ontology of scale, which can “replace their structuralist calculus with the language of flows and fluidity.” This replacement with fluidity has value for opening up new ways of looking at secularisation. Their wish is to simplify and thereby demystify the structural constraints of political action which “focuses on both material composition and decomposition, maintaining that complex systems generate both systematic orderings and open, creative events.”

It is at this point that the political reorganisation brought about by secularisation processes can engage with the fluidity and creativity of religious people in European states. By looking at the unfolding of creative events as well as systematic orderings, the reconstruction of the religiously-framed life can be understood as an active process. In Marston et al.’s terms, being religious in public space is an interpenetration of the local and the global. It is about being religious across scales. This interpenetration of scales implies a reflexivity amongst religious people in European states that has not been considered in many accounts of secularisation. Although this new way of thinking about geographic scale remains empirically underdeveloped, it has relevance to the way in which I want to characterize the changes to being religious in particular forms of public space.

The performance of religious belief (and acceptance of its representations) in public space changes over time. The context for and acceptability of veiling practices in France and Ireland differ widely as can be seen above. The French state’s desire to control who wears what in quite specific places involves employing state power and acceptance amongst a group which sees it as contrary to a republican ideal. On a national scale, the legislature can prohibit the wearing of the burqa and, of course, this has consequences for people performing their religious belief on scales much smaller than the national. In this sense, restricting Muslim headscarves creates and draws from a totalised understanding of religious belief in public life, or secularisation. This understanding of secularisation is drawn primarily through state power. In the Irish context, local circumstances are brought to bear in deciding when a girl can wear the hijab and when she cannot. The instruction from the Department of Education refers specifically to the contingent circumstances of the school.

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47 Ibid, 419.
48 Ibid, 422.
49 Ibid, 423.
50 Ibid.
With differentiated domains on different scales, religious belief in public is reorganised. On an inter-personal scale, Casanova refers to the “combination of world abnegation and world mastery”\textsuperscript{51} that fosters an innerworldly attitude to one’s religion. Law is separated from morality and this separation forms the basis for the state’s power in reorganising the secular in public space. Patriarchal relationships within the family and the formation of households as sub-units of the economy are outcomes of these differentiation processes. They are mutually supporting of the privatisation of formerly public spaces and of the legalisation of public action. However, as Benhabib insists, this domain separation is not neutral: “it presupposes a moral and political epistemology; this in turn justifies an implicit separation between the public and the private of such a kind that leads to the silencing of the concerns of certain excluded groups.”\textsuperscript{52}

The retreat of regulation to the self and the reduction of public life to a series of performative actions have particular implications for excluded groups. At the same time, a univeralist public reason comes to be identified with the practices of included groups (as seen in the insistence that non-Christian migrants conform to ‘our’ ways). The legitimation of this exclusion of particular ways of being in public space by the state works across scales. This foundational hierarchy has consequences for specific bodies, communities and subcultures. An enlargement of state power in the regulation of the self has reinforced public/private distinctions across scales. The universalist public reason is the basis for this. For Habermas, the public sphere is universalist as it “Forms the basis of justification for a secular state that no longer depends on religious legitimation. And this in turn makes the separation of state and church possible at the institutional level in the first place.”\textsuperscript{53} Furthermore, Habermas notes its disciplinary nature because “every citizen must know and accept that only secular reasons count beyond the institutional threshold that divides the informal public sphere from parliaments, courts, ministries and administrations.”\textsuperscript{54}

This is a public reason that separates the private from the public but reorganises both across many geographic scales. Within this reorganisation, the public expression of faith (embodied by veiling practices in both Ireland and France) is a performance of the privatised self in particular spaces. The Muslim veil presents a difficulty to the French state not only because it is Muslim, but because it crosses state-legitimated boundaries between performances of the private self and the public self. The veil as worn by Muslim women does not present such a difficulty for the Irish state because these boundaries are not as clearly drawn as they are in France.

Secularisation and the Undifferentiated Public

In the previous section of the paper, I outlined how the separation of institutional domains leads to specific distinctions between the private and the public in Europe. The reorganisation of religious performance in European public space is related to how secularisation is understood in these spaces. In France, there are understandings of the separation of these domains. They pervade the legal code and the interactions between the state and its citizens. In Ireland, there is a very different understanding of the separation of these domains. Accounts of secularisation

\textsuperscript{51} Casanova, 50.
\textsuperscript{52} Seyla Benhabib, “Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the liberal tradition, and Jürgen Habermas” in Habermas and the Public Sphere, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 82.
\textsuperscript{53} Jürgen Habermas, Between Naturalism and Religion (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 120.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, 130. My emphasis.
processes in the social sciences tend to rely on an undifferentiated public, upon which these processes work in a linear fashion. These accounts employ the small-large imaginary that Marston et al. mention in their paper. Secularisation is seen to be a process occurring to passive recipients in that religious people are subjected to reorganised arrangements who adjust their practices. The reorganisation arises in the metropole (from Paris or Dublin) and takes time to reach outlying areas. People become secular and free from religion by eventually changing their place in the world to the practices of the process of secularisation. But as Butler points toward, the secular space is not freely contested across scales and times:

Often, but not always, the…claim is made that such a privileged site of radical freedom must be protected against the putative orthodoxies associated with new immigrant communities. . . . But let’s remember from the outset that this is a suspect formulation, one that is regularly made by a state discourse that seeks to produce distinct notions of sexual minorities and distinct communities of new immigrants within a temporal trajectory that makes Europe and its state apparatus into the avatar of both freedom and modernity.55

Communities of people (middle class voters, migrants, the religious) are constructed within this undifferentiated and free public space. Freedom and speech acts are the currencies of these Habermasian spaces. However, these analyses misunderstand the interpenetrations of power relations within which politics unfolds. In the words of Asad “there is no public sphere of free speech at an instant.”56 For Asad, minorities are only minorities because of a particular hierarchical nature of power relations.57 Furthermore, “secular history’s linear temporality has become the privileged measure of all time.”58 Butler provides the most coherence in this overlapping of space, time and sexual politics:

Certain notions of relevant geopolitical space – including the spatial boundedness of minority communities – are circumscribed by this story of a progressive modernity; certain notions of what ‘this time’ can and must be are similarly construed on the basis of circumscribing the ‘where’ of its happening.59

Within this context, the specificity of veiled women becomes clearer: it is an iteration of the secular practice upon a subjective and a-spatial understanding of religion in public space. France is not the first country in Europe to restrict the use of specific items of clothing associated with religion in public space. The French case during the 1990s to the present points to a specific understanding of what it is to be secular.

Being secular is an understanding that people in law are non-relational, individualized and merely arrive to Europe. The discipline applied in this public seeks to erode some identities in a state’s territory but leaves others unquestioned (the appeal to unhindered communication seen in the Irish guidelines above). Asad summarises this kind of public sphere as “a space necessarily (not just contingently) articulated by power. And everyone who enters it must address power’s disposition of people and things, the dependence of some on the goodwill of others.”60 In these circumstances, religious people and communities are constitutive of minorities distinct from the state itself. In that context, sense can be made of rioting

55 Butler, 1. My emphasis.
56 Asad, 184.
57 Ibid, 175.
58 Ibid, 43.
59 Butler, 2.
60 Asad, 184.
suburban youth who are disconnected from the French way of life. Religious veiling practices in some European publics are problematic because they cross the boundaries between the reorganised private self and the public self. In France, they challenge the state’s unreflexive self-definition of power. In a broader European context, where little sense of unity beyond economics is clear, the problem of the veil is defined by the lack of clarity around what is and is not secular. Gokariksel draws out this interconnection between the secular and religious self in European spaces:

Religion and the pious body are central to the production of the self. The body and veiling are mediums through which the self is produced. . . . [P]iety and its cultivation through the embodied spatial practice of veiling also draw attention to the role that conceptions and performances of the secular play in molding the body and creating a sense of self. 61

The employment of legislation regarding personal dress in public of an identifiable and problematised minority is not then an unexpected outcome of specific politics. This arises from a particular understanding of what it means to be secular in public spaces. What we see in the debate about the headscarf is not the favouring of one type of headdress over another but a debate on the ‘Islamic veil.’ The debate counterposes being European and secular individuals with representatives of a culture. The undifferentiated nature of this specifically European space holds this opaque hierarchical relationship between the local and the global to be true. By it being spatially undifferentiated, it obscures very real and systematic practices of exclusion.

Asad, when outlining what he means by a European civilization, explains that it “is simply the sum of properties, all those material and moral acts that define European identity.” 62 “Real Europeans,” he says, “acquire their individual identities from the character of their civilization. Without that civilization’s essence, individuals living within Europe are unstable and ambiguous. That is why not all inhabitants of the European continent are ‘really’ or ‘fully’ European.” 63 What it means to be European is not just about living on the continent; it is also about the acceptance of this essence. Alongside the acquisition of these identities from their civilization, a de-essentialisation of Islam takes place and this

Is paradigmatic for all thinking about the assimilation of non-European peoples to European civilization. The idea that people’s historical experience is inessential to them, that it can be shed at will, makes it possible to argue more strongly for the Enlightenment’s claim to universality: Muslims, as members of the abstract category ‘humans,’ can be assimilated or (as some recent theorists have put it) ‘translated’ into a global (‘European’) civilization once they have divested themselves of what many of them regard (mistakenly) as essential to themselves. 64

By removing her veil, a Muslim woman can become European in a way that simply being born there does not confer. Her identity changes by its removal and, in doing so, she is doing something that brings her toward the universal. Asad constructs the narrative of minorities in the European context. In the French example he states that the “crucial difference between the “majority” and the


62 Asad, 168.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid, 169.
“minorities” is, of course, that the majority effectively claims the French state as its national state. In other words, to the extent that “France” embodies the Jacobin narrative, it essentially represents the Christian and post-Christian citizens who are constituted by it. He does not discuss scale in his discussion of what is and is not European. However, he comes closest to Marston et al.’s attempt to recast the ontological basis of geographic scale when their paper urges a shift in the prevalent idea of pluralism ‘from a majority nation presiding over numerous minorities in a democratic state to a democratic state of multiple minorities contending and collaborating with a general ethos of forbearance and critical responsiveness.’ The decentered pluralism … requires a continuous readiness to deconstruct historical narratives constituting identities and their boundaries . . . in order to ‘open up space through which care is cultivated for the abundance of life.’

The lack of differentiation between the political subject (embedded within contexts not entirely of her making) and the exclusions of systemic imperatives is a blindspot both in the work of Habermas and secondary literature on the public sphere.

Representations of Islamic countries tend to focus on how Islam is behind Western democracy. To become modern (or perhaps as Mignolo argues to become human), women need to cast aside their inessential religious objects on their bodies. In this sense, a Muslim woman in European public space is created in opposition to the universalised secular person. Against this background of a crisis of European identity in relation to Islam, the veiling debate in Europe is a series of disciplinary actions seen through a particular understanding of being secular. Certain bodies are secular and this secularism is well-inscribed on those bodies; others retain their religious identity and so must be ‘brought up to’ a level that will allow their innate secularism to emerge.

Conclusion

Like Marston et al., I would argue that we need to examine secularisation as one of a number of “complex systems [that] generate both systematic orderings and open, creative events.” The (re)production of public space is increasingly linked with state legitimacy. This reproduction relies on one scale for its conceptualization (the legislative, the national) but with direct consequences for all scales (individuals being abused for wearing the niqab in public places). The construction of an undifferentiated and secular public space is an erasure of emergent and latent conflicts. These conflicts arise from the spatial ambiguity of secularisation itself. As Ali Agrama has pointed out, this ambiguity means that “the processes by which secular doctrine is implemented incessantly generate the very question that doctrine aims to answer, namely, where to draw a line between religion and politics.” Muslim veiling in a European context has different meanings in various contexts. The undifferentiated public space associated with European secularisation obscures a better understanding of what we understand by both religion and the secular.

The self-generating nature of secularism in Europe has particular force

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65 Asad, 187.
66 Marston et al., 427.
68 Marston et al., 423.
for excluded groups. Secularism is inscribed on specific minorities through series of reorganised practices, only one of which, but not insignificantly, is the unveiling of Muslim women. In France, the Muslim veil is reorganized in particular ways around the Republic’s legal codes and its relationship to its former colonies. In Ireland, the Muslim veil is reorganized around a historical and cultural connection with the lack of separation between the Catholic Church and state. The separation of the religious domain from the domain of the market, the state and civil society is an outcome from this reorganization. Analytically, accounts of secularisation processes rely on this undifferentiated public space.

The presence of Muslims among ‘us’ causes an institutional incoherence about European identity, i.e. where does Europe begin and end. But who is religious and who is secular is not an abstract and objective occurrence. It is the outcome of frames of reference to archaeologically-inscribed understandings of nationality, identity and difference. Being religious and one’s orientations to sacred objects in the world are reorganised but remain linked on various scales. In trying to answer the question why this way in France and that way in Ireland, secularisation processes need a contingency across scales that it currently does not have. I am proposing that geographic scale is a way to bring that contingency to bear.

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