

BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDU

Janet R. Jakobsen and **Ann Pellegrini**, eds., *Secularisms*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008, 416 pp. \$US 24.95 paper (978-0-8223-4149-9), \$US 89.95 hardcover (978-0-8223-4125-3)

S*ecularisms* gathers thirteen very diverse essays around a common intention: to challenge a simplistic understanding of the secularization thesis. The central claim of the book is summarized by its title: there is not a single and inevitable process of secularization in contemporary societies; there are a variety of diverse forms of secularisms. The editors argue in their introductory essay that the Weberian approach to secularism is rooted in a Protestant conceptualization of religion, which distinguishes between private and public spheres of life, privileges belief over embodied practice, and coincides with the dominant market-based societies of Western Europe. This formulation is heavily indebted to the anthropologist Talal Asad, who made such a case in *Genealogies of Religion* (1993).

For sociologists, this sets this book apart from an account such as that found in José Casanova's *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994). Casanova argues that secularization theory is generally based on three propositions: religious decline, differentiation between religious and secular spheres, and the privatization and marginalization of religion. But while Casanova argues that the first and third of these assumptions are false (while the second is true), Jakobsen and Pellegrini essentially challenge all three propositions and intend "to undo the religion-secularism binary itself" (p. 10). The scope of this agenda, and its implications, are not always supported by the individual essays, but the collection does offer a rich variety of material upon which to reflect.

The volume is divided into three sections. The first seven essays present particular examples of religious expression which challenge at least one element of the secularization thesis. Part two comprises three historical articles that explore how the discourse of secularism is complicated at the embodied "micro level." Part three is a collection of three theoretical essays which discuss new interventions into the public debate over secularism. The authors represent a broad range of disciplines (although not sociology): religious studies, anthropology, history, women's studies, and political science.

The chief contribution of the collection is the manner in which the seven essays in part one offer detailed explorations which seemingly contradict a singular concept of secularism. Gender receives considerable attention in this section, as do topics ranging from Iran, Turkey, India, American feminism, and Judaism. Afsaneh Najmadadi's "(Un) veiling Feminism," for example, argues that gender plays a central role in constructing Islamist political discourse. Examining the development of women's periodicals after the Iranian Revolution, she highlights the ironic way in which the revolution helped produce a number of feminist editors. This suggests to her the wisdom of *not* defining a clear boundary between the secular and the Islamic, for this only serves to encourage unnecessary and abstract divisions between differing women. In Najmadadi's view, the revolutionary Islamic government around Ayatollah Khamenei and its supporters are the only ones "whose world outlook is centered around a secular-religious divide" and who seek to cultivate it for political reasons (p. 43).

While a number of the essays in this section offer intriguing examples of ways in which religion and secularism are more intertwined than is sometimes assumed, some of the papers actually accept and support elements of the secularization thesis. Laura Levitt's discussion of Jewish reactions to American secularism suggests that Jewish immigrants to the US were forced to conform in order to achieve social integration. They were "required to recreate themselves as Jews," as affiliation became less a form of communal life, and more a matter of voluntary association (p. 114). Judaism was forced to become more "Protestant" and to conform to the expected parameters of what constitutes a "religion." The only challenge to the traditional notion of secularization here is the interesting observation that secular Jews, in order to have some sense of a "Jewish identity," must in some way identify themselves with the religious community. But this is more a challenge to the primary agenda of the book than it is evidence against the secularization thesis.

Even more curious is the essay "Secularism and Laicism in Turkey." Taha Parla and Andrew Davidson analyze how Kemalist laicism, rather than being an example of secularism, has actually served to support and even construct certain forms of Islam. What is puzzling about this essay, given the agenda of the volume, is the manner in which the authors appear to lament these limitations of laicism in Turkey: "if secularism ... is to further take root in Turkish society ... the staple Kemalist laicist stand will not do" (p. 72).

If there is tension between some of the essays in the first section and the agenda set out in the introductory essay, perhaps clearer support might be found in section two? There is much of interest here: histor-

ical explorations of footbinding in China, the dynamics over time in the recent millennium in India, and the Spiritualism movement in 19th century US. What becomes lost in these “micrological” readings, however, is what purpose references to the generalizations of secularism actually serve in the discussions. While it is interesting to note the shifts of language over time among missionaries in China (from language of cultural flaw to biomedical), Angelo Zito’s essay does not offer any account of the causation behind these shifts or how they relate (if at all) to secularization.

The third section of the volume includes essays on “Public Alternatives.” Kathleen Sands and Ranu Samantrai offer papers on feminism and secularism in Britain respectively. While Sands suggests that secular second wave feminism has forgotten its history, Samantrai explores how the recent terror attacks in the US and UK relate to perceiving secularism as either an inoculation or a disease.

Tyler Roberts argues that secularism ought to be “desanctified” in order to open up “new and different possibilities for religious voices in the public sphere” (p. 283). He employs William Connolly’s work to draw a distinction between faith and ethos and to argue for a vision of a “secular diaspora” which allows for a more pluralistic understanding of identity. This is an interesting and creative case for allowing public expressions of faith, but the political complications related to such articulations are the reason that Casanova resisted weakening the second element of secularism he identifies: a differentiation between religious and secular spheres.

Perhaps the lack of a clear conclusion or consistent treatment of secularization is not inappropriate for a volume such as this, in that it does offer a variety of quite different and interesting explorations of the interaction between members of particular religious traditions and the wider environment around them. The book does illustrate that the dynamics of secularism are by no means simple, and that any transformative potential of the secular does not move in only one direction; religion can also give shape to a secular environment. What this volume does not clearly resolve, however, is whether it is accurate to suggest that is no longer appropriate to speak of general characteristics of secularism (in the singular).

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