

**Review of Linell E. Cady and Tracy Fessenden (eds.),  
*Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual  
Difference*, New York and Chichester, West Sussex:  
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On 30 June 2014, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that the religious liberty of closely held corporations were protected under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. This ruling, made in response to *Sebelius vs. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.*, specifically allowed the chain of craft stores to withhold insurance coverage for certain kinds of contraceptives to their female employees because of the religious beliefs of the owners. Significantly, the Supreme Court asserted that their ruling applied only to withholding contraceptives; other medical procedures to which certain religious practitioners might object, such as blood transfusions, were not addressed.

While the case raises questions about the rights of corporations as potential religious entities, the fact that the ruling applies only to contraceptives is indicative of a broader trend as the United States government continues to negotiate the balance of religious freedom within a secular milieu. This highly publicised case exemplifies the ways in which clashes over the boundaries between the religious and secular spheres are often played out in the realm of regulating gender and sexuality.

Despite the prevalence of this trend in the contemporary moment, the majority of scholarship engaging with the secular does not consider gender as central to its analysis. As an initial foray into rectifying this gap, the recent anthology edited by Linell E. Cady and Tracy Fessenden, *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*, offers a series of examples of what a focus on gender in analysing secularism might look like. To use the words of contributor Margot Badran, the essays in this collection 'note constructions and functions of the secular and the religious through the lens of gender and of gender through the lens of the secular and the religious' (2013: 103–4).

Though the essays are organised into four thematic sections – ‘Gendering the Divide’, ‘Gender and the Privatization of Religion’, ‘Gender, Sexuality, and the Body Politic’, and ‘Bridging the Divide’ – there is a synergy that runs through the collection as a whole. Cady and Fessenden’s introduction highlights this synergy; rather than outlining the essays as presented in order, the editors use the introduction to emphasise cross-cutting issues that thread through the volume, such as the links between the secular and Christianity. Though noting the ways in which the secular and Christianity are imbricated – particularly in the version of secularism found in the United States – is not new, many contributors to this volume note particularly the ways in which this slippage impacts discourse on women’s rights.

Joan Wallach Scott’s essay, ‘Secularism and Gender Equality’, grounds the collection. Scott argues that secularism does not equal gender equality, despite overblown rhetoric about the progressive nature of the universe which pits secularism and religion at opposite ends of the spectrum. In contrast, secular political models often explicitly reinforce gender inequality by deploying arguments about sexual difference as a natural phenomenon. Scott makes this argument by exploring the history of secularisation, pointing specifically to moments of gender inequality, such as the fact that women’s suffrage was granted in the United States one hundred and fifty years after the disestablishment of a state religion.

Scott’s analysis is not just a matter of historical accuracy in recognising the limits of liberal secularism as an emancipatory model of governance. In concluding her essay, she writes:

I have *not* been arguing that there is no difference between secular and religious societies in their treatment of women. Of course there are differences, differences that matter for the kinds of possibilities open to women (and men) in the course of their lives. I do insist, however, that the differences are not always as sharp as contemporary debates suggest and that the sharpness of the distinction works to obscure the continuing problems evident in secular societies by attributing all that is negative to religion. (2013: 42)

The stakes for this argument have important repercussions on the prevalent discourse about gender and religion. If secularism is seen as by nature liberating for women, then logic dictates that the opposite is also true, and religion must be by nature oppressive; this contributes to the commonly held idea that religion is by definition ‘bad for women’. Scott’s essay is an intervention against this discourse. By destabilising the framework of the secular as liberatory, she opens space for scholars to critique secularism and valorise religious practice along new axes of inquiry.

The other essays in Part I are framed as overt responses to Scott’s argument; however, all of the essays included throughout the anthology can be fruitfully read as responses to Scott’s piece. The following examples both show the range of responses to Scott’s analysis and give a sense of common threads of inquiry that run through the collection.

Gene Burns, in ‘Secular Liberalism, Roman Catholicism, and Social Hierarchies: Understanding Multiple Paths’, argues that while Scott is correct in stating that secular liberalism does not necessarily cause an increase in gender equality, secular liberalism and gender equality are correlated; empirically, secular liberal states tend to offer more civil liberties than other forms of governance do,

precisely because of certain inherent attributes, such as a commitment to pluralism. While Burns' point is valid, he includes a long list of necessary caveats in order to make it, thereby narrowing the applicability of his argument.

Saba Mahmood approaches Scott's essay with a different focus. Rather than exploring the limits of secular liberalism, Mahmood expands on Scott's point about the privatisation of both religion and gender under a secular rubric. In 'Sexuality and Secularism', she explores the way this privatisation has played out, using the rise of family law in the Middle East as a case study.

Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini also note Scott's focus on the connections between the privatisation of religion and the spread of secularism. However, they use Scott's point as a way to explore the dynamic interrelations between gender and religion/secularism, particularly as relates to U.S. foreign policy. In doing so, they focus on Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism as it played out during the Cold War and in the present moment.

Finally, in 'Rescued by Law? Gender and the Global Politics of Secularism', Elizabeth Shakman Hurd builds on Scott's argument that secularism is simply one frame through which sexual differences are managed. She discusses the ways in which this framework – seeing secularism as a mode of managing gender and sexuality – impacts foreign policy and international human rights. She concludes with an analysis of the recent scholarship on critical international law to think about ways of moving forward with human rights discourse under a rubric that is more engaged with theories of secularisms.

As evidenced by the examples listed above, contributors offer a range of analytical tools, modes of analysis, and foci. Many of the essays are thought provoking and present issues for further study. In addition, in bringing together a range of voices, Cady and Fessenden give the reader a sense of what scholars from different backgrounds are thinking about in terms of the fruitful intersections of gender and the secular. As with any anthology, some essays are stronger than others. Overall, however, Cady and Fessenden present a strong collection of insightful essays that provide nuanced theoretical engagement with scholarship on both gender and the secular, bringing these two strands of thought together in exciting ways. Furthermore, because of the political repercussions of this complex debate – as evidenced by the Hobby Lobby case – this volume is important not only in shaping scholarship, but in encouraging scholars to explore the way their work shapes the broader world.