Letting Their Hair Down

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Sex and Secularism
by Joan Wallach Scott.
Princeton University Press,
235 pp., $27.95

Moral Combat:
How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics
by R. Marie Griffith.
Basic, 395 pp., $32.00

If ever a couple of books were locked in an epistemic cage match it would be the two under review here, written by warring brands of historians on the subject of sex, religion, and secularism. I am, by default, in the secularite corner: I come from such religiously indifferent people they couldn't even bother to be atheists. My sister and I were the only ones of our friends who didn't go to Sunday school—when I once asked why, my father said that he and my mother couldn't agree on whether to send us to a conservative or a reform temple, so we didn't go at all. Maybe he meant it as a parable. In any case, that always seemed like religious education enough: minor doctrinal differences blown into major impasses. Or impossible conundrums. (As with the Sunnis and the Shias, my parents eventually divorced.)

I invoke this secular pedigree because it's Western feminists of my ilk—who assume that secularism has been women's ally, who associate religion with the fear of female bodies (coupled with a perverse desire to control them), we who play for the Enlightenment team—whom Joan Wallach Scott's polemic *Sex and Secularism* aims to persuade. A distinguished feminist historian whose career—from labor history, to history of women, to gender theory, to poststructural and postcolonial theory—has tracked the evolution of her discipline, Scott argues here that those of us who thought progress toward female emancipation was paved with secular milestones have been sold a bill of goods.

"In fact," writes Scott, "*gender inequality was fundamental to the articulation of the separation of church and state that inaugurated Western modernity.*" Further: "Euro-Atlantic modernity entailed *a new order of women's subordination.*" The italics are Scott's, and in her reckoning, the sexual division of labor central to secularization provided cover for the exclusion of women from the public sphere and indeed from the category of personhood itself.

By this account, the public–private divide that characterizes modernity, by which Scott means the emergence of Western nation-states from the eighteenth century on, simply produced newfangled versions of female subordination rather than rectifying the old ones. Women were associated with religion in secularist discourse—we're the superstitious, emotional ones—and men with reason; women were assigned to familial lockdown while men ran the world, just as before. The difference is that secularism invokes biology instead of divine law to justify its notions of masculine and feminine spheres, trafficking in crackpot medical theories about women and the female brain (men had bigger skulls, women bigger pelvises—guess who was considered the more rational sex).

It's the sort of stuff that can be racialized, as required, to scientifically explain the inferiority of nonwhite peoples. And indeed it has been: the secularism story has always been a cover-up for anti-Islamism and imperial conquest, according to Scott, serving to justify the claims of white, Western, and Christian racial and religious superiority by projecting its own misogyny onto Islam. Though the word "secularism" itself dates back only to the mid-nineteenth century, its history is so entangled with Orientalism that "whenever the concept was invoked" there was an anti-Muslim aspect at work. All the more so after September 11, 2001: once Islam replaced communism as the primary political threat to the West, secularism was once again enlisted as an emblem of Western freedom, this time to support its variously misbegotten wars on terror.

These are rather large claims, launched at those Scott sees as secularism's cheerleaders. "Clash of civilizations" fossil Samuel Huntington is named, along with more recent arrivals in his camp who tout secularism and gender equality as the basis of the West's superiority to Islam. The philosopher Charles Taylor, though a practicing Catholic, is on the adversaries list for regarding secularism as progressive; universalizers like Martha Nussbaum come under fire for conflating Western versions of sexual liberalization with human rights.

As a default secularist, I felt the sting of Scott's critique too, for naively buying the conventional story—that women's political emancipation followed the era of democratic revolutions, which followed the individualizing tendencies set in motion by the Protestant Reformation. In Scott's deconstructive who-done-it, those of us who failed to notice that any invocation of secularism is inherently anti-Muslim have been colonialism's allies and dupes. "The idea that inequality exists solely for Muslim women is simply not true," she declares.

But did anyone really think it was? *Solely*? It doesn't exactly need saying that secularism didn't end sexism or overthrow the sexual division of labor. Scott's position is not, however, that Western and non-Western, Christian and non-Christian societies share persistent patterns of inequality between the sexes. It's that secularism, which is tethered in this account to modernity, *intensified* gender inequality.

Magnum Photos

Cairo, 2005; photograph by Martin Parr

The accumulated historical culpabilities piled onto secularism can seem a bit overdetermined in Scott's genealogical account. For instance: the advent of modern secularism and the emergence of modern nations brought "a new insistence on the immutability of gender roles and the policing of sexual activity to keep them in place." It's the "new" I wondered about—even Scott admits that such exclusions can be traced back to the ancients. We're provided with a familiar catalog of the West's failures to achieve gender equity on wages, political representation, sexual harassment, and so on, yet I could find no comparable discussion of Islam's successes and failures in these areas.

Is secularism perhaps being asked to answer for what might equally be regarded as the cross-cultural persistence of misogyny? No, Scott insists: "these notions of difference based on sex were fundamental to the conceptualization of political modernity." Okay, but *more* fundamental than to religious or premodern societies? Yes, Scott seems to think: the gender differentiations of the non-West were either "imposed by colonial powers, usually in the form of family law, or imported...by those seeking to live up to Western models."

If Scott's goal is to contest "the unqualified good of the secular" and take back the free pass it hands itself on gender progress, she would need to convince me that her historical table-turning, in which it was actually the discourse of secularism that *produced* the gendered hierarchies we associate with religiously traditional societies, isn't just fancy footwork. By fancy footwork, I mean her frequent reliance on what might be called the Foucault gambit: Y, which might *seem* to postdate X (or perhaps be its antithesis), in fact discursively precedes it (or contains it), and here are a few scattered historical anecdotes that cinch the case, but don't press too hard lest they deflate.

Among Scott's indictments of secularism is that its supposed commitment to women's equality keeps getting used to justify foreign intervention in our name. As far as it goes, this is certainly true—I recall my head spinning on hearing George W. Bush invoke women's rights as a reason for invading Iraq in 2003. Scott's example is the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, one rationale for which was that barbaric Arabs mistreated their women and needed to be civilized, making the sexuality of the swarthy a buried yet constitutive feature of secularism.

Yet—and here's the Foucault gambit—from Scott's vantage, the male supremacy that *looks* like a feature of traditional cultures was actually a byproduct of the colonial legacy. Evidence: in the course of the French colonization of Algeria, it was the occupiers who restricted sharia law to family matters, resulting in separate male and female spheres that hadn't previously been demarcated. In other words, Arab "traditions" regarding the social role of women came about as a result of colonialism's secular influence.

This usefully complicates any simple opposition between tradition and modernity, as does Scott's discussion of Frantz Fanon's observations regarding veiling during the Algerian war for independence: the veil was a form of resistance to French inducements to unveil and modernize, yet the veil was also worn, as Scott quotes Fanon, "because tradition demanded a rigid separation of the sexes." Notice that the secular-leaning Fanon's firsthand account blurs and possibly contradicts Scott's more polemical way of telling the story (that such "traditions" were the product of colonial rule), which left me rereading the passage multiple times in an attempt to square the two.

It did often seem, in the course of this book, that Scott's argument was frequently in contradiction with itself. Perhaps it's that the meaning of every term—religion, secularism, tradition, modernity—keeps getting recalibrated. There are so many balls in the air, with so much leapfrogging between continents and time frames and so many extrapolations from the conditions of one moment to pronounce upon another, that it was sometimes hard to keep up.

Scott anticipates such complaints in a perhaps slightly defensive warning to her readers. Yes, she's juxtaposing "examples from places with different histories and geographies," she writes in her introduction, and yes, "some will chafe at what they deem to be overly sweeping transgeographic historical claims," but such readers are misunderstanding her "polemical aim: to engage and discredit, with a broad brush..., the current representation of secularism as the guarantor of equality between men and women." The meanings of the terms she's deploying are unstable; her project

is to expose the purposes to which they've been historically deployed.

Well, perhaps. It was at least helpful to know, when I lost track of the argument, that whatever the example, Western secularism would be the culprit. A case in point is Scott's discussion of veiling in the present, in which Islamic women who voluntarily wear the veil are "self-fashioning"—critiquing secular interpretations of female emancipation—while secular women who don't wear the veil come under Scott's critique for conforming to conventional Western sexual norms.

These attempts at self-fashioning have played out most contentiously in France, beginning in 1989, when a commission ruled that allowing girls to wear headscarves in public schools would undermine the principle of *laïcité*, which advocates for the separation of religious and civil society. The debates surrounding this ruling found French politicians ludicrously attempting to backdate the republic's commitment to gender equality to 1789, arguing for the prohibition of headscarves on behalf of women's equality while, needless to say, ignoring it in almost every other sphere. A ban, clearly aimed at West and North African immigrants, eventually went into effect in 2004.

Scott, among whose previous books is *The Politics of the Veil* (2007), is persuasive when lambasting French politicians for rewriting history; perhaps less so in her conclusion that the contrast between covered and uncovered women was always a creation of secularism. Secularists, she maintains, transform Western women's bodily visibility into an index of achievement, while presuming that covered women lack the freedom to follow their desires, including sexual desires. Further, Western middle-class ideas of what it means to be free require skewed depictions of Muslim women—"they are depicted as sexually oppressed, victims of male violence, deprived entirely of agency in matters personal and religious"—to paper over its own failures at abolishing gender asymmetry.

Here Scott is taking on those (Martha Nussbaum, for example), who align sexual satisfaction with gender equality. Scott declares that there's no necessary connection: "Historically emancipation, freedom, and equality are not equivalents." Does anyone really claim they are? Scott goes so far as to say that "it is only in the contrast with Muslim women's fate" that the idea of sexual freedom "achieves its sense" in the West. *Only*? Is there really no other history of sexual freedom? Scott's tendency to flail against caricatured versions of her opponents' positions while overstating her case doesn't help persuade.

Even if we concede that some uncovered Western heterosexual women conform to sartorial norms that play up femininity to incite male desire, is every campaign for shedding the veil "only" a covert effort to sexualize women? Apparently yes: Scott provides a strenuous parsing of the rhetoric of a Muslim group in France, Ni Putes Ni Soumises (Neither Whores nor Doormats), whose members wish to wear skirts and enjoy their femininity, rather than hide behind veils to resist being looked at. Wrong sort of self-fashioning, according to Scott:

> The femininity evoked here is not the dream of those second-wave feminists who were intent on unleashing "the powers of desire" free of the male gaze; it is instead a more conventional notion that defines women as the object of men's desire.

This is both terrifically condescending and reminiscent of the debates feminists used to have about Madonna in the early 1990s when she was strutting around in those Gaultier cone bras—was she a sexual agent or a female dupe? She obviously couldn't be both.

Who would say there isn't continuing objectification of women in Western democracies? Does that require negating the struggles of non-Western women who appropriate available idioms of freedom, however degraded? (As degraded as commercial rock and roll was for the Prague Spring?) I get that in certain academic camps to speak of "freedom" can only make you a theoretical numbskull because "freedom" is discursively produced; I get that by saying yes to sex one is not saying no to power (Foucault's famous formulation). Maybe French secular Muslims would love to have a feminist poststructuralist on call to explain why their sartorial rebellions are fatally compromised, but what you miss in this account is much of a relation to lived experience. It would be useful to occasionally touch ground.

It's not clear where Muslim women who wish to unveil but are prohibited from doing so fit into Scott's genealogy. Over the last few months there has been a wave of protests in Iran, with dozens of women removing their headscarves—compulsory since 1979—and hanging them on sticks in public places. Iranian police announced in December that they would no longer routinely arrest women for "bad hijab," but would instead send them to Islamic education classes. Nevertheless, at least twenty-nine women have been arrested to date. Even if uncovering is saturated in Western views of freedom and sexual desirability, it strikes me that women's bodies get reified as much in Scott's polemic as in the discourses she's castigating. It's difficult to see that obeisance to modernity's imperatives is worse than the forms of obeisance demanded from women by husbands, mullahs, and morality cops.

Whereas Scott faults secularism for not achieving racial and gender equality, R. Marie Griffith leaves you doubting that the United States ever achieved secularism. In *Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics*, she shows that at every turn in the culture wars of the last century or so, religious leaders have battled to obstruct gender, sexual, and racial equality, frequently with the cooperation of elected officials and the judiciary. Warring over birth control, censorship, sex education, interracial sex, abortion, and same-sex marriage, tearing their ranks and the country apart in the process, the antisecular factions clearly believed that the moral life of every American—and the body of every woman—was in their divinely ordained purview.

Each of Griffith's scrupulously researched chapters, organized roughly chronologically, confounds any easy understanding of the separation between church and state, or indeed between the ecclesiastic and the secular. The schisms among religious leaders themselves were many: Protestants and Catholics split over birth control; conservative Protestants joined Catholics to fight abortion; Catholics for a Free Choice and liberal Protestants aligned with Jews and Planned Parenthood. Southern Baptists were originally pro-choice until after *Roe* v. *Wade*, though according to Griffith, "before the late nineteenth century, the practice of intentionally terminating a human pregnancy was quite common and almost wholly unregulated across the United States"; early in the century abortifacients were routinely advertised not only in mainstream newspapers but in religious ones as well. As late as 1871, by which time abortions had been increasingly outlawed, the American Medical Association estimated that 20 percent of pregnancies were ended intentionally.

DMI/Life Picture Collection/Getty Images

Madonna on her Blond Ambition tour, 1990

Public sexual controversies too had a way of driving wedges between allies. When Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill faced off over her sexual harassment accusations in 1991, white Christian conservatives threw their lot in with a black alleged harasser; progressive Christian women sided with Hill. They all flipped sides when it came to Paula Jones's accusations against Bill Clinton in the mid-1990s. One stalwart Christian lawyer on the Jones team who had actually supported Anita Hill argued (under the sway of antimodernist thinkers who wanted to replace civil law with biblical law) that Clinton's alleged crimes against Jones were "a clear assault on Christ's view of how men and women should relate to each other in the workplace."

A sprightly writer, Griffith sprinkles her social history with textured mini-biographies of the more colorful participants, among them Margaret Sanger, D. H. Lawrence, the sex educator Mary Calderone, and various of their antagonists. Some of her less familiar subjects are drawn from the ranks of the progressive clergy—the first openly gay (and partnered) Episcopal bishop, V. Gene Robinson, and the pro-choice Baptist minister Howard Moody are moving examples. Griffith is good at veering down interesting byways without ever losing the reins of the story: I hadn't known that D. H. Lawrence's Freudianism was transmitted to him by his wife Frieda, who had once had an affair with a psychoanalyst; or that Lawrence's retort to T. S. Eliot's rants against his immorality may have included basing Lady Chatterley's dreary cuckolded husband Clifford on Eliot. The juxtaposition of deep dives and aerial views makes what could have been dusty stuff into a propulsive read.

As do the wrinkles that complicate any easy political assumptions. Birth control was promoted not only by progressives but also by eugenicists. The clergy was a prime mover in maintaining antimiscegenation laws. The black church was progressive on civil rights, except when it came to gay marriage. In Griffith's telling, as against Scott's, it's not primarily secularists who play the role of racists, but there are also more available slots than good guys and bad guys alone.

Among the frictions generated by reading these two books side by side is that in Griffith's account, modernity is as sinful for secularism's opponents as it is blameworthy in Scott's antisecularist polemic. (For Scott, modernity's inception is the colonial conquest of cultural others; for Griffith's crowd it means sexual liberalization.) Modernity—beleaguered, frayed—gets it from all sides.

These frictions are also, to some extent, methodological. For Griffith, gender is a self-evident category: it's sufficient to demonstrate that women's bodies are the ones most subject to regulation. For Scott, defining gender involves pages of explanation on the attribution of cultural meanings to sexed bodies, with detours through psychoanalytic theory that land, ultimately, at indeterminacy. For Griffith, progress involves classes of people attaining rights they previously didn't have. Scott wants us to understand that invoking categories like progress implicates us in horrible historical crimes.

One might argue that Griffith's account relies on unacknowledged secularist assumptions, namely that severing the political from the religious, when achieved, is a step in the right direction. The secular is a motor of equality here, a beneficial force. I'm not saying that it isn't, merely pointing out that a covert progress narrative is embedded in the architecture of Griffith's book, which is structured as a series of successes. Battle by battle, chapter by chapter, religion gets kicked out of politics and law—you might even say religion gets a thumping. Of course the selection of cases and emphases helps: Griffith gives us a rousing account of *Roe* v. *Wade*, merely a paragraph on the passage of the Hyde amendment—which banned federal funds to pay for abortions—and barely a mention of those most affected by the ban, women on Medicaid. We get an exciting blow-by-blow account of the Supreme Court's ruling in the *Obergefell* v. *Hodges* gay marriage case, nothing on Hobby Lobby. All of which I suspect contributed to my pleasure in reading this book.

I definitely prefer Griffith's version of events to the one staring at me in the morning newspaper, which is full of headlines like "The White House Puts the Bible Before the Hippocratic Oath." This was a recent editorial in *The New York Times* with a link to a government website tendentiously titled "Conscience and Religious

Freedom," informing religious health providers that they can refuse to participate in any procedures they object to, presumably abortions. In practice, this apparently includes denying women information about such procedures, even when their health is at risk. Astoundingly, the photograph gracing the site is of a female doctor in a hijab. So an image of a presumably Muslim woman is being enlisted by the Trump administration to endorse the reregulated female body—the veil is repurposed as a symbol of Western freedom, while *Roe* continues to get chiseled away. It's almost as though someone at the White House got an advance copy of *Sex and Secularism* and was having a bit of fun spinning Scott's argument like a top.

Griffith's preference for tales of progress may be why her epilogue on the election of Donald Trump feels a bit muted, as though written under the weight of a great repression. God is going strong in political life these days and appears to have personally stepped in to elect the current president, against every probability. Nor did evangelicals and their pals need to hold their noses to vote for him (as others of us have had to with the various Clintons), so certain were they of his fealty on the only issue that mattered to them: depriving women of abortion rights. He even suggested he'd punish women who had one. Elated, the religious right decided they could overlook the unpalatable stuff—the divorces, the philandering, the gross boasts—as long as he saved those fetuses.

In Griffith's too apt words, Trump may not have won "in spite of his attitude toward women but because of it." Who cares about sexual morality if gender hierarchy can be preserved? We're one nation—of fetuses—under God. Secularism? Not in my lifetime, apparently. □

The Curse of Cortés

Álvaro Enrigue

When Montezuma Met Cortés: The True Story of the Meeting That Changed History
by Matthew Restall.
Ecco, 526 pp., $35.00

On the road to Toboso, where he is hoping to meet Dulcinea, Don Quixote talks to Sancho Panza about the nature of fame. He mentions four characters from classical literature who achieved it by acts of unlikely valor, Julius Caesar among them. Then he adds a more modern figure: "the gallant Cortés." Appearing in *Don Quixote* alongside Julius Caesar is no mean achievement for a member of the minor aristocracy who enriched himself as a bureaucrat on the furthest shores of the Spanish empire.

The reference in *Don Quixote de La Mancha* is not the only one Cervantes makes to Hernán Cortés. In "The Novel of the Glass Lawyer," one of the stories in the *Exemplary Novels*, he mentions Cortés in passing when writing about Venice:

> But thanks be to heaven and the great Hernando de Cortés, who conquered great Mexico City so that great Venice would in some way have some competition. These two famous cities resemble each other in their streets, which are all of water: the one in Europe, the admiration of the old world; the one in America, the fright of the new.

National Palace, Mexico City/Schalkwijk/Art Resource

Detail of Diego Rivera's Disembarkation of the Spanish at Veracruz, *showing Hernán Cortés as a hunchback, 1951*

That to Cervantes, Cortés should be like Julius Caesar, and that Tenochtitlan—the original name for Mexico City—was a fright (*espanto*), gives a clear sense of seventeenth-century imperial Spain's perception of the Conquest of Mexico. Cortés was a figure with the stature of a classical hero, and the city of Tenochtitlan an abomination that was subjugated and occupied by Spain, with Providence guiding Cortés's arm.

This perception has changed. Any military occupation that directly or indirectly caused the deaths, in less than a century, of 90 percent of the population is hardly one to celebrate. It is true that Aztec civilization continues to be seen as a particularly bloodthirsty one, but the general assessment of it has also become more sophisticated. If Cervantes—a knowledgeable dissident in his time—lived today, he would recognize Cortés as a genocidal killer and would not define Tenochtitlan as a "fright" but as a triumph of environmentally sound engineering whose inhabitants suffered from a worrying tendency to make violent death into a performance.

In *When Montezuma Met Cortés*, the American historian Matthew Restall examines documents concerning the military conflict that set the Aztecs in opposition to the Spanish empire in 1520. His aim is to reassess the process of simplification by which Cortés, in his letters to King Carlos I (also Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire), justified the permanent occupation of Mexico and gave it a moral basis. Cortés's vaguenesses and generalizations were extraordinarily effective—you might accuse him of many things, but not of being unable to tell a convincing story—and implied, according to Restall, that Emperor Montezuma and Cortés had more important parts in the conflict than was actually the case. Restall argues that the Spaniard's account would come to distort our understanding of what was in fact a messy and confusing war, one that involved several armies and leaders from several nations, all in alliances with or opposition to one another for a variety of reasons.

Before Cortés sailed to Mexico, he had lived in the Caribbean for fifteen years, first in Hispaniola and then in Cuba. Like other settlers, he received *encomiendas*, grants that gave him land and the right to exploit the labor of native inhabitants, whom he forced to search for precious metals. He served as a notary in Hispaniola and later was secretary to Diego de Velázquez, Cuba's governor. Restall notes that during this time Cortés did not participate in any of the expeditions that explored or conquered parts of the Caribbean, South America, or Mexico, but rather "lived an ordinary life on Hispaniola and Cuba because he was an ordinary man of ordinary abilities."

In 1518, Velázquez selected Cortés to lead an expedition along the Mexican coast; according to Restall, he was not a major figure in the power struggles among Cuba's wealthier and more experienced Spaniards. Before the ships were scheduled to launch, however, Velázquez changed his mind and withdrew his authorization of the mission. Cortés proceeded anyway, departing Cuba with ships and men and landing in Mexico on April 21, 1519. What was meant to be an exploratory voyage eventually became, under Cortés's illicit leadership, one of conquest. Velázquez later tried to get Cortés declared a traitor for his disobedience.

How did this unremarkable man become as famous as Julius Caesar? At the start of his book, Restall makes use of a term coined by Dennis Tedlock, the translator of the *Popol Vuh*—the holy book of the K'iche' Mayas—to define historiography in Mesoamerican cultures. According to Tedlock, the pre-Hispanic epics are "mythistories" because they make no distinction between the factual and the legendary; their function is not to shore up what Westerners define as historical truth, but to supply a foundational narrative that helps a group of people form a collective identity. In the opening pages of *When Montezuma Met Cortés*, Restall applies Tedlock's neologism to European narratives of the Conquest. Although European mythistories are based on the historical record, they make use of the beliefs and literary imaginations of those who circulated them with the aim of constructing an ideology that could be exploited for political gain.

In his effort to see history from the Aztecs' point of view, Restall deploys strategies that have been used before: explaining where indigenous sources came from and how they were written, and examining the work of contemporary Mexican historians and archaeologists, who have always been more inclined to sympathize with the Aztecs than the European and American writers who had, until recently, dominated the discourse on the Conquest of Mexico. The most spectacular and productive of Restall's strategies is purely rhetorical: by renaming the Conquest of Mexico "the Spanish-Aztec War," he grants the losers an active part in it. In this same vein, he refers to the Spanish captains and their men by the name given to them by their Nahua allies and