

**Un- Privatizing Pastoral Concerns:
On The Feminine, Secularism, and Neoliberal Culture**

Danube Noel Johnson
Harvard Divinity School

As contemporary analyses of the status of religion in modern nation-states suggest, secularism has led to the relegation of religious practices, belief, and values to the private sphere. The private—particularity, subjectivity, irrationality, religion, domesticity, the mystic—is distinguished from what is considered the public sphere, which is characterized by modern, liberal principles—universality, objectivity, rationality, secularism, civility, the sensible.¹ Feminist theorists, like Joan Scott, Ann Pellegrini, and Janet Jakobsen, have further considered this differentiation in terms of a gendered binary.² The public sphere represents the masculine, while the private sphere represents the feminine. I am particularly interested in the normalizing effects of this gendered breakdown in the context of contemporary neoliberal culture and contemporary feminist discourse.

Drawing upon sources that are critical of secularism and modern nation-state ideology, I first aim to explicate the significance of neoliberalism and the breakdown between the public and private sphere with an emphasis on gender normativity. After considering Michel Foucault's theory of "pastoral power" and the obvious, yet tacit, principle of interdependency inherent in *any* given social context, I will discuss a feminist value that comes to the fore in light of this analysis.

As I discussed in the introduction, there is an apparent differentiation between the public and the private in modern secular nation-states. In *Orientalism and Religion*, Richard King notes that this distinction finds its roots in the Enlightenment era. He writes, "The Enlightenment ideal of objective knowledge involved the notion of eradicating all subjective prejudgments in favor of a 'neutral' and 'objective' approach, detached from

¹ Talal Asad. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003. Print.

² Linell Elizabeth Cady and Tracy Fessenden, eds. *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*. New York: Columbia UP, 2013. Print.

emotional, affective and personal biases, through the skillful use of the faculty of reason and a sound methodology.”³ Taking up this Enlightenment notion, modern nation-states like France, Germany, Great Britain and the United States, began to form liberal democratic principles based upon the principle that reason, distinct from the mystical or religion, serves as an *emancipatory* force in freeing Man from the irrational, superstitious constraints of religious doctrine and belief. Thus emerged secularism. As William T. Cavanaugh notes in *The Myth of Religious Violence*, “the very separation of religion from politics is an invention of the modern West.”⁴

Of course, this *perceived* separation does not mean that the two are independent from one another. In fact, they are intimately linked and, as “mutually definitional—you know the meaning of one by its relation to the other.”⁵ Nevertheless, ideally, to secularists, (private) “religion” and (public) “politics” are not affected by one another. However, an obvious problem is that individuals, no matter how “rational,” are both private and public. In *Formations of the Secular*, Talal Asad points to a very obvious flaw of this dichotomy: “For the *experience* of religion in the ‘private’ spaces of home and school is crucial to the formation of subjects who will eventually inhabit a particular public culture. It determines not only the ‘background’ by which shared principles of that culture are interpreted, but also what is to count as interpretive ‘background’ as against ‘foreground’ political principles.”⁶

With Asad’s argument in mind, we may deduce that for an individual to even attempt to distinguish his political perspective from his religious background would only

³ Richard King. "Sacred Texts and World Religions." *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'the Mystic East'* London: Routledge, 1999. 73. Print.

⁴ William T. Cavanaugh. "Introduction." *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 5. Print.

⁵ Janet R. Jakobsen, and Ann Pellegrini. *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*. Ed. Linell Elizabeth Cady and Tracy Fessenden. New York: Columbia U, 2013. 161-201. Print.

⁶ Asad 185

mean that he must abandon an integral part of his own identity. Even if this sort of compartmentalization were possible, it suggests that a clean separation between politics and religion inherently undermines the legitimacy of religious belief. This is a *fundamental* problem upon which review of secularism's legitimacy must begin. As Joan Scott writes, "Let us take our distance from the emancipatory story secularism has learned to tell about itself."⁷

In her essay, "Secularism and Gender Equality," Scott problematizes secularism's self-congratulatory claim of liberating women from the allegedly ever-oppressive grip of religion, particularly when it comes to secular perspectives on veiled Muslim women, for example.⁸ That is, the assumption of Western secularists is that Muslim women are oppressed by their religion and forced into wearing headscarves. Furthermore, they dismiss any protest by Muslim women against this assumption as "false consciousness."⁹ Of course, this threatens a Muslim woman's (or any woman's, for that matter) right to agency, which is itself an ironic, anti-feminist, oppressive assertion.

Similar to the descriptive distinction between public and private I offered in the introduction, Scott lists a series of oppositions: "modern/traditional, secular/religion, sexually liberated/sexually oppressed, gender equality/patriarchal hierarchy, West/East..."¹⁰ This is especially important when it comes to the gender distinction, which, as Scott, along with many others, concludes is a part of the same series. This is for a very good reason. Scott argues that there is a crucial link between the public subject, and masculinity, mediated by the notion of reason: "...Because secularization in the Christian lands of the West proceeds by defining religion as a matter of private

⁷ Scott 36

⁸ Scott 39

⁹ Scott 53

¹⁰ Scott 40

conscience, just as it privatizes matters familial and sexual. When reason becomes the defining attribute of the citizen and when abstraction enables the interchangeability of one individual citizen for another, passions get assigned not just to the marital bed, but to the sexualized body of the woman.”¹¹ “Passions” in this passage represent that which is particular, thus incompatible with the so-called universal nature of “reason.”

To further scrutinize the dogmatic notion that religion is responsible for repressive perspectives on femininity, Scott notes that the founding theories of modern political philosophy held sexist views, which argued that *nature* (or biology) dictates women’s so-called rightful places in society. In this respect, men are the individualistic, independent subjects whose bodies are not dedicated to reproduction. Because of this, men can be *abstracted*. Women, on the other hand, are conceived of as weak, dependent bodies. They are not “self-owning.”¹² In *Orientalism*, King echoes Scott’s historical analysis of the Enlightenment’s “Othering” mysticism, which is constructed as the opposite of rationality: “In fact, ‘the mystical’ has tended to be defined in post-Kantian thought in direct opposition to the ‘rational.’ Mysticism comes to represent the preeminently private, the non-rational and the quietistic. As such, it represents the suppressed Other that contributes to the establishment of and high status of those spheres of human activity that are defined as public, rational and socially oriented...”¹³ From this, we can understand how the private is constantly mediated, defined, and subverted by the public.

The relevance of Scott’s critique to this paper is two-fold. Firstly, she makes clear the fact that secularism has *not* been instrumental in emancipatory feminist strides.

¹¹ Scott 41

¹² Scott 42

¹³ King 25

Indeed, it has contributed to women's oppression by denying women's agency and relegating femininity to the private sphere. Secondly, Scott locates the modern woman's role within the private sphere, which, as I have shown, is ultimately also subjected to the public sphere.

Following Scott's reading and reasoning, authors Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle cast the United States as a primitive nation, using notions like sacrifice and totem ritual to suggest the possibility that perhaps America is no "better" or more progressive than tribal social organization in *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation*.¹⁴ In the chapter entitled, "Dismemberment and reconstruction: the domain of the popular and its flag," they argue that the *totem* flag—the standard American flag—is the symbolic equivalent to the *male*, while the "popular" flag—encompassing deconstructed versions found in everything from starred-and-striped bed linens to Uncle Sam's costume and image—represents local, domestic, feminine qualities. Accordingly, the standard flag is pure, objective, and represents the perfect nation, while the popular flag represents impure, subjective, adapted nationalist character. Marvin and Ingle write, "Popular flag practice embraces feeling."¹⁵

With an understanding of the gendered binary, I would now like to offer what I find to be an important addition to the public/private dichotomy—namely, sovereign power/pastoral power. In *Omnes et Singulatim*, Foucault gives a genealogical account of what he sees as two main figures throughout the Western political history up until the Enlightenment: the King (who may evolve into 'the politician') represents sovereign

¹⁴ Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle. *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 1999. Print.

¹⁵ Marvin and Ingle 225

power, and the Shepherd (or the pastor) represents pastoral power.¹⁶ He says this of pastoral power: “What I mean in fact is the development of power techniques oriented towards individuals and intended to rule them in a continuous and permanent way. If the state is the political form of a centralized power, let us call pastorship the individualizing power.”¹⁷

Broadly speaking, the King rules over a *land*, rather than a particular population. He is entitled simply by virtue of his position, and wields power universally over his kingdom. This is distinct from the shepherd who wields power over his particular flock, not a territory. The shepherd’s “salvation” is intimately linked to the safety and health of every member of his flock. If one member goes astray, he is just as responsible for it as he is for the rest of the flock.¹⁸ He must know his flock as a group, and also as individuals. Foucault argues that the shepherd, throughout the Middle Ages, evolves into the pastor, all the while remaining concerned with the health and wellbeing of each individual member of his parish. Without explicitly acknowledging the *necessity* of the pastor’s function—namely, caretaking—Foucault acknowledges that it has been a fundamental issue throughout the history of Western political theory. He even cites a rhetorical question that Plato asked: “How would the politician ever find the time to come and sit by each person, feed him, give him concerts, and care for him when sick?”¹⁹ Cavanaugh hedges on such a distinction, arguing that the secular/religious distinction was not necessarily a *decisive* move by those in power, yet “it was established as the result of

¹⁶ Michel Foucault. “Omnes et Singulatim.” *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate: On Human Nature*. New York: New, 2006. Print.

¹⁷ Foucault 227

¹⁸ Foucault 179

¹⁹ Foucault 235

some contingent shifts in how power was distributed between civil and ecclesiastical authorities in early modern Europe.”²⁰

As I mentioned, Foucault only acknowledges the problem of pastoral concern. He does not venture beyond this. However, assuming that the pastor’s role is necessary—that is, tending to the flock’s needs in healthcare, presumably child-rearing practices, et cetera—a central question relevant to this paper comes to the fore: Who, in modern, secular nation-states, is the pastor? I argue that the modern woman’s role is designated toward tending to pastoral concerns. As the modern man represents the abstract, dominant, political concerns, the modern woman represents the particular, self-sacrificial, care-taking concerns.

At this point, I would like to further problematize the modern woman’s (the pastor’s) location within the private sphere in regard to a current, rather pervasive, and much contested theme in political discourse: neoliberalism. To do this, first I will offer a working definition.

It is helpful to not think of neoliberalism as simply an ideology. Rather, it is pertinent that we think of neoliberalism as what Foucault calls a *totalitarian theory*²¹—not just a political or moral position, but a theory strung together by a set of political and economic practices that converge in a given society to elicit a particular conception of the individual citizen as one endowed with an utmost sense of individual responsibility when it comes to self-fulfillment and economic prosperity. Individuals are urged to become a *better* version of themselves. In *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity*, Brenda Weber argues that neoliberalism involves a “mandate for care of the self in

²⁰ Cavanaugh 7

²¹ Michael Kelly, Michel Foucault, and Jürgen Habermas. "Two Lectures." *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1994. 17-46. Print.

service of the market.”²² To be clear, this is distinct from liberalism. Liberals, in the classical sense, carry a certain ideology that supports the importance of political action that *actively* keeps the government from interfering in economic affairs—liberalism is typically closely related to so-called democratic processes. Neoliberalism, on the other hand, is more than just associated with ideas that characterize a particular relationship between the state and society. In “What is Neoliberalism?,” Dag Einar Thorsen and Amund Lie argue, “Neoliberalism is for instance silent on the issue of whether or not there ought to be democracy and free exchange of political ideas... In fact, neoliberals merely claim, in effect, that as much as possible ought to be left to the market or other processes which individuals freely choose to take part in, and consequently that as litpossible ought to be subject to genuine *political* process.”²³ Thus, we can conceive of neoliberalism as a passive political state, wherein individuals are paradoxically only interested in political processes as long as they are in the service of limiting the effects of the political itself.

Thorsen and Lie go on to argue that in neoliberal societies, power is thus relocated from the political to the economic—“from the state to the markets and individuals, and finally from the legislature and executive authorities to the judiciary.”²⁴ With this power comes the endowment of responsibility I mentioned earlier. Furthermore, this limiting of the effects of political processes subsequently limits the effects of political movements. Thus, neoliberalism is autonomous, creating an impenetrable shell under which all societal activity takes place, rendering it *totalitarian*.

²² Brenda R. Weber. *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2009. 34. Print.

²³ Dag Einar Thorsen and Amund Lie. "What is neoliberalism." *Oslo, University of Oslo, Department of Political Science, Manuscript* (2006).

²⁴ Thorsen 15

As Foucault argues, *totalitarian theories* like neoliberalism erupt as a result of an emergence of “increasing vulnerability to criticism of things, institutions, practices, discourses”—they emerge as systems with the ability to withstand overwhelming amounts of criticism.²⁵ A qualifying characteristic of such a *theory* is that every criticism of it is “put in abeyance, or at least curtailed, divided, overthrown, caricatured, theatricalized.”²⁶ In this context, there are a number of examples wherein the notion of a society wherein interdependency is recognized as a vital, necessary component is caricatured, or at least mocked, in neoliberal politics.

Through Martha Nussbaum’s elaboration on the same matter, we can see how interdependency—what I argue is a condition under which pastoral care is legitimized—becomes feminized, particularly considering the modern nation-state’s appeal to the social contract theory. Nussbaum states, “I think it lies behind the decline of welfare programs in [America]. I think it lies behind many Americans’ skepticism about Europe, about European social democracy. You hear terms like the ‘nanny state’ as though there is something wrong with the idea of maternal care as a conception of what a society actually does. We see it another way, in images of who the ‘real man’ is. The ‘real man’ is sort of like these people in the state of nature. He doesn’t deeply need anyone. He isn’t bound to anyone by ties of love and compassion.”²⁷ What feminists scholars like Joan Scott would argue is that what Nussbaum is suggesting—the rational, modern man’s repudiation of “maternal care” and “love and compassion” —is exactly how the breakdown between the public and private spheres occurs once the so-called rational

²⁵ Thorsen 19

²⁶ Two Lectures, 20

²⁷ Martha Nussbaum. "Justice." Ed. Astra Taylor. *Examined Life: Excursions with Contemporary Thinkers*. New York: New, 2009. 115-32. Print.

man's position is taken to be a legitimate source of modern political organization. Again, with the repudiation of all things *not* rational, comes his repudiation of religion as well.

To elaborate on Nussbaum's point, a "nanny state" would, in fact, bring what is thought of as "private" matters into the public sphere, acknowledging that features like healthcare, nutrition, shelter, et cetera, are provisions that we do, in fact, depend upon one another for. I think acknowledgements of interdependency, the need for pastoral care, and of the fact that women have primarily been the ones to provide such care, holds potentially empowering effects for feminist's projects.

With this being said, there is no doubt that many feminists have taken up the neoliberal ethic of self-cultivation, autonomy, and of course, wealth. Sheryl Sandberg, billionaire and Facebook executive, is a prime example of this. Her book, *Lean In*, encourages young women to be strong, liberated, and in need of no one's help.²⁸ She has even begun a "Ban Bossy" campaign, wherein she encourages young girls to reject the label "bossy," and instead, strive to be a "boss."²⁹ This is obviously the same sort of male-dominated, capitalistic, neoliberal rhetoric that I see as counterproductive, and will only end up marginalizing other disenfranchised, minority groups, even it is not necessarily women. Clearly, everyone cannot be a boss, so Sandberg is more concerned with women *competing* at a level presumably equal to men's.

With this being said, it is crucial that we recognize how enmeshed neoliberalism is within American nationalism, especially neoliberal economic policies. Recalling Marvin and Ingle's analysis, one of the ways in which they support their theory is by indicting "the American Way of Life" as an unquestionably paramount value. They go

²⁸Sheryl Sandberg. *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. New York: Random House, 2013. Print.

²⁹"Ban Bossy. Encourage Girls to Lead." *Ban Bossy. Encourage Girls to Lead*. Lean In Foundation, Apr. 2014. Web. 16 Apr. 2014.

as far as to suggest the adherence to this way of life is an “unacknowledged faith” that is pervasive throughout the nation, citing the flag as a religious symbol that exercises “transcendent utility.”³⁰

Attempting to empower women by the use of rhetoric, and work ethic values will pigeonhole us into the same problem over and over again. Foucault argues, “The successes of history belongs to those who are capable of seizing these rules, to replace those who had used them, to disguise themselves so as to pervert them, invert their meaning and redirect them against those who had initially imposed them.”³¹ The process Foucault details in this passage requires difficult, tricky work. Keeping Marvin and Ingle’s critique of American nationalism—characterized by unwavering, rather blind loyalty to neoliberal, individualistic ideals of “freedom” and “liberty”—any feminist critique that departs from neoliberalism will be met with significant challenges and pushback from those committed to maintaining the status quo. In *Formations*, Asad perfectly articulates a way in which the totalitarian nature of neoliberal progressive narrative is able to account for its own shortcomings: “Thus what has often been described as the political exclusion of women, the property-less, colonial subjects, in liberalism’s history can be re-described as the gradual extension of liberalism’s incomplete project of universal emancipation.”³²

Of course, the sort of solutions that neoliberal feminists like Sheryl Sandberg offer are easy and campaigns like “Ban Bossy” are catchy, but they run the very likely risk of simply reconfiguring the same problem in a different way—they run the risk of marginalizing a *different* group of people.

³⁰ Marvin and Ingle 18-19

³¹ Michel Foucault. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite* (1971): 145-72. *Ucdenvr.edu*. The Regents of the University of Colorado. Web. 2 Dec. 2013.

³² Asad 59

To be clear, I am not advocating that all women should commit themselves to domestic labor or “stay in their place” in the private sphere, I am advocating that we radically reinterpret the narrative and its meaning to subvert the essentializing, and indeed oppressive, secularist, neoliberal discourse not just for women, but for all groups that have been “Othered.”

Women in neoliberal culture can succumb to its pressures and continue to support the notion that it is better to be “liberated,” “independent,” and therefore, rational, masculine, and progressive. However, women could introduce a new feminist conscience, which is what Foucault would call an *insurrection of subjugated knowledges*.³³ By honoring what the traditional role of women has been—namely, the private pastors of modernity—and acknowledging that the role of interdependency as a vital component of human existence, women may find themselves in a position of power that would drastically alter not only feminist discourse, but broader discourses concerning modern nation-states for the better. This has the potential to lead to policy shifts away from totalitarian neoliberal policies, wherein individuals who do need help—disabled persons, impoverished and underprivileged groups—may get the support they need. Thus, this sort of reflection will not only help along feminist projects but will, in the process, open up new discursive space for other political or social groups who have found their identities marginalized or subverted under stifling conditions of modern, secular neoliberal culture.

³³ “Two Lectures” 20

Works Cited

- Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003. Print.
- "Ban Bossy. Encourage Girls to Lead." *Ban Bossy. Encourage Girls to Lead*. Lean In Foundation, Apr. 2014. Web. 16 Apr. 2014.
- Cady, Linell Elizabeth, and Tracy Fessenden, eds. *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*. New York: Columbia UP, 2013. Print.
- Cavanaugh, William T. *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.
- Chomsky, Noam, and Michel Foucault. *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate: On Human Nature*. New York: New, 2006. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite (1971): 145-72*. Ucdenver.edu. The Regents of the University of Colorado. Web. 2 Dec. 2013.
- Jakobsen Janet R., and Ann Pellegrini. *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*. Ed. Linell Elizabeth Cady and Tracy Fessenden. New York: Columbia U, 2013. 161-201. Print.
- Kelly, Michael, Michel Foucault, and Jurgen Habermas. "Two Lectures." *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1994. 17-46. Print.
- King, Richard. *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'the Mystic East'* London: Routledge, 1999. Print.
- Marvin, Carolyn, and David W. Ingle. *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 1999. Print.
- Nussbaum, Martha. "Justice." *Examined Life: Excursions with Contemporary Thinkers*. Ed. Astra Taylor. New York: New, 2009. 115-32. Print.
- Sandberg, Sheryl. *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. New York: Random House, 2013. Print.
- Thorsen, Dag Einar, and Amund Lie. "What is neoliberalism." *Oslo, University of Oslo, Department of Political Science, Manuscript (2006)*.
- Weber, Brenda R. *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2009. 34. Print.