

(In)visible through the veil: re-thinking the secular and the religious subject

Giorgia Baldi, baldi.giorgia@yahoo.it

The image of a silent Muslim woman under the shroud of a burqa has been one of the most recurrent during the ongoing Western ‘war for democracy’. The veil which, since the colonization period, has been a powerful symbol associated with the ‘backwardness’ of Muslim culture, is still one of the most debated issues when thinking about religious freedom. However, while in the last two centuries the meaning of the veil as a ‘sign of’ Muslim women’s oppression remained unchanged in Western culture, in Muslim majority societies veiling is an immanent and performative ever-changing phenomenon which takes different meanings, colors and forms in different cultural and historical contexts. I argue that it is exactly the operation of collapsing differences among Muslim women through the reading of veiling as a monolithic symbol of something intrinsically ‘other’ that nowadays reproduces neo-colonial thought.

This paper argues that western semiotic ideology, which give to images and signs a fixed meaning arbitrarily defined by social convention or by law, does not take into consideration the “affective and embodied practices through which a subject comes to relate to a particular sign”(Mahmood 2009, 841–2) and naturalizes and define the religious subject as an individual who simply submits him/herself to a set of recommendations based on general beliefs: in other words, secularism conceives religion as a simple belief, and so as a matter of personal choice. This understanding is strictly linked to the place of religions within the secular state and to the role of the law in regulating religious practices, such as the veil, in the public space. In this sense, secularism is not understood as the mere separation between temporal and spiritual power, but as the re-conceptualization of religious sensitivities and religious practices in the modern world (Mahmood 2009; Asad 2003): thus, while secular thought has come to define concepts of state, economy, religion and law, it simultaneously create a specific law and religious subject.

I consider this issue through the lenses of the passionate debate that the European legal decisions over the practice of veiling have developed in the last years which rely on the assumption that veiling is ‘irreconcilable with the principle of gender equality’ and thus ‘incompatible with Western democratic values’.

I draw on Mahmood’s study (2005) of ‘pious women’ to argue that non-liberal traditions have developed different understanding of religion and bodily practices: if, on the one hand, secular rationality defines religion (and religious signs/practices) as a ‘private matter’, then on the other ‘pietists women’ disclose a performative/affective understanding of (religious) bodily practices. Mahmood’s analysis is of particular interest as it reveals that what is often ignored is the way in which liberal thought defines and universalizes a specific Christian/liberal/secular rational based on very specific concepts of religion and, along with it, of women’s agency and freedom. I argue

that these universal(ist) concepts are expressed in the juridical regulation of women's bodies which reveals the inadequacy of western universal(ist) discourse over the notion of bodily practice, and women's freedom and agency within non-liberal pluralistic contexts: by taking into consideration only a very liberal/secular understanding of religious practices and women's freedom and agency, not only European judges exclude different concepts of freedom and agency and different forms of 'humanity'(Esmeir 2012), but they also bring private sentiments into the public sphere. In the case, by defining the veil as a fixed 'religious symbol' in contrast with liberal values of gender equality, the secular state defines the proper place of religion and religious practices in the 'modern world'.

Thus, it is not through the analysis of women's freedom, but through the symbology conferred on the practice of veiling that the gender dimension of the problem can be unfolded. Drawing on Goodrich's study of the power of images (1995), and Asad's analysis of the secular (2006), I argue that the definition of veiling as a fixed 'symbol' in contrast with democratic values allows for an exercise of sovereignty aimed at maintaining the unity and homogeneity of a people: through the juridical regulation of symbols and images in the public sphere, the sovereign state gives to religious practices their proper place within secularized democracies. In this sense, as Mancini argues (2014), the regulation of (Muslim) women's attire can only 'defend' a very specific kind of democracy which is based on a form of 'substantial homogeneity', as the one described by Schmitt. It is in the name of an 'imagined' European homogeneity that "secularized religion and secularism are used in order to exclude the other and protect the culturally homogenous character of European societies that is perceived – and even explicitly described – as threatened by pluralism and globalization"(Mancini 2008, 2666).

References

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2002. 'Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others'. *American Anthropologist* 104 (3): 783–90.
- Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford University Press.
- . 2006. 'French Secularism and the "Islamic Veil Affair"'. *Hedgehog Review* 8 (1/2): 93.
- Esmeir, Samera. 2012. *Juridical Humanity: A Colonial History*. Stanford University Press.
- Goodrich, Peter. 1995. *Oedipus Lex: Psychoanalysis, History, Law / . Philosophy, Social Theory, and the Rule of Law*. University of California Press.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject / .* Princeton University Press.
- . 2009. 'Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?' *Critical Inquiry* 35 (4): 836–62.
- Mancini, Susanna. 2008. 'Power of Symbols and Symbols as Power: Secularism and Religion as Guarantors of Cultural Convergence, The'. *Cardozo L. Rev.* 30: 2629.
- . 2010. 'The Crucifix Rage: Supranational Constitutionalism Bumps against the Counter-Majoritarian Difficulty'. *European Constitutional Law Review* 6 (01): 6–27.
- Susanna Mancini. 2014. 'The Tempting of Europe, the Political Seduction of the Cross: A Schmittian Reading of Christianity and Islam in European Constitutionalism'. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

