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The book aims to give a critical contribution to the ongoing debates on the notion of ‘postsecularism’ coined by Jürgen Habermas. Challenging the apparent consensus existing in European public discourse around secularism and its alleged ‘Christian roots’ (also emphasized by C. Taylor), according to which Humanism is a secular version of Christianity, the authors point out that this line of thinking excludes Islam from the so called ‘western rationality’ and consequently from what is considered to be its ‘offsprings’: human rights and emancipation. The book explicitly rejects the dominant perspective of ‘Christian exceptionalism’, as well as a Eurocentric universalism and a problematic view of the West according to which women’s and LGBT’s rights are something acquired in western societies and racism something of the past. In fact, complex analyses avoid the simplified and dichotomised understanding of an ‘allegedly progressive Christian tradition and the allegedly backward others, starting with the Muslim’ (p. 4). Questioning the continuum between secularism and emancipation also means to reject the oversimplified thesis of an insurmountable antagonism between agency and spirituality. This antagonism is typical of normative forms of secularism existing nowadays in Europe which, according to the authors, ‘run(s) the risk of complicity with anti-Islam racism and xenophobia’ (p. 8) among other things.

The first chapters of the book discuss the validity of the categories of secularism, postsecularism, multiculturalism, and citizenship to cover the topic of the possibility, and desirability (or not) of religion in public space. Tariq Modood focuses on the phenomenon of public religion and on reactions of religions against their political marginalization and he concludes that that there is a direct relation between the crisis of secularism and the challenge of multiculturalism.
The author proposes a ‘multiculturalized moderate secularism’ as a way to accommodate Muslims in Europe. Anders Berg-Sørensen, on the other hand, defends a ‘critical secularism’, that is, secularism under surveillance of the core political ideals of Enlightenment (liberty, equality, tolerance and impartiality). These core ideals enable a critique of the use and abuse of power in the name of religion as well as a critique of the use and abuse of power in the name of secularism. However, Christoph Baumgartner points out the dangers involved in a unidimensional definition of the conditions of participating in public political debates between religious and non-religious citizens. According to him (and giving the example of the debates on Muhammad cartoons) Habermas’ focus on cognitive aspects of deliberative forms of public debate leaves in the shade “communicative distortions that are caused by visceral and emotional aspects rather than by problems of translating religious truth claims into ‘secular’ reasons” (p. 91).

The book also presents relevant contributions to postcolonial approaches. Patrick Eisenlohr presents the example of religious mobilization among Muslims in Mauritius and in Mumbai in order to illustrate his main thesis, according to which instead of speaking too hastily about postsecularism we should acknowledge that ‘religion actually never went away but was powerfully transformed by European imperial expansion and the rise of the nation state’ (p. 195). According to Eisenlohr, the state plays an important role in the standardization of religion through its regimes of regulation of religion and of religious plurality. This regulation, occurring in the context of globalization, fosters major standardized forms of religion. Pamela Klassen, referring to the ‘Indian Land Question’ in British Columbia, is convinced, on the contrary, that at the beginning of the twentieth century Christian missionaries and colonial state worked to create the secular by abolishing certain religious mentalities, and instantiating secular practices and rights (such as the right to land) to Christian citizens. Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley establish a clever link between postcolonialism and what they call the ‘postracial common sense’ that constitutes a ‘lauderer of racism’ in contemporary discourses on islamophobic materials spread in Europe (such as films, cartoons, etc.). The ‘European postracialism’ roots its arguments in the assertion that multiculturalist experiences in Europe have failed. Also, it adopts a strategy according to which it is not cultural difference that is rejected, but ‘cultural excess’ (or ‘bad diversity’). This strategy goes along with the racialization and the ontological timeless categorization of Muslims, and with discourses on an ‘abstract “secular”, projected and territorialized as an exclusive property of European public space’ (p. 149). Ernst van den Hemel, on the other hand, speaking about the claiming of Judeo-Christian roots of Dutch society by conservative nationalists, shows that it is possible to adopt a postsecular anti-Islamic tactic by means of a ‘culturalized notion of religion’ best summarized in the following quotation of the Dutch liberal politician Frits Bolkestein (cit. in p. 63): ‘I am not a religious person, but culturally speaking, I am most certainly Christian’. Koen Leurs and Sandra Ponzanesi call to a deeper understanding of new forms of appropriation of religion in cosmopolitan contexts such as the ones experienced by young Moroccan girls and boys in the Netherlands.

Eva Midden and Anne-Marie Korte deal directly with gender issues in their contributions to this book. Midden pleads for a more inclusive feminism, since mainstream western feminism is generally known as being secular and risks to
‘be (mis)used for racist purposes’ (p. 213). According to her, there is the need for a broader debate on the struggles for emancipation, as well as for their contextualization and for an intersectional approach. The discourse analysis results of focus groups with women from various women’s organisations in the Netherlands leads her to conclude that it is relevant to recognize the existence and validity of various interpretations of subjectivity and of agency also for women with religious belongings. Korte writes about blasphemous feminist art, with a special focus on Madonna’s crucifixion scene. She thinks that this provocative and evocative form of art makes visible the changing role of religion in society, in particular the disturbing idea of ‘a progressive rationalization and privatization of religion’ (p. 231).

Rosi Braidotti closes the book with a chapter on the defence of ‘an affirmational politics, resting on a vital materialist vision of subjectivity’ (p. 251) that includes traces of non-theistic spirituality, as well as an understanding of vitalism as a relational philosophy, in which ‘relational nomadic subjects engage in transversal connections’ (p. 256) in the context of multiple ecologies, generating communities that acknowledge difference instead of sameness.

The book combines theoretical approaches with empirical research, following a sequence that is not always clear, since we are presented with specific analysis of particular European societies followed by philosophical chapters (such as the chapter from William Egginton on the eradication of transcendence and on the defence of religious knowledge as a different kind of knowledge that societies should recognize; or Gregg Lambert’s text on the return of Saint Paul in contemporary philosophy). ‘Transformations of Religion in the Public Sphere’ presents a relevant contribution to overcoming the meta-narrative of secularism as the ‘grand theory’ used to describe the position of religions in European societies and takes steps towards the widening of the debate on postsecularism as a more accurate concept to interpret the situation of many countries in Europe. However, it should not be forgotten that there are substantial differences between Northern, Eastern and Southern Europe. In this sense the complexity of European societies’ relations with religion(s) remains something in need of further research. We are also in need of a further exploration of the broader development of the impact of the ‘secular myth’, and of its link with ‘European liberal tradition’ (p. 5) upon the topic of ‘women’s emancipation’. Apart from Eva Midden’s and Anne-Marie Korte’s texts the topic remains a little in the shade, risking jeopardizing the intersectional approach included as one of the book’s goals. Nevertheless, the variety of contributions presented in the book reflects a successful attempt to expand the debate on secularism and postsecularism in ways that avoid approaches in which discussing these topics is synonymous of discussing the ‘Muslim issue’ (as if secularism and postsecularism would not be relevant for the debate on the presence of other religions -namely of Christianity- in public space). And this is one of the reasons (apart from the already mentioned contribution to the discussion of secularism and postsecularism) why the book is relevant and worth reading – especially in the current moment of European history.