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# Secular feminisms and attitudes towards religion in the context of a West-European Society – Flanders, Belgium



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## SYNOPSIS

Ideologies and politics of humanism and secularism in Western Europe historically have a tensioned relationship with religion as well as with feminism and the women's movement. In this article, I aim to demonstrate the multiplicity and complexity of several recent secular feminist responses to increasing religious diversity and the activism of Muslim women in the context of Belgium – a society that is part of postcolonial Europe and is characterized by a specific religious–secular landscape. I argue that the diverging ways in which secular feminists approach Islam and the activism of Muslim women point at a controversy among white secular feminists about religion – that is situated within and reconfiguring the local religious–secular landscape through its (re)constructions of feminist secularities.

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## Introduction

The relationship between feminism and religion in the West-European context can be at best regarded as an ambivalent one (Aune, 2011; Braidotti, 2008). Both in academia and political and popular debates, religion is often regarded to be on the side of women's oppression. At the same time, mainstream feminism is largely known and imagined as secular. However, since recent years, in several West-European countries, such as France and the Netherlands, secular feminists are forced to rethink their standpoint about religion, notably Islam – leading to heated feminist debates about 'religion', 'culture' and women's 'agency' or 'emancipation' and to differing outcomes and results in terms of arguments and practices (Gole, 2010; Midden, 2012; Scott, 2007). Also the white women's movement in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern region of Belgium, has in the last few years been confronted with the increasing visibility of young Muslim women in the public sphere. Due to increasing religious diversity in urban regions and the activism of Muslim women, white secular feminists encounter religion, female religiosity and religious feminists in new ways. However, they have never reached a consensus about attitudes

towards Islam, Muslims and Muslim feminists, nor about the possibility of feminism or women's emancipation within Islamic frameworks (van den Brandt, 2013). The feminist discussions about the Muslim headscarf and its regulation within schools or at the labor market reveal the lack of agreement about and negative attitudes towards religion in general, and Islam in particular (S'jegers, 2005).

The current ambivalent relationship between feminism and Islam in Western-Europe is not independent from broader social–political contexts. In Flanders, as in other regions of Western-Europe, political and media debates about migration, integration and the multicultural society are partly focused on the emancipation of migrant women or gender equality within migrant communities. Many see Islam as a cultural-religious formation that stands in opposition to freedom and equality – values that are assumed to be characteristics of secular societies. However, Coene and Longman criticize such public representations as "the appropriation of a 'colonial feminist discourse' that essentializes 'culture' and 'religion' in view of an assimilation agenda rather than a real concern for the status of (minority) women" (2004, p. 3). The standpoints taken up in the protracted headscarf debates and recent public controversies about street sexism and homophobic

intimidation and violence perpetrated by ethnic minority young men as a result of the broadcasting of two reportages on the public television VRT (*Femme the la Rue* by Sofie Peeters in summer 2012 and a *VOLT* reportage in November 2012) illustrate understandings of Islam as oppressive and liberal-secular values as facilitating freedom and equality (Longman, 2013). Bracke and Fadil (2009) argue that secularist views play increasingly a role in the debates about cultural diversity, which oppose Islam and the religiosity of young Muslim men and women. Some individual feminists and women's organizations also embrace secularist points of view. The increasing visibility and social mobility of young Muslim men and women and "the reality of young Muslim women who are currently (re)fashioning their religious gender identity in an emancipatory manner" (Coene & Longman, 2004 p. 3) seem to confront the increasingly secularized white majority population and white feminists anew with a collective memory of anticlerical struggle against Catholic authorities, traditions and morality (Dobbelaere, 2008).

In this article, I aim to explore and demonstrate the multiplicity and complexity of the recent secular feminist responses to religious diversity and the activism of Muslim women in the context of Flanders – which I describe as a society that is part of postcolonial Europe (Ponzanesi & Blagaard, 2011) and is characterized by a specific religious–secular landscape. The notion 'Catholic secularity' is mine and I use it here with the intention to describe how the religious–secular landscape of Flanders leads to certain dominant formations of secularity (Asad, 2003) – captured as 'Catholic secularity'. In this article, I will point at and elaborate on the ways in which secular standpoints are embedded within a particular Flemish religious–secular landscape that is since recent decades characterized by: first of all, increasing secularization, not least in terms of the levels of churchgoing of its majority population (Dobbelaere, 2008); secondly, an increasing visibility of young socially mobile Muslims, who make political–social claims about equal representation, freedom of religion and non-discrimination (Fadil & Kanmaz, 2009); and finally, a continuing privileged and powerful position of Catholicism in its relationship to the state (Dobbelaere, 2008; Franken & Loobuyck, 2012). The formations of the secular that emerge from the changing landscape assume to trigger neutrality and inclusivity, but keep out of sight the fact that normative understandings of 'religion' and 'secularity' are shifting and that power relations are implicated (Asad, 2003; Bracke, 2011; Fadil, 2011). I will analyze the responses of secular feminists to increasing religious diversity and the interpellations by Muslim women regarding the ways in which these are embedded within the religious–secular landscape. This article emerges from my 4-year PhD research on the relationships between religion, secularism and feminism within the context of Flanders and is part of its ongoing analysis of divergent attitudes towards religion that can be found among feminists and women's movements in Flanders. The Dutch-speaking women's movements in Belgium are far from monolithic regarding standpoints, practices, attitudes, understandings and concerns about the relationships between feminism and Islam. This article therefore contributes to revealing the diversity of the field of white secular feminist thinking and practices that are

influenced by and simultaneously reconfiguring the landscape of feminism, religion and secularity. I hope to develop narratives and analytical tools to better understand the complex constructions of secularity, religion and feminism, and to contribute to nuanced perspectives towards them. I argue that the diverging ways in which secular feminists approach Islam and the activism of Muslim women point at a controversy among white secular feminists about religion – that is situated within and reconfiguring the local religious–secular landscape through its (re)constructions of feminist secularities.

With the term 'secular feminism' I refer to those feminists and women's movements that do not explicitly refer in their thinking and practices to religious or spiritual sources of inspiration, but rather to humanist, liberal and socialist thinking to frame their feminist arguments.<sup>i</sup> In order to explore the issue of white secular feminism, Islam and the feminist activism of Muslim women, I will first of all explore Flemish formations of the secular in terms of a history of power struggle and conflict between what came to be opposite views on politics and ethics. Second, I look at recent writings about and reflections on feminism and religion by two Dutch-speaking white feminist writers, who explicitly identify with humanism as a philosophical outlook on society and human relationships. Finally, I analyze the trajectory of a white Dutch-speaking women's organization, the Women's Consultation Committee (*Vrouwen Overleg Komitee* – VOK), regarding Islam and Muslim feminists. I engage in the critical reading of two articles recently published by the humanist writers considered in this article, and of academic literature about VOK and gray literature produced by VOK. The reading focused on deconstructing understandings of religion in general, and Islam in particular, and of visions on Muslim women and Muslim women's feminism. The discussed material is not representative for feminism in Flanders at large – a major limitation is that it leaves out the large Catholic women's movements. However, I believe it is rather representative of the diversity of ways of thinking about and attitudes towards religion and Muslim women that can be found among white secular feminists and women's movements in Flanders.<sup>ii</sup>

### Rethinking Belgian formations of secularity through conflict

In Catholic regions of Europe, formations of secularism (as a political doctrine) and secularity (as an epistemological category) come into being through conflict at several societal levels. Here, I argue that Belgian current formations of the secular came into existence through a history of ideological and political conflict in a pillarized society, and more recently, through conflict with the increasing visibility of Muslims and Islam as a migrant religion. I moreover argue that the near disappearance of progressive Christianity from collective memory facilitates the current hostility of the white Catholic and non-Catholic population against the recent increasing visibility of Islam. To that end, I discuss a number of academic accounts of European formations of the secular, of which some are of Belgian secularity in particular.

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