

INVESTIGATING THE SECULAR BODY: THE POLITICS OF THE MALE CIRCUMCISION DEBATE IN GERMANY

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Abstract: In the fall of 2012, Germany witnessed a heated debate on male circumcision, triggered by a four-year-old Muslim boy who had suffered complications following a circumcision conducted by a doctor in Cologne. Engaging with Charles Hirschkind's posed question "Is there a secular body?" the article uses this controversy as a starting point to push recent critical scholarship on secularism a little further. It argues that in order to understand the powers of secular governmentality, we need to take more seriously the entanglements between modes of power operative by the secular nation-state and the embodied attachments to the secular, as articulated both in social practices and in epistemological underpinnings of knowledge production bound and enabled by modern nation-state structures. Accordingly, the article suggests that the debates on male circumcision reflect a broader discursive framework in which the ongoing division between proper and improper religious practice is part of the (re)production of a secular body politic and embodied forms of secularity. Its genealogy can be traced back to the nineteenth century and has currently gained a reconfigured currency through the Muslim question in Europe.

Keywords: secular governmentality, secular embodiment, body politics, Muslims in Germany, male circumcision, medicalization

Introduction

Recent critical investigations on secular power around the scholarship of Talal Asad have started to look at the secular as deeply entangled with affect, emotions, and/or embodiments (e.g., Fasil 2009; Asad 2011; Hirschkind 2011; Mahmood 2013).² They thus went far beyond an understanding of the powers of the secular as tied to the modern nation-state and its institutions and looked at the secular *practices* enabled and enacted by specific arrangements of state, religion, and the nation. In a crucial passage in his reflections on veiling bans in France, Asad (2006), for example, draws attention to the affective ties of the discursive practices undergirding these controversies. In this piece, Asad emphasizes that the French

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state's efforts to regulate religion in the public sphere unloaded passions for secular beliefs. More importantly, he claims that these passions were more substantially predicated on *emotional* structures of modern individual freedoms (Asad 2006: 509-15). While Asad hints to the relationship between modern state power to govern the divisions between the religious and the secular and therefore also to be embodied fabric underpinning these techniques of power, he only marginally develops this point further.

One of the few authors who addressed the question of the secular in its embodied contours head on is Charles Hirschkind in his recent article "Is There a Secular Body?" (2011). Engaging two seminal scholarly interventions on the secular, William Connolly (1999) and Talal Asad (2003), Hirschkind asks why very few scholars interested in secular power have investigated the secular on similar registers as they did with religious forms of embodiments. He concludes that the secular can hardly be analyzed with the same methodological tools as forms of piety had been studied (cf. Mahmood 2004; Hirschkind 2006) because – as he puts it – the "secular is the water we swim in" (2011: 634).

In what follows, I would like to take up Hirschkind's question and at the same time complicate both some of his assumptions and his conclusion. When invoking the secular body, I suggest, first, that it is misleading to draw on any ontological understanding of the body, as Hirschkind's question implies ("Is there a secular body?") – even if he does not seem to take it at face value. Precisely because it is odd to think of the secular body as an ontology, if we follow Asad's assumptions that the secular is not a stage, easily denotable and detachable from the religious, it is problematic to even think about the secular body as an already constituted thing.

Second, if we understand the secular as contingent, instable, relational, and dependent on the religious, it is misleading to simultaneously claim that it was "the water we swim in." I would not deny that secular power as a mode of governing the religious and the borders between the religious and the secular, enabled by modern nation-state structures, has become hegemonic in many parts of the world. Yet I suggest that claiming that this was the water we swim in obliquely repeats some of its intrinsic powers, namely, it contributes to the process of unmarking its operations.

While taking issue with Hirschkind's elaborations, I will at the same time push a little further Asad's and his interlocutor's claim that in order to understand the powers of secular governmentality, we need to take seriously the entanglements between modes of power operative by the secular nation-state and the *affective* attachments to the secular, as articulated both in social practices and in epistemological underpinnings of knowledge production bound and enabled by modern nation-state structures.

While we could continue to deliberate on such entanglements on a merely theoretical level, I suggest investigating a specific case that enables me to articulate a more empirically informed theoretical argument. My starting point is therefore the controversy on male circumcision that emerged in 2012 in Germany. This debate is part and parcel of a broader “incitement to discourse” on the “Muslim question”³ in Germany and elsewhere in Europe and on Muslim gendered bodily practices more specifically. I use this case as a starting point to look at how the recurrent evocation of Muslim bodily practices as problematic and deviating from the norm works as a dividing practice to mark and unmark, to distinguish religious embodiments from secular ones, and how this is mediated and patterned by deeper ingrained structures of the secular nation-state and its embodied contours.

I argue that at the heart of this and other heated public controversies on gendered Muslim bodily practices lies a notion and defense of the secularized body and bodily integrity which gains currency *through* the discursification of the Muslim body and its visibility in European public spaces. Engaging with Hirschkind’s above-mentioned piece, I therefore structure the discussions around male circumcision by asking the more particular question: what do their underlying discursive structures tell us about the production and sustenance of the “secular body?” To be clear, I understand the secular here as operating both as a particular *body politic* and as the *embodiment* of secular conventions, in this case a specific understanding of the body as a materiality of the autonomous subject manageable through modern technology. I consider both these dimensions as intrinsically entangled.

Using this as an analytical starting point, I will discuss three interrelated clusters of arguments salient throughout the public controversy on male circumcision: first, the medicalization of the body; second, the notion of bodily integrity; and third, the quest for reasonable justification of religious practices. It goes without saying that there is a wide range of discourses running through this as well as other debates on Islamic practices in Germany and elsewhere in Europe.⁴ My intention is not so much to capture this variety. The selection of the above-mentioned cluster of arguments rather follows from my main interest in the question of the operation of secular governmentality in relation to secular body politics in Germany. I will therefore analyze these contributions in light of their broader epistemological and normative assumptions about “proper” religious practices and freedom in liberal-democratic orders.

With the specific focus on the secular as a structuring feature for organizing and shaping religion in liberal-democratic orders, I simultaneously suggest going beyond recent scholarship that has critically addressed processes of racializing Muslims in Germany (e.g., El-Tayeb 2011; Spielhaus 2011; Tezcan 2012). While these works significantly extend much of the research on Muslims in Europe by not unilaterally investigating Muslims, they mostly remain silent in regard to the

secular as a structuring component responsible for the exclusive gaze on and exposure of Muslim's religiosity.

An Accident Waiting to Happen

In the fall of 2010, a young Muslim boy of four suffered from strong bleedings after a circumcision by a doctor in a hospital in Cologne. Omar Kezze, the doctor who had conducted the circumcision, was accused of "criminal assault" in the first instance by a local court in Cologne (2011; Musharbash 2012). It turned out later, however, that the after-bleedings were not caused by the operation itself but by the fact that the boy's mother had taken off the bandage too early. After revision in May 2012, the doctor was acquitted from penalty. The court nevertheless decided that male circumcision was a criminal act as it caused bodily injury of the under-aged boy, unable to give his consent.⁵

The court's decision quickly triggered a nationwide debate on the question about the (il)legitimacy of male circumcision, involving numerous voices from various parts of society – lawyers, church representatives, theologians, doctors, activists of child protection, representatives of the Jewish community, and – albeit to a much lesser extent – voices of Muslim organizations. After a close inspection of the ritual practice and an attempt to carefully balance the various rights involved, that is, the right to bodily integrity, children's rights, and the right to religious freedom, the Federal Parliament discussed the case in the fall of 2012 and implemented a law in December of the same year. The law, accepted by the majority in the German Federal Parliament,⁶ officially legalizes male circumcision under the condition that it is conducted according to the "art of medical standards."⁷ A broad public debate with partly violent tones, however, remained, as did the echo of the court decision of Cologne criminalizing male circumcision, if conducted without medical prescription.

In the following analysis, I will follow up on Hirschkind's question about the secular body and ask, Why is it that in a particular moment in history *certain* religious practices are put to the public, political, and legal gaze, inspected, deemed suspicious or embraced, in need to be controlled, reshaped, or at least addressed? What is the rationale of this "incitement to discourse" (Foucault 1978) about certain religious practices and what are the functions? Such questions require moving from an analysis of the religious practice at stake or of the dynamics of the public debate it triggered to an examination of its salient discursive structures in their productivity, functionality, and – partly – genealogy.

The Medicalized Body

One salient cluster of argumentation in the controversies on male circumcision centered on what I call the "medicalization" of the body. The argument that male

circumcision causes bodily harm and moral injury was often paired with reference to trauma, that is, the longer term psychological damage caused by the moral injury through the intervention into the child's body. The most prominent proponents of this reasoning were a group of several hundreds of doctors, medical experts, and lawyers who jointly published an open letter to the government in July 2012 which accused parents who initiated male circumcision of sexual violence.⁸

It was Holm Putzke, a professor for criminal law, who most vocally spelled out this concern already before the public debate sparked off. Back in 2008, Putzke published a series of articles in medical journals on the dangers of male circumcision. His contributions were taken up as the main legal-scientific reference by the local court in Cologne and contributed to a large degree to the decision.⁹ These writings are also symptomatic of the coupling of a scientific-medical and a legal vocabulary, in this case penal law. Navigating between apt and inapt, that is, legal and illegal justifications, pro or contra circumcision, Putzke concludes,

The fact that circumcision is unhealthy (mainly because of an irreversible loss of physical substance) relativizes its benefit as a marker of religious identification. [...]. Therefore the bodily integrity for good reasons is prior to pedagogically dependent forms of religiosity. (2008: 272)

What followed from Putzke's and many other's similar arguments was that only "medical indication" justifies the practice of male circumcision. It is important to emphasize that a medical-scientific discourse not only figured prominently in such assumptions but even framed the whole vocabulary running through the debate. Both the authors who referred to the risks and damages of circumcision and those who defended the practice did so by evoking medical reasons (hygiene, prevention of AIDS, etc.).¹⁰ Moreover, both extensively recalled scientific studies conducted by medical institutions.

In other words, the whole discussion has become entrenched in a medical vocabulary which is indicative of the forms of expertise and knowledge production running through it. This points to the wider question as to what kinds of knowledges are recalled, (re)cited, considered legitimate and therefore become authoritative, eventually legally codified, when religious communities (including minoritized ones) are entitled to justify their religious practices in the framework of available individual rights, in this case the right to religious freedom (see Sullivan 2005). And it touches upon the broader question of knowledge and/as power, entailed in the procedures not just of searching for the truth of this bodily practice but also in the supposedly neutralized legal discussions, in which the task is to "objectively" balance legal principles. The right to religious freedom, as other

individual rights, is thus always predicated on particular modes of justification, which mediate the vocabulary available to claim this right. This causes constraints for religious practices justified in the name of “tradition,” which is unintelligible to this repertoire.

The scientific discussion around male circumcision shows, indeed, how authoritative certain kinds of epistemologies anchored in scientific knowledge production have become and how unquestioned their methodologies of “speaking the truth” remain. This belief in “reliable” empirical data (facts and figures) framed the debate to the extent that Muslims and Jews alike had few other possibilities than joining it. Either they were compelled to publicly respond to the proliferating studies on the traumatic effects of male circumcision or they needed to cite those studies which scientifically proved the benefits of this practice.¹¹

The genealogy of this epistemic framework, of course, needs to be traced back to the late nineteenth century when modern medicine and the medicalization of life and death along with its surveillance and control of the individual and collective body started to become one of the most central features of biopolitical power governed and enabled by the modern nation-state. Foucault’s analysis of the *Birth of the Clinic* (2012 [1963]) teaches us two important lessons in this regard: first, that the shift in modern scientific forms of knowledge production was based on the Kantian precondition of rational epistemology establishing the boundaries between private faith and public reason; second, that the centrality of modern medicine and its epistemologies consisted foremost in its ability to initiate a new regime of *visibility* distinguishing between the visible and the invisible, turning the sovereign power of empirical methods of “seeing” into objective knowledge.¹²

More specifically, the intimate relationship between modern medicine and modern legalism has a long history, which I am not able to trace here. It is interesting to recall, however, Alexandra Minna Stern’s (1999) analysis of the close linkage between modern criminology, statistics, and microbiology in the late nineteenth century. Stern analyzes the parallel developments of medical prophylaxis and social prevention, showing how the methodologies of modern science along with the medicalization of the body influenced the ways in which social as well as medical prevention and the calculation of risk became intertwined since that period.

Referring to the same period, Robin Judd (2007) traces how the medicalization of male circumcision gained salience in Germany when Jewish practices came to the fore of political debates as “Ritualfragen” (ritual questions). Judd succinctly shows how the increasing condemnation of male circumcision as a blood entrenched barbaric act functioned as an important drive to condemn Jews as lacking civilized religiosity, fueling Anti-Semitism and other kinds of racism. Moreover, it also served to foster modern medicine as the antidote to uncivilized

ritual practices and rites causing problems for societies' health – a discourse which was decisively pushed by influential Jewish intellectuals. While the medical discourse took shape throughout the nineteenth century, in the current controversies it appears as the naturalized reference proving both the benefits and harms of this bodily intervention.

These insights on modern techniques of knowledge production remind us, beyond each of their specific fields of inquiry, how crucial it is to problematize and politicize established epistemologies and methods. Although this is an almost banal statement, the politics entailed in the act of producing numbers or facts on the risks or benefits on male circumcision has not been contested. The medical and parts of the legal discourse around male circumcision, indeed, reveal how this coupling of apt and inapt knowledges is part of a regime of truth about apt or inapt religious practices. It also illustrates how much the supposed “view from nowhere,” which Donna Haraway already problematized in the late 1980s (Haraway 1988), has remained unchallenged in certain domains of knowledge production. The debate on male circumcision in its anchorage not just in a medical vocabulary but also in its reliance on scientific studies and statistics producing what is then considered “reliable facts” materializes the socio-psychological vocabulary running through the “discursive explosion” (Foucault 1978: 17) on Muslim forms of social and life and religious bodily practices. This interconnection is most pointedly spelled out in many of the measures geared toward the prevention of Islamic extremism and the management of Muslims more broadly. Here, the vocabulary of diagnosis, therapy, and prevention has deeply entrenched political programs as well as academic knowledge production on Muslims in Germany and in Western Europe more broadly (cf. Johansen and Spielhaus 2012).

The Child's Bodily Integrity

The second – and closely related – argument I would like to take up and problematize is that of the child's bodily integrity. This was put forward in the strongest tone by movements of children's protection often in alliance with the group of above-mentioned doctors and lawyers who signed the open letter accusing forced male circumcision as a form of “sexual violation.”¹³ Campaigning with the slogan “My body belongs to me,” they adopted the vocabulary of earlier campaigns against sexual violence toward children for combating the practice of male circumcision.¹⁴

The notion of the body as an individual property was mainly coupled with the idea that the child owned her body and that this ownership needed to be protected – if necessary with coercive means, that is, legal sanctions against the practice. It needs to be emphasized that the epistemological underpinnings of the body as

owned and formed by the individual not only have a long history but are also manifested in other domains of modern medicine, especially in technologies of reproduction and market of organs. It is all but uncontested.

Embedding this discussion within its wider context of the incitement to discourse on Muslim forms of life and social practices in Germany (and Europe more broadly), it is important to note that the to-be-protected underaged child has, indeed, complemented the covered Muslim woman subjected to patriarchal violence and therefore in need of some kind of saving. In her recent book *Do Muslim Women need Saving?* Abu-Lughod dismantles the global discursive production and the structures undergirding some of the rescue narratives involved in the gestures and practices to liberate women from Islam (Abu-Lughod 2013).

The discursive repertoire running through the controversies on male circumcision echoes some of the arguments deployed by the opponents of the veil, especially the face veil. While veiling is often considered as a practice that harms the bodily integrity of the woman, in the discussions on male circumcision it is the underaged child who suffers from a harming patriarchal system. In both cases, the subject causing and reproducing this system is the *male* Muslim subject. It is interesting in this regard to note that while the male child's body is considered in need to be saved, the same male body is made responsible for the reproduction of a patriarchal system which causes harm to children's and women's bodies.¹⁵ This connection could, of course, be spelled out much more carefully in a different kind of argument. My aim to allude to the male subject here consists primarily in pointing out that the circumcision case has contributed to expose Muslim masculinities more explicitly to the public gaze than, say discourses on veiling.

Moreover, I do not put these different bodily practices, that is, veiling and male circumcision, on the same footage. Of course, they require different ways in which they shape religious dispositions, and, more importantly, they are situated within different regimes of (in)visibility. Also, the discursification of veiling and circumcision works on different registers: veiling in liberal-secular public spaces disrupts regimes of visibility, transparency, and control, whereas circumcision is attributed to the realm of the individual body and his most intimate sphere. My point here is rather that both bodily practices have been turned into a public, political, and legal discourse, revealing similar kinds of affective attachments and mobilizing similar aversions vis-à-vis gender norms that are considered suspicious and measured against the backdrop of a liberal, egalitarian, and autonomous gendered order.

The deployment of a discourse of modern medicine in the case of male circumcision, moreover, gives these controversies on Islamic bodily practices a slightly new twist. For it sustains the regime of truth embedded in a liberal-secular matrix in a different way than the discourse around the Muslim woman to be saved on the ground of a liberal gender order. Narratives by covered women have repeatedly

contradicted their one-sided representations as mired in oppressive gender regimes, caused by a “religious system,” and simultaneously complicated the questions of bodily harm. While the scientific discourse is able to “prove” harm, the underaged child is not an interlocutor but more evidently spoken for.

Moreover, the underaged or even newborn child is more vulnerable, and therefore adds salience to underlying notions of saving or protection. Children are not just any category within the population; they are the main subjects of regulation, education, and discipline and therefore hard-fought about. In the case of male circumcision, parental authority of particular populations (i.e., Muslims) was, however, implicitly and sometimes explicitly considered problematic and in need to be supplemented by state authorities. The specificity of this particular case thus consists in the assumption that the child’s well-being is threatened by a religious upbringing and ultimately to be decided upon by the state. I would like to pause here for a moment because this particular argument, widespread throughout this as well as other debates, on Muslim bodily practices brings us closer to the core of my argument about the secular body. Arguably, it seems that the notion of individual autonomy, strongly inscribed into the self-understanding of modern political theory and practice, has gained a new momentum in the discussions on male circumcision.

The protectors of children’s rights suggested that since the child was not able to choose freely, he/she should be trained to do so from his/her early childhood. One of the most important elements in this notion of free choice is, unsurprisingly, the assumption that the child should freely choose his/her religion and the rites he/she wants to practice and which he/she does not. Circumcision, by necessity conducted upon the child’s body without his consent, was accordingly deemed an illegitimate intervention into the child’s bodily integrity, as it marks the body religiously and thereby determines his religious trajectory and undermines the ideal of freedom of choice. It is the association of free choice with a religious lifestyle that I find necessary to problematize. For, it presupposes an outspokenly non-religious perspective as a neutral standpoint and considers all other kinds of embodiments of the child as unproblematic. This substantially reveals the process of naturalizing the secular – as opposed to all that is “religious” – as anchored in the ideal of free will, hence the driving force of individual autonomy.

As numerous critiques of liberalism have shown, individual autonomy is neither free from constraints nor an ahistorical, abstract good available to anyone at any time. Rather, as freedom generally, individual autonomy in particular is culturally and historically mediated and produced through institutions, social conventions, and discursive practices more generally (Rose 1999). Liberal societies are not immune to these mediations. Rather, they similarly condition the individual choices of their free citizens, be it through the logics of the market or through

historically grounded institutional arrangements of religion, state, and the nation, which make certain religious choices appear more acceptable than others.¹⁶

The assumption that one can freely choose one's religion from the moment one is grown up and is therefore able to choose independently is thus itself a perspective full of assumptions about the free subject. Mediated by a particular understanding of free choice, this standpoint requires particular kinds of dispositions, ways of education and upbringing. And it necessitates cultural practices and techniques which do not leave the child's body unmarked. While the concept of individual choice in the discussions on male circumcision functions as a (re)production of a normative ideal of individual autonomy, it discards this very loadedness. In other words, the recurrent claim to *not* determine, nor even to influence the child's religious choices, leaves aside that this position is itself anchored in and productive of a particular perspective, which guides the child's ability to reproduce the secular practice of dividing the religious from the secular, which so powerfully structures secular power since the inception of the modern secular nation-state (Asad 2003; Agrama 2012).

Moreover, the question as to when public authorities should intervene into the lives of families, protected under the rule of law as the "private" sphere, to protect the child's bodily integrity is a sensitive and troubling one. It points to some essential questions, which can hardly be answered easily: Where does parental authority start and where should it end in order to protect the child's integrity? Where should medical advice or prescription supplement or supplant parental authority for the child's safety and the other way around? The very assumption that only particular bodily imprints are culturally or religiously loaded and cause harm exceptionalizes bodily harm, while normalizing all other kinds of interventions as "medically prescribed" and therefore neutral. The underlying assumption is, of course, that marking the child's body religiously is different from any medically indicated or aesthetic markers which are freely chosen (e.g., tattoos, piercing). I do not want to contest this assumption. Rather, I want to insist that the decision as to when a bodily intervention or bodily imprints are considered normal and when deviant depends on the broader social, political, economic, and cultural structures and conventions within which they are discussed and negotiated.

The question as to how a society and individuals deal with pain, health, and related corporeal expressions and bodily inscriptions, derived from religious traditions or otherwise, is neither stable nor uncontested. It is largely dependent on the question as to which norms of bodily health, bodily conventions, and sexuality are considered apt and promotable and which are to be discouraged. Speaking about the modern pleasures of pain, as depicted, for example, in the rising genre of pornography in the nineteenth and twentieth century, Asad (2011) reminds us that while physical pain became increasingly tabooed, and to be managed with modern

techniques of power, some forms of violence with marked interventions, penetrations into bodily integrity, became increasingly widespread and unchallenged, such as pornography. The controversies on male circumcision with their performatively reconstituted notion of the autonomous and self-formed body at work here, framed and rationalized as a matter of medicalization, do not only reveal a particular genealogy of how pain is controlled and dealt with, as Asad contends, but they also exceptionalize certain religiously connoted practices as illegible within a liberal-secular understanding of religiosity. This will become more evident in the following section.

Legible Modes of Justification

The last – and again closely related – argument I want to investigate is the assumption that any ritual practice needs to be justified, that is, rationalized in a vocabulary that is legible to a wider audience beyond that of the religious community itself. This argument runs through many of the contributions and was spelled out pointedly by Psychoanalyst and Doctor Matthias Frantz (2014), who edited a volume on the harms and dangers of male circumcision. After having equated male circumcision with castration and rape, Franz claims, “Religious communities today are requested to explain their rituals to a religiously *neutral* public and not simply to ask for particular rights” (ibid: 9; my own translation, emphasis added). In this cluster of arguments, we can find echoes of a Habermasian deliberative philosophy – although definitely simplified. Accordingly, any kinds of speech act should be turned into a universally understandable language. Habermas’ (2008, 2009) recent interventions on post-secularism are instructive in this sense. Here, he conceptualizes religion in the classical liberal mode as something which aids the endowment of sense, which nevertheless should not exert any influence without the provision of *translation* into public discourse, and definitely not in an ideologically neutral state and its legislation. Habermas urges those he calls “secularists” to keep an open mind to the possibility of religious statements containing truth and to enter into dialogue with “religious” speech acts. His call for translatability, however, results from a clear-cut distinction between secular and religious arguments. More importantly, it unequivocally prioritizes what Habermas calls “secular” reasoning:

Under the normative premises of the constitutional state and an ethos of democratic citizenship the admission of religious statements in a political context in the public domain is only meaningful when all citizens are expected not to exclude the possibility of cognitive content – whilst respecting the principle of *precedence of secular reasons* and of the institutional translation reservation. (Habermas 2009: 145, emphasis added)

I evoke Habermas here not only because his equation of secular reason with a neutral and comprehensively available language is now inscribed into the public and political discourse on religious plurality in Germany more broadly but also because Habermas, indeed, commented on the question of male circumcision in a similar mode.¹⁷ While objecting to a legal prohibition as suggested by the court in Cologne, Habermas repeated his argument of the necessity of translation into a commonly comprehensible language and the filter to be established between civil society and political institutions. As in his more elaborate contributions on post-secularism, he does, however, not reflect more thoroughly on the boundaries between what he qualifies as the secular and as the religious. As has often been pointed out, the problem with the assumption about a common language based on a reasonable consensus is that it relies on the ideal of what is universally *right* as detached from what is particularly *good*. Just as the embodied imprints of an expressively non-religious upbringing, the “universally understandable language” is *not* unmarked and the public sphere its inclusive forum. Rather, any speech act is situated, partial, and embodied. The Habermasian call for translation of religious speech acts and in this case religious practices into a commonly understandable language therefore needs to be regarded as part and parcel of a discursive regime which necessarily contributes to the unmarking of embodied secular politics by marking the minoritized body of the other and urgently in need for (cognitive) justification. The Protestant theologian Wilhem Gräß pushed this argument further when he asked Muslim and Jewish communities to justify religious bodily practices:

They should *justify* its [male circumcision’s] religious and therefore hopefully also human meaning. They have to clarify the meaning of the ritual practice [...]. What is historically grown, can also be transformed throughout time. Today, it would be appropriate to make circumcision legible in its semiotic and symbolic meanings. Therefore, one could develop a ritual – and this is already practiced in liberal Jewish communities – according to which the circumcision of boys at the 8th day of their lives is not conducted in reality and physically but through a symbolic gesture. The decision for the real physical operation can then be made by the individual once he is able to decide. (Gräß 2012, emphasis added)

What is at issue here is thus the call for a constant reflection and gradual transformation of certain religious practices, so that they can be made legible to a *liberal* – and not just any kind of – understanding of religion with a distinct Protestant legacy. It is therefore not by chance, I suggest, that the Habermasian argument of translatability of religious speech acts into an alleged universal vocabulary is often coupled with a Protestant understanding of religiosity whose central narrative

components are self-reflexivity, a critique of non-rational religious practices and a distinction between inner belief and embodied practice. The model is thus a tamed and largely invisible religiosity, inspired by (Protestant) Christianity. Habermas somewhat spells out this assumption by noting that the Catholic Church already underwent this “learning process,” or that philosophers since Kant have successfully modeled the act of translation of theological vocabularies into that of reason (*ibid.*).

It would of course be worth thinking more carefully about the political theology of such reasoning and locate the call for a secularization of belief and belonging more systematically in its Protestant legacy. For the call for authentic belief as based on the individual’s free will and choice, and as detached from corporeal practices, definitely needs to be coupled with the alleged disembodiment of abstract universal principles. My aim here is however not to delve into the alliances between abstract universalism and Protestant reasoning, even if this is central to understanding the deeper embeddedness of secular power in a Christian legacy (Asad 1993; Keane 2007).

In this context, I just want to insist that the circumcision debate is symptomatic of more general contradictions, inscribed into a modern notion of religion and its related discourse of secularity. These contradictions, in this case the Protestant legacy of an alleged universal language, are reconfigured in the current debates on the Muslim question in Germany. Moreover, the construction of disembodied privatized forms of religiosity oriented toward the “inner” lives of the people, and sustained by the imaginary of a detachment between internal belief and its external manifestations, has since its inception been accompanied and enhanced by new – political theologies, discovered, for example, in the scientification of the body, the various technological means to manage and regulate pain and extend but eventually also to erase life (*cf.* Santner 2012). The question about the regulation of the body leads me to my last point in which I return to the question of the secular body. I suggest analyzing the three interrelated tropes of reasoning within the debates on male circumcision as anchored in a liberal-secular matrix which in this particular case reveals its embodied contours.

The Secular as Body Politic and Embodied Politics

What materializes in all three – partly intertwined, partly complementary arguments – is the ideal of the person’s body as a property to be detached from all kinds of injuries and pains. The repetitive discourse on the owned body as the property of the autonomous individual, allegedly only disrupted by particular religious bodily practices, needs to be read in its – partly contradictory – functionalities: as naturalizing, on the one hand, the authority attributed to modern technology, medicine,

and objectified forms of knowledge production and, on the other hand, that of the state, nominated to regulate and manage the freedoms of the individual.

With the attempts to legally regulate, at times ban, and in any case put to the public gaze *certain* religious practices, the case of male circumcision confronts us with a kind of regulation of religious life that affects the personal sphere of the individual in his/her bodily imprints and expressions. This individual is considered to be protected through the law in her autonomy and yet governed and acted upon through modes of embodiment, which themselves largely escape from view. This points to the ambivalent role attributed to state power here, which is also at the heart of the regulative components entailed in the management of individual freedoms: while the individual is deemed to determine autonomously his/her body, the state is considered to care for these individual choices, especially in cases where the parents are constructed as unable to care properly for the health, well-being, and the self-determination of their children.

In this sense, the (self-)entitlement of the state to pursue the education of proper citizens with the underlying assumption of its capability to shape the right notion of freedom, enabling self-determination and fostering individual autonomy – at times with coercive means – reveals the paradoxes of the modern conception of the state monopoly of violence. It implies a set of practices of intervention, whose consequences on the formation of the subject are indeed left outside of the discussion. As we have learned through critical studies investigating the intervening practices of state power also in its liberal underpinnings and the institutions of normalization – school, army, or more broadly knowledge production (Nadesan 2008; Dean 2012 [1999]) – what needs to be emphasized is the racialized component of biopolitical power attributed to the state.

It is important to remind here that in the case of male circumcision, the state even felt compelled to intervene, that is, to issue a law prohibiting or legalizing the practice. The discussions on male circumcision therefore need to be analyzed as part and parcel of a broader discursification of Muslim forms of social life and religious practices in Germany. Almost any discussion on religious plurality currently centers on the legitimate or illegitimate place of Islam in the public and, by necessity, in the private sphere. Gendered bodily practices, including male circumcision, are the magnifying glass of this incitement to discourse. As both the various state initiatives to structure a “dialogue” with Muslims (Amir-Moazami 2011; Tezcan 2012) and the proliferation of handbooks and brochures guiding Muslims to turn into “subjects of freedom” (Mahmood 2004), this process has generated an extension of state power of a largely paralegal and pedagogical kind. The child’s bodily integrity as the central target of such interventions thus needs to be understood as enabled by the construction of state power as entitled to structure moral norms and guide the child’s individual’s choices. In other words, the

recurrent call for the state to intervene in the case of male circumcision is embedded in a broader discursive web in which Muslim parents and families are considered to not responsibly care for the well-being of their children.

Male circumcision as well as many other Islamic bodily practices thus becomes the externalized physical manifestation of an archaic otherness in need to be problematized, justified, and eventually remedied either in a gesture of pedagogical benevolence or legal sanction. Read along these lines, this discussion also questions the common idea, suggested by Foucault (2004 [1977-78]), of biopolitical forms of regulation as a more or less generic process. The case shows, on the contrary, how biopolitics is deeply racialized, and indeed, has always been, since the inception of modern technologies of power (Stoler 1995; Young 1995). The discovery and production of “population” occur within the production of specificities and particularities which are constituted as bearing either unbridgeable, or to be disciplined or normalized, differences. The public interventions into the practice of male circumcision, in other words, make explicit the biopolitical dimensions of governmental power in current regulations of religious plurality in Germany. More importantly, they reveal how Foucault’s dictum that the juridical institution (i.e., the law) has increasingly been incorporated into a continuum of apparatuses is currently reconfigured through its racialized components prevalent in the regulation of some religious practices which are deemed suspicious and deviant.

In order to understand the traces of these racializing processes, we need to recall here the striking echoes to the discursification of “ritual questions” in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Germany, as analyzed by Robin Judd (2007). Judd shows how “Ritualfragen” became part and parcel of the exploding “Jewish question” and the anti-Semitic aversions and practices it accompanied. The debates surrounding “ritual questions” such as kosher slaughtering and male circumcision, as Judd argues, became a kind of magnifying glass for shaping exclusive notions of German nationhood. This legacy importantly highlights the emergence of a particular body politic in which the construction of the nation as a biological entity served as an entrance point to racialize both the collective, that is, national and the individual body, metaphorically expressed in the emerging notion of the “Volkskörper.”

This national body was constituted as managed and regulated through hygiene, modern medicine, and modern techniques of knowledge, whose central source of legitimation was positive science.¹⁸ The process of turning Jewish religious practices into a matter of political and medical discourse throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and downgrading them as outdated and barbaric was hence part of a broader construction of a biologically defined national unity.

What Judd, however, only implicitly addresses is how the case of Jewish rituals which materialized a deviant otherness and the emerging national body was more

specifically coupled with and predicted on emerging ideals of a secularized body, hence the notion of a secularized and tamed Christianity.

I would argue that while Jewish rituals helped to construct a healthy German national body, they more specifically contributed to strengthen the narrative of the rational, reflexive, and philanthropic character of Christianity, detached from its embodied rituals *through* the bodily practices of the Jewish Other. It is, in other words, important to remind, once again, of the importance to read these racializing processes in their connectedness with secular powers, and to therefore understand the production of an unmarked social national body as also enabled by specific norms of religiosity. There seems to be an intimate relationship between an emerging modern conception of the body as ruled and governed by modern medicine and the related racialization of *religiously* justified bodily practices, whose genealogy still needs to be traced more carefully.

It is also important to remind that the openly racist and strongly embodied language of race theories inspiring, guiding, and nurturing political practices of constructing deviant bodies was paralleled by a more neutralized language of emerging individual freedoms. Scholars such as Gil Anidjar (2003) succinctly show how the alleged disembodiment of universal principles by early Enlightenment thinkers from Kant to Hegel deeply depended on the bodies of Others (Semites, Jews, Muslims, Orientals, or blacks). This point also brings us back to Asad's contention about the *emotional* structures of abstract universal principles, even though it would still be important to learn more about how we can grasp the embodiments of allegedly abstract, universal, and allegedly disembodied principles. The two variations of discourses, at first glance antagonistically opposing each other, thus share the feature of a dividing practice functioning either as an attempt to transcend embodiment or as an act of cultivating the flesh of an exclusive national body.

It is important to recall this story here in order to remind ourselves about the structural patterns of demarcation of boundaries inscribed into modern European nation-states. The marking of male circumcision as an act of illegitimate violence and religious inscription of the child's body or at least as an act that needs to be justified within a liberal vocabulary has thus a longer, even if contingent history.¹⁹

Authors such as Fatima El-Tayeb (2011), Rita Chin et al. (2009: chap. 3), or Uli Linke (1999) have shown variably how the category of race has survived in reconfigured ways in post-1945 Germany, either as translated into essentialist notions of culture (Chin et al. 2009) or in openly racist discourses and practices (Linke 1999; El-Tayeb 2011). Linke's work is particularly interesting in this regard, as she looks at the subtle forms of racism in its bodily components. She shows how the obsessive display of white skin in public spaces of Germany after 1945 contributed to the naturalization of both whiteness and nakedness.

Linke traces this back to the nationalist and racist exposure of healthy German bodies culminating in the Nazi era. For her also the Leftist and expressively anti-Nazi movements emerging in the late 1960s, paradoxically, constitute a reconfigured manifestation of the exposure and claim of white German bodies. The analogies consist in the assumption that nakedness in public constitutes the natural and de-sexualized body closely tied to the roots of nature (obviously to be traced back to movements in Romanticism). Linke (1999) shows in particular in which ways both the Nudist movements of the 1970s and 1980s and political, mainly Leftist movements that used naked white bodies as political manifestations, reinvoked Nazi aesthetics of exposing the white Aryan body as the natural and healthy flesh: “It [nudity] permitted Germans to exhibit race ‘innocently,’ without having to publicly (or consciously) acknowledge their participation in a racial mythography [...]” (113).

I find Linke’s analysis very useful for my argument, in that she illuminates how certain conventions of bodily practices and visibility – in this case, naked bodies in public – have become normalized, naturalized, and unmarked, while others are exceptionalized as harmful and disgusting. What is missing, however, in Linke’s and other’s analyses is the question as to how the hypervisibility of German white skin, exposures of bodies in public and racism, can and should be looked at as *secular* practices, that is, as manifestations of the bodily constraints of religious doctrines and practices. More generally, the question as to how the prevalence of race and racism in specific body politics is coupled with the secular body politics still needs to be investigated more carefully.

Read along this line, the controversy on male circumcision can be interpreted as signaling a particular racializing and secularizing body politic in which the state constitutes itself by demarcating its embodied contours. These embodied contours, I claim, are part and parcel of the kind of secular body politic I am trying to get closer to here: Rather than merely repeating naturalized notions of bodily health, integrity, and (de-)legitimization of certain kinds of pain, I suggest that such debates should be understood, at least in part, as techniques of self-assurance. They are geared toward the demarcation of the borders and contours of liberal orders by discursively enabling, cultivating, and publicly reiterating certain choices as proper and unmediated, and others as inapt and conditioned by obsolete religious traditions.

Conclusions

This brings me back to the starting point of my paper about the question as to how to investigate the secular body. In light of the analysis of the discursive structures running through the debates on male circumcision in Germany, I find Hirschkind’s

question productive. It is especially in regard to ongoing contestations regarding Muslim's bodily practices in liberal public spheres of Europe that I consider it necessary to challenge the often unaddressed question about the embodiments inscribed into the liberal-secular matrix, which guides these discussions, even if often tacitly.

On a basic level, Hirschkind's rhetorical question therefore invites us to shift the gaze from the particular to the allegedly universal, from religious embodiments to those we could call secular in the sense of their enactment vis-à-vis the religious. Hirschkind's question thus encourages us to more carefully focus on secular embodiments as learned, inscribed, and often unnoticed bodily dispositions, practices, and affects, which are difficult to even discern because of their largely embodied character. If we agree that the secular is not a stage that can be detached from the religious, the secular body consists of largely unmarked, inconspicuous forms of embodiment. I suggest that in the case under scrutiny, these secular embodiments concern precisely the allegedly disembodied notion of religiosity derived from an almost naturalized Protestant legacy.

Now, Hirschkind would probably object to such a reading since his analysis of the secular "directs us less to a determinant set of embodied dispositions than to a *distinct mode of power*, one that mobilizes the productive tension between religious and secular to generate new practices through a process of internal self-differentiation" (2011: 643, emphasis added). However, rather than being unmediated, I conceive of the secular embodiments at stake in the controversies over male circumcision as anchored in such modes of power as much as they depend on their constant iterations. In other words, it is important to look at the intertwining between contingent, that is, not determinant embodied dispositions and the distinct mode of power which mobilizes and attempts to stabilize them. Quoting William E. Connolly (1999), Hirschkind recalls that "the practice of articulating and defending secular political claims [...] serves to mold and deepen the affective attachments that passionately bind one to the secular life those claims uphold" (2011: 636).

The circumcision controversy, much like other debates one dimensionally oriented toward Muslim forms of life and religious practices, can be read as materializing Connolly's assumption about the performative nature of secular speech acts in liberal public spheres and as a foil to see secular embodiments at work on a microscopic scale. It is only through such religiously connoted practices that the secular body can be revealed and simultaneously stabilized. If the secular is to be understood as relational, these practices and conventions can be discursively marked and valorized as secular only because they constitute themselves through a distinction from practices that are considered religious in a particular way – in this case, causing an illegitimate intervention into the child's body. In this sense, one could argue that the practice of circumcision based on religious conventions

and convictions simultaneously triggers *and* bounds embodied secular dispositions. Rather than asking if there *is* a secular body, as Hirschkind does, a more productive question in my view is *how* the secular body is enacted in specific moments of history and through particular techniques of power.

Consequently, I claim that the notion of the body as a property of the individual, which is considered a thing to be formed only by his individual owner, and therefore manageable autonomously, is based on an entangled understanding of individual rights and a related understanding of the autonomous subject of these rights. This understanding, rather abstract in its legal tenets, is, however, tied to and even dependent on such kinds of reiterative discursive practices which demarcate what is considered conventional, consensual, and therefore not in need to be critically investigated. There is thus a largely performative, and exactly not ontological dimension involved in the reiteration of what could be grasped as the secular body. Similarly, the recurrent act of distinguishing between a justified practice derived from a religious tradition and a medically prescribed or recommended one is an act of reiteration, regardless of whether one accepts or rejects it. The act of compelling Muslims and Jews to justify their religious practices in a particular language – free choice and/or medical prescription in the case of male circumcision – thus is such a mode of self-cultivation.

Hirschkind also poses the interesting, yet again rather rhetorical question, why very few scholars of religion and secularism have analyzed more systematically the ritual practices and techniques of the body, geared toward enabling an autonomous self, as cultivations of a secular body to a similar extent as through religious rituals and practices to be shaping a pious body. I agree with Hirschkind that it is difficult and problematic to discern the secular through the same methodologies as critiques of secularism from Talal Asad to Saba Mahmood looked at religious embodiments (through rituals, symbols, and disciplinary self-practices). Self-differentiation works in an entirely different register. I suggest, however, that one has to understand such self-techniques also in terms of the passionately discharged *discursive* practices, which are always based on habitualized ones, and hence as a kind of self-cultivation through self-assurance about the contours of what constitutes the secular order and its bodies in public and in private. It is thus the intertwinement between modes of power, their institutional underpinnings *and* embodied conventions which condition specific sensorial and affective repertoires. These, in turn, also largely structure the ways in which aversions against certain bodily practices and certain kinds of pain are mediated. They also explicitly but often rather tacitly form hegemonic frames which also guide the borders between proper and improper religious practices.²⁰

On a microscopic level, this unfolds in the juxtaposition between the healthy, that is, uncircumcised male body and the injured one – one leading to a

conventionalized masculine sexuality, enabling normalized sexual pleasures, the other to a traumatized one, forever marking the body and its sexuality. It would therefore definitely be worth exploring further how the aspiration toward a freely chosen religiosity – in this case revealed through the uncircumcised male genital – is coupled with the cultivations of bodily dispositions through which the autonomous male subject is elevated. These bodily dispositions necessarily inscribe themselves into the body. Moreover, further analysis would be necessary to unravel more thoroughly the concrete practices undergirding the reiteration of the untouched male sexuality and sexual pleasure and the affective charge thereof, as, for instance, in the assertiveness of secular sexualized visibilities in the case of veiling (Scott 2007; Jacobsen 2011).

To conclude, self-differentiation as a mode of unmarking the secular in this case works exactly through the gaze on the marked body of the other. It therefore seems that the more such religious practices are put to the public and political gaze as illegible within a liberal-secular vocabulary, the more all other kinds of bodily practices, rationalized as non-religious, freely chosen or medically justified, appear as the disembodied, naturalized, and universalized matrix against which the body of the other is measured.

Our task as scholars critical toward the operations of secular power vis-à-vis minoritized subjects in my view consists therefore in disrupting the game of marking and unmarking by disclosing the operations of this very process. In the case of debates on male circumcision in Germany, this would mean to problematize the prioritization and hierarchization of proper (“scientific”) and improper (“traditional”) justifications of religious practice. In order to understand the deeper ingrained discursive structures at work here, it would also mean to think more carefully about the ways in which a particular structural, governmental, and epistemic framework conditions the questions, which are markedly ingrained in a Christian, secularized set of concepts about religion, in their entangled presuppositions about what counts as proper religion and what counts as proper knowledge.

Notes

1. For their valuable comments on earlier versions of this article, I would like to thank Nadia Fadil, Christine M. Jacobsen, Kari Telle, Christina von Braun as well as the peer reviewers.
2. I am not going into detail here about the differences between emotion and affect. That is not only because many of these scholars engaging with these concepts tend to use them interchangeably but also because the scholarship on both is quite contradictory (for the most obvious examples, see Scheer’s defense of emotions as embodied practices and Reckwitz’ defense of affect as having exactly these functions).
3. I use the term “Muslim question” in order to point to the fact that the definite, durable, and not temporary presence of Muslims in Europe has gradually been turned into a “problem” which

relevant parts of society and the political establishment consider necessary to address and act upon. The ways in which it is addressed, however, reveal a number of different political rationalities and practices.

4. A number of authors have voiced a critique about the exclusionary politics and injuries caused by the strong emphasis on the dangers and damages of this practice (Cetin et al. 2012). Representatives of Jewish organizations, more specifically, raised the claim that they still felt rejected by German society (e.g., Knobloch 2012; see also Öktem 2013). Finally, some legal scholars argued that the right to religious freedom got increasingly undermined and was gradually interpreted as freedom *from* religion (Bielefeldt 2012).
5. Landgericht Köln, 151 Ns 169/11.
6. Knobloch (2012): <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/beschneidung-in-deutschland-bundestag-erlaubt-rituelle-beschneidungen-1.1548922>
7. A closer reading of the parliamentary debate prior to the implementation of the law would definitely be worth it for reasons other than those central to this article. The discussions reveal the exclusionary vocabulary still running through most of the political discourse on religious plurality in Germany, for example, the sharp boundaries reiterated through a welcoming gesture to respect “our” Jewish or Muslim “co-citizens” (Mitbürger).
8. <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/offener-brief-zur-beschneidung-religionsfreiheit-kann-kein-freibrief-fuer-gewalt-sein-11827590.html>.
9. It would be interesting to trace in a more detailed way the dynamics of what local courts consider the authoritative literature on religious bodily practices, constituting the ground for legal rulings, as there seems to emerge a certain pattern here.
10. For a detailed documentation of the medical studies supporting circumcision, see <http://ajcberlin.org/de/meldungen/ajc-studie-deckt-unwissenschaftliche-argumente-der-beschneidungsdebatte-auf>.
11. The most salient document which employs the scientific vocabulary was published by Jewish communities: http://ajcberlin.org/sites/default/files/update_ajc_berlin_briefing_fakten_und_mythen_in_der_beschneidungsdebatte_web.pdf.
12. It would be interesting and necessary to look more carefully into the relationship between the authority of objective methodologies and the recurrent explosion of studies that social scientifically measure Muslims as compact and exceptional populations both in Germany and elsewhere in Europe.
13. It is worth mentioning that some of the public manifestations by child protectionists were organized as public performances whose iconography would be worth analyzing more carefully, especially in its usage of blood as centrally characterizing male circumcision.
14. The authors of *Fakten und Mythen in der Beschneidungsdebatte* (2012: 8) even allude to the analogies between the terminology of “forced circumcision” and “forced sterilization” during Nazi times.
15. The assumption that the act of circumcision and especially the practice of celebrating the male subject’s entrance into a patriarchal family system and its dominant masculinity was most pointedly put forward by the sociologist and activist Necla Kelek who had published bestsellers on imported brides from Turkey and male honor before (Kelek 2012).
16. There are obviously numerous other fields in which social conventions structure the ways in which scientific monitoring and medical interventions into the child’s body are considered appropriate or not. The case of medically assisted sex-change operations is one of the most salient examples. Butler’s discussion of the John/Joan case, for example, indicates how strongly the scientific and pedagogic monitoring of and interventions into the gendered body are molded by a discursive matrix that textures the corporeal norms about clear-cut divisions into masculine or feminine sexes (Butler 2001).

17. Habermas (2012): <http://www.nzz.ch/aktuell/feuilleton/literatur-und-kunst/wie-viel-religion-vertraegt-der-liberale-staat-1.17432314>
18. Robin Judd (2007) succinctly shows how the rising debates on “Ritualfragen” oriented one-dimensionally toward Jewish religious practices lead Jewish Rabbis to gradually detach male circumcision from its religious significations and connected to hygiene and protection of infections, and therefore legible through a secularized vocabulary.
19. There is another important component involved in this contingent history, which I am not able to address more carefully at this point: that concerns the way in which especially the parliamentary debate has gradually split, and one fraction more offensively accused the *Islamic* ritual with a particular charge of injury, while claiming that Jews were “welcome with their rituals.” This division, of course, would need to be looked at as echoing a specific history that the current discursification of male circumcision both reveals and rejects.
20. In a recent intervention on the headscarf controversies across Europe, Sarah Bracke and Nadia Fadil (2012) similarly argue that the sheer act of scrutinizing the bodily practice of veiling over and over again and not others contributes to exceptionalize them as well as it normalizes bodily practices of a more unmarked kind. Importantly, Bracke and Fadil argue that the very framing of these debates – “Is the headscarf oppressive or emancipatory?” – provides these women very little room for articulations outside of this framework. It scrutinizes *their* views on gender roles and relations and *their* agency or lack thereof.

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