

Rethinking Secularism

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Secularism is often treated as a sort of absence. It's what is left if religion fades. It's the exclusion of religion from the public sphere but somehow in itself neutral. This is misleading. We need to see secularism as a presence. It is something, and therefore in need of elaboration and understanding. Whether we see it as an ideology, as a worldview, as a stance toward religion, as a constitutional approach, or as simply an aspect of some other project—of science, or a philosophical system—secularism is something we need to think through, rather than merely the absence of religion.

Secularism, moreover, is only one of a cluster of related terms. Reference to the secular, secularity, secularism, and secularization can in confusing ways mean

different things. There is no simple way to standardize usage now, trying to police an association of each term with only one concept. But the fact that the different terms have a common linguistic root shouldn't obscure the fact that they operate in different conceptual frameworks with distinct histories. Although they sometimes inform each other, thus, we should try to keep distinct such usages as reference to temporal existence, or to worldliness, to constitutions distinguishing religion from politics, and to a possible decline in religion.

It is helpful to unpack some of the range of references. These have a longer and more complex history than is implied by a secularization narrative starting in the 17th or 18th centuries; secularism is not simply a creature of treaties to end religious wars or the rise of science, or the Enlightenment. It is informed by a long history of engagements with the temporal world and purposes that imply no transcendence of immanent conditions. It needs direct attention in contemporary discussions of religion and public life. Moreover, I shall contend that working within a sharp binary of secularism vs religion is problematic. Not least, it obscures both the important ways in which religious people engage this-worldly, temporal life; the important senses in which religion is established as a category not so much from within as from "secular" perspectives like that of the state; and the ways in which there may be a secular orientation to the sacred or transcendent.

SECULARISM AND SECULARIZATION

Secularism is clearly a contemporary public issue in its own right. France proclaims secularism—*laïcité*—not simply as a policy choice but as part of its national identity. This is informed by a history of anti-clericalism and a nationalist ideology forged in relationship to Enlightenment and Revolution. But it is also a “*Catholaïcité*” shaped like French identity generally by Christian, and specifically Catholic, culture. There remains a cross atop the Pantheon, a sign of its history as a church before it become a monument to the heroes of the secular state but also of the compromises between religion and *laïcité* that shape France today. Thus secularism shapes the French response to Islamic immigrants, but it is not simply a neutral category unrelated to its own religious history. A version of French *laïcité* was incorporated into the design of Attaturk’s Turkey, and not surprisingly also changed by the context. It is packaged into Attaturkism as an essential sign of modernity and a demarcation not only from domestic Islamist politics but also from the Arab and Persian countries in which Islam plays a greater public role. A different model of secularism is a central part of the constitutional and policy formation in which India deals with religious diversity. In this case, secularism is identified not with distance from religion but equity towards religions, including equitable state subsidies for Hindus, Muslims and others. Still another secularism is embodied in the US constitution, which in prohib-

iting established churches protected religious difference and helped to create a sort of marketplace of religions in which faith and active participation flourished. The reformulation of constitutional doctrine as separation of church and state later created its own controversies. And a broader secularism is attacked by parts of the American religious right as part of the notorious “secular humanism.” In each of these contexts, secularism takes on its own meanings, values, and associations; it is not simply a neutral antidote to religious conflicts.

Having an idea of the secular doesn’t presume a secularist stance towards it. The Catholic Church, for example, distinguishes priests with secular vocations from those in monasteries or other institutions devoted wholly to contemplation and worship of God. A secular vocation, it should be clear, is not a vocation to promote secularism. It involves, rather, a calling to ministry in this world, helping people deal with temporal existence, and to maintain a religious orientation to their lives in this secular world.

The idea of secularization, by contrast, is a suggestion that there is a trend. It is a trend that has been expected at least since Early Modernity and given quasi-scientific status in sociological studies advancing a secularization hypothesis. This is often understood simply as the expectation of a long-term, continuous decline in religious practice and diminution in the number of believers. But in classic formulations like Max Weber’s notion

of the disenchantment of the world it refers also to growing capacity of secular explanations and secular institutions. There is reality to secularization in this strongest sense, but not in simplistic expectations of a, pardon the pun, secular decline in religion.

There has been an enormous expansion in the construction of institutions for worldly purposes. These are often demarcated from spiritual engagements, sometimes with restrictions on explicit religious practices. They not only pursue goals other than promoting religion, they operate outside the control of specifically religious actors. Much of social life is organized by systems or “steering mechanisms” that are held to operate independently of religious belief, ritual practice, or divine guidance. Markets are a pre-eminent example. Participants may have religious motivations; they may pray for success; they may form alliances with co-religionists. But despite this economists, financiers, investors, and traders understand markets mainly as products of buying and selling. It may take a certain amount of faith to believe in all the new financial instruments they create, but this is not in any strict sense religious faith. For most it is not faith in divine intervention but rather faith in the honesty and competence of human actors, in the accuracy of information, the wisdom of one’s own investment decisions, and the efficacy of the legal and technological systems underpinning market exchange. In short, it is a secular faith. Or put another way, people understand what markets are by

means of a social imaginary in which the relevant explanations of their operations are all this-worldly.

Not only markets but also a variety of other institutions have been created to organize and advance projects in this world. Schools, welfare agencies, armies, hospitals, and water purification systems all operate within the terms of a secular imaginary. Of course some people's actions may be shaped by religious motives, and religious bodies may organize such institutions in ways that serve their own purposes. But even for those who orient their lives in large part to religious or spiritual purposes, activities in relation to such institutions are widely structured by a secular imaginary. Cause and effect relationships are understood in this-worldly terms as matters of nature, technology, human intention, or even mere accident. This is part of what Charles Taylor means by describing modernity as a "secular age."¹ It is an age in which lots of people, including religious people, make sense of lots of things entirely or mainly in terms of this-worldly cause and effect. In Taylor's phrase, they think entirely within "the immanent frame." They see non-metaphysical, non-transcendent knowledge as sufficient to grasp a world that works entirely of itself. One of the themes of *A Secular Age* is to work out how people come

1. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2007. See also Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, eds., *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2010.

to see this imminent frame as the normal, natural, tacit context for much or all of their action, and how this changes both religious belief and religious engagement in the world.

A secular imaginary has become more prominent and a variety of institutions exist to do things in this world. In this sense, one might say that secularization has been real. But discussions of secularization are generally not limited to this sense; they present modernity as necessarily involving a progressive disappearance of religion. Particularly outside Europe, this simply hasn't happened, and there is almost no evidence of it happening. Even inside Europe the story is more complex. There is more explicit unbelief, and there is also more compartmentalization of religion. The differentiation of value spheres—religious, political, economic—that Max Weber described as basic to modernity is more clear cut in some settings. But demarcation is not disappearance. Declaring oneself an unbeliever is different from accepting an order of society in which religion matters prominently in some affairs and not others, on some days of the week and not others.

Many accounts of secularization take the form of what Taylor has called “subtraction stories.” That is, they suggest that religion used to fill a lot of space, and religion has been removed from some of the space, leaving everything else untouched. This is another sense of seeing the secular as the absence of religion rather than

something, a presence, needing analysis. For the importance of secular institutions has grown through historical transformations, not simply a process of subtraction. It has facilitated some purposes and impeded others. It has taken forms that empowered some people more than others.

Many secularization narratives presented religion as simply an illusory solution to problems that could in modernity be met by more realistic solutions. But even without taking a position on the truth of any particular religion, one can recognize that religious practice takes many forms other than advancing propositions that may be true or false. From marriages to mourning, from solidifying local communities to welcoming newcomers in large cities, from administering charities to sanctifying wars that made charities more necessary religion involves a range of actions and institutions. Changes in religion, including reductions in religious belief or organized religious participation, cannot accordingly be mere subtractions. They are parts of more complex transformations.

To get a better picture of this it is helpful to reduce the extent to which discussions of the secular, secularism, and secularization start with either the Peace of Westphalia or the Enlightenment.

Roots

The root notion of the secular is a contrast not to religion but to eternity. It is derived from *saeculum*, a unit

of time reckoning important to Etruscans and adapted by Romans after them. For example the lives of children born in the first year of a city's existence were held to constitute its first *saeculum*. The succession of *saecula* was marked with ritual. While some ancient texts held this should be celebrated every 30 years, making the *saeculum* roughly equivalent to the notion of generation, more said every 100 or 110 years, reflecting the longest normal duration for a human life. The latter usage dominated as calendars were standardized and the *saeculum* became roughly a century.

It is worth noting that already in this ancient usage there is reference both to the natural conditions of life and to the civil institution of ritual and a calendar. Each of these dimensions informed the contrast drawn by early Christian thinkers between earthly existence and eternal life with God. For many, it should be recalled, this was something that would come not simply after death but with the return of Christ after a thousand years, a millennium, ten *saecula*. Here too an older idea was adapted. The Etruscans thought ten *saecula* to be the lifespan allotted to their city. Romans celebrated the thousandth anniversary of the founding of Rome with great ritual in CE(AD) 248. This marked the beginning of a *Saeculum Novum* though Rome's situation in this new era quickly became troubled. Christians started a new calendar, of course, marking years before or after the birth of Christ, and investing metaphysical hopes (and fears) in the mil-

lennium expected in AD 1000. Here the succession of *saecula* counted the time until Christ's return and the end of history. In a very important sense, this was not what later came to be called secular time. It was temporary, a time of waiting, not simply years stretching infinitely into the future.

Likewise, when Saint Augustine offered his famous and influential distinction of the City of God from the City of Man he did not mean to banish religion from "secular" affairs. On the contrary, his image of the City of God is the Church, religious people living in secular reality, and the contrast is to those who live in the same world but without the guidance of Christianity. Augustine wrote shortly after the sack of Rome in CE 410, an event that (not unlike the attacks of September 11th 2001) underscored the vulnerability of even a strong state. Augustine not only insisted that Christian suppression of pagan religion was not to blame, he argued that Christian faith was all the more important amid worldly instability. He urged readers to look inward to find God, emphasizing the importance of this connection to the eternal for their ability to cope with the travails of the temporal world. They—even a Christian emperor—needed to resist the temptation to focus on material gains or worldly pleasures. That the pagans lacked the advantage of Christianity is one reason they were often corrupt. So Augustine distinguishes a spiritual orientation from an orientation to worldly things.

Augustine criticizes pagan religion for its expectation that Gods can be mobilized to protect or advance the worldly projects of their mortal followers. Christians, he says, look to God for a connection to what lies beyond such “secular” affairs. God shapes human affairs according to a plan, but this includes human suffering, tests that challenge and deepen faith, and demands for sacrifice. Knowing this helps Christians escape from the tendency to desire worldly rather than spiritual gains. We need, says Augustine, to put this world in the perspective of a higher good.

Augustine’s discussion, along with others of the early Christian era, is informed by fear of an entanglement in worldly, sensual affairs. This is a theme dating back at least to Plato, a reflection of the prominence of ascetic and hermetic traditions in early Christianity, and an anticipation of the prominence of monastic life in the middle ages. Caught up in the material world we lose sight of the ideal and run the risk of corruption. This is an anxiety that comes to inform ideas of the secular. It is not merely the world of human temporality in which we all must live until the Second Coming. It is the world of temptation and illusion.

The contrast of sensuous and corrupt to ideal and pure is mapped onto that of secular to eternal. For one thread of the ensuing conceptual history the secular is associated more with the fallen than simply with the created. Asceticism, retreat from worldly engagements, and mo-

nastic disciplines are all attempts to minimize the pull of worldly ends and maximize focus on ultimate ends. In this context Christianity has long had special issues about sex and bodily pleasures. These run from early Christian debates about marriage and celibacy, reflected in Paul's instructions to the Christians of Corinth, through the tradition of priestly celibacy, to 19th century utopian communities like the Shakers. The issue remains powerful in the current context where the fault lines of politically contested debates over religion and the secular turn impressively often on issues of sexuality and of bodies: abortion, homosexuality, sex education, and promiscuity have all been presented as reflections of a corrupt secular society in need of religious improvement.

Yet this very idea of subjecting the secular world to religious action is different from simply keeping it at distance. The two notions have subsisted side-by-side through Church history. Both parish ministry and monastic discipline have been important. There are "religious" priests in orders that call for specific liturgical practices. There are "secular" priests who have not taken vows specific to any of these orders and who live "in the world." But religious priests may also serve parishes or go out into the world as missionaries. This isn't the place to try to untangle a complex and sometimes contested distinction. But we should note that its meaning has shifted with contexts and over time. For example in some colonial settings indigenous priests were more likely secu-

lar and resented what they saw as preferential treatment for priests in religious orders who were more likely to be European. More generally, secular priests were important to a growing sense of positive value to engagement with the world. Overlapping the era of Protestant Reformation, this included figures like Bartholomew Holzhauser whose communitarian—perhaps even communist—Apostolic Union of Secular Priests was formed in the aftermath of the Thirty Years War to lead a renewal of religious life among lay people.

This development coincided with what Taylor has called a new value on “ordinary happiness.” A variety of this worldly virtues received new levels of praise; new moral value was attached, for example, to family life.² Priests were called to minister to the affairs in this world and the moral conditions of this world, not only the connections of people to the transcendent. In no sense uniquely Catholic, this trend runs from the Seventeenth Century through issues like the extent to which many Evangelical mega-churches today are organized, in large part, as service-delivery institutions. That is, they may espouse Biblically literalist, or fundamentalist, or enthusiastically celebrationist theologies and religious practices, but they are also organized, in very large part, to deliver secular services in the world: marriage counseling, psychotherapy, job placement, education, help for

2. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1989.

relocating immigrants. They are, in that sense, secular-while-religious.

There is also a long and overlapping history around humanism and indeed humanitarianism. This appears in theological debates over the significance of the humanity of Christ, in late Medieval and early Modern humanism, and in questions about the spiritual status of New World peoples. The Valladolid controversy famously pitted Las Casas against Sepulveda and made clear that answers to religious questions had secular consequences: “Do the natives have souls?” “Should we think about them as needing to be saved?” “Are they somehow like animals, and thus to be treated as mere labor?” Versions of these debates were intertwined with missionary activity throughout the era of European colonialism. They influenced also the idea of humanitarianism as a kind of value and a virtue linked to progress in this world. Informed the idea of imitating Christ, by the Nineteenth Century to be a good humanitarian was to be somebody who helps humanity in general and advances progress in society. This was an ultimately secular project, though for many participants it might have religious motivation. And this remains important in humanitarian action today: emergency relief in situations of natural disaster or war and refugee displacement is an important project for religious people and organizations (as well as others), but it is organized very much in terms of ministering to the needs of people in the secular world.

Some of the same ideas can inform ethics—and spiritual engagements—that do not privilege the human. Seeing environmentalism as stewardship of God’s creation is a religiously organized engagement with (quite literally) the world. The Deep Ecology movement even introduces new metaphysical ideas, new notions of immanence. Others approach environmental issues with equal dedication but entirely within the immanent frame.

THE SEPARATION OF RELIGION FROM POLITICS

Throughout the Christian era, a key question was how the Church—and after successive splits, the various churches—would relate to states and politics. It’s an issue that goes back to the first century of the Christian Era. It forms the context for *The Book Of Revelations*, written in the aftermath of the Jewish Wars. It shapes centuries of struggle over papal and monarchical power, and ultimately issues with Marsilius of Padua in the doctrine of the Two Swords. Of course this notion of distinct powers in different spheres was honored more in doctrine than ever in reality. Which is to say that the Pope and the monarchs of Europe, who represented a kind of secular counterpart to church power, didn’t live up to the notion of separate-but-equal for very long.

The Protestant Reformation brought an intensification of the relationship of religion to politics. This produced considerable violence within states as religious minorities were persecuted, sometimes on a large scale

as in France's St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572. It also shaped a hundred fifty years of interstate war. Of course, the "religious wars" that wracked Europe through the 15th and early 16th centuries were also wars of state-building. In other words they expanded secular power even when fought in the name of religion. Indeed, the conclusion of these wars in the 1648 Peace of Westphalia is often cited as the beginning of a secular state system in Europe. It is claimed as the beginning of modern international relations, understood as a matter of secular relations among sovereign states.

This is profoundly misleading. The Peace of Westphalia did not make states secular. It established the principle of *cuius regio eius religio*—who rules, his religion. What followed was a mixture of migration, forced conversion, and legal sanctions against religious minorities. European states after the Peace of Westphalia were primarily confessional states with established churches. Members of some minorities moved to European colonies abroad—including English settlers who fled religious persecution only to set up state churches of their own in American colonies they dominated. Colonial-era governments (which often had established churches) further developed the category of religion—that is, reference to a set of bodies of partially analogous cultural practice and belief—to take account of the religions of people they governed.³

3. There has been much discussion in the field of comparative religion of the formation of the category that defines it, including

There is much more to this story, of course, including different formations and transformations of nationalism. Sometimes closely related to religion this was increasingly a secular narrative establishing the nation as the always already identified and proper people of a state and thereby a secular basis for legitimacy. It became harder for monarchs to claim divine right and more important for them to claim to serve the interests of the people. Where the power of absolutist states was closely tied up with religious claims to authority (and the daily domination of religious authorities)—as in France—revolution took up the mantle of secularism.

The European path to relatively strong secularism—and in some countries eventually irreligion—was not a direct one from the Peace of Westphalia. It was, rather, shaped by struggles against the enforced religious conformity that followed the 1648 treaties. The strong French doctrine of *laïcité* was the product of un-churching struggles, struggles against priestly authority—that continued through the 19th and into the 20th centuries. These gave a more militant form to secularism, and positioned it as a dimension of social struggle and liberation. More generally, such secularizing struggles did not simply confront ancient state churches, but new church-state

its colonial era roots and the importance of international assemblies purporting to represent the world's religions. See for example Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2005.

partnerships forged in the wake of 1648. This, as Jose Casanova has argued as clearly as anyone, is central to what has made Europe particularly secular.⁴ It contrasts with situations where there is more of an open marketplace for religion. This is one reason why, perhaps ironically, the American separation of church and state has been conducive to high levels of religious belief and participation.

The un-churching struggles produced a strident, militant *laïcité*. We see echoes of this today in European panics over Islam. These often strike a chord among populists and intellectuals alike that is not well-recognized. On the one hand, there are frequent contrasts of Enlightenment reason to unenlightened versions of faith. And many are indeed committed to an idea of comprehensive rationality, the supremacy not just of logic and empirical research but also of systematic, thorough, and exclusive reliance on them. This European history and concept-formation also informs the *laïcité* of other countries where anxiety over religious-political rule is strong—not least Turkey—though transposing it into a new context changes at least some of its meaning. Yet to take such commitments as though they are the whole story—their virtues a sufficient explanation of holding them—is to obscure both the more specific European history and the

4. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, University of Chicago Press, 1994. See also Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003.

extent to which reliance on these ideas is informed by anxiety over specific manifestations of religion—notably Islam but also Evangelical Christianity. It was the same in the Scottish Enlightenment. The great philosophers were proponents in various combinations of reason and research but they were also opponents of religious enthusiasm. Enthusiasm always seemed to them to encourage not only belief on bases not subjected to rational criticism, but failures of discipline. Enthusiasm encouraged both strong convictions and a willingness to express them directly in action. The this was dangerous not only in religion but in politics, where it might seem to give warrant to radicals seeking to mobilize the “lower orders” in wholesale transformation of social institutions.⁵

Secularism can also designate a framework for religious pluralism, but this is by no means always the case. In fact, post-colonial societies around the world have given rise to most of the regimes of religious pluralism and religious tolerance. These are much less di-

5. Here we see the link between figures like Hume in the Scottish Enlightenment and Burke’s famous response to the French Revolution. But we should not equate this with conservatism in the sense of a “right wing.” Even the early anarchist William Godwin insisted on gradualism, resisted enthusiasm (which he thought as likely to take the form of Church and King mobs as Jacobinism), and abhorred the idea that the undisciplined lower orders would participate directly in politics. See Alex Benchimol, in Benchimol and Whaley and Goodwin, *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders*.

rectly products of the European Enlightenment than is sometimes thought. If Europe's trajectory was state churches followed by militant laïcité, the United States, India, and a number of other post-colonial states produced much stronger practices of religious pluralism. These are supported by very different models of state secularism. If separation is the rule in the US, the Indian state subsidizes religion but seeks to do so without bias for or against any.⁶

Non-dominant religions may actually be disadvantaged by apparently neutral regimes that in some ways mask tacit understandings of legitimate religious identity. In other words, the secular may be constructed with one kind of religion in mind, such that it legitimates that kind of religion but doesn't do a good job of being neutral toward other kinds of religions or projects. And this is important, because for much of the world, ideas of citizenship have been constructed in secular terms in most of the societies of the world.

This is also an issue with regard to how secularism gets mobilized in other projects. For example, the assertion of secularism may seem to be just an assertion of neutrality. But when it is written into a constitution it typically reflects events that are not neutral: a new party coming to power, a revolution, or conflicts with international actors in other states. So there's always a kind

6. See Alfred Stepan's review in "The Twin Tolerations," and the various chapters in Rajeev Bhargava, ed., *Secularism*.

of political context, and it needs to be asked of particular secular regimes what they express in that political context and how they shape distributions of power and recognition.

In a more general sense, the category of religion reflects not so much the self-understanding of the religious as the gaze—particularly from the standpoint of states—on a plurality of religious practices. It is often remarked that the root of “religion” is Latin for “binding.” But it is not the experience of being bound together with others or with God that gives us the category so much as the recognition of multiple different ways of being bound and organizing the ritual practices, moral understandings, and beliefs that follow from this. This was evident already in Rome, where the category reflected recognition that other peoples had practices and beliefs not commensurate with that of Roman custom.⁷ The category of religion groups together objects—religions—understood as cultures. It thus includes those considered false religion—errors—not only the true and correct. It is a reference to phenomena in the secular world, even when articulated

7. Somewhat similarly, the Roman idea of “nation” was shaped not by self-reflection but by reference to the distinctive cultures of others including conquered peoples and enemies. These were nations partly because inclusion was reckoned in terms of descent rather than citizenship (see Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002).

by someone who is religious as well as by someone who believes all religions to be erroneous.

Awareness of “other religions” was thus an awareness of systems of belief and practice partially analogous to one’s own or that prevalent in one’s own society. It co-existed with other notions, like that of the Infidel—one who lacked faith or at least the proper Faith and as important failed to adhere faithfully to the proper practices. Faced with new divisions among Christians in the era of the Reformation, the idea of religion as a category gained importance, not least in pleas for religious tolerance but also in the attempt to separate religion from politics, especially inter-state politics and war.

This informed the Peace of Westphalia and with it the founding myth of modern international relations. This is grounded in the view that both religions and states exist as objects in the secular world. Each state is sovereign, without reference to any encompassing doctrine such as divine right. Karl Schmitt sees this as the transfer of an idea of the absolute from theology proper to political theology rendering each state in a sense an exception but also beyond the reach of any discourse of comparative legitimacy. The Peace of Westphalia produced a division of the international from the domestic modeled on that between the public and the private—and it urged treating religion as a domestic matter. Both diplomatic practice and eventually the academic discipline of international relations would come to treat states as externally

secular. That is, they attempted to banish religion from relations between states.

So thoroughly did the field of international relations absorb the idea of its essential secularity that it became all but blind to religious influences on international affairs. As Robert Keohane explains, “the attacks of September 11 reveal that all mainstream theories of world politics are relentlessly secular with respect to motivation. They ignore the impact of religion, despite the fact that world-shaking political movements have so often been fueled by religious fervor.”⁸ After all, it is not as though religion was not a force in international politics between 1648 and 2001, and only somehow erupted out of the domestic sphere to shape international politics in this era of Al Qaida and other non-state movements. And of course it is not only Muslims who bring religion into international politics, as though they were simply confused about the proper modern separation. Consider, to the contrary, recent US legislation mandating an international defense of religious freedom. As Saba Mahmood has indicated, the ostensible secularism or at least neutrality of the legislation obscures the fact that it is strong-

8. Keohane, “The Globalization of Informal Violence, Theories of World Politics, and ‘The Liberalism of Fear,’” p. 77-92, in C. Calhoun, P. Price, and A. Timmer, eds., *Understanding September 11*, New York, New Press 2002, p. 72. See also Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007.

ly informed by specific religious understandings.⁹ Much the same goes for the demonization of Islam in the name of a secular national security.

But if the field of international relations is extreme, it is not alone. In general, social science is a deeply secular project, secular almost by its very definition. Particularly in the North American context, the group of fields called the social sciences became a separate faculty within the arts and sciences partly on the basis of a late-19th Century determination to separate themselves from religion and moral philosophy.¹⁰ More generally, in their very pursuit of scientific objectivity (and status) the social sciences (some more than others) have tended to approach religion less than one might have expected based on its prominence in social life and often only in ostensibly value-free external terms, leaving more hermeneutic inquiries more often to other fields. They also subscribed to the secularization narrative longer than dispassionate weighing of the evidence might have suggested.

Social science discussion of secularism centers largely on the role of religion in politics. What should be the role of religion in politics, if any? How autonomous should the state be from religion? How autonomous should religion be from the state? Certainly some social scientists

9. "Politics of Religious Freedom: Minority Rights, Sovereignty, and Gender." Speech at the American Academy of Religion, Montreal, 9 November 2009.

10. See Julie Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996.

join the so-called New Atheism of a variety of scientific authors in calling for a more stringent secularism in reaction to religious movements. But this is more a matter of personal ideology than of research and scholarly argumentation.

Situated in the context of a dominant interest in the relationship of religion to politics, secularism is easily backgrounded. It is in this context that it is commonly treated as an absence more than a presence. But there is growing recognition that constructions of the secular and governmental arrangements to promote secularism both vary a good deal. Constitutional regimes approach the secular in very different ways: as a look at the US, India and either France or Turkey quickly suggests. Questions of freedom of religion, of the neutrality of the state toward religion, of the extent to which religious laws should be acknowledged by secular states all put the varied structures of secularism on the research agenda. Likewise, there is growing recognition that secularism is not simply a universal or a constant in comparative research. On the contrary secularism takes different shape in relation to different religions and different political and cultural milieux. I have discussed mainly the development of European secularism in a history dominated by Christianity, but distinct issues arise around secularism among Jews and in Israel, among Muslims in different regions, among Buddhists, among Hindus, and in countries where more than one of these or other religions are important.

Ideas of the secular concern not only the separation of religion from politics, but also the separation—or relation—between religion and other dimensions of culture and ethnicity. Reform and purification movements in Europe in the Late Medieval and Early Modern period sought to separate proper Christian practice from pre-Christian inheritance: from magic, from superstition. This new policing of the proper content of religion also intensified its boundary with the secular as well as with other religions and other spiritual practices. It may have made explicit professions of unbelief more likely. Attempts to enforce doctrinal orthodoxy also raise issues about the extent to which “a” religion is unitary and the extent to which different national or other cultures shape versions of such an ostensibly unified religion. Do all Catholics in the world believe the same things? North American Catholics are a little bit shaky about this. Or are there strong national differences but limited capacity to recognize them? The Umma Islam, ostensibly a unit of common belief, is divided not just between Shia and Sunni, but also on national lines. What’s distinctive in Indonesia, or in Pakistan, or in Yemen? Again, intellectual resources for thinking through the relationships among “secular” culture, varied religious practices and proclamations of religious unity are important but often underdeveloped. Catholicism and Islam offer just two examples. We could add the upheavals of the Anglican Communion to this picture, or tensions over who is rec-

ognized as a Jew in different contexts. In general, it is unclear how much can we separate religion from culture, ethnicity, national identity, or a variety of other concepts constructed in secular terms.

Conversely, for some people religion appears as a quasi-ethnic secular identity. That is, being Muslim, being Christian, being Hindu, being Jewish are mobilized as secular identities, like ethnic identities. Religious identities are claimed as secular markers by people who don't practice the religion in any active and sometimes by people who explicit declare themselves unbelievers.

But even people who are serious about their religious commitments and practices can be unclear about the relationship between use of a religious label to denote religion as such or to denote a population. Muslim attitudes toward the relation of religion to politics, for example, are shaped not just by religious ideologies, but also by resentment of external political domination. Such resentment is common among Muslims, but it is misleading to see it as an attribute of Islam *per se*.¹¹ Indeed, it is striking how much of what goes on among, or is ascribed to Muslims is understood by ostensibly secular Westerners as integral to Islam. More room needs to be made for attention to the secular institutions of the "Islamic" world.

Questions are recurrently raised as to whether Islam can be separated from politics. Debates about this, how-

11. See Tariq Ramadan, "Manifesto for a New "We" 7 July 2006, posted at <http://www.tariqramadan.com/spip.php?article743>.

ever, are shaped by previous debates over the question of the division of religion and politics in Christendom. Aspects of European history are now projected onto and reworked in Islam. This isn't only a question about alleged theocracy, or about clerical rule of one kind or another. It is also a question that shapes the whole idea of what counts as modern. The separation of religion from politics has become all but defining of the modern for some.

Ironically, there are also concerns that this very separation has gone too far. These are producing discussions of "post-secularism." The term is confusing because it often isn't clear whether those who use it intend to describe a change in attitudes of a large population or only a shift from their own previous more doctrinaire secularism. The stakes of the discussion are whether the democratic public sphere (a) loses capacity to integrate public opinion if it can't include religious voices, and (b) is deprived of possible creative resources, insights, and ethical orientations if it isn't informed by ideas with roots in religion.

Both John Rawls and Jurgen Habermas have reconsidered their previous arguments that the public sphere has to be completely secular in order to be neutrally accessible to all. Both have been advocates for a mainly processual, non-substantive treatment of public discourse. They argue that constitutional arrangements and normative presuppositions for democracy should focus on achieving just procedures rather than pursuing a par-

ticular substantive definition of the good.¹² Rawls initially excluded religious reasons from public debates; late in his life he reconsidered and argued that they should be included so long as they could be translated into secular terms.¹³ Habermas has gone further, worrying that the demand for ‘translation’ imposes an asymmetrical burden; he is also concerned not to lose religious insights that may still have liberatory potential.¹⁴ Habermas seeks to defend a less narrow liberalism, one that admits religion more fully into public discourse but seeks to maintain a secular conception of the state. He understands this as requiring impartiality in state relations to religion, including to unbelief, but not as requiring the stronger *laïc* prohibition on state action affecting religion even if impartially. Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that the liberal state and its advocates are not merely enjoined to religious tolerance but—at least potentially—cognizant of a functional interest in public expressions of religion. These may be key resources for the creation of meaning and identity; secular citizens can learn from religious contributions to public discourse (not least when

12. Compare Alastair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice, Which Good* (1988) and *After Virtue* (2007).

13. John Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” in *The University of Chicago Law Review*, v. 64, n. 3, p. 765-807, Summer 1997.

14. See Habermas, *Rationality and Religion: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2002, and “Religion in the Public Sphere.”

these help clarify intuitions the secular have not made explicit). But, Habermas insists, it remains the case that a direct appeal to the absolute, a transcendent notion of ultimate truth, is a step outside the bounds of reasoned public discourse.

Habermas's argument presumes that such absolutes, or higher order values, are absent from ordinary rational discourse and introduced only by religious beliefs (or close analogues like nationalist politics informed by Schmitt's political theology). But here I would follow Taylor in suggesting that all normative orientations, even those that claim to be entirely rational, in fact depend on higher order values.¹⁵ Being completely rational can be one such value. Some higher values are very this-worldly, as, for example, in economic discussions in which either some indicator of utility or some hedonic principle of human happiness is clearly the higher value on which the entire discussion is organized, and which has a standing apart from any of the mere incremental values. So it is not clear that reference to higher values clearly demarcates religious from secular reason. The question of how "secular" the public sphere can and should be remains contested.

SECULAR TRANSCENDENCE

The relationship between eternity and the temporal lies at the root of the idea of the secular. The secular

15. See the discussion of "hypergoods" in *Sources of the Self*.

world, this world, is the world of temporal change and also finitude. Transcendence implies reaching beyond this world to eternity and to God. But we should not ignore the possibility of another sense of transcendence, that of reaching beyond the limits of what actually exists, beyond the now and the identification of the real with the actual. To engage the possible and the future may arguably entail some version of what Kant called the transcendental, that is the capacity to know objects even before we experience them.¹⁶ But I am not concerned here with the transcendental conditions of knowledge so much as with the capacity to imagine the future and orient oneself towards it (a capacity which I think also entails imagining the past and the continuity of the world beyond oneself as a specific subject).

Taylor's brilliant chapter on "the immanent frame" considers thought that insists on the adequacy of this-worldly explanation and understanding of all phenomena including human life. It raises the question of how life is limited by foreshortening assumptions about what is possible and what counts as explanatory. Ruling out theocentric explanations is part of this. More generally, attempts to purge philosophy of metaphysics raise similar questions. The issue is not just the viability of particular explanations that rely on God or Gaia or Geist. It is a preference for reductionistic and decontextualizing

16. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, London, Penguin, 2008; orig. 1781.

explanations, and frequently explanations that resist reliance on ideas of “meaning.” This preference is not entailed by insistence on this-worldly explanations; it is a sort of epistemic elective affinity. Ironically, it often has the effect of limiting the idea of the human even in philosophies (and scientific thought) that would appear to support humanism.

The limits are of various kinds. Mechanistic explanations bring some. An insistence that consciousness is a phenomenon of discrete individual minds brings others. So does a sharp distinction between poetry and the reliance only on unambiguous constative statements to represent (let alone evoke) truth. So does giving rational consistency paramount value. But my main focus here is on the tendency to equate the real with the actual. This inhibits attention to the past, the future, the centrality of poiesis, and important aspects of human being-in-the-world. It makes it much harder to recognize and appreciate the ways in which some “values” or what Taylor calls “hypergoods” give order to human life and action.

If we reduce “value” to “desire,” for example, we can effectively work within the limits of reductionist explanations. Desires are as immediate as projected outcomes; they can be understood in purely material terms. But a value is something different insofar as it suggests a determination to make certain preference orderings in the future. Even desire is more complicated than often imagined. The model of desiring, say, food or even specific

foods doesn't exhaust what we mean by the word. Desire for a life with my wife, for example, extends beyond possession and beyond experience of current pleasures. It is a value not only on what I might acquire but also what I might be and what I might create. It includes current "tastes" but also anticipations—for example that while I do not desire to be old, I prefer to be old in my marriage than without it. It includes commitments, world-making promises in Hannah Arendt's sense, and also hopes (including for forgiveness when promises are broken). But value also has other meanings: as for example valuing freedom isn't the same as wishing the freedom to pursue any particular course of action (though how we think about it is surely informed by such more concrete images and desires). Even so, we could understand—or try to understand—freedom as simply one potential good among many: alongside dinner, a good night's sleep, and remembering your wife's birthday. When I sit in a faculty meeting and wish to be free of it, the meaning is of this sort. But the point of the idea of hypergoods is to remind us that the work done by values like freedom is not just of that sort. Beyond the concrete freedoms we wish we may—most of us probably do—value freedom in a way that gives order to our other values and desires and thus to our actions, our lives, and our imaginings of possible futures.

We could say that freedom is a sacred value. The exaltation of specific values is one plausible meaning of 'sa-

cred'. Whether equating the sacred to hypergoods is an adequate exploration is not my primary question here. My sense is that is not, that this is part of what the sacred means to us but that the sacred is a matter of awe in a way that hypergoods may not necessarily be.

In any case, hypergoods, even if not sacred, reach beyond the immediate and beyond the immanent. They describe a way in which we are oriented beyond not only what we have now but also beyond what we are or what we can achieve. Wanting ourselves to have better wants describes a part of this. To be sure, valuing rational explanations and "being reasonable" are not transcendent in the way valuing God's will is. But what, say, of valuing universal justice or care for all who suffer, or for that matter, the beauty of the world? Universal justice and care for all who suffer are clearly aspirational. They can only be located in the future and I think only in a particularly hypothetical future since it is not at all clear that faith in this future would be rationally justified. The beauty of the world is different. There is more than enough beauty in the world to inspire awe and wonder and longing and attachment. Yet every day some of it vanishes; recurrently we fear its loss, or loss of our access to it. This is part of the meaning of mortality, as well as part of the anxiety in a strong environmental consciousness.

Our relationship to the beauty of the world transcends the existing even though it is intensely related to it. We understand that beauty to belong to the world, not only

to our experience of it.¹⁷ As immediate as experience of it can be, its very magnificence and our awe and wonder are related to the fact that it is part of the world that existed before us and will exist after us—although anxiety about how long the world will endure may inflect and perhaps intensify our sensitivity to this beauty. This may offer a version of the experience of “fullness” that Taylor evokes. Taylor exemplifies this with a lovely passage from Bede Griffiths—troubling to some readers because of its apparent sentimentality—which indeed engages the beauty of the world. For Griffiths and perhaps for Taylor the experience of fullness points to something beyond the world; it is a fusion of the immediately material with the cosmic and spiritual. Without denying that experience (or interpretation) I want to evoke the possibility of a transcendent experience of the beauty of the world that does not depend on fusion with something beyond the world, but on the extent to which the world itself is beyond us, is enormous, and is, at least in the aspect of its beauty, whole. With a nod to Griffiths’ efforts to fuse East and West, we might say it is integral. But we

17. I am using the phrase “beauty of the world” rather than, say, experience of the sublime precisely to emphasize reference to aspects of the world itself which we experience, rather than of our experience itself. I have in mind something of the orientation to nature suggested by the 19th century New England transcendentalists among others. This is not nature as a system, though thinking of nature that way need not preclude access to the beauty of the world.

should be cautious here. The opposite of ‘fragmented’ need not be ‘systematically integrated’.

We may grasp the beauty of the world as involving innumerable connections without necessarily apprehending it as systematic. Thus by the “wholeness” of the world’s beauty I want to designate the sense of connections that constitute something larger. The connections are not only of classification, nor of cause and effect. They are of diverse and not necessarily commensurable sorts. We cannot abstract particulars fully from their contexts and connections. I meant to suggest something integral rather than fragmented, thus, not something complete in the sense of plenitude. Taylor’s metaphor of fullness could be read—against his own inclination—as signaling the kind of neoPlatonic completeness (and indeed hierarchy) traced by Arthur Lovejoy in his account of the great chain of being. That is a matter of all spaces being filled in, recognizing connections especially in hierarchy, rather than of the ubiquity of connections and omnipresence of spiritual meaning.¹⁸

What I hope to evoke is the possibility of dramatic, moving connections that are nonetheless multiple and not readily commensurable. We could evoke this by the distinction between a polytheistic sense of the Gods rather than at least reductionistic versions of monotheism. In

18. *The Great Chain of Being*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1976.

any case, monistic system-building is not the only way in which we apprehend large-scale connections.

Connections are different from equivalences, and connections are not only matters of cause and effect. They involve shared culture and common histories. They involve the closeness to specific settings and versions of being-in-the-world that Heidegger described as 'dwelling'. This may involve a recognition of others as belonging in some of the same settings even without a sense of being the same as them or feeling fond of them. At a global scale, thus, we might helpfully think of a cosmopolitanism of connections, thus, rather than one only of universal categorical equivalences. And at a local level we may create the conditions of peaceful coexistence better through recognition of fellow-belonging despite difference than through a search for universalistic common denominators.¹⁹

In any case, there may be something transcendent in our connection to the beauty of the world. We reach beyond the moment, beyond our individual lives, and beyond a fragmented sense of existence. Something of the same transcendent connection may be forged in relation to the sorrows of the world. Think for example of the empathy felt for victims of the recent Haitian earthquake (or any of a host of other disasters). We respond not simply

19. Such a conclusion fits, for example, with the findings of Varshney about the presence or absence of inter-communal violence in Indian cities.

to recognition that those suffering our human. Our sense of common humanity is often represented as membership in a set of more or less equivalent individuals. This is the logic of human rights, for example. But this is not the only way in which we apprehend the human. We apprehend it in analogies, contexts, and connections. The suffering human beings who are represented as interchangeable masses in many media images are also connected to us by intertwined histories such as colonialism and slavery, by recognition of analogous roles like parent and child, by awareness that we have a capacity to act to mitigate suffering or fail to act.

Our potentially transcendent relationship to the world depends in important ways on recognition that it exists without us. Yet we may also recognize that the world is in part made by human action (not only damaged by it), and indeed that we participate in that action, albeit usually in rather small ways. It matters both that the consequences of the Haitian earthquake were so devastating because of conditions the United States helped to create—poverty, political instability, and the growth of Port-au-Prince precisely at an ecologically unsustainable site on a tectonic fault line—and that as individuals we have genuine options to care or not care, help or not help.

Connection to history and to projects of making the future are potentially sources of secular transcendence. By this I mean two things. First, both consciousness of the past and anticipations of the future enable people to

recognize the institutional arrangements and other features of the present as contingent rather than essential or necessary. This invites an awareness of larger (or at least other) possibilities. It may also suggest connections to people, culture, ideas, and threads of experience that transcend the immediately given. Second, people may work actively to transcend the limits of existing social conditions or culture. They may do this as individuals but social movements are particularly important to this. They both depend on a sense of the possibility of transcending the given and (at least sometimes) reinforce this with experiences of transcendent solidarity.

Participating in a movement brings to many both a heightened sense of the possibility of transforming conditions others take as unalterably given and a heightened sense of connections to each other. These connections to each other are not necessarily—and are generally not primarily—connections to humanity as whole. Nor are they necessarily ‘oceanic’ feelings of connection to everything. They are connections to others who join in shared actions, to specific individuals and larger groups. They evoke the sense not so much of equivalence or sameness as of connection despite difference and of being in something together. Likewise the sense of possibility need not be the anticipation of perfection. There may be mountains beyond mountains, movements beyond movements. Movements link the general sense of potential transcendence we gain from taking the historicity of human ex-

istence seriously to engagement in particular transformations. We wish to overcome capitalist exploitation, or environmental deprivation, or war—and usually specific capitalist abuses, specific degradations of the environment, and specific conflicts.

Similar thoughts might inform a different theological understanding. We might engage God less as the Absolute or the One at the center of neoPlatonic order, and more as being “in the struggle with us.” Likewise, we might explore the extent to which transcendent connections to music and art are not to those categories as such but to much more specific works and events of performance or contemplation. These are mediated by history and culture even though they may take us beyond the limits of historical circumstances and cultural categories. But my main point is to urge us to think of both experiences of and commitments to transcendence in this-worldly, temporal life. A secondary point which I have not developed, is that this need not be understood in the register of the ‘aesthetic’. It may be much more directly connected to action in the world. In this regard, many modern versions of “the secular” and of “the immanent frame” are importantly anti-historical. They suggest that we must accept the world as it is. They may argue especially against the hope that God offers something better in eternal life. But implicitly their frameworks argue also against the hope that we can make this into a better world. This is ironic, since many of these self-declared

secularists are in fact committed to projects of making the world better through science, technology, and social reform. But the potential of these projects is often hemmed in by the tendency to treat too much of the existing as necessary and inevitable.

CONCLUSION

Distinctions between the religious and the secular are embedded in a modern era which also imposes a range of other differentiations, notably that of public and private. Many of these are closely linked to states and their administrative practices—indeed, both in colonial and in domestic administration states helped to create the very category religion as one that would subsume a whole class of ostensibly analogous phenomena. But the differentiation of states from market economies, sometimes understood to be self-moving, is also powerful. These differentiations shape modern social imaginaries which in turn help to the world. That is, by distinguishing politics from religion or the economy from both we inform our material practices and the way we build institutions in the world. The distinctions take on a certain material reality, thus, but they can also be obstacles to a better intellectual analysis. The distinction between the secular and the religious is a case in point. It obscures both ways in which religious people engage the temporal world and ways in which states and other this-world institutional structures inform the idea of religion itself.

More generally, Max Weber famously argued that the differentiation of value spheres—religious, economic, political, social, aesthetic—was basic to modernity. The notion of value spheres is informative, but we should also be clear the differentiations reflect (and reproduce) tensions among projects not just values. The making of the world is pursued by both religious and non-religious projects. There is contention among these projects over the nature of institutions. Some of that contention is between the religious and non-religious. Part of the advance of what we call “the secular” stems from creating new domains of this-worldly efficacy and action. Science is important in this way, not just as a clashing value system or ideology. Medicine is not just another domain of knowledge but now meddles with the very nature of life through genetic engineering. The economy, the state, and social movements all involve world-making projects. These may contend with each other as well as with specifically religious projects. But the expansion of reliance on this-worldly institutions and practices is an expansion of the secular even when it is compatible with or carried out by religious people.

Finally, we should recognize the prominence of a secularist ideology that goes beyond affirming the virtues of the ostensibly neutral. The demarcation between religion and the secular is made not just found. The secular is claimed by many not just as one way of organizing life, not just as useful in order to ensure peace and har-

mony among different religions, but as a kind of maturation. It is held to be a kind of developmental achievement. Some people feel they are “better” because they have overcome illusion and reached the point of secularism. That ideological self-understanding is itself powerful in a variety of contexts. It shapes even the way in which many think of global cosmopolitanism as a kind of escape from culture, national and religion into a realm of apparently pure reason, universal rights, and global connections. We might, by contrast, think of cosmopolitanism as something to be achieved through the connections among all the people who come from and are rooted in and belong to different traditions, different social structures, different countries, different faiths. There is a profound difference between an ideology of escape and the idea of interconnected *ecumena*.

In any case, secularism is not simply the project of some smart people reflecting on problems of religion. It is a phenomenon in its own right that demands reflexive scholarship, critique, and open-minded exploration.