NATION AND RELIGION

PERSPECTIVES ON EUROPE AND ASIA

Edited by
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Is the Idea of Secularization Worth Saving?

Religion has been central to the formation of many European national identities: Poland, Ireland, Greece, England, and others. In the New World, Protestantism played a vital part in the construction of the new American nation, and religion continues to be important despite the constitutional separation of church and state. Zionism and Arab nationalism in the Middle East have both been influenced (albeit in very different ways) by religious histories. In what follows I explore the limits of this way of understanding the public character of religion.

There is renewed interest among scholars in uncovering connections between religion and politics. This interest is linked to a widespread sense that the Enlightenment's view of the place of religion in modern life needs to be revised. The emergence of religious movements in parts of the Third World, and the phenomenon of political Islam in particular, has perplexed many Enlightenment supporters. One consequence of this is the increasing structural differentiation of social spaces resulting in the creation of modern "hybrids": the principle of structural differentiation—according to which religion, economy, education, and science are located in autonomous social spaces—no longer holds. Hence the first element of the secularization thesis falls. Since the second element has already been abandoned, nothing retrievable remains of the secularization thesis.

The argument is that whether religious deprivatization threatens modernity or not depends on how religion becomes public. If it furthers the construction of civil society (as in Poland) or promotes public debate around liberal values (as in the United States), then political religion is entirely consistent with modernity. If, on the other hand, it seeks to undermine civil society (as in Egypt) or individual liberties (as in Iran) then political religion is indeed a rebellion against modernity and the universal values of Enlightenment.

This is certainly an original position but not, I would submit, an entirely coherent one. For if the legitimate role of deprivatized religion is carried out effectively, what happens to the allegedly viable part of the secularization thesis as stated by Casanova? The answer is that the first and third elements are both undermined.

When religion becomes an integral part of modern politics, it is not indifferent to debates about how the economy should be run, which scientific projects should be publicly funded, or what the broader aims of a national education system should be. The legitimate entry of religion into these debates results in the creation of modern "hybrids": the principle of structural differentiation—according to which religion, economy, education, and science are located in autonomous social spaces—no longer holds. Hence the first element of the secularization thesis falls. Furthermore, given religion's entry into political debates issuing in effective policies, it makes no sense to measure the social significance of religion only in terms of such indices as church attendance. Hence the third element of the secularization thesis falls. Since the second element has already been abandoned, nothing retrievable remains of the secularization thesis.

This does not mean that the secularization thesis must be either accepted in its original form or dismissed as nonsense. Its numerous critics are right to attack it, but they have generally missed something vital. I try to outline what that is later on. For the moment I simply assert that neither the supporters nor the critics of the secularization thesis pay enough attention to the concept of "the secular" that emerged historically in a particular way and was assigned specific practical tasks.
I begin by examining the kind of religion that enlightened intellectuals like Casanova see as compatible with modernity. For when it is proposed that religion can play a positive political role in modern society, it is not intended that this apply to any religion whatever but only to those religions that are able and willing to enter the public sphere for the purpose of rational debate with opponents who are to be persuaded rather than coerced. Only religions that have accepted the assumptions of liberal moral and political discourse are being commended.

Ever since Habermas drew attention to the central importance of the public sphere for modern liberal society, critics have pointed out that it systematically excludes various kinds of people, or types of claim, from serious consideration. From the beginning the liberal public sphere excluded certain kinds of people: women, subjects without property, and members of religious minorities. This point about exclusions resembles the objection made many years ago by critics of pluralist theories of liberal democracy. For these critics the public domain is not simply a forum for rational debate but an exclusionary space. It is not enough for liberals to respond to this criticism, as they sometimes do, by saying that although the public sphere is less than perfect as an actual forum for rational debate, it is still an ideal worth striving for. The point here is that the public sphere is a space necessarily (not just contingently) articulated by power. And everyone who enters it must address power’s disposition of people and things.

Another way of putting it is this. The enjoyment of free speech presupposes not merely the physical ability to speak but to be heard, a condition without which speaking to some effect is not possible. If one’s speech has no effect whatever, it can hardly be said to be in the public sphere, no matter how loudly one shouts. To make others listen even if they would prefer not to hear, to speak to some consequence so that something in the political world is affected, to come to a conclusion, to have the authority to make practical decisions on the basis of that conclusion—these are all presupposed in the idea of free public debate as a liberal virtue. But these performatives are not open equally to everyone because the domain of free speech is always shaped by preestablished limits. These include formal legal limitations to free speech in liberal democracies (libel, slander, copyright, patent, and so on), as well as conventional practices of secrecy (confidentiality), without which politics, business, and morality would collapse in any society. But these examples do not exhaust the limits I have in mind. The limits to free speech are not merely those imposed by law and convention—that is, by an external power. They are also intrinsic to the time and space it takes to build and demonstrate a particular argument, to express (or understand) a particular experience—and more broadly, to become particular speaking and listening subjects. There is no public sphere of free speech at an instant.

Three questions follow. First, given that historical forces shape elements of “the public” differently, particular appeals can be successfully made only to some sections of the public and not to others. If the performance of free speech is dependent on free listening, its effectiveness depends on the kind of listener who can engage appropriately with what is said, as well as the time and space he or she has to live in. How have different conceptions and practices of religion helped form the ability of listeners to be publicly responsive? This question applies not only to persons who consider themselves religious but to those for whom religion is distasteful or dangerous. For the experience of religion in the “private” spaces of home and school is crucial to the formation of subjects who will eventually endorse a particular public culture.

Second, if the adherents of a religion enter the public sphere, can their entry leave the preexisting discursive structure intact? The public sphere is not an empty space for carrying out debates. It is constituted by the sensibilities—memories and aspirations, fears and hopes—of speakers and listeners, and also by the way they exist (and are made to exist) for each other. Thus the introduction of new discourses may result in the disruption of established assumptions structuring debates in the public sphere. More strongly, they may have to disrupt existing assumptions in order to be heard. Far from having to prove to existing authority that it is no threat to dominant national values, a religion that enters political debate on its own terms may on the contrary inevitably threaten the authority of existing assumptions. And if that is the case, what is meant by demanding that any resulting change must be carried out by moral suasion and negotiation and never by manipulation or force?

Third, why are secularists alarmed at the thought that religion should be allowed to invade the domain of our personal choices—when the process of speaking and listening freely implies precisely that our thoughts and actions should be opened up to change by our interlocutors? Secularists accept that in modern society the political increasingly penetrates the personal. They accept that politics, through the law, has juridical consequences for life in the private sphere. This partiality can be explained by the secular doctrine that while the national law permits the essential self to make and defend itself (“our rights and duties constitute our modern liberties”) religious prescriptions only confine and dominate it. Yet even if we take as unproblematic the assumption that there exists a priori a secular self to be made, the question of coercion in such a constructive task cannot easily be brushed aside. For the juridification of all interpersonal relations constrains the scope for moral suasion in public culture. In that context, far from becoming a source of moral values that can enrich public
debate, deprivatized religion becomes a site of conflict over nonnegotiable rights—for example, the parent’s right to determine his or her child’s upbringing, or the pregnant woman’s right to dispose of her fetus.

One old argument about the need to separate religion from politics is that because the former essentially belongs to the domain of faith and passion, rational argument and interest-guided action can have no place in it. The secularist concedes that religious beliefs and sentiments might be acceptable at a personal and private level but insists that organized religion, being founded on authority and constraint, has always posed a danger to the freedom of the self as well as to the freedom of others. That may be why some enlightened intellectuals are prepared to allow deprivatized religion entry into the public sphere for the purpose of addressing the moral conscience of its audience—but on condition that it leave its coercive powers outside the door and rely only on its powers of persuasion.

The public, however, is notoriously diverse. Modern citizens do not subscribe to a unitary moral system (moral heterogeneity is said to be one of modern society’s defining characteristics). The puzzle here is how a deprivatized religion can appeal effectively to the consciences of those who do not accept its values. After all, the possibility of negotiation depends on the prior agreement of the parties concerned that the values to be negotiated are in fact negotiable. Even in a modern society such agreement does not extend to all values. The only option religious spokespersons have in this situation is to act as secular politicians do in liberal democracy. Where the latter cannot persuade others to negotiate, they seek to manipulate the conditions in which they act or refrain from acting. And in order to win the votes of constituents, they employ a variety of communicative devices to target their desires and anxieties. I return to the idea that deprivatized religion in a secularized society cannot be any different.

My conclusion to what I have said so far is that those who advocate the view that the deprivatization of religion is compatible with modernity do not always make it clear precisely what this implies. Is the assumption that by appealing to the conscience of the nation religious spokespersons can evoke its moral sensibilities? The difficulty here is that given the moral heterogeneity of modern society referred to above, nothing can be identified as a national conscience or a collective moral sensibility. So is the assumption that religious spokespersons can at least enrich public argument by joining in political debates? But even liberal politicians do not merely engage in public talk for the sake of “enriching” it. As members of a government and as parliamentarians they possess the authority to make decisions that are implemented in national policies. What authority do religious spokespersons have in this matter?

Should Nationalism Be Understood as Secularized Religion?

Is nationalism, with its affirmation of collective solidarity, already a religion of the nation-state? Is that how religious spokespersons can derive their authority in the public sphere, by invoking the national community as though it were also a religious one? There is certainly a long and interesting tradition that suggests nationalism is a religion. Thus as far back as 1926 Carlton Hayes remarked that “Nationalism has a large number of particularly quarrelsome sects, but as a whole it is the latest and nearest approach to a world-religion.”

Julian Huxley, writing in 1940, maintained that “humanist religion” was destined to replace traditional theological religion, and that social movements of a religious nature like Nazism and communism were evidence of this supersession. Their cruel and repulsive character, he went on to suggest, merely reflected their youthfulness in terms of evolutionary development: “Just as many of these early manifestations of theistic religion were crude and horrible . . . so these early humanist and social religions are crude and horrible.” Although Huxley does not address the question of nationalism directly, the idea of nationalism as the highest stage of religion conceived within an evolutionary framework is not hard to discern in his text.

More recently, Clifford Geertz has identified the centrality of sacred symbols springing from religious impulses to all forms of political life, nationalistic as well as prenationalistic, in cultures both modern and premodern. The symbolic activities that take place in the center, Geertz suggests, give it “its aura of being not merely important but in some odd fashion connected with the way the world is built.” This is why “the gravity of high politics and the solemnity of high worship” are akin.

Margaret Jacob makes a similar point about secular rituals and the formation of modern political values. She describes how a new pattern of sentiments, beliefs, and ceremonial activities—a “new religiosity”—came to be associated with eighteenth-century Freemasonry, and how it contributed to the emergence of liberal society. “Reason” and “civil society,” she proposes, were thus sacralized in the life of early west European nations.

However, I am not persuaded that because national political life depends on ceremonial and symbols of the sacred, it should be represented as a kind of religion. My view is that according to the modern construction “religion” consists precisely of those representations and practices that should be distinguished by and separated from politics, and that the secular is the essential ground that enables this to be done. Notions of sanctity, spirituality, and communal solidarity are invoked in various ways to claim authority in national politics (sovereignty, the law, national
glories and sufferings, the rights of the citizen, and so on). Critics often point to the words in which these notions are conveyed as signs of religion. But this evidence is not decisive. I suggest that we need to attend more closely to the historical form of concepts and not to what we take as signs of an essential phenomenon.

A writer who appears to do this is Carl Schmitt. He argues that many theological and political concepts share a common structure. “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts,” he writes, “not only because of their historical development—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent law-giver—but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts. The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology. Only by being aware of this analogy can we appreciate the manner in which the philosophical ideas of the state developed in the last centuries.” Although Schmitt’s thesis about the secularization of religious concepts is not about nationalism as such, it does have implications for the way we see it. For if we accept that religious ideas can be secularized, we might be induced to accept that nationalism has—in part or whole—a religious origin.

My view is that we should consider the results rather than the origins of the process referred to as secularization. For example, when it is pointed out that in the latter part of the nineteenth century Tractarianism in England and Ultramontanism in France (and in Europe generally) helped break the post-Reformation alliance between church and state, and that this was done by deploying religious arguments aimed at securing the freedom of Christ’s Church from the constraints of an earthly power, we should regard this development as significant not because of the essentialized (“religious”) agency by which it was initiated but because of its completed outcome. That outcome not only included the development of different moral and political disciplines, such as those Foucault identified as governmentalität. It also involved a redefinition of the essence of religion as well as of national politics.

By way of contrast: in later eighteenth-century England, supporters of the established church regarded it as a representative institution reflecting popular sentiment and public opinion. It would not be right to say that religion was then being used for political purposes or influencing state policy. The established church, which was an integral part of the state, made the coherence and continuity of the English national community possible. We should not say that the English nation was shaped or influenced by religion: the established church (called “Anglican” only in the nineteenth century) was its necessary condition. Nor, given that it was a necessary condition of the nation-state, should we speak of the social location of religion in the eighteenth century being different from the one it came to occupy in the late nineteenth and beyond. Rather, the very essence of religion was differently defined—that is to say, in each of the two historical moments different conditions of religion’s existence were in play. What we now retrospectively call “the social,” that all-inclusive secular space that we distinguish conceptually from variables like “religion,” “state,” “national economy,” and on which the latter can be constructed, re-formed, and replotted, did not exist prior to the nineteenth century. Yet it was precisely the emergence of society as an organized secular body that made it possible for the state to oversee and facilitate an original task by redefining religion’s competence: the unceasing material and moral transformation of its entire national population regardless of their diverse “religious” allegiances. It is therefore not enough to point to the structural analogies between premodern theological concepts and those deployed in secular constitutional discourse, as Schmitt does: the practices these concepts facilitate differ according to the historical formations in which they occur.

I am arguing that the secular should not be thought of as the space in which real human life gradually emancipates itself from the controlling power of religion and thus achieves the latter’s relocation. This assumption encourages us to think of religious ideas as “infecting” the secular domain, or as replicating within it the structure of theological concepts. The concept of the secular today is part of a doctrine called secularism. Secularism does not simply valorize the human and worldly “out there” as opposed to the otherworldly; it does not simply insist that religious practice and belief be confined to a space where they cannot threaten political stability or the liberties of “free-thinking” citizens. Secularism posits a particular conception of the world (“natural” and “social”) and of the problems generated by that world. In the context of early modern Europe these problems were perceived as the need to control the increasingly mobile poor in city and countryside, to govern mutually hostile Christian sects within a sovereign territory, and to regulate the commercial, military, and colonizing expansion of Europe overseas.

The ideological genealogy of secularism can be traced in part to the Renaissance doctrine of humanism, in part to the Enlightenment concept of nature, and in part to Hegel’s philosophy of history. Hegel—an early secularization theorist—saw the movement of world history culminating in the truth and freedom of what he called “the modern period.” Like later secularists, he held that from the Reformation to Enlightenment and Revolution, there emerged at last a harmony between the objective and subjective conditions of human life resulting from “the painful struggles of History,” a harmony based on “the recognition of the Secular as capable of being an embodiment of Truth; whereas it had been formerly
regarded as evil only, as incapable of Good—the latter being essentially ultramundane.”

In fact the historical process of secularization effects a remarkable ideological inversion, though not quite the way Hegel claimed in the sentence just cited. For at one time the secular was part of a theological discourse (saeculum). Secularization (saecularisatio) at first denoted a legal transition from monastic life (regularis) to the life of canons (saecularis)—and then, after the Reformation, it signified the transfer of ecclesiastical real property to laypersons, that is, to the “freeing” of property from church hands into the hands of private owners, and thence into market circulation. In the discourse of modernity the secular presents itself as the ground from which theological discourse was generated (as a form of false consciousness) and from which it gradually emancipated itself in its march to freedom. On that ground humans appear as the self-conscious makers of history (in which calendrical time provides a measure and direction for human events) and as the unshakable foundation of universally valid knowledge about nature and society. The human as agent is now responsible—answerable—not only for acts he or she has performed (or refrained from performing) but for events he or she was unaware of—or falsely conscious of. The domain in which acts of God (accidents) occur without human responsibility is increasingly restricted. Chance is now considered to be tamable.

The interesting thing about this view is that although religion is regarded as alien to the secular, the latter is also seen to have generated religion. Historians of progress relate that in the premodern past, secular life created superstitious and oppressive religion, and in the modern present, secularism has produced enlightened and tolerant religion. Thus the insistence on a sharp separation between the religious and the secular goes with the paradoxical claim that the latter continually produces the former. Nationalism, with its vision of a universe of national societies, in which individual humans live their worldly existence, requires the concept of the secular to make sense. The loyalty that the individual nationalist owes is directly and exclusively to the nation. Even when the nation is said to be “under God,” it has its being only in “this world”—a special kind of world. The men and women of each national society make and own their history. Nature and culture (that famous duality accompanying the rise of nationalism) together form the conditions in which the nation uses and enjoys the world. Mankind dominates nature and each person fashions his or her individuality in the freedom defined and protected by the nation-state.

One should not take this to mean that the worldliness of the secular members of modern nations is an expression of the truth revealed through the human senses. However unworldly medieval Christian monks and nuns may have been, they too lived in the world (where else?) but they lived in it differently from laypersons. Allegiance demanded of them was solely to Christ, and through him to other Christians. Benedict Anderson quite rightly represents the worldliness of secular nationalism as a specific ideological construct (no less ideological than the one it replaces) that includes in the present an imagined realm of the nation as a community with a “worldly past.” And he makes an important point when he draws our attention to the fact that nationalism employs highly abstract concepts of time and space to tell a particular story—even though that story is presented as commonsensical, that is, as accessible to all members of the nation—a story about the nation as a natural and self-evident unity whose members share a common experience. This construct is no less real for being ideological; it articulates a world of actual objects and subjects within which the secular nationalist lives. What needs to be emphasized beyond Anderson’s famous thesis is that the complex medieval Christian universe, with its interlinked times (Eternity and its moving image, and the irruptions of the former into the latter: Creation, Fall, Christ’s Life and Death, Judgment Day) and hierarchy of spaces (the heavens, the earth, purgatory, hell), is broken down by the modern doctrine of secularism into a duality: a world of self-authenticating things in which we really live as social beings and a religious world that exists only in our imagination.

To insist that nationalism should be seen as religion, or even as having been shaped by religion is, in my view, to miss the nature and consequence of the revolution brought about by the Enlightenment doctrine of secularism in the structure of modern collective representations and practices. Of course modern nationalism draws on preexisting languages and practices—including those that we call, anachronistically, “religious.” How could it be otherwise? Yet it does not follow from this that religion forms nationalism.

My concern is that we should not accept the Enlightenment idea of causality always and without question. Thus if we take cause to be about the way an event is “felt” in subsequent events, we will tend to look for the continuity of religious causes in nonreligious effects. But searching in this way for the origin of elements or for the “influence” of events on one another is, I would submit, of limited value here. What requires explaining (how nationalism contains a religious influence) is being used innocently as the means of explanation (religion as at once both cause and effect). If instead we were to attend to an older sense of cause (cause answers to the question “Why?”) we would ask about the reformation of historical elements in order to understand why their meaning is no longer what it was. After all, religion consists of particular ideas, sentiments, practices, institutions, traditions—as well as followers who instantiate, maintain, or alter them. To discover their meanings must surely be our
first task. And so too with secularism. We have to discover what the secular is before we can understand what is involved in the secularization of theological concepts in different times and places.

Or Should Islamism Be Regarded as Nationalism?

Let us take for granted that nationalism is essentially secular (in the sense that it is rooted in human history and society). Can we now argue that some apparently religious movements should be viewed as nationalist, and that they are therefore really secular? Many observers of political Islam have adopted this argument, although in doing so they are in effect simply reversing the terms of the secularization thesis.

To represent the contemporary Islamic revival (known by those who approve of it in the Arab world as as-sahawa, “the awakening”) as a form of cryptonationalism,¹⁹ to refer to it explicitly by the term cultural nationalism,²⁰ is to propose that it is best understood as a continuation of the familiar story of Third World nationalism. That proposal renders the claim by Muslim activists to be part of a historical Islamic tradition spurious because, as cultural nationalists, they must be seen as part of something essentially (though distortedly) “modern.” However, the fact that those active in the revival are usually highly critical of “traditional” teachers and practices does not prove that they are really rejecting tradition. Belonging to a tradition does not preclude involvement in vigorous debate over the meanings of its formative texts (even over which texts are formative) and over the need for radical reform of the tradition. The selectivity with which people approach their tradition does not necessarily undermine their claim to its integrity. Nor does the attempt to adapt the classical view an account of the Arab nation’s rise and decline. Classical Islamic chronicles are not “history” in the sense that nationalism claims “it has a history.” They grow out of hadith accounts (records of the sayings and doings of the Prophet) on which the sunna is based, and they articulate a Qur’anic worldview as expressed in the political and theological conflicts among the faithful. At any rate it is easy to see that while the Arab nation is inconceivable without its history, the Islamic umma presupposes only the Qur’an and sunna.

The differences spring from the Islamist project of regulating conduct in the world in accordance with “the principles of religion” (usul ud-din), and from the fact that the community to be constructed stands counter to many of the values of modern Western life that Arab nationalism endorses. Both these conditions define what one might call contemporary Islamic worldliness. The basic thrust of Arab nationalist ideology is of course supradenominational (despite its invocations of Islamic history and its concessions to Islamic popular sentiment) and it is committed to the doctrine of separating law and citizenship from religion, and of confining the latter to the private domain. In brief, religion is what secular Arabism specifies and tries to set in its proper social place.

For nationalism the history of Islam is important because it reflects the unification and triumph of the Arab nation; in that discourse the “Arabian Prophet” is regarded as its spiritual hero.²¹ This is an inversion of the classical theological view according to which the Prophet is not a national inspiration for an imagined community but a model for virtuous conduct (sunna) that each Muslim, within a Muslim community, must seek to embody in his or her life, and the foundation, together with the Qur’an, of din (now translated as “religion”). Nor is Islamic history in the classical view an account of the Arab nation’s rise and decline. Classical Islamic chronicles are not “history” in the sense that nationalism claims “it has a history.” They grow out of hadith accounts (records of the sayings and doings of the Prophet) on which the sunna is based, and they articulate a Qur’anic worldview as expressed in the political and theological conflicts among the faithful. At any rate it is easy to see that while the Arab nation is inconceivable without its history, the Islamic umma presupposes only the Qur’an and sunna.

The Islamic umma in the classical theological view is thus not an imagined community on a par with the Arab nation waiting to be politically unified but a theologically defined space enabling Muslims to practice the disciplines of din in the world. Of course the word umma does also have the sense of “a people”—and “a community”—in the Qur’an. But the members of every community—or society—imagine it to have a particular character, and relate to one another by virtue of it. The crucial point therefore is not that it is imagined but that what is imagined predicates distinctive modes of being and acting. The Islamic umma presupposes individuals who are self-governing but not autonomous. The shari‘a, a system of practical reason morally binding on each faithful individual, exists independently of him or her. At the same time every Muslim has the psychological ability to discover its rules and to conform to them.

The fact that the expression al’arabiyya is used today to denote the “Arab nation” represents a major conceptual transformation by which umma is cut off from the theological predicates that gave it its
universalizing power and made to stand for an imagined community that is equivalent to a total society, limited and sovereign like other limited and sovereign nations in a secular (social) world. The umma-l-muslimin (the Islamic umma) is ideologically not "a society" onto which state, economy, and religion can be mapped. It is not limited nor sovereign: not limited, for unlike Arab nationalism's notion of al-umma al-'arabiyya, it can and eventually should embrace all of humanity, and not sovereign, for it is subject to God's authority. It is therefore a mistake to regard it as an "archaic" (because "religious") community that predates the modern nation.24

I do not mean to imply that the classical theological view is held in all its specificity by individual Islamists. All Muslims today inhabit a different world from the one their classical forebears lived in, so it cannot be said of any of them that they hold the classical theological view. Even the most conservative Muslim draws on experiences in the contemporary world to give relevance and credibility to his or her theological interpretations. As I indicated above, people who have been called Islamists are in many ways close to nationalists even though nationalism had no meaning in the doctrines of the classical theologians. Yet it is evident that Islamists, as they have been called by observers (to themselves they are simply proper Muslims), relate themselves to the classical theological tradition by translating it into their contemporary political predicament. Of course this relationship is not articulated identically in different countries, or even within the same country. But the very fact that they must interpret a millennium-old discursive tradition—and, in interpreting it, inevitably disagree with one another—marks them off from Arab nationalists with their Western-derived discourse. For example, the individual's right to the pursuit of happiness and self-creation, a doctrine easily assimilable by secular nationalist thought, is countered by Islamists (as it is in classical Islamic theology) by the duty of the Muslim to worship God as laid down in the shari'a.

Both Arab nationalism (whether of the liberal or the socialist variety) and Islamism share a concern with the modernizing state that was put in place by Westernizing power—a state directed at the unceasing material and moral transformation of entire populations only recently organized as "societies."23 In other words, Islamism takes for granted and seeks to work through the nation-state, which has become so central to the predicament of all Muslims. It is this statist project and not the fusion of religious and political ideas that gives Islamism a nationalist cast. Although Islamism has virtually always succeeded Arab nationalism in the contemporary history of the Middle East, and addressed itself directly to the nation-state, it should not be regarded as a form of nationalism.26 The real motives of Islamists, of whether or not individuals are using religion for political ends, is not a relevant question here. (The real motives of political actors are usually plural and often fluctuating.) The important question is what circumstances oblige Islamism to emerge publicly as a political discourse, and whether, and if so in what way, it challenges the deep structures of secularism, including the assumptions of nationalist discourse.

From the point of view of secularism, religion has the option either of confining itself to private belief and worship or of engaging in public talk that makes no demands on life. In either case such religion is seen by secularism to take the form it should properly have. Each is equally the condition of its legitimacy. But this requirement is made difficult for those who wish to reform life by the ambition of the secular state itself. Given that the modern nation-state seeks to regulate all aspects of individual life—even the most intimate, such as birth and death—no one, religious or otherwise, can avoid encountering its ambitious powers. It is not only that the state intervenes directly in the social body for purposes of reform; it is that all social activity requires the consent of the law, and therefore of the nation-state. The way social spaces are defined, ordered, and regulated makes them all equally political. So the attempt by Muslim activists to ameliorate social conditions—through, say, the establishment of clinics or schools in underserviced areas—must seriously risk provoking the charge of political illegitimacy and being classified Islamist. The call by Muslim movements to reform the social body through the authority of popular majorities in the national parliament will be opposed as antidemocratic, as in Algeria in 1992 and in Turkey in 1997. Such cases of depribatized religion are intolerable to secularists primarily because of the motives imputed to their opponents rather than to anything the latter have actually done. The motives signal the potential entry of religion into space already occupied by the secular. It is the nationalist secularists themselves, one might say, who stoutly reject the secularization of religious concepts and practices here.

The main point I underline is that Islamism's preoccupation with state power is the result not of its commitment to nationalist ideas but of the modern nation-state's enforced claim to constitute legitimate social identities and arenas. No movement that aspires to more than mere belief or inconsequential talk in public can remain indifferent to state power in a secular world. Even though Islamism is situated in a secular world—a world that is presupposed by, among other things, the universal space of the social that sustains the nation-state—Islamism cannot be reduced to nationalism. Many individuals actively involved in Islamist movements within the Arab world may regard Arab nationalism as compatible with it, and employ its discourse too. But such a stance has in fact been consid-
Toward an Anthropology of Secularism?

In conclusion, I suggest that if the secularization thesis seems increasingly implausible to some of us, this is not simply because religion is now playing a vibrant part in the modern world of nations. In a sense what many would anachronistically call “religion” was always involved in the world of power. If the secularization thesis no longer carries the conviction it once did, this is because the categories of politics and religion turn out to implicate each other more profoundly than we thought, a discovery that has accompanied our growing understanding of the powers of the modern nation-state. The concept of the secular cannot do without the idea of religion.

True, the “proper domain of religion” is distinguished from and separated by the state in modern secular constitutions. But formal constitutions never give the whole story. On one hand, objects, sites, practices, words, representations—even the minds and bodies of worshipers—cannot be confined within the exclusive space of what secularists name religion. They have their own ways of being. The historical elements of what come to be conceptualized as religion have disparate trajectories. On the other hand, the nation-state requires clearly demarcated spaces that it can classify and regulate: religion, education, health, leisure, work, income, justice, and war. The space that religion may properly occupy in society has to be continually redefined by the law because the reproduction of secular life within and beyond the nation-state continually affects the clarity of that space. The unceasing pursuit of the new in productive effort, aesthetic experience, and claims to knowledge, as well as the unending struggle to extend individual self-creation, undermines the stability of established boundaries. My point here is neither to discredit nor to celebrate these processes but to point to the contradictory conditions that undergird the category of the secular.

I do not deny that religion, in the vernacular sense of that word, is and historically has been important for national politics in Euro-America as well as in the rest of the world. Recognition of this fact will no doubt continue to prompt useful work. But there are questions that need to be systematically addressed beyond this obvious fact. How, when, and by whom are the categories of religion and the secular defined? What assumptions are presupposed in the acts of defining them? And finally, what conception of religion makes our secular moral and political practices possible? An anthropology of the secular as practical experience remains entirely unexplored.

Notes

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3. Robert Wolff, for example, wrote in 1965: “There is a very sharp distinction in the public domain between legitimate interests and those which are absolutely beyond the pale. If a group or interest is within the framework of acceptability, then it can be sure of winning some measure of what it seeks, for the process of national politics is distributive and compromising. On the other hand, if an interest falls outside the circle of the acceptable, it receives no attention whatsoever and its proponents are treated as crackpots, extremists, or foreign agents.” “Beyond Tolerance,” in Robert P. Wolff, Barrington Moore Jr., and Herbert Marcuse, eds., A Critique of Pure Tolerance (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 52; emphasis in original. William Connolly has pushed this criticism in new and more interesting directions in The Ethos of Pluralism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
4. An example of this was made dramatically evident in Turkey in the summer of 1997 when the secularist army forced the resignation of the coalition government led by the pro-Islamic Welfare Party. The military-backed government that succeeded it has instituted major reforms in an effort to contain the growing resurgence of Islam in the population. A crucial part of these reforms is the formal extension of compulsory secular education for children from five to eight years, a measure designed to stop the growth of Islamic sentiment in the formation of schoolchildren.


10. The constitutional privilege accorded the Church of England in the British state today is largely a formality—and to the extent that it still has material consequences, it is often cited as evidence of Britain's "incompletely modernized" state. See Tom Nairn, The Break Up of Britain, London: New Left Books, 1977.

11. Strictly speaking, Foucault does not think of discipline as being intrinsic to governmentality but only as something "in tension with it." That is why he speaks of "a triangle, sovereignty-discipline-government, which has as its primary target the population and as its essential mechanism the apparatus of security." See "Governmentality," in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds., The Foucault Effect (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 81-104. I am not persuaded, however, that discipline can be conceptually separated from governmentality whose raison d'être is the management of target populations within nation societies.

12. Mary Poovey notes that "By 1776, the phrase body politic had begun to compete with another metaphor, the great body of the people. . . . By the early nineteenth century, both of these phrases were joined by the image of the social body." Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 7. See also the second chapter, "The Production of Abstract Space."

13. Hans Blumenberg criticizes Schmitt for not taking into account the way theological metaphors are selected and used within particular historical contexts, and therefore for mistaking analogies for transformations. See The Legitimacy of the Modern Age (1973-76; rpt., Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), pt. 1, chap. 8. This point—as well as his more extensive critique of Karl Löwith's thesis about the essentially Christian character of the secular idea of progress—is well taken. But I find Blumenberg's delineation and defense of "secularism," rooted firmly as it is in a conventional historical-ideas approach, unconvincing. His relative neglect of practice is remarkable given the nature of his criticism of Schmitt.


18. That is to say, as though there were no question about whether even the senses might in some degree be mediated. See Constance Claessen, Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures (London: Routledge, 1993). For a fascinating account of culturally different ways in which water may be sensed by the body, see G. Vigarello, Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). See also Peter Gay, The Education of the Senses (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).


20. Luciani, reviewing the effect of the Islamic resurgence on modern Middle Eastern politics, observes that "modern Islamic thinking, in avowedly different ways, offers radical answers to contemporary issues. These answers are, in a sense, a form of cultural nationalism, in which religion gives more substance to the rejection of Western domination." The Arab State (London: Routledge, 1990), xxx.

21. The delegates were mostly from countries that had opposed the U.S.-led invasion of Kuwait and Iraq, including Islamist and Marxist currents within the PLO, but oppositional elements from Muslim states that had supported the Americans—such as Egypt and Turkey—also participated. See Majdi Ahmad Husain, "al-Mu'tamar ash-sha'bi al-arabi al-islam: al-Fikra, al-mumarasa, ash-thamara," ash-sha'bi, 7 May 1991, 3.

22. A Christian Arab nationalist writes with admiration of the personality of the prophet Muhammad, of his strength of conviction and firmness of belief, and concludes: "This is the spiritual message contained in the anniversary of the Arafah, the birthday of the prophet Muhammad, of his strength of conviction and firmness of belief, and the prophet concludes: "This is the spiritual message contained in the anniversary of the Arafah, the birthday of the prophet Muhammad, of his strength of conviction and firmness of belief, and..."

23. The reference here is to Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation: "It is an imagined political community—invented as both inherently limited and sovereign."


25. It may be noted that the modern Arabic word for "society"—mu'tama—"secured"—is used primarily in the 1930s. See Jaroslav Stetkevych, The Modern Arabic Literary Language Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 25. Lane's Lexicon, compiled in the mid-nineteenth century, gives only the classical meaning of mu'tama: "a meeting place."

27. Thus when a delegate from Jordan at the conference (mentioned in note 21) asserted that disagreements between the aims of the Islamic movement and those of Arab nationalism were relatively minor, and that it was certain that “any movement that is to prevail in our Arab world must be either a nationalist movement incorporating the Islamic perspective with a commitment to democracy and social justice, or an Islamic movement incorporating nationalist perspectives” (Husain, “al-Mu'tamar”), his assertion was strongly contested, especially—but not only—by delegates from non-Arab countries who insisted that the only bond between Muslims at present divided among nation-states was Islam.

28. Whether it should be so is contested even in the paradigmatic case of the United States. Thus it is pointed out that the phrase “separation of church and state” is not found in the Constitution, but represents the Supreme Court’s interpretation of the Founders’ intention. See David Barton, The Myth of Separation (Aledo, Tex.: Wallbuilder Press, 1992). But see also Winnifred F. Sullivan, Paying the Words Extra: Religious Discourse in the Supreme Court of the United States (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

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The Goodness of Nations

BENEDICT R. ANDERSON

One can see instantaneously where nationalism and religion part company if one tries to transpose the well-worn cliché “My Country Right or Wrong” into, say, “My Religion (Christianity or Islam or Buddhism or Hinduism) Right or Wrong.” The latter are “impossible” oxymorons. How could a religion, for its adherents, conceivably be “wrong”?

Yet this contrast should not be taken wholly at face value. For if nations can, at least hypothetically, be “wrong,” this wrongness is temporary, and is always set against a more permanent “good.” The question then is—and one poses it in opposition to the eternal goodness of religion—what is the source of this goodness, given that the nation, no matter how grandly conceived, is intrahistorical (it has no place in heaven or in hell)? I argue that we need to think about innocence, or, more precisely, about who, in the national ambience, guarantees the nation’s ultimate blamelessness.

The Unborn

The “unborn” (in the literal and metaphorical sense) are not a collectivity with which the Great Religions are much preoccupied. They are simply awaiting their turn (return) on the brief stage of life. But they figure very significantly in the national imagination, because their existence is the only sure guarantee of the nation’s quasi-eternity. One can do no better, in illustrating this, than turn to the peculiar ruminations of Max Weber, in his 1895 inaugural lecture on assuming a position at the university of Freiburg. The bulk of this lecture is a pitiful jeremiad about the condition of Germany. The “traditional” Prussian ruling class—the Junkers—he described as finished: “They have done their work, and today are in the throes of an economic-death struggle.” From the German bourgeoisie nothing good could be expected. “One section of the haute bourgeoisie longs all too shamelessly for the coming of a new Caesar, who will protect them in two directions: from beneath against the rising masses of the people, from above against the socio-political impulses they suspect the German dynasties of harboring.” Another section is “sunk in that politi-