The Anthropology of Secularism

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Abstract
Recent debates on this topic have been heavily shaped by two paradigms: Asad’s deconstructivism and Taylor’s Catholic/Hegelian revisionism. This article outlines the arguments of each but frames them within the longer history of arguments that make claims for the reality of secularization and alternate sources for claims that “the secular” is a historically constructed category, including arguments from radical theology and (differently) in the anthropology of India. It is argued that implicit claims for the hierarchical ordering of reality in modernity, in which the political is seen as more real than the religious, continue to create disjunctures in the range of debate that new ethnography has the opportunity to address.
INTRODUCTION

I begin by putting my cards on the table. I do not myself write from a faith position, but I am a sceptic about secularism as some of my fellow social scientists are sceptics about religion. I am not convinced that there is such a thing as an absolutely secular society nor that there can be such a thing as a perfectly secular state of mind. I agree with those who argue that the secular is a historically produced idea, a theory about how things are or could be, and not an inescapable or inevitable process or fact (compare Dumont 1985, Milbank 1990). Like other powerful ideas, however, it has many centrally important material effects, as when it is politically institutionalized and becomes programmatic. These material effects have been intensified where people hope or fear that secularism may be an inevitable condition, linked with the processes of modernity. That is to say, its effects—like the effects of some religious faiths—vary according to how far people believe in it and in which ways.

This review is not centrally concerned with my own opinions. But stating them in these simple terms may help because the literature considered here circles constantly around the problem of the relation of religion to modernity. Thus although much of this discussion is beyond our scope here, the reader should note that the meanings of “secular” and “secularism” are constantly shifting in the literature, depending on whether a given author believes that they are real. Two linked discussions are (a) the question of whether social science can proceed only through a thoroughly secular theory and (b) the question of whether it is true, as some think, that although the reality of the secular is moot, it is necessary to act as though we believed in it to limit conflict between faith groups or to defend other treasured values in the public sphere, including, but not confined to, democratic politics and human rights.

I begin with a brief survey of secularization theory, which mounts the most committed defense of the reality of the secular. I then consider the recent and highly influential body of writing by Asad, Hirschkind, and Mahmood, which questions this and all the terms of the older debate in the context of the discussion of contemporary Islam, drawing on the ideas of Foucault and others. Next, I discuss the important body of work on Indian secularism, which examines the ethnographic meaning of the secular in a given context and thus relativizes it differently from deconstructivism. In the last section, I touch on some of the thinkers outside anthropology who have written key works on the problem of secularism, works that often set the terms of anthropological debate at one remove; I also consider writing now emerging on other parts of the world, which may allow us to begin to develop a genuine comparative anthropology of secularisms based on particular historical and local studies.

SECULARIZATION THEORY AND ITS LEGACIES

The terms of the current anthropological literature on secularism are set in relation to both classic and recent developments in secularization theory. This debate could in itself exceed the space allotted for this article (see, e.g., Casanova 1994, chapter one; Dobellaere 1998), so I give only a brief discussion here.

Classic secularization theory derives mainly from anglophone sociological work conducted in the 1960s by Luckmann (1970), Berger (1990), Talcott Parsons (1960), Luhmann (1982) and others. These authors produced various interpretations of the foundational sociology of Durkheim (1971) and Weber (1946, 1963, 1976), which had explored the links between Western modernity and the decline of traditional religions. Bryan Wilson (1966) and others then continued to synthesize these propositions, producing a widespread consensus among sociologists over four decades.

Neither Durkheim nor Weber offered a strongly teleological view of modernity. Weber’s focal interest was in the unique features of Western historical development, which he maintained could never be literally repeated elsewhere, although comparable forms of
rationalization might occur within different regional or religious traditions. Weber also clearly distinguished between the analysis of the origin of an idea or institution (e.g., Christianity) and the analysis of its historical spread or transposition (e.g., in colonial conversion). Commentators such as Parsons recognized these features of Weber's thought (Parsons 1963) and drew attention to his famous essay on the *Protestant Ethic* (Weber 1976) as a specific case study of historical Europe, not as a template for the universal study of modernities. Both Luhmann and Berger also focused on Western modernity, arguing that religious modalities transformed in complex ways, rather than simply being discarded. Nevertheless, interpretations of this work often drifted toward a convergence theory view that Western modernity would provide a template for modernization processes elsewhere; secularization was understood as both sign and consequence of an inevitable modernity. The definition of secularity often remained implicit.

Although the debate has now moved on considerably, some influential scholars still defend classic secularization positions. For instance, Bruce proposes that the key issue to be addressed is still what he suggests is the convincing empirical evidence of decreasing religious participation and increasing religious indifference in the Western world. The pluralism of modern society compared with a more socially homogeneous past is crucial; it is the perception of the possibility of choice that propels the splitting and decline of religion “[f]rom [c]athedrals to [c]ults” (Bruce 1996). Bruce believes that institutional fissure (rather than modern science per se) is causally linked to the rise of religious indifference. Religion can no longer be taken so seriously, and (redeploying Nietzsche's famous phrase), for Bruce, “God is dead” (2002) in modern Britain.

Whereas changes in institutional forms and congregational attendance in Britain are well documented, their connection to religious indifference in Britain or elsewhere is contested (e.g., Davie 1994). Bruce’s later work makes less-clear-cut claims about the uniformity of secularization at the global level than does his earlier writing, but he continues to argue that Britain and indeed the United States confirm his views. In the U.S. case, he asserts that the persistently high levels of church affiliation and faith in God in America compared with levels in Europe are a transitional phenomenon linked to the history of U.S. immigration and the role of religion as a marker of ethnic identity. Rejecting the criticism that his views are teleological, Bruce nevertheless predicts that trends in American Protestantism indicate a repetition of the European experience: “Privatization, individualism and relativism are now affecting the US churches in the way they did the British churches in the middle of the twentieth century” (Bruce 2002, p. 227).

This kind of argument was criticized by an early and continuing dissenter on secularization among sociologists: Martin (2005). Martin’s work has stressed that secularization can take quite different routes within different global contexts, has argued for the value of seeing modernity as capable of taking religious forms (for instance, in Latin America), and has been alert to continued Christian valences in apparently secular Western Europe. However, such views were shared by few other sociologists before the late 1980s.

Since the resurgence of so-called political religion in the 1980s, academic positions have changed considerably. Thus Casanova, writing in 1994, described a volte-face in sociological opinion and asked, “Who still believes in the myth of secularization?” (Casanova 1994, p. 11). I propose that somewhat uncritical oppositions between religion and secularism and between the past and modernity, in fact, continue to be constitutive of many public areas of debate and some important academic arenas.

Secularization arguments appear to be a default position at the borders of the academic, the journalistic, and the political (compare Benthall 2009). Convergence theory interpretations have often been combined with subtraction theory interpretations of modernity in which, as Milbank (1990) has argued, some scholars claimed or assumed that the
contemporary world has acquired a privileged grasp of reality compared to the past, by discarding religious illusion. Modern science is cast as offering access to material reality, whereas religion is cast as an expression of (personal) childishness or (collective) immaturity. As Taylor (2007, p. 636) has noted, some individuals are drawn to the idea (based on a misinterpretation of Nietzsche) that facing man’s aloneness in the universe is the most crucial guarantee of toughness of character and of mind. Thus we can understand the glee with which some commentators greeted the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) of 2001 (http://www.americanreligionssurveyaris.org) and its follow-ups to 2009, which appear to show statistically that the number of Americans who believe in God, although still overwhelming, is gradually decreasing; refutations from the opposite camp were equally vocal. The trends recorded by ARIS are clearly important, although the survey actually measures a rise in the numbers of Americans who answer that they are of “no religion,” which leaves open the question of what this statement means emically. But where liberal political positions are often aligned with “secular” outlooks and conservative positions with “religious” outlooks (compare Harding 1987, 1994, 2001), as in the United States, both sides have a high stake in interpretation.

A perception that the link between modernity and secularization is somehow obvious has also played into the enormous interest in the debates over the “new atheists” (Beattie 2007). Dawkins (2006) argues at length both that religion is responsible for most of the atrocities in world history and that religion is a form of fallacious explanation of the origins of the world, now superceded by scientific accounts such as neo-Darwinism. His critics have opined that Dawkins does not understand theology well; as Terry Eagleton puts it, “Christianity was never meant to be an explanation of anything in the first place. It is rather like saying that thanks to the electric toaster we can forget about Chekhov” (Eagleton 2009, p. 7, emphasis in original). Nevertheless, the popular appeal of the idea that the relative truth claims of religion and science can be somehow settled in straight contest is clearly strong, and this mindset accounts for the unusual mainstream success of books such as cognitive anthropologist Boyer’s Religion Explained, which seeks to show that religion is simply an unwanted “side effect” of diverse human mental processes, which evolved for other reasons (Boyer 2001, p. 330; for an important critique, see Bloch 2008).

Certain ideas about secularization, therefore, have entered popular culture and have themselves become a form of ethnographic datum. Insofar as many people believe secularization to be inevitable in modernity, it may even become in some places a partly self-fulfilling prophecy (Cannell 2006). In other cases, it is clear that people are rejecting the term religion itself, while attempting (sometimes in contradictory ways) to create forms of practice that many anthropologists would still classify as religion (e.g., Luhrmann 1989, Pike 2001). An unusual degree of overlap exists between terms social science uses in the analysis of contemporary forms of religious and secular experience and the terms that informants may use in daily life. Anthropologists are potentially well placed to record this ethnographically and so perhaps exit from some of the circular aspects of general-order analysis.

If for some secularization theorists the institutional changes in mainstream Western religion are causally linked to the rise of religious indifference, other trends of thinking, drawing on Luckmann (1970) and ultimately on Durkheim (1971 [1915]), have stressed instead the transmutation of collective religion into a modern, nontheistic religion of the individual. Perhaps the best-known current proponent of this view is Heelas (1996), who revisits this line of analysis via a distinctive emphasis on the importance of 1960s counter-culture; for Heelas, this is a key period in which people began to abandon the mainstream churches primarily because they disliked churches’ claims to authority, and people redirected their
energies toward multifarious individual quests, often preferring to define these as spiritual but not religious. Heelas has worked with Woodhead (Heelas et al. 2004) to analyze the decline in U.K. Christian congregations from this perspective (but compare Smith 2008 who summarizes the case against). Heelas’s most recent book presents a significant revision to his earlier views; in replacing his earlier uses of the terms self-spiritualities and New Age with the phrase “spiritualities of life” (Heelas 2008, p. 26), he seeks to correct any implication that new religious formations are trivial and to illuminate their connections with Romantic philosophy.

The widespread popular avoidance of the term religion is clearly an important fact. Yet the potential hazard with this debate is that it becomes tautologous; some analysts claim to demonstrate from it that religion is clearly declining, whereas others claim that spiritual practices are ultimately (implicitly) religious. There is scope for reading the evidence either way, depending on the definition of religion considered allowable. The material presented is therefore interesting and valuable, but the debate is unlikely to provide an unequivocal definition of the relationship between secularity and modernity.

Classic secularization arguments have raised crucial questions about modernity, but they have not always been historically nuanced. There is a tendency toward broad-brush contrasts between a religious past and a secular present, which disregards many inconvenient facts. One problem is a relative indifference to the history of secularization itself, as an idea, and not just as an automatic mechanism. At the political level, it is clear that claims to be secular became closely bound up with the ideologies and policies of nation-states, especially in the nineteenth century. Such ideas may have been most characteristic of West European nations, but they were exported to many other parts of the world, both in European colonialism and in many noncolonized indigenous states, which saw secularism as one means to emulate and overtake European progress. To anticipate, this history of transmission is one of Asad’s central concerns, whereas much of the recent work by anthropologists of India understands secularism as an aspect of state ideology, colonial or local.

Casanova’s central book, Public Religions in the Modern World, offered a considerable advance on most previous sociological writers except Martin, precisely because Casanova is interested in historical variation. Casanova suggests that secularization theory has confused three premises that should, in fact, be kept separate: (a) the historical process of differentiation in Western modernity through which religion has come to be objectified and separated out from other functions, particularly politics and economics; (b) the idea that religion necessarily exits the public sphere in modernity and becomes privatized; and (c) the claim (dating back to Enlightenment philosophy) that religion as sentiment and practice will “tend to dissipate with progressive modernization” (Casanova 1994, p. 7).

For Casanova, the third claim is patently false, and he argues that much previous discussion has proceeded against overwhelming evidence of continued religious activity in Europe and America only because the myth of secularization had been taken to be axiomatic. The second claim he views as only one possibility among a range of actual historical outcomes to be explored. The first claim, the idea of differentiation of functions in modernity, however, he accepts as a historical reality.

The central section of the book is given over to a close examination of five case studies: the cases of Spain, Poland, and Brazil, followed by discussions of evangelical Protestantism and of American Catholicism. The focus on Catholic contexts is important to Casanova partly because these contexts are often backgrounded in Protestant-inflected Whig history. Casanova argues that the claims of the nation-state to autonomy from religion conceal absolutist monarchs’ actual reliance on the annexation of religious mana. He further claims that the decline of a public role for religion...
has been exaggerated everywhere and may be central where (as in Soviet Poland) the population has regarded the secular government as illegitimate. Finally, Casanova argues that both Catholicism and Pentecostal Protestantism are growing in new, deterritorialized forms.

On the question of religious values in modernity, Casanova proposes that decline is a possible, perhaps a majoritarian, but not a necessary consequence of differentiation. He suggests that where churches have accepted disestablishment most rapidly, they may in fact have suffered the least decline in popular support and participation as they found other arenas of public discourse in which to engage.

In a more recent article, Casanova (2006) revisits and updates his arguments in the light of intervening events and in response to Asad. He identifies three limitations of his earlier position: (a) his focus was restricted to Western Christendom and its inheritors, (b) he emphasized civil society as the key public space of religions in modernity, and (c) he focused on the nation-state rather than the transnational dimensions of modern religion. His response is ready acknowledgment of the importance of wider comparisons and rephrases some earlier conclusions. For example, he comments that “the European concept of secularization is not a particularly relevant category for the ‘Christian’ United States” (Casanova 2006, p. 9) because in the United States the advance of the secular (as differentiation) has, in fact, been accompanied both by continued high levels of religious adherence and by continued public roles for religion. He also underlines the diversity of European developments. He further acknowledges that other religious traditions may not construct the same tension between the categories of religious and secular (i.e., worldly) and therefore that the relationship between modern differentiation and religion may unfold quite differently in, for example, Chinese Confucianism and Daoism. We will see in the third section below that this issue has, in fact, already been taken up in a tradition of Indianist and other regional anthropologies, which is apparently not familiar to Casanova.

ASAD AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF RELIGION AND THE “SECULAR”

Asad has defined much of the recent anthropological discussion of the secular. His *Formations of the Secular* (2003) and, by anticipation, his *Genealogies of Religion* (1993) explicitly challenge anthropologists to contribute more fully to a debate that had long been dominated by political science and political philosophy. Invoking the comparative tradition of Mauss, which permits the setting side by side of “lifeways” from different times and places (Asad 2007, p. 17), Asad offers a vigorous challenge to the seeming obviousness and inevitability of the secular in the modern. His anthropology of secularism (as a form of political constitution that follows the development of the concept of the secular) and secularization (as a particular historical instance of the adoption of secular logic) unravels some of its component concepts and reveals their development as historically contingent rather than as fatefully necessary.

Asad focuses closely on the entanglement of secularism with capitalist liberal democracies in nation-states, of whose politics and rhetorics he is an incisive critic. Indeed, he is less hopeful of benevolent outcomes from the liberal public sphere than is either Connolly (1999) or Taylor (1999, 2007), with each of whom he engages mainly on this particular question. While discarding any essentialist definitions of West versus non-West, Asad also retains a clear grip on the idea that secularism was a concept with particular geographical and historical locations and patterns of export, first from Europe and then from America, following lines of global capitalist inequality.

Asad asserts that liberal secularism is characterized by the claim to know what nature, including universal human nature, is (but see Das 2006) and by the myth of progress, which suggests that all societies should be traveling toward this same understanding. Secularism, he tells us, has become a hegemonic cluster of projects in the contemporary world. It permits and develops certain ways of being and living,
while disdaining, tacitly prohibiting, or stunting others. The central sections of *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* attempt to show this line of thinking in relation to concepts of subjectivity, agency, and rights. Asad pays particular attention to claims that democratic politics alleviates human suffering. On one hand, he argues that suffering has not been reduced, but merely deflected onto alternate (often non-Western) targets and managed through a different aesthetic. On the other, he draws our attention toward ways in which secular logics refuse to permit certain kinds of “passionate” agency, which involve attributing meaning to pain (the key example here is religious asceticism, but he also discusses childbirth), but instead outlaw these as irrational and therefore unjustified.

Asad thus rephrases the dilemma often discussed as the clash between universal rights and minority rights by asking under which conditions some people come to be considered as minorities at all. Liberal secularism’s claims to tolerance, he argues, will always reach a limit when the fundamental premises of its worldview are challenged; at this point, “minorities” are prevented from speaking about alternate realities, either by persuasion or by force.

Yet although he often seems to sympathize with the practitioners of counter-hegemonic ways of life in the modern world, those whose passionate and embodied experiences work against the grain of liberal rationalism, Asad has also argued for the preservation in political life of a reconstructed secularism (Asad 2001, p. 147; compare Bangstad 2009, p. 192), and he distances himself from the views of theologians and others for whom religion is a greater reality than secularism is. He dislikes, for instance, any arguments that suggest there may be an underlying and transformed religious component to apparently secular ideas including nationalism because, as he says, “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” (Asad 2003, p. 191). Rather, he maintains that the contrast between religious and secular, like that between disenchantment and enchantment (but see Lambek 2005), is a false binary produced posthoc by the ideological lens through which the Western present views the past and elsewhere as premodern.

As in his earlier work on religion, Asad’s interest in Foucault is evidenced by his particular attention to the constraining and productive powers of practice as well as of ideology; he writes, “we should look to what makes certain practices conceptually possible, desired, mandatory—including the everyday practices by which the subject’s experience is disciplined” (Asad 2003, p. 36). His own books, of course, are not first-hand ethnographies of such practices, but two of his former students have each responded to the call for such ethnography with widely admired results. Both anthropologists study the Islamic pietist movement in Egypt. Mahmood’s densely considered book (2005) and her key articles (2001a,b) conduct an ethnographic examination of the women’s piety movement in Cairo against the grain (as she tells us) of Mahmood’s own secular progressivist and feminist assumptions about what female agency should be (Mahmood 2005, p. xi). The mosque movement Mahmood studies strikingly includes precisely the constituency of women—middle class and increasingly educated, often professional—who might be expected to adopt secular values (2005, p. 66). The movement is also innovative in allowing women to teach women on Islamic matters. While always allowing for the macropolitical context in which many Egyptians are critical of the post-Sadat secular government, and especially of its Western leanings, Mahmood finds narrowly political explanations inadequate; the aim of this movement is to become more pious. Although the dominance of secular logic makes it inevitable that alternative self-fashionings must engage state politics if they are to succeed, these ethical practices of self-fashioning are not reducible to their political means (2005, p. 194). These aims are pursued through a program of prayer that begins with the deliberate awakening of conscience and the rousing of the will, but whose
success can be gauged by the degree to which prayer becomes an embodied desire and need in itself. Understanding such practices, Mahmood argues, facilitates a critique of many of the binaries through which the anthropology of religion may often be expressed, including the opposition between ritual and spontaneity and that between autonomous agency and subordination. Hirschkind’s absorbing study (2006) similarly explores embodied disciplines within current Islam but focuses on the (male) use of cassette sermons and the distinctive practices of audition cultivated by their users.

These authors have sought to counter stereotypical views of Islamic pietism in the public debate on Islam and secular politics (Hirschkind & Mahmood 2002, and see interventions by each author at http://www.theimmanentframe.org). Their theoretical approaches do have limitations as well as gains, however. Mahmood attends to the comparative implications of the Egyptian case with respect to the construction of women’s agency and identity politics (2005, chapter 5 and epilogue) but sometimes claims that a cross-cultural comparative approach to prayer and religious self-construction would inevitably mislead (2001b, p. 844). Despite his invocation of Mauss, Asad’s own Foucauldian antiessentialism tends to produce a resistance to the search for similarities and a preference for the highlighting of irreducible differences across contexts. Connectedly, his focus on the contrast between the discontinuities of Christianity as an object and the potentialities of Islamic tradition sometimes appears as an inconsistency in his work and even risks reproducing the dualistic contrast between them, which he seeks to unravel (compare Bangstad 2009, Caton 2006).

In another vein is Bowen’s recent research on French Islam, published as a lucid account of the development of the specific French state view of secularism, or laïcité, and its consequences for the crisis over veiling in public schools (2008) and an ethnography of understandings of being Muslim and of being French (2009) in the suburbs of Paris, the location of the 2005 clashes between police and French Muslims. Bowen’s first study brings to life the point made by many commentators: that there is wide variation between secularisms even within Europe. French laïcité is grounded not only in the French Revolution’s production of a particular idea of citizenship, but also in the extended efforts by the state to disentangle itself from reliance on French Catholic institutions, particularly in the field of education. In France, Bowen tells us, citizenship and the dignity of the individual are guaranteed by a certain compulsory Republican homogeneity of self-presentation in public domains, including all domains of public employment such as hospitals and schools. By contrast, variation of opinion on matters that may implicitly challenge Republican assumptions must be reserved to the private sphere. These are not merely theoretical issues; Bowen tells us that abstract and elite discourse is woven into media and popular debate in France to an unusual extent, defining the ways in which (for instance) documentary portrayals of French Muslims are produced and consumed. The French affaire du voile and the law that banned the wearing of religious signs in French schools may have conspicuously avoided the issues of the economic and social disadvantage of France’s immigrant workforce, the legacy of colonialism, etc., but it did so through a deeply felt French horror of public displays of religious affiliation. Bowen argues that (as well as transgressing French feminism) headscarves were experienced by non-Muslim French people as a deliberate communication of difference and claim of (moral) superiority in a public context in which all should relate as equal citizens. It is for these historically constructed yet viscerally felt reasons, he argues, that the French state finds it so difficult to accommodate the claim of large numbers of people in the Parisian suburbs and elsewhere to identify themselves as both French citizens and visibly observant Muslims. Yet the reasons for wearing the veil among French schoolgirls are complex, highly various, and often less concerned with communication to non-Muslim others than with the production of a certain kind of self-formation.
Among other contributions, Hefner & Zaman’s (2006) Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education offers valuable comparisons from inside and outside Europe, with a clear-sighted introduction by Hefner, and these issues are usefully related to the public sphere debates by Taylor and others (Taylor et al. 2008).

**INDIAN SECULARISM**

Before the recent explosion of debates on Islam, however, secularism was already being considered comparatively in the context of Indian politics. This literature is especially thought provoking for anthropologists. Indian politicians and intellectuals almost universally remarked that secularism was an idea that devolved from European history and philosophy and was imported into India under British colonialism. Its relevance to the Indian situation could therefore not be assumed. This indigenous debate has shaped the academic literature on the subject, giving it helpful analytic purchase.

We may consider the current literature to have started with Smith’s (1963) *India as a Secular Nation*, which took as its topic the observation made by the then-Indian President Dr. S. Radhakrishnan: “It may appear somewhat strange that our government should be a secular one, while our culture is rooted in spiritual values” (quoted in Smith 1963, p. 146). Smith explores a wide range of possible explanatory factors. Beginning with what he takes to be the central feature of Western secularism—that is, the historical assertion by the state of its autonomy from the church and religion—he reviews the major Asian religions to consider whether some would be more likely to provoke or tolerate parallel moves in Asian states. Smith concludes that Hinduism, with no centralized clerical institutions likely to compete with those of the state and with a cyclical view of history that does not encourage religious intervention in political fields, was indeed an unlikely precursor for secularism.

Smith reviews the three central explanations (and justifications) offered for secularism in India itself. First, he quotes the argument of many supporters of the Congress Party. All Indians must be able to commit to a civic identity not based on any religious precept so that the nation is not threatened by perceived differences between Hindu and Muslim. Second, there is the argument that Indian secularism rests largely on Western models and is rooted in British policies of religious neutrality. This view, like the first, tends to accompany a belief that state and religion must be separate if freedom of religion and equal rights are to be protected. The third view differs: It argues that ancient values of tolerance inherent in Hindu culture are the best guarantee of religious freedoms because Hinduism acknowledges that aspects of the universal divinity are discernible in all forms of worship. In this definition, secularism comes to be defined as a form of pluralism with metaphysical foundations and not, in any sense, as the replacement of religious values by irreligious ones. Smith himself leans toward the view that the separation of state and religion is a firmer defense against potential interreligious violence. He points to aspects of the Hindu formula that would not be acceptable to Muslims, Christians, and others (perhaps even Buddhists). Smith tends to link Western secularism with democratic modernity and progress.

His discussion was nevertheless prescient. It was only after the eruption in 1992 of Hindu fundamentalist violence at the Ayodhya mosque that writers turned again to the topic of Indian secularism. How had Hindu tolerance degenerated into the actions of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and other radical groups? Madan (1997) argued that fundamentalist movements in religions including Hinduism and (earlier) Islam and Sikhism were a response to the hidden intolerance of Western-style secularist policies. Madan is among a number of scholars who argue that the European Enlightenment was not simply a humane and liberating movement; it also contained oppressive potentials, in particular, the tendency to portray religious thinking as false with respect to science and the accompanying stereotyping of
religious people as backward. Madan is somewhat sceptical of romantic views of Hinduism as perfectly tolerant. Hinduism may extend tolerance to other faiths, but encounters with Western objectifications of religion can awaken its own defensive, nationalist, and territorialist potentials. Western models of a state freed from religion cannot, in Madan’s view, succeed in India. This ideal was “a gift of Christianity,” specific to and only feasible within a particular European, post-Protestant context (Madan 1997, p. 754).

The founder of Indian independence and Indian secularism, Mahatma Gandhi, was, of course, a deeply religious Hindu who argued that faith-based respect for all religions was the best foundation for tolerance and peace in India. Gandhi argued that the state should not support any religious organization and that it should govern on areas of common citizen interest, permitting the free expression of religious practices. His successor Jawaharlal Nehru amended this position according to his own agnostic and progressive views. Nehru argued that India could be ruled only by a government that afforded equal protection and respect to those of all faiths and none and that the Indian Constitution should strive to afford equal protection to all its citizens. This objective, however, has frequently been in tension with India’s personal laws, dating back to administrative arrangements resorted to in the British period. These allow for the application of different systems of Hindu law (also applicable to Jains, Sikhs, and Buddhists) and Muslim and Christian laws to issues such as marriage, divorce, caste, and other issues deemed religious. Determining and maintaining the boundary between religious and civil jurisdictions continue to be difficult, and the tension between Gandhian and Nehruvian visions of Indian secularism plays out in complex ways. Thus the Hindutva (Hinduness) Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has advocated the universal application of the civil code in questions of law and alimony, partly as an opportunistic strike against Muslims defending shari’a-based personal law in these contexts.

Mahajan (2003) provides a lucid statement of a Nehruvian position. He argues that the debate on Indian secularism has been falsely premised on a Western model of separation between state and religion. Secularism’s critics (Madan 1987; Mitra 1991; Nandy 1985, 1992) claim that politics without religion is without moral basis; its advocates (e.g., Chatterji 1984, d’Souza 1985, Kumar 1989, Singh & Chandra 1985) insist that such a separation is a condition of continued democracy and civil rights. Mahajan does not agree that the separation of the state from religion can only occur in the West; this mindset merely underwrites essentialized distinctions between East and West. Mahajan argues that the state can guarantee civil freedom by affording equal protection to citizens of all faiths and none. In Mahajan’s view, the Western attempt to make religion uncontentious by making it private cannot work (in India or the West) because religions require public expression. Such freedoms can be balanced only against the protection of other citizens case by historical case (Mahajan 2003, p. 934).

The range of this debate is considerable. Chatterjee (1993) tries to find a middle ground to resolve arguments for discarding and retaining the idea of Indian secularism. Among defenders of secularism, Corbridge & Harriss (2000) is an important critique; Beteille (1994) claims that Indian secularism has suffered from the “bad advocacy” of academics.

Indian secularism has also been importantly contextualized by recent works examining Hindu nationalism and religious revival. Fuller (1983, 2003) offers a revealing account of the revival in status of the priests of the Minakshi temple in Tamil Nadu, reversing an earlier sharp decline between independence and the late 1970s. Fuller lucidly demonstrates how misleading it would be to see the secular Indian state as simply antireligious. State clashes with the temple were driven by a combination of Congress Party commitment to the promotion of Harijan (“untouchable”) rights of temple access and local Dravidian sentiment against North Indian Brahmanism. Conversely, the priests did not oppose state regulation of
the temple per se, but they did contest the Indian government's representation of itself as heir to the local Nyata royal dynasty. As it happened, state modernization of priestly status via the demand for more formal education in the Agamic ritual texts has opened a path for priests' self-assertion. The robust confidence of the temple priests today is upheld by the recognition that although the revival of temple endowments by contemporary Indian politicians may sometimes be self-interested, it is necessitated by the atmosphere of heightened Hindu religious devotion among voters; there is thus no sense of religion moving out of the public sphere in this setting (compare Van der Veer 2001, Veer & Lehmann 1999). Chatterjee (1993) suggested that the category of religion became central to the imagination since colonialism of a distinctive Indian national culture by its elite, whereas Hansen (1999, p. 52) argues that early-twentieth-century nationalist claiming of religion as a transcendent moral space paved the way for its opportunist annexation by the BJP. Like Fuller, each scholar notes an important impact of imported and indigenized understandings of secularism on historical developments, but they conclude that what happened in India cannot be fully conceptualized in terms of the workings of Western states. We may recall here Das's comment that Asad's definitions sometimes suffer from "a restricted notion of context" (Das 2006, p. 101). Asad's close focus on the history of the secular in the West, logical for his own project, means that he does not engage at length with polytheistic (or nontheistic) formations of religion or with the unexpected forms of secularity, which might emerge in such contexts.

It continues to prove difficult to separate the anthropological recognition of the asymmetrical history of colonialism from the assumption that modernity has an asymmetrical and homogeneous effect on tradition (Fuller 1984, 2003), or secularism on religion. As Spencer (1995) notes in a thoughtful review of Tambiah's (1992) account of Sinhala nationalism, these problems are heightened where religious violence is to be explained. The apparent paradox of aggressive nationalism promoted by Buddhist monks must steer between "unacceptable primordialism" and "unacceptable constructivism" (Spencer 1995, p. 358).

"A SECULAR AGE"
As Asad notes, debates on secularism were dominated for many years by writers in political science and political philosophy (e.g., Habermas 1992) whose interests had been in forms of justice, the definition and potentials of the public sphere, etc. These writers have not been concerned primarily with a radical critique of the concept or origin of secularism as such. Connolly (1999) and Taylor (2007) are clear exceptions, but Asad engages each of them on their divergences from his position rather than on their commonalities. Asad considers Taylor insufficiently critical of liberal democracies, especially their claims to be "direct-access" societies. Asad also suggests that, for Taylor, something like secularism is likely to accompany modern democratic states all over the world and may guarantee pluralism (Taylor 1999), which from Asad's point of view is a naive and potentially dangerous formulation (Asad 2006). An astute close reading of these differences between Taylor and Asad is given in a recent article by Bangstad (2009), although Bangstad perhaps oversimplifies in claiming that Taylor views modern life as benign (Taylor 2007, p. 675).

Like Asad, Taylor sets out to deconstruct the notion of the secular. Unlike Asad, he does so with the premise that there may be something like a universal human search for religious experience, often defined by Taylor as a search for fullness of life. In this view, religious experience cannot be understood as an aspect of the transformations of (state) power and the forms of knowing these transformations permit. Taylor's position clearly differs from Weber's careful avoidance of truth claims about, or specific definitions of, religion. However, to an anthropologist, and for all the range of his philosophical sources (especially Hegel), Taylor's project often reads as an extended meditation.

We earlier noted a tendency of classic secularization theory to exaggerate contrasts between a “relatively stable” (Bruce 2002, p. 8) European past where religion was “a single, moral universe” and a fragmented, unstable present. The plea is that, in a broad-brush argument, differences between periods in the past are relatively unimportant. This misleads not only because preindustrial European history was scarcely marked by social stasis, but also because the possibility of radical scepticism within the allegedly homogeneous lifeworlds of the traditional past has been charted by several historians (e.g., Fulton 2002, p. 65). It is a mistake to imply that religious pluralism is found only in modern contexts because the comparison with the pluralism of the ancient world is well known; Taylor, for instance, discusses it at length, evolving the argument that classical pluralism and atheism did not appeal to a mass audience, whereas European movements after humanism were able to do so (Taylor 2007, pp. 80–84). In fact, the more detailed historical information we have, the more complex it becomes to answer the central question Taylor himself sets: Why is it difficult to believe in God in the Western present, and why was it difficult not to at periods of the European past (Taylor 2007, p. 25)? For Taylor, it requires 896 pages to begin to trace the unfolding historical processes through which the modern secular came to be thinkable and to feel normal. He attempts to trace these transformations in the North Atlantic world (the heir to Latin Christianity), viewed not as the subtraction of illusion from reality but as the creation of new forms of experience that had never previously existed but which nonetheless come to seem like the obvious medium in which we live.

Taylor maintains that secularity did not develop in a simple linear fashion, but rather through a series of doublings-back, reprises and ironies that allow, even in modern times, for the existence of multiple strands of experience or “cross-pressures” (Taylor 2007, pp. 595, 772). Nevertheless, he picks a central strand, which he (sometimes) calls the Reform Master Narrative (p. 774). Although the long history of Reform goes back to at least the eleventh century (pp. 786 n.7; 92), he also picks a crucial period, including what we usually call the Reformation and Counter-Reformation (pp. 77ff) but centrally motivated by the previous (fifteenth) century, when heightened anxieties about death helped create the subsequent “rage for order.” For Taylor, as for Dumont (1985) and again here recalling Weber (1946), the origins of the secular therefore do not only lie with developments in state politics, nor indeed with the Enlightenment, but with earlier developments in which Christian theology ironically played a crucial part (Taylor 2007, pp. 19, 75).

The vast synthetic reach of Taylor’s text is a feature of his argument. He wishes to demonstrate that Christian belief and contemporary atheistic humanism are philosophical cousins, not irreconcilable opposites, and thus (contra Dawkins et al.) to restore the possibility that Christian thinking contributes to modern debate on equal terms. Taylor thus expresses sympathy for the views of the radical orthodox theologians including Milbank (1990) and Pickstock (1998), Milbank having argued some time ago that “once there was no secular; the secular as a domain had to be instituted or imagined” (Milbank 1990, p. 9, emphasis in original). Milbank’s perspective differs from Taylor’s in locating the crucial turn in Western thinking much earlier: in deformations of the theology of Augustine. Dumont (1985) and others have also suggested an early medieval turning point for the crucial developments of Western secularism. Taylor (2007) recognizes these views in an epilogue that argues for the validity of “the many stories” (p. 773). One consequent difficulty with Taylor’s text is determining where exactly he differs from many of the authors he discusses or why some issues and approaches, which might seem equally consequential (such as the development of capitalist institutions), are discussed relatively little.
MANY STORIES?

Like Asad, although for different theoretical reasons, Taylor is concerned primarily with the origin of “the secular” as a Western historical phenomenon; however, as Indianists have clearly shown, what happens to such categories once exported is unpredictable, especially where the context is no longer a monotheistic faith.

At this juncture, anthropologists must surely contribute to the expansion of the repertoire of ethnographic studies of actual, lived situations (in the West and outside it) in which local peoples enact their understandings of, interest in, or perhaps total indifference to the secular and the religious. Ethnographies of particular forms of secularism are now gradually increasing. Navaro-Yashin (2002) offers a thought-provoking account of the ways in which ordinary people experience the Turkish state. Constructed on a rhetoric of nationalist secularism that casts Islam as “unprogressive,” the Turkish state nevertheless revolves around the “uncanny” cult of Kemal Ataturk, a hybrid conceivable only within this particular view of religion. Navaro-Yashin charts the ways in which “fantasies for the state” (p. 155) are produced and reproduced in daily life, even through the idioms of cynicism that attempt to puncture its pretensions. Tambar (2009, p. 519) considers recent developments in Turkey, reviewing the ways in which secularism has become a populist movement that defines itself against an elite Islamic leadership and proceeds through the mechanism of the crowd as much as the vote.

An explicit discussion of secularism has begun among anthropologists of the formerly atheistic Communist states. Feuchtwang (2009) compares Chinese and Indian secularisms, whereas McBrien & Pelkmans (2008) examine the ways in which secularism has come to be understood as a religion in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Others have examined the view that modernity in African settings is typically religious (e.g., Meyer 1999).

At a different point of conjuncture to these debates, Palmié (2007) and Rutherford (2009) are among those scholars asking in what American secular experience might consist (compare Engelke 2009 on aspects of English secularism). Rutherford’s argument—that the category of belief, which has lately been avoided by many anthropologists for its Christocentric bias, is actually a constitutive aspect of secular American understandings of action—underscores the current degree of disjuncture between the secularism debates and the more established literature on religious modernity, even including work on Christian fundamentalisms (e.g., Harding 1987, 1994, 2001). Perhaps this failure of engagement is, in part, a consequence of Asad’s focus on the constitutive differences between Islam and Christianity, but it also appears to be part of a more general divergence of orientation. Although the anthropology of secularism still turns toward interdisciplinary interlocutors who consider themselves to be writing on politics, works such as Keane’s provocative and fascinating Christian Moderns (2007 and see Cannell 2008) most obviously engage fellow anthropologists, still tolerant of the discussion of transformations of religion, kinship, and exchange. But if this debate reminds us of anything, it is that these categorical distinctions, particularly that between the apparently urgent world of the political and the seemingly arcane or private domain of the religious, are themselves only a fiction of the historical processes we are examining.

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