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Secular, Secularization, and Secularism

A Review Article

Andrzej Bronk

Secularism is still a popular topic in social sciences and religious studies, discussed at many conferences and the title of many books. But the word itself and associated words “secular” and “secularization” remain ambiguous, having a lot of opposite and excluding meanings. So-called resurgence of religion in the public sphere has elicited a wide array of reactions and a vehement opposition to the very idea that religious reasons should ever have a right to expression in public political debate. The collection of 13 essays, “Rethinking Secularism,” edited by Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen,¹ is a new attempt to rethink the confusions about these categories, especially of the binary secular/religious, and a scrutiny of the phenomenon of secularism itself in its many diverse manifestations in the contemporary globalized and pluralized world. The volume is the effect of an interdisciplinary, multiyear project, sponsored by the Social Science Research Council (its president is Calhoun), where prominent, leading scholars – coming from sociology, political science, anthropology, international affairs, as well from history, literature, and religious studies – have collaborated in a reconsideration from many perspectives of secularism and secularity in the context of contemporary global politics and transnational social change. Their aim was to take stock of the ongoing research on multiple forms of secularism, and to reframe discussions of religion in the social sciences by drawing attention to the central issue of how “the secular” is constituted and understood, and to how new understandings of both religion and secularism shape perspectives in the social sciences and various practical projects in politics and international affairs.

Identifying themselves as social scientists, the authors start with questioning the validity of the traditional (European) category of religion and secular and, at the same time, try to dismantle the secularization thesis or give to it a more appropriate meaning. J. Casanova (“Public Religious in the Modern World,” 1994) suggests for instance, that the three

propositions of the secularization thesis – the decline of religious beliefs, the privatization of religion, and the differentiation of secular spheres and their emancipation from religion – should be looked at separately to get away from the till now dominant stereotypes. In the spirit of Enlightenment, religion is still identified conventionally with the supernatural, the irrational, and the outdated, and the secular is posited in relationship to science, reason, and modernity.

“Rethinking Secularism” is thought of as a contribution to the remapping of secularism and simultaneously an answer to the practical question of how the politicians could deal with the growing religious diversity in secular societies. As Casanova notices, there is a paradox, that at the same time the scholars of religion are questioning the validity of the category of religion (and the theory of secularization itself), the reality of religion is more widespread than ever and became an undisputable global social fact. He himself believes that any discussion of secularization should start with the reflection on the global trends where the globalization of the category of religion and the binary classification of reality in religious/secular are seen as a decisive factor. So seen, the volume is conceived as an introduction to some of the most compelling new conceptual and theoretical understandings of secularism and the secular, while also examining sociopolitical trends, involving the relationship between the religious and the secular from a variety of locations across the globe.

The scholars raise fundamental questions about secularism and religion: To what degree are the concepts shaped by the European historical experience? Do they perhaps carry the baggage of Western, specifically Christian, notions? To what extent are religion and secularism twin concepts that speak to similar moral sensibilities? Is there currently a decline in secularism, or is there, rather, a reformulation of the secular/religious distinction? Can this distinction be transcended through new ways of thinking about civil society and the public sphere, political order and social transformation, global politics and international affairs? It seems obvious for them that even if people around the world use the same category of religion, they actually mean very different things. At the same time, the very fact that this category is being used globally testifies to the global expansion of the modern secular/religious system of classification of reality that first emerged in the modern Christian West. Therefore, Juergensmeyer suggests to think of the elusive term “religion” in two senses: Enlightenment and non-Enlightenment ways of thinking. The first view is the narrow idea of religious institutions and beliefs contrasted with

¹ Calhoun, Craig, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds.), *Rethinking Secularism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 311 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-979668-7. Price: £ 12.79. ♦

secular social values in the modern West, the other, a broad one, involves moral values, traditional customs, and publically articulated spiritual sensibility. The notion of religion as somehow private, which has informed the modern era, is misleading as religion simply was never in every sense private. All the more because the question is, how, where, and by whom the proper boundaries between the religious and the secular ought to be drawn? The same applies to the binaries: natural/supernatural, sacred/profane, transcendent/immanent, private/public, premodern/modern, and illiberal/liberal, "City of God" / ♦ "City of Man," spiritual/temporal, which remain ambiguous and flexible. Imposing them on the contemporary social processes in a simplistic way gives a distorted view of the world politics and misses and misconstrues some of the most significant political developments of our time.

To speak of Western modernity as secular can among others mean: distinction of church and state, separation of church and state, and, finally, sidelining of religion from the state and from public life (Taylor), the separation of religion from public life, the decline of religious belief (in God), and practice among ordinary people, as what is left after religion fades, the neutrality of the state with regard to religious beliefs and especially to the church. In the secularist ideology the secular is claimed not just as one way of organizing life, not just as useful in order to ensure peace and harmony among different religions, but as a kind of maturation because of being devoid of religion. Similarly, there are particular varieties of (state) secularism which can mean: a worldview; a matter of personal identity and a stance toward religion and life, that clearly separates religious from nonreligious ways of being; the removal of religion into a "private" sphere and the assumption that public life should be basically secular; an utopian ideal of a world free of every kind of religion, a more or less forceful ideology and a practice carried by political movements; a general tendency toward a world in which religion matters less and various forms of secular reason and secular institutions matter more; anticlericalism and scientism; enlightened ideas about the progress, in which religion (magic) has to be replaced by scientific rationality; and a view of the modernity as necessarily involving a progressive disappearance of religion and its replacement by secularism.

The book opens with a detailed "Introduction" (3–30) by Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and VanAntwerpen, explaining critically the content, structure, intentions, and the main topics and concepts of the book. The first essay by Charles Taylor, "Western Secularity" (31–53), relies on his "A Secular Age,"

(2007) which has shaped current discussions of secularism and secularity. He distinguishes three meanings of secularism with respect to the "North Atlantic Societies" of Western Europe and North America. He tells the story of how the three modes of secularism have developed throughout the course of Western history and how they have mutually influenced one another. The article has four parts: deliberations on the terms of the secular/religious, a sketch of their Western path and the role deism has played in it, the place of this double vector in the broader historical context, and the new understanding of "religion." Noting that the term "secular" is both complex and ambiguous and subject to alterations and distortions, Taylor nonetheless argues that Western secularity should be understood as the result of a fundamental change in sensibility marked by the enlightened systematic repression of the "magical" elements of religion. True religion in this view consists in a doctrine that is rationally defensible and that generates a morality that is endorsed by reason.

The essay by José Casanova, "The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms" (54–74) presents an analytical elaboration of the three concepts: secular, secularization, secularism and some of the phenomenological experiences, institutional arrangements, historical processes, constitutional frameworks, and normative-ideological projects to which they refer. All three concepts are related and used very differently in various political and cultural contexts. Casanova himself proposes how to differentiate them simply as a way of distinguishing analytically in an exploratory manner among three different phenomena, without any attempt to reify them as separate realities. He distinguishes also three different ways of being secular: that of *mere secularity*, that of *self-sufficient and exclusive secularity*, and that of *secularist secularity*. Respectively, the theory of secularization has to be disaggregated analytically into three disparate and not necessarily interrelated components or subtheses: the theory of the institutional differentiation of the so-called secular spheres; the theory of the progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices as a concomitant of levels of modernization; and the theory of privatization of religion as a precondition of modern secular and democratic politics. In Casanova's view secularism refers more broadly to a whole range of modern secular worldviews and ideologies which may be consciously held and explicitly elaborated into philosophies of history and normative-ideological state projects.

Craig Calhoun, "Secularism, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere" (75–91), is rethinking the implicit secularism in conceptions of citizenship. Drawing

on a critical engagement with the work of Jürgen Habermas, he considers the various ways in which an unreflective secularism distorts much of the liberal understanding of the world. In general, political secularism hinges on a distinction of public from private and the relegation of religion to the private side of that dichotomy. As the secularization story derives partly from an Enlightenment-rationalist view of religion as mere superstition, liberal theorists have commonly suggested that religion should remain private and religious arguments should not have any legitimate place in the public sphere. But religion has never been essentially private, because human beings obviously have the capacity for acts of self-transcendence even if they do not require the practice of religion or belief in God.

Rajeev Bhargava, “Rehabilitating Secularism” (92–113), an authority on secularism in India, considers the ideal of a secular/secularized state as the best solution for a state and for a religion in the situation of pluralism of faiths. Despite contemporary criticisms of the doctrine of political secularism, he argues, political secularism must be rehabilitated rather than abandoned, because there is currently no reasonable moral and ethical alternative. It remains our best help to deal with ever-deepening religious diversity and the problems endemic to it. Bhargava clarifies first the concepts of “secularism” and “religious diversity,” then proposes a distinction between “internal” and “external” diversity of religion that enables the identification of religious plurality as well as the tracking of differences between models of state-religion relations. He ponders then three normative responses to the pluralism of religions: the American “mutual exclusion model,” the French “one-sided exclusion model,” and the Western European “separation and support model.” This comparison leads into Bhargava’s presentation of his “principled distance model,” the premises of which are: separation, understood as principled distance; contextual moral reasoning; critical respect; and modern, though not necessarily “Western,” character. The novelty of his clearly written, analytical, and detailed article lies in its multivalued perspective, which takes into account both individual and communitarian rights and values.

Alfred Stepan, “The Multiple Secularisms of Modern Democratic and Non-Democratic Regimes” (114–144), analyzes the variety of possible, and actual, democratic patterns of state-religion-society relations and calls attention to the great variations in state-religion-society (church?) relations that exist in modern democracies, discussing the distinct patterns of relation that constitute a “multiple secularisms.” He uses this concept in the title of his es-

say not as a normative but an empirical claim to get around some of the difficulties of a single meaning of “secular” and to help identify and analyze the great variations in state-religion-society relations that can and do exist in modern democracies. Secularism is neither a sufficient condition for democracy nor a concept necessary for its analysis but “twin tolerations” (the minimal degree of toleration that democratic institutions need to receive from religion and the minimal degree of toleration that religion needs to receive from the state) are necessary for a polity to be democratic. Stepan develops seven patterns of state-religion-society relations that happen to coexist with democracy: the separatist model (France, United States), the separatist secularism (Turkey), the established religion model (Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark, Finland, and the United Kingdom), the positive accommodation model (Germany), the respect all model, the positive cooperation, and the principled distance model. Concluding, the author states, that it is highly probable that in the increasingly globalized and multicultural societies, new state-society-religion patterns will have to be constructed, and old ones reconstructed, in order to respond adequately to new contingencies and new challenges to the “twin tolerations” in modern democracies.

Peter J. Katzenstein, “Civilizational States, Secularisms, and Religions” (145–165), explains in chapter one why scholars of international relations focus on secularism in the singular and disregard religion in their analyses. He shows in chapter two the intermingling of secularisms and religions in world politics and develops the concept of the “civilizational state” as an alternative to the “rational state.” Informed by the writings of Yasusuke Murakami, he inquires in chapter three into the topic of cultural commensurabilities in world politics and offers in chapter four a brief conclusion. He criticizes liberal and realist approaches to the study of international relations as two dominant approaches. Instead, he proposes the concepts of “civilizational states” and “polymorphic globalism” as a means of adequately conceptualizing the intermingling of multiple secularisms and religions in contemporary world politics.

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, “A Suspension of (Dis)Belief. The Secular-Religious Binary and the Study of International Relations” (166–184), politicizes, historicizes, and critically interrogates the rigid and pervasive secular/religious tandem, using examples from recent world politics (of relations between the United States and Iran) to illustrate her arguments and she draws attention to dimensions of politics and forms of political authority, including

the power exercised by the category of the secular itself. She notices a shift in paradigm in social sciences that brings new insights to the field of international relations and makes it possible to see the world more fully. Prevailing distinctions between the religious and the secular have embedded a false assumption that religion has been effectively privatized and, thus, is no longer relevant in modern politics, leading scholars of international relations to miss or misunderstand some of the most important political developments of the contemporary period.

In his essay on secular and religious treatments of violence the sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer, "Rethinking the Secular and Religious Aspects of Violence" (185–203), joins Hurd in critiquing the bifurcation of politics and politics into their secular and their religious aspects. He asks why are social and political tensions in the twenty-first century imagined as confrontations between religion and secularism and examines how secular politics sought to excise religion from public life and considers the manner in which secularism has recently been challenged and sometimes rejected outright by actors mobilizing religious language and ideologies as a form of political critique. One answer is that the problem has been created by secularism as much as by religion: it has been generated by the construction of the idea of a secular social order that marginalizes religious values, practices, and identities and creates a potential scapegoat for social and cultural frustrations. In particular, the problem lies in the idea that there is something called "religion" that is excluded from public life and "secularism" that dominates the public sphere. Juergensmeyer sees also, as one of history's great ironies, the political construction of secular nationalism, often perceived as a "strange religion" in its own right, spread throughout the world with "almost missionary zeal," meant to bring peace and civility to social life, that has in the period of late modernity become a contested idea and a source of conflict and critique. Acts of violence against the secular state become symbolic expressions of empowerment and attempts to claim leverage in a public arena that is perceived as hostile and marginalizing. The author comes to an unsettling conclusion that it is not religion that is the cause of much of the violence associated with it, but the way that the activists and their foes have come to think about religion.

Cecelia Lynch, "Religious Humanitarianism and the Global Politics of Secularism" (204–224), is interested in how religious humanitarian actors today engage with the religious/secular binary in different parts of the world, in particular, what work claims about the religious and the secular accomplish,

when people employ them to describe the ethical imperatives that compel them to act. She examines the activities of religious humanitarian workers in the context of the global politics of secularism and analyzes phenomena she has encountered through research in Cameroon, Kenya, Ghana, Jordan, the West Bank, New York, and Geneva, paying attention to the construction of the religious and the secular in the midst of intersections among global-market and war-on-terror discourses and transnational and local humanitarian configurations of the religious and the secular.

Historian R. Scott Appleby, "Rethinking Fundamentalism in a Secular Age" (225–247), reflects critically the religious fundamentalism, with specific reference to the large-scale initiative "The Fundamentalism Project" (TFP), he codirected with Martin Marty. He asks: What might a reconsideration of the project's methods, assumptions, themes, and findings contribute to this book's remapping of secularism? Given that TFP was an extraordinary example of how knowledge is produced, reproduced, and disseminated within a specific and limiting historical, political, and social context, he offers here, by way of introduction, three observations on the project's origins and structure, and on the challenges inherent in pulling it off. Fundamentalists insist on the radical otherness of the transcendent and seek to bend the world to the will of the divine within the confines of secular time. Acknowledging the widespread and persistent misuse to which the term fundamentalism has been put, Appleby nonetheless defends a revised conception of fundamentalism as a religious mode defined by both an intentional appropriation of constitutive elements of the secular and an antipathy to dominant forms of secularism.

Richard Madsen, "Secularism, Religious Change, and Social Conflict in Asia" (248–269), uses Taylor's "Secular Age" as a framework for understanding the advent of a "secular age" in the Asian modernity. Modern Asian countries have secular states, but despite efforts of some states to destroy all religion, they still have religious societies. Focusing on political and religious transformations taking place in China, Indonesia, and Taiwan in the aftermath of the Cold War, Madsen seeks to show how the ostensibly secular facade of Asian political institutions has frequently masked an "interior spirit" of religiosity, which, however, he argues, is often a matter not of personal belief but, rather, of collective ritual and socially "embedded" religion. First, Madsen acknowledges the limitations of Taylor's framework; second, he applies it as a first-draft approximation to understanding the historical transformations of religion in another culture; third, he

sees how it does not fit and then uses this discrepancy as a stimulus to expand our horizons. He concludes: Although many people in most Asian societies continue to practice religion, it is a different kind of religion from that in most Western societies, it is more a matter of ritual and myth than belief, a part of the public life of local communities. In any case, religion has not undergone the transition from public practice to private belief that Taylor discerns in the West, and the “immanent and the transcendent” are much more mixed up in various hybrid combinations. In accord with widespread traditions of syncretism, many people believe and practice many things at once.

Peter van der Veer, “Smash Temples, Burn Books. Comparing Secularist Projects in India and China” (270–281), examines secularism in India and China in a comparative historical analysis from the post-Weberian perspective. He first deals with secularism in China, then with secularism in India, in order to show what kinds of problems secularist projects attempt to address and what kinds of violence their interventions entail. He starts with a few introductory observations: first, that the project of European modernity should be understood as part of what he calls “interactional history”; second, that with all of the attention to secularization as a historical process, there is not enough attention to secularism as a historical project; and third, that the religious and the secular are produced simultaneously and in mutual interaction. Concluding the author states: “The Chinese and Indian cases show us that secularism is not simply antireligious in these societies, although there are antireligious elements in it, but that it simultaneously attempts to transform religions into moral sources of citizenship and national belonging” (280).

Talal Asad, “Freedom of Speech and Religious Limitations” (282–297), takes up the question of blasphemy and freedom of speech. He starts with the question: “If blasphemy indicates a religious limit transgressed, does it really have no place in a free, secular society” (282)? There has been much talk in Europe and America about the threat to free speech, particularly whenever Muslims have raised the issue of blasphemy in response to some public criticism of Islam. However, the essay is neither an apologia for Muslim reactions nor a criticism of those who defended the publication of the cartoons. The author reflects on what contemporary debates over Islamic blasphemy claims suggest about the shape of liberal secularity, and its ideal of the free human being. What, in contrast, do Islamic ideas of blasphemy tell us about our modern liberal assumptions about free speech? Asad discusses some

moral, political, and aesthetic problems that have crystallized in the form of the idea of free speech and shows that even in a liberal society (liberal university) free speech is not an absolute value but necessarily conditional. Secular societies do have legal constraints on communication in the form of copyright, patent, and trademark and laws protecting commercial secrets, all of which prohibit in different ways the free circulation of expressions and ideas. Ultimately, Asad argues, that all limitations of free speech derive not simply from sociopolitical constraints but from the theological language in which such constraint is articulated, since theology invokes dependence on transcendental power, while secularists reject such power in the name of its own particular, and ideological, conception of human freedom.

Let us repeat some major outcomes. In “Rethinking Secularity” we have got an up-to-date report about the contemporary state of discussion concerning the categories of “secular,” “secularization,” and “secularism” and the problems grouped around this words. The well-tested and validated theses, with a lot of empirical, detailed examples and models, are founded on solid erudition, deep knowledge, and skills of the competent authors. They focus on how “the secular” and “religious” are constituted and understood in sociopolitical struggles and cultural politics. On the one hand, they stress the continued relevance of religion for the world politics, and on the other hand, they see the secular as the absence of religion rather than a positive formation of its own that can be studied and analyzed. They all question a sharp line between things, secular, and religious, that has been a habit of thought since the Enlightenment, and show the mutations of these categories through ages and their dialectical interdependence right up to the opposition. The monotheistic definition of religion, with a genealogy in universalist Deism and in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European expansion, which constructs the object of study of religious studies and defines religious actors and institutions according to a particular set of parameters, should not be taken as a norm, as it misconstructs or misses entirely a spectrum of political actors, religious histories, and social processes.

The words “secular/religious,” even if applied universally, do not mean the same thing in each iteration. It is a mistake to think that the boundaries between the religious and the secular are fixed and that the Western distinction (made and not simply found!) between “politics” and “religion” could be uncritically exported to other regions. There are many different ways in which other civilizations have drawn boundaries between “sacred” and “pro-

fane,” “transcendent” and “immanent,” “religious” and “secular.” Therefore, there is no singular secularism but rather a cluster of related terms and multiple competing secularisms, as there are multiple and diverse forms of religion. Secularisms differ from one another, particularly those that arose not out of Christianity. The fact, that the modernization of so many non-Western societies is accompanied by processes of religious revival, puts into question the premise, that the decline of religious beliefs and practices is a *quasi*-natural consequence of processes of modernization. It proves as Casanova stated that the historical process of secularization of European Latin Christendom, instead of being the norm, is an “exceptional process, which is unlikely to be reproduced anywhere else in the world with a similar sequential arrangement and with the corresponding stadial consciousness” (64). If modernization *per se* does not produce necessarily the progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices, then we need a better explanation for the radical and widespread secularity one finds among the populations of most Western European societies.