Introduction: Thinking about Secularism

I

What is the connection between "the secular" as an epistemic category and "secularism" as a political doctrine? Can they be objects of anthropological inquiry? What might an anthropology of secularism look like? This book attempts, in a preliminary way, to address these questions.

The contemporary salience of religious movements around the globe, and the torrent of commentary on them by scholars and journalists, have made it plain that religion is by no means disappearing in the modern world. The "resurgence of religion" has been welcomed by many as a means of supplying what they see as a needed moral dimension to secular politics and environmental concerns. It has been regarded by others with alarm as a symptom of growing irrationality and intolerance in everyday life. The question of secularism has emerged as an object of academic argument and of practical dispute. If anything is agreed upon, it is that a straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular is no longer acceptable. But does it follow that secularism is not universally valid?

Secularism as political doctrine arose in modern Euro-America. It is easy to think of it simply as requiring the separation of religious from secular institutions in government, but that is not all it is. Abstractly stated, examples of this separation can be found in medieval Christendom and in the Islamic empires—and no doubt elsewhere too. What is distinctive

about "secularism" is that it presupposes new concepts of "religion," "ethics," and "politics," and new imperatives associated with them. Many people have sensed this novelty and reacted to it in a variety of ways. Thus the opponents of secularism in the Middle East and elsewhere have rejected it as specific to the West, while its advocates have insisted that its particular origin does not detract from its contemporary global relevance. The eminent philosopher Charles Taylor is among those who insist that although secularism emerged in response to the political problems of Western Christian society in early modernity—beginning with its devastating wars of religion—it is applicable to non-Christian societies everywhere that have become modern. This elegant and attractive argument by a highly influential social philosopher demands the attention of everyone interested in this queston.[1]

Taylor takes it for granted that the emergence of secularism is closely connected to the rise of the modern nation-state, and he identifies two ways in which secularism has legitimized it. First, there was the attempt to find the lowest common denominator among the doctrines of conflicting religious sects, and second, the attempt to define a political ethic independent of religious convictions altogether. It is this latter model that is applicable throughout the world today, but only after we have adapted to it the Rawlsian idea of an *overlapping consensus*, which proceeds on the assumption that there can be no universally agreed basis, whether secular or religious, for the political principles accepted in a modern, heterogeneous society. Taylor agrees with Rawls that the political ethic will be embedded in some understanding or other of the good, but argues against Rawls that background understandings and foreground political principles need not be tightly bound together as the latter maintains. This model of secularism is not only intellectually appealing, it is also, Taylor believes, one that the modern democratic state cannot do without.

Taylor likes Benedict Anderson's thought that a modern nation is an "imagined community" because it enables him to emphasize two features of the modern imaginary that belongs to a democratic state. These are: first, the horizontal, direct-access character of modern society; and second, its grounding in secular, homogeneous time. Direct access is reflected in several developments: the rise of the public sphere (the equal right of all to participate in nationwide discussions), the extension of the market princi-

1. Charles Taylor, "Modes of Secularism," in Rajeev Bhargava, ed., *Secularism and Its Critics*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

ple (all contracts are between legal equals), and the emergence of citizenship (based on the principle of individualism). Apart from the idea of a direct-access society, homogeneous time is a prerequisite for imagining the totality of individual lives that comprise a (national) community in which there are no privileged persons or events, and therefore no mediations. This makes the sources of political legitimacy in a modern direct-access, temporally homogeneous state radically different from the sources in a traditional temporally and politically mediated one. "Traditional despotisms could ask of people only that they remain passive and obey the laws," he writes. "A democracy, ancient or modern, has to ask more. It requires that its members be motivated to make the necessary contributions: of treasure (in taxes), sometimes blood (in war), and always some degree of participation in the process of governance. A free society has to substitute for despotic enforcement a certain degree of self-enforcement. Where this fails, the system is in danger."[2]

Is this account persuasive? Some doubts arise at this point. Surely, the payment of taxes and induction into the army depend not on self-enforcement but on enforcement by the state? "Some degree" of participation in governance (by which Taylor means taking part in elections once every four or five years) explicitly refers to a statistical measure of the entire population and not to a measure of how strong individual motivation is. It depends, therefore, on the political skill with which large numbers are managed—including the organization and financing of electoral campaigns—rather than on the ethics of individual self-discipline. The distinctive feature of modern liberal governance, I would submit, is *neither* compulsion (force) *nor* negotiation (consent) *but* the statecraft that uses "self-discipline" and "participation," "law" and "economy" as elements of political strategy. In spite of the reference to "democracy, ancient or modern," which suggests a comparability of political predicaments, the problems and resources of modern society are utterly different from those of a Greek polis. Indeed Taylor's statement about participation is not, so one could argue, the way most individuals in modern state-administered populations justify governance. It is the way ideological spokespersons theorize "political legitimacy." If the system is in danger it is not because of an absence of self-enforcement by citizens. Most politicians are aware that "the system is in danger" when the general population ceases to enjoy any sense of prosperity, when the regime is felt to be thoroughly unre-

2. Ibid., p. 43.

sponsive to the governed, and when the state security apparatuses are grossly inefficient. Policing techniques and an economy that avoids disappointing too many in the general population too seriously are more important than self-discipline as an autonomous factor.

In today's liberal democracies a strong case can be made for the thesis that there is less and less of a direct link between the electorate and its parliamentary representatives—that the latter are less and less representative of the socio-economic interests, identities, and aspirations of a culturally differentiated and economically polarized electorate. And the absence of a direct reflection of the citizen in his political representation is not compensated for through the various extra-parliamentary institutions connected to governance. On the contrary. The influence of *pressure groups* on government decisions is more often than not far greater than is warranted by the proportion of the electorate whose interests they directly promote (for example, the Farmers Union in Britain; AIPAC and the oil lobby in the United States). *Opinion polls*, continuously monitoring the fragile collective views of citizens, keep the government informed about public sentiment between elections, and enable it to anticipate or influence opinion independently of the electoral mandate. Finally, *the mass media*, increasingly owned by conglomerates and often cooperating with the state, mediate the political reactions of the public and its sense of guarantee and threat. Thus in crucial ways this is not at all a direct-access society.[3] There is no space in which all citizens can negotiate freely and equally with one another. The existence of negotiation in public life is confined to such elites as party bosses, bureaucratic administrators, parliamentary legislators, and business leaders. The ordinary citizen does not participate in the process of formulating policy options as these elites do—his or her participation in periodic elections does not even guarantee that the policies voted for will be adhered to.

The modern nation as an imagined community is always mediated through constructed images. When Taylor says that a modern democracy must acquire a healthy dose of nationalist sentiment[4] he refers to the national media—including national education—that is charged with culti-

3. See the interesting article by Bernard Manin, "The Metamorphoses of Representative Government," *Economy and Society*, vol. 23, no. 2, May 1994.

4. "In other words, the modern democratic state needs a healthy degree of what used to be called patriotism, a strong sense of identification with the polity, and a willingness to give of oneself for its sake" (Taylor, p. 44).

vating it. For the media are not simply the means through which individuals simultaneously imagine their national community; they *mediate* that imagination, construct the sensibilities that underpin it.[5] When Taylor says that the modern state has to make citizenship the primary principle of identity, he refers to the way it must transcend the different identities built on class, gender, and religion, replacing conflicting perspectives by unifying experience. In an important sense, this transcendent mediation *is* secularism. Secularism is not simply an intellectual answer to a question about enduring social peace and toleration. It is an enactment by which a *political medium* (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion. In contrast, the process of mediation enacted in "premodern" societies includes ways in which the state mediates local identities without aiming at transcendence.

So much for questions of space in modern secular society—the alleged absence of hierarchy and supposed dependence on horizontal solidarity. What about time? Here, too, the reality is more complex than Taylor's model suggests. The homogeneous time of state bureaucracies and market dealings is of course central to the calculations of modern political economy. It allows speed and direction to be plotted with precision. But there are other temporalities—immediate and mediated, reversible and nonreversible—by which individuals in a heterogeneous society live and by which therefore their political responses are shaped.

In short, the assumption that liberal democracy ushers in a direct-access society seems to me questionable. The forms of mediation characteristic of modern society certainly differ from medieval Christian—and Islamic—ones, but this is not a simple matter of the absence of "religion" in the public life of the modern nation-state. For even in modern secular countries the place of religion varies. Thus although in France both the highly centralized state and its citizens are secular, in Britain the state is linked to the Established Church and its inhabitants are largely nonreligious, and in America the population is largely religious but the federal state is secular. "Religion" has always been publicly present in both Britain and America. Consequently, although the secularism of these three countries have much in common, the mediating character of the modern imag-

5. See Hent de Vries, "In Media Res: Global Religion, Public Spheres, and the Task of Contemporary Comparative Religious Studies," in *Religion and Media*, ed. H. de Vries and S. Weber, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001.

inary in each of them differs significantly. The notion of toleration between religiously defined groups is differently inflected in each. There is a different sense of participation in the nation and access to the state among religious minorities in the three countries.

So what does the idea of *an overlapping consensus* do for the doctrine of secularism? In a religiously diverse society, Taylor claims, it allows people to have different (even mutually exclusive) reasons for subscribing to the independent, *secular* ethic. For example, the right to life may be justified by secular or religious beliefs—and the latter may come in several varieties that belong to different traditions. This means that political disagreements will be continuous, incapable of being authoritatively resolved, and that temporary resolutions will have to depend on negotiated compromise. But given that there will be quarrels about what is to count as *core political principles* and as *background justifications*, how will they be resolved? Taylor answers: by persuasion and negotiation. There is certainly a generous impulse behind this answer, but the nation-state is not a generous agent and its law does not deal in persuasion. Consider what happens when the parties to a dispute are unwilling to compromise on what for them is a matter of principle (a principle that articulates action and being, not a principle that is justifiable by statements of belief). If citizens are not reasoned around in a matter deemed nationally important by the government and the majority that supports it, the threat of legal action (and the violence this implies) may be used. In that situation negotiation simply amounts to the exchange of unequal concessions in situations where the weaker party has no choice.[6] What happens, the citizen asks, to the principles of equality and liberty in the modern secular imaginary when they are subjected to the necessities of the law? It emerges then that although she can choose her happiness, she may not identify her harms.

Or to put it another way: When the state attempts to forcibly establish and defend "core political principles," when its courts impose a *particular* distinction between "core principles" and "background justifications" (for the law always *works through* violence), this may add to cumulative disaffection. Can secularism then guarantee the peace it allegedly ensured in

6. Intimidation can take many forms, of course. As Lord Cromer, consul-general and agent of the British government and informal ruler of Egypt at the end of the nineteenth century, put it, "advice could always take the substance, if not the form, of a command" (cited in Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid, *Egypt and Cromer*, London: John Murray, 1968, p. 66).

Euro-America's early history—by shifting the violence of religious wars into the violence of national and colonial wars? The difficulty with secularism as a doctrine of war and peace in the world is not that it is European (and therefore alien to the non-West) but that it is closely connected with the rise of a system of capitalist nation-states—mutually suspicious and grossly unequal in power and prosperity, each possessing a collective personality that is differently mediated and therefore differently guaranteed and threatened.

Thus a number of historians have noted the tendency of spokespersons of the American nation, a tendency that has dramatically resurfaced since the September 11 tragedy, to define it as "good" in opposition to its "evil" enemies at home and abroad. "It is an outlook rooted in two distinctive American traditions," says Eric Foner, a historian at Columbia University. "The country's religious roots and its continuing high level of religious faith make Americans more likely to see enemies not just as opponents but as evil. Linked to that is the belief that America is the world's last best hope of liberty, so that those who oppose America become the enemies of freedom."[7] Included in this pattern, these historians tell us, is the tendency to denounce public dissent as treason and to subject various immigrant groups to legalized suppression. The historians have traced this recurring pattern of American nationalism (where internal difference, especially when it is identified as "foreign," becomes the focus of intolerance) from the end of the eighteenth century—that is, from the foundation of the republic—to the present. Is it to be understood in relation to its religious origins? But in the twentieth century the political rhetoric and repressive measures have been directed at real and imagined secular opponents. Regardless of the religious roots and the contemporary religiosity that historians invoke in explanation of this pattern, America has—as Taylor rightly observes—a model secular constitution. My point is that whatever the cause of the repeated explosions of intolerance in American history—however understandable they may be—they are entirely compatible (indeed intertwined) with secularism in a highly modern society. Thus it seems to me there has been scarcely any sustained public *debate* on the significance of the September 11 tragedy for a superpower-dominated world. On the whole the media have confined themselves to two kinds of question: on the one hand the requirements of national security and the danger

7. Robert F. Worth, "A Nation Defines Itself by Its Evil Enemies: Truth, Right and the American Way," in the *New York Times*, February 24, 2002.

to civil liberties of the "war on terror," and, on the other, the responsibility of Islam as a religion and Arabs as a people for acts of terror. (A number of thoughtful articles on the September tragedy Have been published, but they do not appear to have affected the dominant intellectual discourse.) This absence of public debate in a liberal democratic society must be explained in terms of the mediating representations that define its national personality and identify the discourses that seem to threaten it.

Another instructive example is India, a country that has a secular constitution and an outstanding record as a functioning liberal democracy—perhaps the most impressive in the Third World. And yet in India "communal riots" (that is, between Hindus and various minorities—Muslim, Christian, and "Untouchable") have occurred frequently ever since independence in 1947. As Partha Chatterjee and others have pointed out, the publicly recognizable personality of the nation is strongly mediated by representations of a reconstituted high-caste Hinduism, and those who do not fit into that personality are inevitably defined as religious minorities. This has often placed the "religious minorities" in a defensive position.[8] A secular state does not guarantee toleration: it puts into play different structures of ambition and fear. The law never seeks to eliminate violence since its object is always to *regulate* violence.

II

If secularism as a doctrine requires the distinction between private reason and public principle, it also demands the placing of the "religious" in the former by "the secular." Private *reason* is not the same as private *space*; it is the entitlement to difference, the immunity from the force of public reason. So theoretical and practical problems remain that call for each of these categories to be defined. What makes a discourse and an action "religious" or "secular"?

A book entitled *The Bible Designed to Be Read as Literature*, published in England before the Second World War,[9] has a format that does away with the traditional double columns and numbered verses, and through

8. See, in this connection, Partha Chatterjee, "History and the Nationalization of Hinduism," *Social Research*, vol. 59, no. 1, 1992.

9. *The Bible Designed to Be Read as Literature*, ed. and arranged by E. S. Bates, London: William Heineman, undated.

modern page layout and typography aims to produce the effect of a continuous narrative with occasional breaks for lines of poetry. As the Introduction explains: "although a great part of the Bible is poetry, the poetry is printed as prose. The prose, on the other hand, instead of being printed continuously, is broken up into short 'verses,' and arbitrarily divided into 'chapters.' The Bible contains almost all the traditional types of literature; lyric poetry, dramatic and elegiac poetry, history, tales, philosophic treatises, collections of proverbs, letters, as well as types of writing peculiar to itself, what are called the Prophetic Books. Yet all these are presented in print as if, in the original, they had the same literary form" (page vii). The changes in layout certainly facilitate a reading of the Bible as "literature." But as the passage quoted implicitly acknowledges, "literature" has an ambiguous sense—at once "art," "texts dealing with a particular subject," and simply "printed matter."

If the Bible is read as art (whether as poetry or myth or philosophy) this is because a complicated historical development of disciplines and sensibilities has made it possible to do so. Hence the protest the Introduction makes to the effect that a concern for literary reading is no derogation of its sacred status ("And indeed, to make a rigid division between the sacred and the secular is surely to impoverish both") is itself a secular expression of the text's malleability. An atheist will not read it in the way a Christian would. Is this text essentially "religious" because it deals with the supernatural in which the Christian believes—either a text divinely revealed or a true record of divine inspiration? Or is it really "literature" because it can be read by the atheist as a human work of art? Or is the text neither in itself, but simply a reading that is either religious or literary—or possibly, as for the modern Christian, both together? For over the last two or three centuries it has become possible to bring a newly emerging concept of *literature* to the aid of religious sensibilities. However, until someone decides this question authoritatively, there can be no authorized allocation of what belongs to private reason and what to "a political ethic independent of religious belief" (a public ethic that is said to be subscribed to for diverse private reasons—that thus become little more than *rationalizations*).

Let me pursue this point briefly with reference to what is described in our media, and by many of our public intellectuals, as "the Islamic roots of violence"—especially since September 2001. Religion has long been seen

as a source of violence,[10] and (for ideological reasons) Islam has been represented in the modern West as peculiarly so (undisciplined, arbitrary, singularly oppressive). Experts on "Islam," "the modern world," and "political philosophy" have lectured the Muslim world yet again on its failure to embrace secularism and enter modernity and on its inability to break off from its violent roots. Now some reflection would show that violence does not *need* to be justified by the Qur'an—or any other scripture for that matter. When General Ali Haidar of Syria, under the orders of his secular president Hafez al-Assad, massacred 30,000 to 40,000 civilians in the rebellious town of Hama in 1982 he did not invoke the Qur'an—nor did the secularist Saddam Hussein when he gassed thousands of Kurds and butchered the Shi'a population in Southern Iraq. Ariel Sharon in his indiscriminate killing and terrorizing of Palestinian civilians did not—so far as is publicly known—invoke passages of the Torah, such as Joshua's destruction of every living thing in Jericho.[11] Nor has any government (and rebel group), whether Western or non-Western, *needed* to justify its use of indiscriminate cruelty against civilians by appealing to the authority of sacred scripture. They might in some cases do so because that seems to them just—or else expedient. But that's very different from saying that they are *constrained* to do so. One need only remind oneself of the banal fact that innumerable pious Muslims, Jews, and Christians read their scriptures without being seized by the need to kill non-believers. My point here is simply to emphasize that the way people engage with such complex and multifaceted texts, translating their sense and relevance, is a complicated business involving disciplines and traditions of reading, personal habit, and temperament, as well as the perceived demands of particular social situations.

The present discourse about the roots of "Islamic terrorism" in Islamic texts trails two intriguing assumptions: (a) that the Qur'anic text will

10. "In the case of the Bible the tradition handed down from the Middle Ages has been to regard it as a collection of texts, any of which could be detached from its surroundings and used, regardless of the circumstances in which it was written or by whom it was spoken, as divine authority for conduct; often (as we know) with devastating consequences. Texts have been set up as idols, as cruel as ever were worshiped by savage idolaters" (ibid., p. viii).

11. The Torah is, of course, replete with God's injunctions to his chosen people to destroy the original inhabitants of the Promised Land. But it would be incredibly naive to suggest that religious Jews who read such passages are thereby incited to violence.

force Muslims to be guided by it; and (b) that Christians and Jews are free to interpret the Bible as they please. For no good reason, these assumptions take up contradictory positions between text and reader: On the one hand, the religious *text* is held to be determinate, fixed in its sense, and having the power to bring about particular beliefs (that in turn give rise to particular behavior) among those exposed to it—rendering readers passive. On the other hand, the religious *reader* is taken to be actively engaged in constructing the meaning of texts in accordance with changing social circumstances—so the texts are passive. These contradictory assumptions about agency help to account for the positions taken up by orientalists and others in arguments about religion and politics in Islam. A magical quality is attributed to Islamic religious texts, for they are said to be both essentially univocal (their meaning *cannot* be subject to dispute, just as "fundamentalists" insist) and infectious (except in relation to the orientalist, who is, fortunately for him, immune to their dangerous power). In fact in Islam as in Christianity there is a complicated history of shifting interpretations, and the distinction is recognized between the divine text and human approaches to it.

Those who think that the *motive* for violent action lies in "religious ideology" claim that any concern for the consequent suffering requires that we support the censorship of religious discourse—or at least the prevention of religious discourse from entering the domain where public policy is formulated. But it is not always clear whether it is pain and suffering as such that the secularist cares about or the pain and suffering that can be attributed to religious violence because that is pain the modern imaginary conceives of as gratuitous. Nor is it always clear how a "religious motive" is to be unequivocally identified in modern society. Is motivated behavior that accounts for itself by religious discourse ipso facto religious or only when it does so *sincerely?* But insincerity may itself be a construction of religious language. Is it assumed that there is always an *unconscious* motive to a religious act, a motive that is therefore secular, as Freud and others have done? But that begs the question of how to distinguish between the religious and the secular. In short, to identify a (religious) motive for violence one must have a theory of motives that deals with concepts of character and dispositions, inwardness and visibility, the thought and the unthought.[12] In modern, secular society this also means *authoritative* theories and practices—as

12. Two excellent conceptual investigations appeared in 1958: G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, Oxford: Blackwell; and R. S. Peters, *The Concept of Motivation*,

in law courts, or in the hegemonic discourse of the national media, or in parliamentary forums where the intentions of foreign friends and enemies are assessed and policies formulated.

It would be easy to point to innumerable "secular" agents who have perpetrated acts of great cruelty. But such attempts at defending "religion" are less interesting than asking what it is we do when we assign responsibility for "violence and cruelty" to specific agents. One answer might be to point out that when the CIA together with the Pakistani Secret Service encouraged, armed, and trained religious warriors to fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan, when the Saudi government facilitated the travel of volunteer fighters from Arabia to that country, we had an action with several part-agents, networks of actors in an evolving plot. There was no single or consistent motive for that complex action not only because there were several part-agents but also because of the diverse desires, sensibilities, and self-images involved. But beyond this recognition of agentive complexity we can press the question further: When do we look for a clear motive? When we identify an unusual outcome that seems to us to call for justification or exoneration—and therefore for moral or legal *responsibility*. As I said above, there are theories as to how this attribution should be done (the law being paradigmatic here), and it is important to understand them and the circumstances in which they are applied in the modern world. In brief, although "religious" intentions are variously distinguished from "secular" ones in different traditions, the identification of *intentions* as such is especially important in what scholars call modernity for allocating moral and legal accountability.

III

Many critics have now taken the position that "modernity" (in which secularism is centrally located) is not a verifiable object.[13] They argue that contemporary societies are heterogeneous and overlapping, that they contain disparate, even discordant, circumstances, origins, valences, and so

London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. Herbert Morris, *On Guilt and Innocence* (published by University of California Press in 1976), looks at the question of motivation from an explicitly juridical perspective.

13. For example, Bernard Yack's *The Fetishism of Modernities: Epochal Self-Consciousness in Contemporary Social and Political Thought*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997.

forth. My response is that in a sense these critics are right (although the heuristic value of looking for necessary connections should not be forgotten) but that what we have here is not a simple cognitive error. Assumptions about the integrated character of "modernity" are themselves part of practical and political reality. They direct the way in which people committed to it act in critical situations. These people *aim* at "modernity," and expect others (especially in the "non-West") to do so too. This fact doesn't disappear when we simply point out that "the West" isn't an integrated totality, that many people in the West contest secularism or interpret it in different ways, that the modern epoch in the West has witnessed many arguments and several irreconcilable aspirations. On the contrary, those who assume modernity *as a project* know that already. (An aspect of modern colonialism is this: although the West contains many faces at home it presents a single face abroad.[14]) The important question, therefore, is not to determine why the idea of "modernity" (or "the West") is a misdescription, but why it has become hegemonic *as a political goal*, what practical consequences follow from that hegemony, and what social conditions maintain it.

It is right to say that "modernity" is neither a totally coherent object nor a clearly bounded one, and that many of its elements originate in relations with the histories of peoples outside Europe. Modernity is a *project*—or rather, a series of interlinked projects—that certain people in power seek to achieve. The project aims at institutionalizing a number of (sometimes conflicting, often evolving) principles: constitutionalism, moral autonomy, democracy, human rights, civil equality, industry, consumerism, freedom of the market—and secularism. It employs proliferating technologies (of production, warfare, travel, entertainment, medicine) that generate new experiences of space and time, of cruelty and health, of consumption and knowledge. The notion that these experiences constitute "disenchantment"—implying a direct access to reality, a stripping away of myth, magic, and the sacred—is a salient feature of the modern epoch. It is, arguably, a product of nineteenth-century romanticism, partly linked to

14. "Simultaneously, and despite the parochialism of the governments at home," wrote Count Carlo Sforza, "a sort of international solidarity was slowly evolving in the colonies. . . . Out of interest if not out of good will, an embryonic European understanding had at last been found in Africa. We could hate one another in Europe, but we felt that, between two neighbouring colonies, the interest in common was as great as between two white men meeting in the desert" (*Europe and Europeans*, 1936).

the growing habit of reading imaginative literature[15]—being enclosed within and by it—so that images of a "pre-modern" past acquire in retrospect a quality of enchantment.

Modern projects do not hang together as an integrated totality, but they account for distinctive sensibilities, aesthetics, moralities. It is not always clear what critics mean when they claim that there is no such thing as "the West" because its modern culture has diverse genealogies taking it outside Europe. If Europe has a geographical "outside" doesn't that itself presuppose the idea of a space—at once coherent and subvertible—for locating the West? In my view that is not the best way of approaching the question. Modernity is not primarily a matter of cognizing the real but of living-in-the-world. Since this is true of every epoch, what is distinctive about modernity *as a historical epoch* includes modernity as a political-economic project. What interests me particularly is the attempt to construct categories of the secular and the religious in terms of which modern living is required to take place, and nonmodern peoples are invited to assess their adequacy. For representations of "the secular" and "the religious" in modern and modernizing states mediate people's identities, help shape their sensibilities, and guarantee their experiences.

But what evidence is there that there is such a thing as "a modern project"? In a review article on the new edition of *The Communist Manifesto,* the political scientist Stephen Holmes recently claimed that "the end of Communism has meant the collapse of the last world power officially founded on the Hegelian belief in capital-H History, loudly echoed by the *Manifesto.* The end of the Cold War means that, today, no single struggle spans the globe."[16] Yet this attribution of a universal historical teleology solely to a defeated Communism is less than convincing. Leaving aside neo-Hegelian apologists for the New World Order such as Francis Fukuyama, Holmes's disregard of U.S. attempts to promote a single social model over the globe is puzzling. Especially over the past fifteen years, the

15. Benedict Anderson's discussion of "print-capitalism" focuses on the significance of newspaper reading for imagining the nation as a community (1983), but he does not consider the simultaneous growth of serialized novels published in periodicals and the enormous expansion in the market for imaginative "literature"—both prose and poetry—that mediated people's understanding of "real" and "imagined." See Per Gedin, *Literature in the Marketplace,* London: Faber and Faber, 1982 (Swedish original 1975).

16. S. Holmes, "The End of Idiocy on a Planetary Scale," *London Review of Books,* vol. 20, no. 21, October 29, 1998, p. 13.

analyses and prescriptions by international agencies dominated by the United States (OECD, IMF, the World Bank) have been remarkably similar regardless of the country being considered. "Seldom," observes Serge Halimi, "has the development of the whole of humanity been conceived in terms so closely identical and so largely inspired by the American model." As Halimi notes, that model is not confined to matters of free trade and private enterprise but includes moral and political dimensions—prominent among them being the doctrine of secularism.[17] If this project has not been entirely successful on a global scale—if its result is more often further instability than homogeneity—it is certainly not because those in a position to make far-reaching decisions about the affairs of the world reject the doctrine of a singular destiny—a transcendent truth?—for all countries. (That the opponents of this project are themselves often driven by totalizing ideologies and intolerant attitudes is undoubtedly true. However, it is as well to stress—in the aftermath of the September 11 tragedy—that my point here is not to "blame America" and "justify its enemies," but to indicate that as the world's only superpower, the protection of its interests and commitment to "freedom" require America to intervene globally and to help reform local conditions according to what appear to be universal values. The reformed local conditions include new styles of consumption and expression. Whether these are best described as "freely chosen" or "imposed" is another question.)

We should look, therefore, at *the politics* of national progress—including the politics of secularism—that flow from the multifaceted concept of modernity exemplified by "the West" (and especially by America as its leader and most advanced exemplar). But should we not also inquire about the politics of the contrary view? What politics are promoted by the notion that the world is *not* divided into modern and nonmodern, into West and non-West? What practical options are opened up or closed by the notion that the world has *no* significant binary features, that it is, on the contrary, divided into overlapping, fragmented cultures, hybrid selves, continuously dissolving and emerging social states? As part of such an understanding I believe we must try to unpack the various assumptions on which secularism—a modern doctrine of the world in the world—is based. For it is precisely the process by which these conceptual binaries are established or subverted that tells us how people live the secular—how

17. See S. Halimi, "Liberal Dogma Shipwrecked," *Le Monde diplomatique,* Supplement to *The Guardian Weekly,* October 1998.

they vindicate the essential freedom and responsibility of the sovereign self in opposition to the constraints of that self by religious discourses.

IV

It is a major premise of this study that "the secular" is conceptually prior to the political doctrine of "secularism," that over time a variety of concepts, practices, and sensibilities have come together to form "the secular." In the chapters that follow I therefore begin with a partial genealogy of that concept, an effort aimed at questioning its self-evident character while asserting at the same time that it nevertheless marks something real. My resort to genealogy obviously derives from ways it has been deployed by Foucault and Nietzsche, although it does not claim to follow them religiously. Genealogy is not intended here as a substitute for social history ("real history," as many would put it) but as a way of working back from our present to the contingencies that have come together to give us our certainties.

But precisely for this reason, because the secular is so much part of our modern life, it is not easy to grasp it directly. I think it is best pursued through its shadows, as it were. That is why in the first chapter I pay special attention to the notion of myth (central to the modern idea of "enchantment") in some of its historical guises—and then, in Chapters 2 and 3, I discuss agency, pain, and cruelty in relation to embodiment. From these explorations of the secular, I move to aspects of secularism—to conceptions of the human that underlie subjective rights (Chapter 4), the notion of "religious minorities" in Europe (Chapter 5), and the question of whether nationalism is essentially secular or religious (Chapter 6). In the final chapter I deal at some length with some transformations in religious authority, law, and ethics in colonial Egypt that illuminate aspects of secularization not usually attended to.

Finally: Can anthropology as such contribute anything to the clarification of questions about secularism? Most anthropologists are taught that their discipline is essentially defined by a research technique (participant observation) carried out in a circumscribed field, and that as such it deals with particularity—with what Clifford Geertz, following the philosopher Gilbert Ryle, called "thick description." And isn't secularism a universal concept, applicable throughout the modern world—capable at once of explaining and moderating the volatility of cultural multiplicities?

In my view anthropology is more than a method, and it should not be equated—as it has popularly become—with the direction given to inquiry by the pseudoscientific notion of "fieldwork." Mary Douglas once proposed that although conventional accounts of the rise of modern anthropology locate it in the shift from armchair theorizing to intensive fieldwork (with invocations of Boas, Rivers, and Malinowski), the real story was very different. The account of modern anthropology that she favors begins with Marcel Mauss, pioneer of the systematic inquiry into cultural concepts ("Foreword" to Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, London: Routledge, 1990, p. x). Douglas herself has been a distinguished contributor to this tradition of anthropology. But conceptual analysis as such is as old as philosophy. What is distinctive about modern anthropology is the comparison of embedded concepts (representations) between societies differently located in time or space. The important thing in this comparative analysis is not their origin (Western or non-Western), but the forms of life that articulate them, the powers they release or disable. Secularism—like religion—is such a concept.

An anthropology of secularism should thus start with a curiosity about the doctrine and practice of secularism regardless of where they have originated, and it would ask: How do attitudes to the human body (to pain, physical damage, decay, and death, to physical integrity, bodily growth, and sexual enjoyment) differ in various forms of life? What structures of the senses—hearing, seeing, touching—do these attitudes depend on? In what ways does the law define and regulate practices and doctrines on the grounds that they are "truly human"? What discursive spaces does this work of definition and regulation open up for grammars of "the secular" and "the religious"? How do all these sensibilities, attitudes, assumptions, and behaviors come together to support or undermine the doctrine of secularism?

Trying to formulate such questions in detail is a more important task for anthropology than hasty pronouncements about the virtues or vices of secularism.

SECULAR

1

What Might an Anthropology
of Secularism Look Like?

Sociologists, political theorists, and historians have written copiously on secularism. It is part of a vigorous public debate in many parts of the world—especially in the Middle East. Is "secularism" a colonial imposition, an entire worldview that gives precedence to the material over the spiritual, a modern culture of alienation and unrestrained pleasure? Or is it necessary to universal humanism, a rational principle that calls for the suppression—or at any rate, the restraint—of religious passion so that a dangerous source of intolerance and delusion can be controlled, and political unity, peace, and progress secured?[1] The question of how secularism as a political doctrine is related to the secular as an ontology and an epistemology is evidently at stake here.

In contrast to the salience of such debates, anthropologists have paid scarcely any attention to the idea of the secular, although the study of religion has been a central concern of the discipline since the nineteenth century. A collection of university and college syllabi on the anthropology of religion prepared recently for the Anthropological Association of America,[2]

1. These two points of view are represented in a recent debate on this subject between Abdel-Wahab al-Messiri and Aziz al-Azmeh, published as *Al-ʿalmāniyya taht al-mijhar*, Damascus: Dar al-Fikr al-Muʿasir, 2000. I take up the theme of secularism and law in Egypt under British rule in Chapter 7.

2. Andrew Buckser, comp., *Course Syllabi in the Anthropology of Religion*, Anthropology of Religion Section, American Anthropological Association, December 1998.

shows a heavy reliance on such themes as myth, magic, witchcraft, the use of hallucinogens, ritual as psychotherapy, possession, and taboo. Together, these familiar themes suggest that "religion," whose object is the sacred, stands in the domain of the nonrational. The secular, where modern politics and science are sited, makes no appearance in the collection. Nor is it treated in any of the well-known introductory texts.[3] And yet it is common knowledge that religion and the secular are closely linked, both in our thought and in the way they have emerged historically. Any discipline that seeks to understand "religion" must also try to understand its other. Anthropology in particular—the discipline that has sought to understand the strangeness of the non-European world—also needs to grasp more fully what is implied in its being at once modern and secular.

A number of anthropologists have begun to address secularism with the intention of demystifying contemporary political institutions. Where previous theorists saw worldly reason linked to tolerance, these unmaskers find myth and violence. Thus Michael Taussig complains that the Weberian notion of the rational-legal state's monopoly of violence fails to address "the intrinsically mysterious, mystifying, convoluting, plain scary, mythical, and arcane cultural properties and power of violence to the point where violence is very much an end in itself—a sign, as Benjamin put it, of the existence of the gods." In Taussig's opinion the "institutional interpenetration of reason by violence not only diminishes the claims of reason, casting it into ideology, mask, and effect of power, but [it is] also . . . *precisely the coming together of reason-and-violence in the State that creates, in a secular and modern world, the bigness of the big S*—not merely its apparent unity and the fictions of will and mind thus inspired, but the auratic and quasi-sacred quality of that very inspiration . . . that now stands as ground to our being as citizens of the world."[4] Once its rational-legal mask is re-

3. Take, for example, Brian Morris's *Anthropological Studies of Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, and Roy Rappaport's *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, neither of which makes any mention of "secular," "secularism," or "secularization," but both, of course, have extensive references to the concept of "the sacred." Benson Saler's survey entitled *Conceptualizing Religion*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993, refers only—and symptomatically—to "secular humanism as a religion," that is, to the secular that is also religious. Recent anthropological interest in secularism is partly reflected in a number of brief statements on the subject in a special section of *Social Anthropology*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2001.

4. M. Taussig, *The Nervous System*, New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 116, italics in original.

moved, so it is suggested, the modern state will reveal itself to be far from secular. For such critics the essential point at issue is whether our belief in the secular character of the state—or society—is justified or not. The category of the secular itself remains unexamined.

Anthropologists who identify the sacred character of the modern state often resort to a rationalist notion of myth to sharpen their attack. They take myth to be "sacred discourse," and agree with nineteenth-century anthropologists who theorized myths as expressions of beliefs about the supernatural world, about sacred times, beings, and places, beliefs that were therefore opposed to reason. In general the word "myth" has been used as a synonym for the irrational or the nonrational, for attachment to tradition in a modern world, for political fantasy and dangerous ideology. Myth in this way of thinking stands in contrast to the secular, even for those who invoke it positively.

I will refer often to myth in what follows, but I am not interested in theorizing about it. There are several books available that do that.[5] What I want to do here is to trace practical consequences of its uses in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries in order to investigate some of the ways the secular was constituted. For the word "myth" that moderns have inherited from antiquity feeds into a number of familiar oppositions—*belief* and *knowledge, reason* and *imagination, history* and *fiction, symbol* and *allegory, natural* and *supernatural, sacred* and *profane*—binaries that pervade modern secular discourse, especially in its polemical mode. As I am concerned with the shifting web of concepts making up the secular, I discuss several of these binaries.

The terms "secularism" and "secularist" were introduced into English by freethinkers in the middle of the nineteenth century in order to avoid the charge of their being "atheists" and "infidels," terms that carried suggestions of immorality in a still largely Christian society.[6] These epithets

5. For example: Ivan Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History: Cassirer, Eliade, Levi-Strauss and Malinowski*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987; Robert Segal, *Theorizing About Myth*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999; and Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

6. The word "secularism" was coined by George Jacob Holyoake in 1851. "Secularism was intended to differentiate Holyoake's anti-theistic position from Bradlaugh's atheistic pronouncements, and, although Bradlaugh, Charles Watts, G. W. Foote, and other atheists were identified with the secular movement, Holyoake always endeavoured to make it possible that the social, political, and

mattered not because the freethinkers were concerned about their personal safety, but because they sought to direct an emerging mass politics of social reform in a rapidly industrializing society.[7] Long-standing habits of indifference, disbelief, or hostility among individuals toward Christian rituals and authorities were now becoming entangled with projects of total social reconstruction by means of legislation. A critical rearticulation was being negotiated between state law and personal morality.[8] This shift presupposed the new idea of society as a total population of individuals enjoying not only subjective rights and immunities, and endowed with moral agency, but also possessing the capacity to elect their political representatives—a shift that occurred all at once in Revolutionary France (excluding women and domestics), and gradually in nineteenth-century England. The extension of universal suffrage was in turn linked—as Foucault has pointed out—to new methods of government based on new styles of classification and calculation, and new forms of subjecthood. These principles of government are secular in the sense that they deal solely with a worldly disposition, an arrangement that is quite different from the medieval conception of a social body of Christian souls each of whom is endowed with equal dignity—members at once of the City of God and of divinely created human society. The discursive move in the nineteenth century from thinking of a fixed "human nature" to regarding humans in terms of a constituted "normality" facilitated the secular idea of moral progress defined and directed by autonomous human agency. In short, secularism as a political and governmental doctrine that has its origin in nineteenth-century liberal society seems easier to grasp than the secular. And yet the two are interdependent.

What follows is not a social history of secularization, nor even a his-

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ethical aims of secularism should not necessitate subscription to atheistic belief, in the hope that liberal-minded theists might, without prejudice to their theism, join in promoting these ends—an attitude to which he persisted in clinging, despite the small success which it achieved." Eric S. Waterhouse, "Secularism," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 11, ed. James Hastings, p. 348.

7. Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the 19th Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.

8. That moment was a critical part of a much longer history. See the account of the gradual withdrawal of legal jurisdiction over what comes retrospectively to be seen as the domain of private ethics from the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century in James Fitzjames Stephen's *A History of the Criminal Law of England*, London: MacMillan, 1883, vol. 2, chapter 25, "Offences Against Religion."

tory of it as an idea. It is an exploration of epistemological assumptions of the secular that might help us be a little clearer about what is involved in the anthropology of secularism. The secular, I argue, is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a simple break from it (that is, it is not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred). I take the secular to be a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life. To appreciate this it is not enough to show that what appears to be necessary is really contingent—that in certain respects "the secular" obviously overlaps with "the religious." It is a matter of showing how contingencies relate to changes in the grammar of concepts—that is, how the changes in concepts articulate changes in practices.[9] My purpose in this initial chapter, therefore, is not to provide the outline of a historical narrative but to conduct a series of inquiries into aspects of what we have come to call the secular. So although I follow some connections at the expense of others, this should not be taken to imply that I think there was a single line of filiation in the formation of "the secular." In my view the secular is neither singular in origin nor stable in its historical identity, although it works through a series of particular oppositions.

I draw my material almost entirely from West European history because that history has had profound consequences for the ways that the doctrine of secularism has been conceived and implemented in the rest of the modernizing world. I try to understand the secular, the way it has been constituted, made real, connected to, and detached from particular historical conditions.

The analyses that I offer here are intended as a counter to the triumphalist history of the secular. I take the view, as others have done, that the "religious" and the "secular" are not essentially fixed categories. However, I do not claim that if one stripped appearances one would see that some apparently secular institutions were *really* religious. I assume, on the contrary, that there is nothing *essentially* religious, nor any universal essence that defines "sacred language" or "sacred experience." But I also assume that there were breaks between Christian and secular life in which words and practices were rearranged, and new discursive grammars replaced previous ones. I suggest that the fuller implications of those shifts need to be

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9. The notion of grammar here is of course derived from Wittgenstein's idea of grammatical investigation. This notion pervades all his later writing. But see especially *Philosophical Investigations*, section 90.

explored. So I take up fragments of the history of a discourse that is often asserted to be an essential part of "religion"—or at any rate, to have a close affinity with it—to show how the sacred and the secular depend on each other. I dwell briefly on how religious myth contributed to the formation of modern historical knowledge and modern poetic sensibility (touching on the way they have been adopted by some contemporary Arab poets), but I argue that this did not make history or poetry essentially "religious."

That, too, is the case with recent statements by liberal thinkers for whom liberalism is a kind of redemptive myth. I point to the violence intrinsic to it but caution that liberalism's secular myth should not be confused with the redemptive myth of Christianity, despite a resemblance between them. Needless to say, my purpose is neither to criticize nor to endorse that myth. And more generally, I am not concerned to attack liberalism whether as a political system or as an ethical doctrine. Here, as in the other cases I deal with, I simply want to get away from the idea that the secular is a mask for religion, that secular political practices often simulate religious ones. I therefore end with a brief outline of two conceptions of "the secular" that I see as available to anthropology today, and I do this through a discussion of texts by Paul de Man and Walter Benjamin, respectively.

A reading of origins: myth, truth, and power

West European languages acquire the word "myth" from the Greek, and stories about Greek gods were paradigmatic objects of critical reflection when mythology became a discipline in early modernity. So a brief early history of the word and concept is in order.

In his book *Theorizing Myth*, Bruce Lincoln opens with a fascinating early history of the Greek terms *mythos* and *logos*. Thus we are told that Hesiod's *Works and Days* associates the speech of *mythos* with truth (*alethea*) and the speech of *logos* with lies and dissimulation. *Mythos* is powerful speech, the speech of heroes accustomed to prevail. In Homer, Lincoln points out, *logos* refers to speech that is usually designed to placate someone and aimed at dissuading warriors from combat.

In the context of political assemblies *mythoi* are of two kinds— "straight" and "crooked." *Mythoi* function in the context of law much as *lo-*

goi do in the context of war. *Muthos* in Homer, "is a speech-act indicating authority, performed at length, usually in public, with a full attention to every detail."[10] It never means a symbolic story that has to be deciphered— or for that matter, a false one. In the Odyssey, Odysseus praises poetry— asserting that it is truthful, that it affects the emotions of its audience, that it is able to reconcile differences—and he concludes his poetic narration by declaring that he has "recounted a *mythos.*"[11]

At first, poets tended to authorize their speech by calling it *mythos*— an inspiration from the gods (what moderns call, in a new accent, the *supernatural world*); later, the Sophists taught that all speech originated with humans (who lived in *this world*). "Whereas the Christian world-view increasingly separates God from this world," writes Jan Bremmer, "the gods of the Greeks were not transcendent but directly involved in natural and social processes. . . . It is for such connections as between the human and divine spheres that a recent study has called the Greek world-view 'interconnected' against our own 'separative' cosmology."[12] But there is more at stake here than the immanence or transcendence of divinity in relation to the natural world. The idea of "nature" is itself internally transformed.[13] For the representation of the Christian God as being sited quite apart in "the supernatural" world signals the construction of a secular space that begins to emerge in early modernity. Such a space permits "nature" to be reconceived as manipulatable material, determinate, homogeneous, and subject to mechanical laws. Anything beyond that space is therefore "supernatural"—a place that, for many, was a fanciful extension of the real

10. Richard Martin, *The Language of Heroes*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989, p. 12, cited in Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

11. Marcel Detienne notes that Herodotus calls his stories *logoi*, or *hiroi*, and never *mythoi*. "The famous 'sacred discourses' which our usage interprets as 'myths' all the more easily since these traditions are often connected with ritual gestures and actions—these are never called *mythoi.*" Marcel Detienne, "Rethinking Mythology" in *Between Belief and Transgression*, ed. M. Izard and P. Smith, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 49.

12. Jan Bremmer, *Greek Religion* (published for the Classical Association, Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 5.

13. For an early account of such transformations see the study by R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1945, in which Greek cosmology is contrasted with later views of nature.

world, peopled by irrational events and imagined beings.[14] This transformation had a significant effect on the meaning of "myth."

The *mythoi* of poets, so the Sophists said, are not only emotionally affecting, they are also lies in so far as they speak of the gods—although even as lies they may have a morally improving effect on an audience. This line is taken up and given a new twist by Plato who argued that philosophers and not poets were primarily responsible for moral improvement. In the course of his attack against poetry, Plato changed the sense of myth: it now comes to signify a socially useful lie.[15]

Enlightenment founders of mythology, such as Fontenelle, took this view of the beliefs of antiquity about its gods. Like many other cultivated men of his time, he regarded the study of myth as an occasion for reflecting on human error. "Although we are incomparably more enlightened than those whose crude minds invented Fables in good faith," he wrote, "we easily reacquire the same turn of mind that made those Fables so attractive to them. They devoured them because they believed in them, and we devour them with just as much pleasure yet without believing in them. There is no better proof that the imagination and reason have little commerce with each other, and that things with which reason has first become disillusioned lose none of their attractiveness to the imagination."[16] Fontenelle was a great naturalizer of "supernatural" events in the period when "nature" emerges as a distinctive domain of experience and study.[17]

But in the Enlightenment epoch as a whole myths were never only objects of "belief" and of "rational investigation." As elements of high culture in early modern Europe they were integral to its characteristic sensibility: a cultivated capacity for delicate feeling—especially for sympathy—and an ability to be moved by the pathetic in art and literature. Poems,

14. Amos Funkenstein's *Theology and the Scientific Imagination: From the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986, traces the new scientific worldview, with its ideals of the univocation of signs and the homogeneity of nature, as well as of mathematization and mechanization, that emerged in the seventeenth century. Funkenstein shows—especially in Chapter 2, entitled "God's Omnipresence, God's Body, and Four Ideals of Science"—how this required of theology a new ontology and epistemology of the deity.

15. Lincoln, p. 42.

16. Cited in Jean Starobinski, *Blessings in Disguise; or, The Morality of Evil*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 186.

17. Fontenelle's debunking *Histoire des oracles* (1686) was rapidly published in English as *The History of Oracles, and the Cheats of Pagan Priests*, London, 1688.

paintings, the theater, public monuments, and private decoration in the homes of the rich depicted or alluded to the qualities and quests of Greek gods, goddesses, monsters, and heroes. Knowledge of such stories and figures was a necessary part of an upper-class education. Myths allowed writers and artists to represent contemporary events and feelings in what we moderns call a fictional mode. The distanced idealization of profane love, the exaggerated praise for the sovereign, were equally facilitated by a fabulous style. And this in turn facilitated a form of satire that aimed to unmask or literalize. Ecclesiastical authority could thus be attacked in an indirect fashion, without immediately risking the charge of blasphemy. In general, the literary assault on mythic figures and events demonstrated a preference for a sensible life of happiness as opposed to the heroic ideal that was coming to be regarded as less and less reasonable in a bourgeois society. But, as Jean Starobinski reminds us, myth was more than a decorative language or a satirical one for taking a distance from the heroic as a social ideal. In the great tragedies and operas of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, myths provided the material through which the psychology of human passions could be explored.[18]

So the question of whether people did or did not *believe* in these ancient narratives—whether (as Fontenelle suggested) by appealing to the imagination untruths were made attractive—does not quite engage with the terrain that mythic discourse inhabited in this culture. Myth was not merely a (mis)representation of the *real*. It was material for shaping the possibilities and limits of action. And in general it appears to have done this by feeding the desire to display the actual—a desire that became increasingly difficult to satisfy as the experiential opportunities of modernity multiplied.

Some modern commentators have observed that statements such as Fontenelle's signaled a mutation of the older opposition between sacred and profane into a new opposition between imagination and reason, principles that inaugurate the secular Enlightenment.[19] This change, they suggest, should be seen as the replacement of a religious hegemony by a secular one. But I think what we have here is something more complicated.

The first point to note is that in the newer binary Reason is endowed with the major work of defining, assessing, and regulating the human imagination to which "myth" was attributed. Marcel Detienne puts it this

18. Starobinski, p. 182.

19. Among them, Starobinski.

way: "exclusionary procedures multiply in the discourse of the science of myths, borne on a vocabulary of scandal that indicts all figures of otherness. Mythology is on the side of the primitive, the inferior races, the peoples of nature, the language of origins, childhood, savagery, madness—always the *other*, as the excluded figure."[20] But the *sacred* had not been endowed with such a function in the past, and there was as yet no unitary domain in social life and thought that the concept of "the sacred" organized. Instead there were disparate places, objects, and times, each with its qualities, and each requiring conduct and words appropriate to it. This point requires elaboration, so I will now discuss the sacred/profane binary before returning to the theme of myth.

A digression on the "sacred" and the "profane"

In the Latin of the Roman Republic, the word *sacer* referred to anything that was owned by a deity, having been "taken out of the region of the *profanum* by the action of the State, and passed on into that of the *sacrum*."[21] However, even then there was an intriguing exception: the term *homo sacer* was used for someone who, as the result of a curse (*sacer esto*), became an outlaw liable to be killed by anyone with impunity. Thus while the sacredness of property dedicated to a god made it inviolable, the sacredness of *homo sacer* made him eminently subject to violence. This contradictory usage has been explained by classicists (with the acknowledged help of anthropologist colleagues) in terms of "taboo," a supposedly primitive notion that confounds ideas of the sacred with those of the unclean, ideas that "spiritual" religion was later to distinguish and use more logically.[22] The conception that "taboo" is the primordial origin of "the sacred"

20. Detienne, pp. 46–47, italics in original.

21. W. W. Fowler, "The Original Meaning of the Word *Sacer*," in *Roman Essays and Interpretations*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920, p. 15.

22. "If this is the right meaning of the word *sacer* in *sacer esto*, we may, I think, trace it back to the older stage in which it meant simply 'taboo' without reference to a deity; and we have seen that it seems to be so used in one or two of the ancient laws" (Fowler, p. 21). But the evolutionary explanation offered here is at once dubious and unnecessary. Giorgio Agamben has more interestingly argued that the "sacred man," object of the curse *sacer esto*, must be understood in relation to the logic of sovereignty, which he regards as the absolute power over life and death in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

has a long history in anthropology, from which it was borrowed not only by classics to understand antique religion but also by Christian theology to reconstruct a "true" one. The anthropological part of that history is critically examined in a study by Franz Steiner in which he shows that the notion "taboo" is built on very shaky ethnographic and linguistic foundations.[23]

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "sacred" in early modern English usage generally referred to individual things, persons, and occasions that were set apart and entitled to veneration. Yet if we consider the examples given in the dictionary—the poetic line "That sacred Fruit, sacred to abstinence," the inscription "sacred to the memory of Samuel Butler," the address-form "your sacred majesty," the phrase "a sacred concert"—it is virtually impossible to identify the setting apart or the venerating as being the same act in all cases. The subject to whom such things, occasions, or persons are said to be sacred does not stand in the same relation to them. It was late nineteenth-century anthropological and theological thought that rendered a variety of overlapping social usages rooted in changing and heterogeneous forms of life into a single immutable essence, and claimed it to be the object of a universal human experience called "religious."[24] The supposedly universal opposition between

23. In fact Steiner claimed that the problem of taboo was a Victorian invention, occasioned by ideological and social developments in Victorian society itself. See Franz Steiner, *Taboo*, London: Cohen & West, 1956.

24. The classic statement is Durkheim's. "All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present one common characteristic," writes Durkheim. "They presuppose a classification of all things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words *profane* and *sacred* (*profane, sacré*). The division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought; the beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends are either representations or systems of representations which express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers that are attributed to them, or their relations with each other and with profane things. But by sacred things one must not understand simply those personal beings which are called gods or spirits; a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word, anything can be sacred. A rite can have this character; in fact, the rite does not exist which does not have it to a certain degree. There are words, expressions and formulae which can be pronounced only by the mouths of consecrated persons; there are gestures and movements which everybody cannot perform" (*Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 1915, p. 37). Critics have objected that Durkheim was wrong to claim that

"sacred" and "profane" finds no place in premodern writing. In medieval theology, the overriding antinomy was between "the divine" and "the satanic" (both of them transcendent powers) or "the spiritual" and "the temporal" (both of them worldly institutions), not between a supernatural sacred and a natural profane.

In France, for example, the word *sacré* was not part of the language of ordinary Christian life in the Middle Ages and in early modern times.[25] It had learned uses, by which reference could be made to particular things (vessels), institutions (the College of Cardinals), and persons (the body of the king), but no unique *experience* was presupposed in relation to the objects to which it referred, and they were not set apart in a uniform way. The word and the concept that mattered to popular religion during this entire period—that is, to practices and sensibilities—was *sainteté*, a beneficent quality of certain persons and their relics, closely connected to the common people and their ordinary world. The word *sacré* becomes salient at the time of the Revolution and acquires intimidating resonances of secular power. Thus the Preamble to the *Déclaration des Droits de l'homme* (1789) speaks of "droits naturels, inaliénables et sacrés." The right to property is qualified *sacré* in article 17. "L'amour sacré de la patrie" is a common nineteenth-century expression.[26] Clearly the individual experience denoted by these usages, and the behavior expected of the citizen claiming to have it, were quite different from anything signified by the term "sacred" during the Middle Ages. It was now part of the discourse integral to functions and aspirations of the modern, secular state, in which the sacralization of individual citizen and collective people expresses a form of naturalized power.[27]

François Isambert has described in detail how the Durkheimian

profane and sacred are mutually exclusive domains because profane things can become sacred and vice versa. (See William Paden, "Before 'The Secular' Became Theological: Rereading The Durkheimian Legacy," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1991, who defends Durkheim against this charge.) More recently, critics have protested that in ordinary life sacred and profane are typically "scrambled together." But even such critics accept the universality of the sacred, which they represent as a special kind of power. What they object to is the idea of its rigid separation from "the materiality of everyday life" (see Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity,* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995, chapter 1).

25. See Michel Despland, "The Sacred: The French Evidence," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion,* vol. 3, no. 1, 1991, p. 43.

26. Ibid.

27. See the excellent history of universal suffrage in France: Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le sacre du citoyen,* Paris: Gallimard, 1992.

school, drawing upon Robertson Smith's notion of "taboo" as the typical form of primitive religion, arrived at the scholarly concept of "the sacred" as a universal essence.[28] The sacred came to refer to everything of social interest—collective states, traditions, sentiments—that society elaborates as representations, and was even said to be the evolutionary source of cognitive categories.[29] The sacred, constituted first by anthropologists and then taken over by theologians, became a universal quality hidden in things and an objective limit to mundane action. The sacred was at once a transcendent force that imposed itself on the subject and a space that must never, under threat of dire consequence, be violated—that is, profaned. In brief, "the sacred" came to be constituted as a mysterious, mythic thing,[30] the focus of moral and administrative disciplines.

It was in the context of an emerging discipline of comparative religion that anthropology developed a transcendent notion of the sacred. An interesting version of this is to be found in the work of R. R. Marett,[31] who proposed that ritual should be regarded as having the function of regulating emotions, especially in critical situations of life, an idea that enabled him to offer a well-known anthropological definition of the sacraments: "For anthropological purposes," he wrote, "let us define a sacrament as any rite of which the specific object is to consecrate or make sacred. More explicitly, this means any rite which by way of sanction or positive blessing invests a natural function with a supernatural authority of its own."[32]

This notion of the sacrament as an institution designed to invest life-cycle crises ("mating," "dying," and so forth) with "supernatural authority,"

28. F. Isambert, *Le sens du sacré,* Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1982.

29. But this original inclusiveness, Isambert points out, was precisely what made it useless for identifying the particularity of religion: "On voit ainsi que cette expression du domaine sacré était bien faite pour fonder l'idée d'une évolution des divers secteurs de la pensée à partir de la religion. Mais, pour la même, la notion devenait impropre à la détermination de la spécificité du domaine religieux" (op. cit., p. 221).

30. "C'est ainsi que le sacré en arrive à être constitué en objet mythique" (op. cit., p. 256).

31. Marett is famous for the claim that "savage religion is something not so much thought out as danced out." R. R. Marett, *The Threshold of Religion,* 2nd ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914, p. xxxi. He was also the authority for Fowler's venture into evolutionary anthropology (see above, p. 30, n. 22).

32. R. R. Marett, *Sacraments of Simple Folk,* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933, p. 4.

of its being essentially a "religious psychotherapy" as Marett also puts it, is presented as having general comparative application. But it stands in marked contrast, for example, to the medieval Christian concept of the sacrament. Thus the twelfth-century theologian Hugh of St. Victor, responding to the question "What is a sacrament?" first considers the conventional definition: "A sacrament is a sign of a sacred thing," but then goes on to point out that it will not do, because various statues and pictures as well as the words of Scripture are all, in their different ways, signs of sacred things without being sacraments. So he proposes a more adequate definition: "A sacrament is a corporeal or material element [sounds, gestures, vestments, instruments] set before the senses without, representing by similitude and signifying by institution and containing by sanctification some invisible and spiritual grace." For example, the water of baptism represents the washing of sins from the soul by analogy with the washing of impurities from the body, signifies it for the believer because of Christ's inaugurating practice, and conveys—by virtue of the words and actions of the officiating priest who performs the baptism—spiritual grace. The three functions are not self-evident but must be identified and expounded by those in authority. (Medieval Christians learnt the meanings of elaborate allegories used in the mass through authorized commentaries.) Thus according to Hugh, a sacrament—from the moment of its authoritative foundation— was a complex network of signifiers and signifieds that acts, like an icon, commemoratively. The icon is both itself and a sign of what is already present in the minds of properly disciplined participants; it points backward to their memory and forward to their expectation as Christians.[33] It does not make sense to say, with reference to the account Hugh gives, that in the sacraments "natural" functions are endowed with "supernatural" authority (that is, a transcendent endowment), still less that the sacraments are a psychotherapy for helping humans through their life-crises (a useful myth). Hugh insists that there are conditions in which the sacraments are not recognized for what they are: "This is why the eyes of infidels who see only visible things despise venerating the sacraments of salvation, because beholding in this only what is contemptible without invisible species they do not recognize the invisible virtue within and the fruit of obedience."[34] The authority of the sacraments is itself an engagement of the Christian subject

33. I discuss Hugh of St. Victor's account of the sacraments in some detail in *Genealogies of Religion*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 153–58.

34. Hugh of St. Victor, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, ed. R. J. Defarrari, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1951, p. 156.

with what his eyes see as an embodiment of divine grace.[35] Grace is conceived of as a particular state of unawareness within a relationship, not as a divine payment for ritual assiduity.

What facilitated the essentialization of "the sacred" as an external, transcendent power? My tentative answer is that new theorizations of the sacred were connected with European encounters with the non-European world, in the enlightened space and time that witnessed the construction of "religion" and "nature" as universal categories. From early modern Europe—through what is retrospectively called the secular Enlightenment and into the long nineteenth century, within Christian Europe and in its overseas possessions—the things, words, and practices distinguished or set apart by "Nature Folk" were constituted by Europeans as "fetish" and "taboo."[36] What had been regarded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in theological terms as "idolatry" and "devil-worship"[37] (devotion to false gods) became the secular concept of "superstition" (a meaningless survival)[38] in the framework of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century evolutionary thought. But they remained objects and relations falsely given truth status, wrongly endowed with virtuous power. They had to be constituted as categories of illusion and oppression before people could be liberated from them, as Freud knew when he used "fetish" and "taboo" to identify symptoms of primitive repressions in the psychopathology of modern individuals.

It may therefore be suggested that "profanation" is a kind of forcible emancipation from error and despotism. Reason requires that false things be either proscribed and eliminated, or transcribed and re-sited as objects to be seen, heard, and touched by the properly educated senses. By successfully unmasking pretended power (profaning it) universal reason dis-

35. According to John Milbank, a profound shift occurred in the later Middle Ages in the way the "sacrament" was understood, making it the external dress of spiritual power, a semantic shift that had far-reaching consequences for modern religiosity (personal communication). See also Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, especially chapter 3.

36. William Pietz, "The problem of the fetish, I," *Res*, no. 9, 1985; Steiner, op. cit.

37. Margaret T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1964.

38. See Nicole Belmont, "Superstition and Popular Religion in Western Societies," in *Between Belief and Transgression*, ed. M. Izard and P. Smith, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982.

plays its own status as legitimate power. By empowering new things, this status is further confirmed. So the "sacred right to property" was made universal after church estates and common lands were freed. And the "sanctity of conscience" was constituted a universal principle in opposition to ecclesiastical authority and the rules casuistry authorized. At the very moment of becoming secular, these claims were transcendentalized, and they set in motion legal and moral disciplines to protect themselves (with violence where necessary) as universal.[39] Although profanation appears to shift the gaze from the transcendental to the mundane, what it does is re-arrange barriers between the illusory and the actual.

Developing a Durkheimian insight, Richard Comstock has suggested that "the sacred, as a kind of behaving, is not merely a number of immedi-ate appearances, but a set of rules—prescriptions, proscriptions, interdic-tions—that determine the shape of the behavior and whether it is to count as an instance of the category in question."[40] This is helpful, but I think one also needs to attend to the tripartite fact that (1) all rule-governed be-havior carries social sanctions, but that (2) the severity of the social sanc-tions varies according to the danger that the infringement of the rule con-stitutes for a particular ordering of society, and that (3) such assessments of danger do not remain historically unchanged. Attention to this fact should shift our preoccupation with definitions of "the sacred" as an object of ex-perience to the wider question of how a heterogeneous landscape of power (moral, political, economic) is constituted, what disciplines (individual and collective) are necessary to it. This does not mean that "the sacred" must be regarded as a mask of power, but that we should look to what makes cer-tain practices conceptually possible, desired, mandatory—including the everyday practices by which the subject's experience is disciplined.[41] Such

39. Thus Durkheim on secular morality: "Ainsi le domaine de la morale est comme entouré d'une barrière mystérieuse qui en tient à l'écart les profanateurs, tout comme le domaine religieux est sustrait aux atteintes du profane. C'est un domaine *sacré*." Cited in Isambert, p. 234.

40. "A Behavioral Approach to the Sacred: Category Formation in Religious Studies," *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. XLIX, no. 4, 1981, p. 632.

41. It is of some interest that attempts to introduce a unified concept of "the sacred" into non-European languages have met with revealing problems of trans-lation. Thus although the Arabic word *qadāsa* is usually glossed as "sacredness" in English, it remains the case that it will not do in all the contexts where the English term is now used. Translation of "the sacred" calls for a variety of words (*muhar-*

an approach, I submit, would give us a better understanding of how the sa-cred (and therefore the profane) can become the object not only of reli-gious thought but of secular practice too.

Myth and the Scriptures

I referred above to some functions of myth as secular discourse in Enlightenment art and manners. The part played by myth as sacred dis-course in religion and poetry during the nineteenth and twentieth cen-turies is more complicated. Inevitably, in what follows I must select and simplify.

It has been remarked that the German Higher Criticism liberated the Bible from "the letter of divine inspiration" and allowed it to emerge as "a system of human significances."[42] We should note, however, that that lib-eration signals a far-reaching change in the sense of "inspiration"—from an authorized reorientation of life toward a telos, into a psychology of artistry whose *source* is obscure—and therefore becomes the object of speculation (belief / knowledge).[43] It was a remarkable transformation. For in the for-mer, the divine word, both spoken and written, was necessarily also mate-rial. As such, the inspired words were the object of a particular person's rev-erence, the means of his or her practical devotions at particular times and places. The body, taught over time to listen, to recite, to move, to be still, to be silent, engaged with the acoustics of words, with their sound, feel,

ram, mutahhar, mukhtass 'bi-l-'ibāda, and so on), each of which connects with dif-ferent kinds of behavior. (See below, my discussion of the self-conscious resort to myth in modern Arabic poetry.)

42. E. S. Shaffer, *"Kubla Khan" and* The Fall of Jerusalem: *The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature, 1770–1880*, Cambridge: Cam-bridge University Press, 1975, p. 10.

43. In the middle of the twentieth century, T. S. Eliot attempted a formula-tion that embraced both religious and secular senses of the notion: "if the word 'in-spiration' is to have any meaning, it must mean just this, that the speaker or writer is uttering something which he does not wholly understand—or which he may even misinterpret when the inspiration has departed from him. This is certainly true of poetic inspiration. . . . [The poet] need not know what his poetry will come to mean to others, and a prophet need not understand the meaning of his prophetic utterance." "Virgil and the Christian World" [1951], in *On Poetry and Poets*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957, p. 137.

and look. Practice at devotions deepened the inscription of sound, look, and feel in his sensorium. When the devotee heard God speak, there was a sensuous connection between inside and outside, a fusion between signifier and signified. The proper reading of the scriptures that enabled her to *hear* divinity speak depended on disciplining the senses (especially hearing, speech, and sight).

In contrast, the mythic method used by the Higher Biblical Criticism rendered the materiality of scriptural sounds and marks into a *spiritual* poem whose effect was generated inside the subject as believer independent of the senses. An earlier change had assisted this shift. As John Montag has argued, the notion of "revelation" signifying a statement that issues from a supernatural being and that requires mental assent on the part of the believer dates only from the early modern period. For medieval theologians, he writes, "revelation has to do primarily with one's perspective on things in light of one's final end. It is not a supplementary packet of information about 'facts' which are round the bend, as it were, from rational comprehension or physical observation."[44] According to Thomas Aquinas, the prophetic gift of revelation is a passion to be undergone, not a faculty to be used, and among the words he uses to refer to it is *inspiratio*.[45] A neo-Platonic hierarchy of mediations linked divinity to all creatures, allowing the medium of language to facilitate the union of the divine with the human.

With the Reformation (and the Counter-Reformation) an unmediated divinity became scripturally disclosable, and his revelations pointed at once to his presence and his intentions. Thus language acquired the status of being extra-real, capable of "representing" and "reflecting"—and therefore also of "masking" the real. "The *experiment*, in the modern sense of the word," notes Michel de Certeau, "was born with the deontologizing of language, to which the birth of a linguistics also corresponds. In Bacon and many others, the experiment stood opposite language as that which guaranteed and verified the latter. This split between a deictic language (it shows and/or organizes) and a referential experimentation (it escapes and/or guarantees) structures modern science, including 'mystical science.'"[46] Where *faith* had once been a virtue, it now acquired an epistemological sense. Faith became a way of knowing supernatural objects, parallel

44. John Montag, "Revelation: The False Legacy of Suárez," in *Radical Orthodoxy*, ed. J. Milbank, C. Pickstock, and G. Ward, New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 43.

45. Montag, p. 46.

46. Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable; Volume One: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992, p. 123.

to the knowledge of nature (the *real* world) that reason and observation provided. This difference in the economy of "inspiration" needs to be investigated further, but it may be suggested that the modern poetic conception of "inspiration" is a subjectivized accommodation to the transformations here referred to.

Of course, I do not intend a simple historical generalization. For on the one hand the idea of an inner dialogue with God has deep roots in the Christian mystical tradition (as it has in non-Christian traditions), and on the other, a fusion between physical and significant sound has been a part of modern evangelical experience since at least the eighteenth century.[47] But my interest is in genealogy. I do not claim that Protestant culture was uniquely interested in inner spiritual states—as though medieval Christian life, with its rich tradition of mystical experience, had had no interest in them. My concern is primarily with a conceptual question: What were the epistemological implications of the different ways that varieties of Christians and freethinkers engaged with the Scriptures through their senses? (Discounting, suppressing, marginalizing one or more of the senses are also, of course, ways of engaging with its materiality.) How did Scrip-

47. But for opponents of the evangelical movement (whether Christian, deist, or atheist) the need to identify deceptive sensory effects was pressing. "To liberal-minded opponents like Chauncy, the vocal immediacy of evangelical piety was not in harmony with the Puritan fathers and genuine reformed devotion; it smacked of the Quakers and the French Prophets. 'The *Spirituality* of Christians does not lie in *secret Whispers*, or *audible Voices*,' Chauncy pronounced confidently. If stalwart evangelicals lacked such blanket clarity, they had similar misgivings. Ever wary of the dangers of enthusiasm and the claims of immediate revelation, many evangelical ministers would have been ready to concur with the Anglican rector Benjamin Bayly, who in 1708, maddened by inspired sectaries, dismissed 'this way of Revelation, *by Calls and Voices*,' as 'the lowest and most dubious of all.' 'It becomes Men of Learning and Piety, methinks, . . . not to ground their Belief upon so idle a thing as a *hollow Voice*, or *little Noise*, coming from behind a Wall, or no Body can tell whence.' Even as Bayly wanted to protect the unique persuasiveness of the divine voice that spoke to the biblical prophets, he did all he could to delegitimate these slippery, disembodied soundings among his contemporaries" (Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 71). Schmidt describes how the pursuit of practical knowledge about sound and hearing in the Enlightenment was linked to the unmasking of religious imposture, and how it included the construction of ingenious auditory devices by which (so the secular critics claimed) priests in antiquity had produced "supernatural" effects.

ture as the medium in which divinity could be experienced come to be viewed as information about or from the supernatural? Alternatively: In what ways did the newly sharpened opposition between the merely "material" sign and the truly "spiritual" meaning become pivotal for the reconfiguration of "inspiration"?

Robertson Smith, theologian, anthropologist, and devotee of the Higher Criticism, provides an example of the shifting direction and character of inspiration in his essay on the Old Testament as poetry, where he distinguishes poetry as force from poetry as art. This enables him to speak of all *genuine* poetry, whether secular or religious, as "spiritual." For when poetry moves "from heart to heart"[48] it becomes the manifestation of a

48. Contrasting Robert Lowth, who was among the first to approach the Old Testament as poetry, with Johann Gottfried Herder, Robertson Smith writes: "While Lowth busies himself with the *art* of Hebrew poetry, the theologian of Weimar expressly treats of its *spirit*. If the former professed only to commend a choice poetry to students of polite letters . . . , the latter seeks to introduce his readers, through the aesthetic form, into the inmost spirit of the Old Testament. . . . Lowth proposed to survey the streams of sacred poetry, without ascending to the mysterious source. Herder's great strength lies in his demonstration of the way in which the noble poetry of Israel gushes forth with natural unconstrained force from the depths of a spirit touched with divinely inspired emotion. Lowth finds in the Bible a certain mass of poetical material, and says: 'I desire to estimate the sublimity and other virtues of this literature—*i.e. its power to affect men's minds*, a power that will be proportional to its conformity to the true rules of poetic art.' Nay, says Herder, the true power of poetry is that it speaks from the heart to the heart. True criticism is not the classification of poetic effects according to the principles of rhetoric, but the unfolding of the living forces which moved the poet's soul. To enjoy a poem is to share the emotion that inspired its author" (William Robertson Smith, "Poetry of the Old Testament" in *Lectures and Essays*, London: Adam and Charles Black, 1912, p. 405, italics in original). All early poets, says Robertson Smith, united inner feeling with outer nature, and among the ancient Greeks and heathen Semites this union is differently reflected in each religion. In the latter "Always we find a religion of passionate emotion, not a worship of the outer powers and phenomena of nature in their sensuous beauty, but of those inner powers, awful because unseen, of which outer things are only the symbol" (ibid., p. 425). The evolutionary thought here is that the Semitic worship of inner (spiritual) powers as opposed to outer (material) forms enabled them to become the recipients of divine revelation (a communication *from* the deity), although the advance of the Hebrews from formal to spiritual religion was continually retarded by lapses into idolatry.

transcendent force that secular literary critics now refer to by the theological term "epiphany."

But as skepticism about *the source* of inspiration thought of as communication led to a questioning of the idea that the scriptures were divinely given, a concern with their historical authenticity—with true origins—became increasingly urgent. If God did not directly inspire the Gospels, then Christian *belief* demanded that at least the accounts of Jesus they contained should be "reliable," because only then would they guarantee the life and death of Christ in this world, and thus bear witness to the truth of the Incarnation.[49]

Much has been written on the way Protestant historians helped to form the notion of history as a collective, singular subject. "If the new view of History and the historian secularized revealed religion," observes John Stroup, "it also tended to sacralize profane events and the universal historian. . . . By the end of the Enlightenment sacred and profane history were so intertwined that it was hard to disentangle them."[50] In the same vein, Starobinski writes of the mythicization of modern history as progress: "It is not enough to note, as many have done, the existence of a 'secularizing' process in enlightenment philosophy, a process in which man claims for reason prerogatives that had belonged to the divine *logos*. An opposite tendency also existed: myth, at first excluded and declared to be absurd, was now endowed with full and profound meaning and prized as revealed truth."[51]

But I turn from the old themes of historical teleology and of the sacralization of history to focus on the project of historical authenticity. In that connection one should note that it was not an already constituted dis-

49. "If the question is whether the Christian religion is divinely inspired," noted the eighteenth-century theologian Johann David Michaelis, "authenticity, or lack of authenticity, of Scripture turns out to be more important than one might assume at first glance. . . . Assuming that God did not inspire any of the books of the New Testament but simply left Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Paul the freedom to write what they knew, provided only that their writings are old, authentic and reliable, the Christian religion would still be the true one" (cited in Peter Bietenholz, *Historia and Fabula: Myths and Legends in Historical Thought from Antiquity to the Modern Age*, Leiden: Brill, 1994, p. 315–16).

50. J. Stroup, "Protestant Church Historians in the German Enlightenment," in H. E. Bödeker et al., eds., *Aufklärung und Geschichte*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986, p. 172.

51. Starobinski, p. 192.

cipline of secular history that was endowed with sacredness. On the contrary, it was Christian doubt and anxiety[52]—the discontinuities of Christian life—that drove biblical scholars to develop textual techniques that have since become part of the foundation of modern, secular historiography.[53] Herbert Butterfield, in his history of modern historiography, puts it this way: "the truth of religion was so momentous an issue, and the controversies about it so intense, that the critical methods were developing in ecclesiastical research before anybody thought of transposing them into the field of modern history."[54] But this move should not, strictly speaking, be thought of as a transposition. A secular critique developed, accidentally as it were, out of a concern with the apparent unviability of Christian traditional practice and *that in itself* helped to constitute the field of written secular history. The result was a clearer split between "scientific" history

52. There were other conditions as well. "The rise of the central state implied the emergence of a literate group whose horizons were not determined by the ideas of particularistic society," writes Stroup. "In accord with this emergence was the origin of the Pietist and Enlightenment Christianity placing great emphasis on public toleration and private religiosity: the institutional church and its dogma were to be of secondary importance. What mattered was arriving at a Christianity that transcended existing factions: one immune from the machinations of the clerical estate. The related attack on the divine legitimation, apostolic foundation, and juridical privilege of the existing institutional church and its dogma and clergy, utilized an appeal to history. The effort was made to reshape Christianity so as to remove any rough edges disturbing to the central state and its social allies" (op. cit., p. 170). However, it is not so much the alleged motives of theologians that interest me as the techniques they devised—such as "source criticism"—that helped to produce the field of modern secular history.

53. There were, of course, earlier moments in the construction of modern history that can be identified retrospectively. Thus, significant steps were taken in that direction during the Counter-Reformation by the Dominican theologian Melchior Cano when he sought to defend the traditional authorities under assault (see Julian Franklin, *Jean Bodin and the Sixteenth-Century Revolution in the Methodology of Law and History*, New York: Columbia, 1963, "Chapter VII. Melchior Cano: The Foundations of Historical Belief"). But my concern here is with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century developments when the idea of "secular" history separated itself definitively from "religious."

54. Herbert Butterfield, *Man on His Past: The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955, pp. 15–16. Butterfield is summarizing Lord Acton.

(including ecclesiastical history)[55] that depended on an attitude of skeptical inquiry in pursuit of authenticity, and "imaginative" literature (or religion and the arts generally) that depended on setting aside the question of propositional validity. This growing split was what consolidated "secular history"—history as the record of "what really happened" in this world—and in the same moment, it shaped the modern understanding of "myth," "sacred discourse," and "symbolism." As textualized memory, secular history has of course became integral to modern life in the nation-state. But although it is subject, like all remembered time, to continuous re-formation, reinvestment, and reinvocation, secular history's linear temporality has become the privileged measure of all time. The rereading of the scriptures through the grid of myth has not only separated the sacred from the secular, it has helped to constitute the secular as *the* epistemological domain in which history exists as history—and as anthropology.

In the mythic rereading of the scriptures, Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection could still be represented as foundational. But in the course of this reconstruction, Christian faith sought a reconsideration of the question of inspiration. God might not have literally dictated to the Old Testament prophets and to the apostles of the New, but the faithful Christian sought some sense in which they could still be said to be "inspired"—that is, literally breathed into by the Holy Spirit. Herder had initiated an answer by attributing to the Old Testament prophets a gift for giving expression to the power of the spirit, but it was his follower Eichhorn who applied this thought systematically. It was Eichhorn, too, who provided a new solution to the irreconcilable claims of skeptics and believers—the claim, on the one hand, that the prophets were charlatans, and on the other, that they were spokesmen for the divinity. Prophets, Eichhorn proposed disarmingly, were inspired artists. But what appears to have gone largely unnoticed was that while prophets were *called,* artists were not. Artists might commune with God's creation—but they could not hear his voice. Not, at any rate, in their capacity as poets.

Given that inspiration was no longer to be thought of as direct divine communication, romantic poets identified it in a way that could be accepted by skeptics and believers alike. Elaine Shaffer observes that Coleridge used sleep, waking dream, and opium (which he took for the relief

55. The collapse of ecclesiastical history into the general history of mankind was a crucial step in the constitution of comparative religion (see Stroup, p. 191).

of pain) to suspend normal perception and to attain to a state that could be described as an illuminated trance.[56] In this, as in other cases, there was more than a simple attempt to reassure skeptical opinion: a new twist was given to problematize further the notion of a unitary, self-conscious subject by attributing to fragmented states access to radically different kinds of experience.[57]

According to Coleridge's theory of imagination, poetic vision presupposed the alteration of ordinary perception, regardless of how it might be attained.[58] No longer opposed to reason, as in the secular Enlightenment, "imagination" now acquired some of reason's functions, and stood in contrast to "fancy."[59] For Coleridge, himself deeply read in German Biblical Criticism, prophets were not men who sought to predict the future but creative poets who expressed a vision of their community's past—the past both as a renewal of the present and as a promise for the future. And a "re-

56. There is an interesting discussion of "anaesthetic revelation" in William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Fontana Books, 1960 [1902], Lectures XVI and XVII. James is agnostic about the source of the mystical experiences reported by many subjects who had undergone total anesthesia for a surgical operation. But commenting on the ecstasies of Saint Teresa, he writes: "To the medical mind these ecstasies signify nothing but suggested and imitated hypnoid states, on an intellectual basis of degeneration and hysteria. Undoubtedly these pathological conditions have existed in many and possibly in all cases, but that fact tells us nothing about the value for knowledge of the consciousness which they induce. To pass a spiritual judgment upon these states, we must not content ourselves with superficial medical talk, but inquire into their fruits for life" (p. 398). James's religious philosophy requires that the idea of a governing consciousness be retained so that actions attributed to a unitary subject can be assessed overall on a pragmatic basis. In his assumption of a unitary subject James is closer to Freud—with his concept of a consciousness that misreads the language of its suppressed unconscious, an unconscious that needs to be unmasked through the practice of analysis—than either is to the notion of a decentered self whose successive experiences can never be recovered. True, Freud greatly complicated his earlier picture of id and ego as occupying respectively the domain of the unconscious and of consciousness, so that ego eventually came to be seen as itself partly unconscious. But it remains the case that the therapeutic work of analysis cannot take place if the self is taken to be horizontally decentered.

57. Eighteenth-century sensationalist psychology of Condillac and Hartley had begun, in its own way, to do this.

58. E. S. Shaffer, p. 90.

59. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* [1817].

newal," as the Durkheimian Henri Hubert was to point out much later, is a repetition, a participation in mythic time.[60]

Not only was it conceded that prophets and apostles were not superhuman, they were even credited with an awareness of their personal inadequacy as channels of revelation. In the romantic conception of the poet, the tension between authentic inspiration and human weakness allowed for moments of subjective illusion—and thus accounted for evidence of exaggeration and insufficiency. In this regard the prophets and apostles were no different. What mattered was not the authenticity of facts about the past but the power of the spiritual idea they sought to convey as gifted humans.[61]

I now move from the history of Christian theology briefly to the history of ethnography, where we find changing concepts of inspiration entangled with an emerging experimental physiology and concepts of artistic genius.

Shamanism: inspiration and sensibility

An accumulating ethnography of shamans in the eighteenth century contributed to the recrafting of the idea of "inspiration" in secular terms.

60. See François Isambert, "At the Frontier of Folklore and Sociology: Hubert, Hertz and Czarnowski, Founders of a Sociology of Religion," in *The Sociological Domain: The Durkheimians and the Founding of French Sociology*, ed. P. Besnard, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

61. As the Hegelian David Strauss wrote in the preface to his epochal *Life of Jesus* (1835): "Orthodox and rationalists alike proceed from the false assumption that we have always in the gospels testimony, sometimes even that of eye-witnesses, to fact. They are, therefore, reduced to asking themselves what can have been the real and natural fact which is here witnessed to in such extraordinary ways. We have to realize that the narrators testify sometimes, not to outward facts, but to ideas, often most practical and beautiful ideas, constructions which even eye-witnesses had unconsciously put upon facts, imagination concerning them, reflections upon them, reflections such as were natural to the time and the author's level of culture. What we have here is not falsehood, but misrepresentation of the truth. It is a plastic, naive, and, at the same time, often most profound apprehension of the truth, within the area of religious feeling and poetic insight. It results in narrative, legendary, mythical in nature, illustrative often of spiritual truth in a manner more perfect than any hard, prosaic statement could achieve" (cited in W. Neil, "The Criticism and Theological Use of the Bible, 1700–1950," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 3, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 276).

This involved not only the shifting of all causation from outside the world of material bodies entirely into that world, but also an "inside" that had to be progressively redefined. That shift also served to separate healthy from unhealthy states of mind and behavior, and led—in the thought of Enlightenment rationalism—to the doctrine that morality be based on medical science rather than the other way around, as the older Christian view had it.

From the very beginnings of the encounter between Europeans and aboriginal peoples, Christian doctrine and rationalist skepticism tended to describe shamans[62] as demon worshipers, magicians, charlatans, or quacks, and the shamanic séance, with its drumming, its contorted gestures and strange cries, as merely grotesque attempts at deception. The shaman's claims to be able to divine and prognosticate were invariably dismissed and classed with the priests and soothsayers of antiquity who had pretended to commune with gods and spirits. But Enlightenment demystification did not preclude a curiosity, in some reports at least, about shamanic healing abilities. Greater attention was therefore given to the theatricality of séances, which were sometimes acknowledged to be remarkable performances in which music and rhythm helped to enrapture an audience and soothe the sufferer. There was some interest, too, in the natural substances used by shamans to cure or alleviate pain or illness.[63] However, such interest came from a culture in which pain was increasingly regarded as having an origin entirely internal to a mechanistic world and therefore susceptible only to the action of elements in that world. The shaman was a striking example of occult powers that appeared to elude the world of nature. As inhabitants of the supernatural they had to be explained—or explained away.

In eighteenth-century Europe the understanding of pain was undergoing momentous changes that have been retrospectively labeled "secularization."[64] Roselyne Rey, in her medical history of pain, describes a signif-

62. Michael Taussig has written an interesting study, partly historical and partly ethnographic, on the subject in *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987. Taussig's book is one of the sources of inspiration for Caroline Humphrey's *Shamans and Elders: Experience, Knowledge, and Power Among the Daur Mongols*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

63. Gloria Flaherty, *Shamanism and the Eighteenth Century*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

64. A triumphalist history of the secularization of pain describes the process as a move from the premodern resignation to suffering and cruelty justified or condoned by religious beliefs, to the accumulation of scientific knowledge and the

icant transformation in the deliberations of physicians belonging to the vitalist school. The myth of punishment for original sin was translated by the latter into the myth of punishment for transgressions against the laws of nature (for example, following a wrong diet or failing to exercise.)[65] This was a simple metaphorical translation, by which Nature was personified and endowed with an agency originally possessed by God.[66] But there was another and more interesting shift that Rey also identifies, one that was not merely a matter of metaphorical substitution but of a change in the grammar of the concept.

Citing attacks by the philosophes on the Christian justification of pain (a celebration of pain that begins with the myth of Christ's suffering) she notes that the discourse of sin and punishment was being set aside in favor of another.[67] In this newer discourse pain began to be objectified, set in the framework of a mechanistic philosophy, and sited within an accumulating knowledge of the living body acquired through the discipline of vivisection: "even a religious or indeed devout figure such as Haller," writes Rey of one of the great early experimenters, "could approach the question of pain without introducing religious obsessions; it is true that this was easier for someone whose work involved experimenting on animals, rather

growth of humanitarian attitudes that lead to the discovery and use of anesthesia in the nineteenth century. See Donald Caton, M.D., "The Secularization of Pain," *Anesthesiology*, vol. 62, no. 4, 1985.

65. "Their pain became totally secular since pain as well as illness were seen as nature's punishment for omissions in one's regimen, while mental illness was perceived as a sign of conflict between the demands of each individual character and the constraints of the social order; this interpretation called for a fundamental social reorganization when its standards (chastity in particular) went against nature. This explains why, as a leitmotiv, the physician of the Enlightenment maintained that in order to be a good moralist, one must first be a good physician, thus reversing the traditional relationship between medicine and morality" (Roselyne Rey, *The History of Pain*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 107).

66. See Basil Willey's *The 18th Century Background: Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1940.

67. Rey claims that "essentially, the main change occurred elsewhere. . . . This change lay precisely in the fact that for the physician or the physiologist, the problematical question of pain could be placed outside the problem of sin, evil and punishment" (Rey, p. 90). Strictly speaking the question of pain now becomes a "human evil"—a secular concept that lacks a supporting theology.

than being a physician [that is, being someone who cultivated in himself the arts of healing and comforting]. With Haller and the beginning of the experimental method, the definition of sensibility and the respective functions of the nerves and the muscles found themselves based on more scientific foundations."[68] That is to say, *activity* and *passivity* are distinguished in empiricist terms, by which *feeling* is attributed to the former and denied to the latter.

In this example the secularization of pain signals not merely the abandonment of a transcendental language ("religious obsessions") but the shift to a new preoccupation—from the personal attempt at consoling and curing (that is, inhabiting a social relationship) to a distanced attempt at investigating the functions and sensations of the living body. Pain is inflicted in systematic fashion on animals in order to understand its physiological basis.[69] So on the one hand we have pain inhabiting a discourse between patient and physician; on the other, pain is the reading made through experimental observation in a context where—as de Certeau noted—language has become de-ontologized. It is this latter model that informs Enlightenment skepticism toward the shaman's curative claims (mixed up as they are with ecstatic displays and "inspiration" by *invisible* spirits) and helps to constitute the secular domain of physiological knowledge through written reports of experimental results.[70] The contrast is not properly described in terms of "disenchantment" when what is at stake are different patterns of sensibility about pain, and different ways of objectifying it. Thus a question that preoccupied Haller in his animal experiments was whether pain was the product of the stimulus or of the body part to which it was applied: "It was in order to resolve this problem that, in his experiments, Haller multiplied and diversified the types of reagent and means used to stimulate a given part, using a process of elimination: thus he successively applied thermal stimulants, mechanical stimulants (tearing,

68. Ibid., p. 91.

69. "In Haller's work," Rey observes, "the animal's pain became an instrument of physiological investigation which allowed him to establish that only the nerves and the innervated parts are sensitive, whilst only muscle fibres are irritable" (ibid., p. 110).

70. Ibid., p. 109. In a review article on Roy Porter's history of medicine, Thomas Laqueur notes ruefully the counterpoint of violence, the pain inflicted experimentally on animals and on humans, that has accompanied the triumphant story of modern medicine (T. Laqueur, "Even Immortality," *London Review of Books*, July 29, 1999).

cuts, etc.) and chemical stimulants (oil of vitriol, spirit of nitrate) to each part. Electricity, and particularly galvanism when it was discovered, also provided a means of measuring the irritability of the parts and their residual vitality after death. The entire body was thoroughly investigated from head to toe: membranes, cellular tissue, tendons and aponeuroses, bones and cartilages, muscles, glands, nerves, etc." The concept of "experience" that had from early on had the sense of putting something to the test was now being used to identify an internal state through an external manipulation ("experiment").[71]

However, the claims of quacks (to whom shamans were often likened) were not always dismissed. Jerome Gaub, member of the Royal Society and professor of medicine, regarded their rhetoric and the credulity it addressed as valuable for healing: "It is this faith that physicians greatly wish for, since if they know how to procure it for themselves from the ill, they render them more obedient and are able to breathe new life into them with words alone, moreover they find the power of their remedies to be increased and the results made more certain." The extravagant performances of mountebanks who promised cures aroused wonder, and wonder led to hope. "The arousal of the bodily organs is sometimes such that the vital principles cast off their torpidity, the tone of the nervous system is restored, the movements of the humors are accelerated, and nature then attacks and overcomes with her own powers a disease that prolonged treatment has opposed in vain. Let those fortunate enough to have more rapidly recovered by means of these empty arts than by means of approved systems of healing congratulate themselves, I say, on having regained their health, regardless of the reason!"[72] For Gaub healing was a social process in which the inspiration of the healer was validated not by its occult *source* but by its salutary *effect*.

Interest in the mind-altering substances used by shamans was to develop much later.[73] But in the eighteenth century another aspect of the

71. For an account of the new grammar of "experience" in seventeenth-century natural science, see Peter Dear, *Discipline and Experience: The Mathematical Way in the Scientific Revolution*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

72. Cited in Flaherty, p. 99.

73. In her study of shamanism and poetic inspiration, Nora Chadwick refers to a nineteenth-century ethnographer of Siberian life: "According to Niemojowski children consecrated for the office of shaman are taught by old men, doubtless shamans themselves, not only the outward form and ceremonies, but the medical

shaman figure was being taken much more seriously: the shaman as poet, myth-recounter, and performing artist. Gloria Flaherty summarizes the reports of Johann Georgi, who described Central Asian shamanism and connected it to the origin of the verbal arts. "Like the oracles of antiquity, he wrote, contemporary shamans and shamankas [women shamans] spoke in an extraordinarily flowery and unclear language so that what they said could be applicable in all cases, whatever the outcome. Actually, he added, it was necessary that they did so because their believers, who had only hieroglyphs, no alphabet, themselves only knew how to communicate by sharing images and sensations. The litany was one favored form because its rhythms and tones affected the body directly, without appeal to the higher faculty of reason. . . . Georgi cited their particular kind of nervous system as the cause: 'People of such makeup and such irritability must be rich in dreams, apparitions, superstitions, and fairy tales. And they are, too.'"[74] Shamans, far from being mere charlatans were, as Herder more famously declared, oral poets, sacred musicians and healing performers who—for all the tricks they might use—enabled their audiences to sense in their own souls a force greater than themselves.[75]

If shamanic rhetoric and behavior were to be viewed as art, some artists could be viewed as shamans. If ecstasy had been a sign of mantic inspiration, it was becoming an indication of artistic genius. Flaherty writes of the evolving theory of genius in eighteenth-century Europe that drew on the classical myths of Orpheus as well as the ethnographic descriptions of shamans, a theory that eventually focused on the extraordinary international phenomenon of Mozart.[76] That he was often likened to Orpheus by his audiences was, says Flaherty, part of the mythologization of the great artist, of his healing and "civilizing" powers acquired through inspiration. Thus she cites, among other contemporaries, the physician Simon Tissot, who described "the stamp of genius" that Mozart's music making displayed: "He was sometimes involuntarily driven to his harpsichord, as by a sudden force," Tissot wrote, "and he drew from it sounds that were the living expression of the idea that had just seized him. One might say that at

properties of plants and herbs, with the different ways of forecasting the weather by the behaviour and migration of animals" (*Poetry and Prophecy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952, p. 53).

74. Flaherty, pp. 74–75.
75. Ibid., chapter 6.
76. Ibid., p. 150.

such moments he is an instrument at the command of music, imagining him like a set of strings, harmoniously arranged with such art that a single one cannot be touched without all others being set in motion; he plays all the images, as a Poet versifies and a Painter colours them."[77] This idea of inspiration was thus deduced from the artist's extraordinary *performance*, best described as a consequence of his being seized by an external force.

Johann Sulzer, a theorist of the fine arts, wrote in more general terms: "All artists of any genius claim that from time to time they experience a state of extraordinary psychic intensity which makes work unusually easy, images arising without great effort and the best ideas flowing in such profusion as if they were the gift of some higher power. This is without doubt what is called inspiration. If an artist experiences this condition, his object appears to him in an unusual light; his genius, as if guided by a divine power, invents without effort, shaping his invention in the most suitable form without strain; the finest ideas and images occur unbidden in floods to the inspired poet; the orator judges with the greatest acumen, feels with the greatest intensity, and the strongest and most vividly expressive words rise to his tongue."[78] Such statements, Flaherty argues, are strongly reminiscent of accounts of shamanism—in this case of a shaman described not skeptically but in wonderment. They employ the idea of inspiration metaphorically—as control of an "instrument" from outside the person, or as a "gift" from a "higher power." But these remain metaphors, covering an inability to explain a this-worldly phenomenon in natural terms.

But when the physician Melchior Weickard locates his explanation entirely in terms of human physiology, a genuine change in the language has taken place: "A Genius, a human being with exalted imaginative powers, must have more excitable brain fibers than other human beings," he speculates, "Those fibers must be set into motion quicker and more easily, so that lively and frequent images arise."[79]

Regardless of the adequacy of such explanations from the perspective of a later century, a secular discourse of inspiration now referred entirely to the abilities of "the natural body" and to their social demonstration. The genius, like the shaman, was at once object, performer, and reproducer of myth. For Immanuel Kant, a genius was simply someone who could naturally exercise his cognitive faculties wonderfully without having to be

77. Cited in ibid., p. 159.
78. Cited in ibid., pp. 151–52.
79. Cited in ibid., p. 153.

taught by anyone: "We say that he who possesses these powers to a superior degree has a head; and he who has a small measure of these faculties is called a simpleton, because he always allows himself to be guided by other persons. But we call him a genius who makes use of originality and produces out of himself what must ordinarily be learned under the guidance of others."[80] A genius was the product of nature, and what he produced was "natural," albeit singular. For this reason it could be appreciated by a cultivated audience exercising judgments of taste.

Myth, poetry, and secular sensibility

Poets from Blake and Coleridge on, "geniuses" in the romantic tradition, experimented with the mythic method in their own religious poetry.[81] Myth was regarded in much early romantic thought as the original way of apprehending spiritual truth. If biblical prophets and apostles—as well as shamans in "the primitive world"—were now to be seen as performing, in mythic mode, a poetic function, then modern geniuses could reach into themselves and express spiritual truths by employing the same method. For this the virtue of faith was not necessary; all that was required was that one be sincere in one's intention, that one represent the deepest feelings truthfully in outer discourse. This may help to explain the prevalence among Victorian unbelievers of what Stefan Collini calls "a rhetoric of sincerity."[82] For not only was the idea of being true to oneself conceived of as a moral duty, it also presupposed the existence of a secular self whose sovereignty had to be demonstrated through acts of sincerity. The self's secularity consisted in the fact that it was the precondition of transcendent (poetic or religious) experience and not its product.

Poets like Browning, who struggled to retain their religious convictions in an increasingly skeptical age, saw in mythic patterns a way to harmonize the findings of psychology and history—that's to say, to harmonize internal reality with external. Robert Langbaum observes that it was

80. I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978, p. 22.

81. Coleridge's uncompleted epic *Kubla Khan* was a landmark—as Elaine Shaffer has so ably shown—in the development of modern religious poetry. But Blake (who was, incidentally, an inspiration for Coleridge) is also important here, although his work is not discussed by Shaffer.

82. *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850–1930*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1991, p. 276.

Browning who first outlined "what has come to be the dominant twentieth-century theory about poetry—that it makes its effect through the association in the reader's mind of disparate elements, and that this process of association leads to the recognition, in what has been presented successively, of static pattern. The recognition in the twentieth century is often called 'epiphany'"[83]—the sudden showing forth of the spiritual in the actual.

The mythic method continued to be important even among twentieth-century writers who disclaimed any religious faith, such as James Joyce. T. S. Eliot, in his laudatory review of *Ulysses*, writes that "In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. . . . [The mythic method] is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats. . . . Psychology . . . ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art, toward . . . order and form."[84]

T. S. Eliot famously used what he called the mythical method in his own poetry. However, this use of myth is not to be confused with Starobinski's reference to the mythicization of modern history that I cited earlier. There is no yearning for a lost plenitude in this literature. Here myth is invoked explicitly as a fictional grounding for secular values that are sensed to be ultimately without foundation.[85] It therefore marks a very different sensibility from the one to be found in the use of myth by Coleridge and other romantics. (Ironically, the fictional character of myth that led Enlightenment writers like Diderot to place "myth" together with "tradition" is precisely what leads early twentieth-century writers to link mythic fabrication to "modernity."[86])

83. Robert Langbaum, *The Modern Spirit: Essays on the Continuity of Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 87.

84. Cited in ibid., p. 82.

85. See also Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," in *The Idea of Spatial Form*, Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991.

86. The *Encyclopaedie* entries begin with "Tradition" in the theological sense, proceed to "Tradition" in the religious sense (Christian and Jewish), on to

The importance of myth as a literary technique for imposing aesthetic unity on the disjointed and ephemeral character of individual experience the poet encounters in modern life has frequently been noted.[87] By a curious inversion, the "New" Arab poets, strongly influenced by modernist European poetry, have resorted to ancient Middle Eastern mythology in order to signify the authentically modern, indicating in this way their desire for escape from what they regard as the stifling traditions in the contemporary Islamic world. The most prominent among these poets is Adonis, the Phoenician pseudonym of the most eminent member of the shi'r group,[88] a self-declared atheist and modernist. Using devices familiar to Western symbolist and surrealist poetry, Adonis alludes to mythic figures in a self-conscious effort to disrupt Islamic aesthetic and moral sensibilities, to attack what is taken to be sacred tradition in favor of the new— that is, of the Western.[89] (These myths, incidentally, have had to be translated into Arabic from the writings of modern European scholars who transcribed and re-narrated them.) But in this respect Adonis's technique is figural rather than structural; it aims primarily to dislocate settled feelings, not to impose a sense of order and form where these are lacking. This use of myth in modern Arabic poetry is part of a response to the perceived failure of Muslim societies to secularize, and it is infused with a consciousness of "the West" as an object of emulation.

For Adonis, myth arises whenever human reason encounters perplexing questions about existence and attempts to answer them in what

"Tradition Mythologique," and end with "Tradition" in the jurisprudential sense (the action of transferring, giving up, a thing).

87. See Michael Bell and Peter Poellner, eds., *Myth and the Making of Modernity: The Problem of Grounding in Early Twentieth-Century Literature*, Amsterdam/Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1998.

88. So called after the periodical with that title, founded in 1956 in Beirut.

89. See the extended interview conducted by Saqr Abū Fakhr, "A Dialogue with Adūnīs: Childhood, Poetry, Exile," especially Part 9, in *al-Quds al-'Arabi Daily*, Friday, July 14, 2000, p. 13, which deals with enlightenment, secularism, religion, and tradition—and the role of myth (*astūra*) with respect to them. At one point, referring to a three-volume work on pre-Islamic myths edited by Adonis, the interlocutor asks him why myths and epics are absent in Islam. Adonis answers that Islam rejected prior texts as expressions of idolatry or superstition and magic, but it did, nevertheless, adopt many myths connected with Judaism—such as stories about the miraculous rod of Moses, the parting of the Red Sea, and so forth— which are themselves rewritings of earlier myths in the region.

can only be a non-rational way (*bi-tariqa lā 'aqlāniyya*), thus producing a combination of poetry, history, and wonderment. The freedom to think in this way, to recognize publicly that myth is a necessary product of the secular mind, Adonis regards as integral to modernity. Hence in his poetry existential questions and historical ones are addressed in mythic terms. More specifically, his desire for salvation of the Arab people, held for a millennium in the grip of a "sacred language," is acted out through myths of alienation, of resurrection, and of redemption.[90] And yet in classical Islamic discourse the Arabic language of the Qur'an is never called "a sacred language" (*lugha muqaddisa*) as it is in modern secular discourse. For the latter idea presupposes an abstraction called "language" that it can then combine with a contingent quality called "sacredness."

Typically, Adonis uses the term myth both to celebrate human creativity (*ibdā'*) and to unmask the authority of divine texts. His concern is with Reason, and with restoring to humanity its essential sacredness (*qadāsa*). Echoing an earlier European (Feuerbachian) discourse, Adonis declares "Here the logic of atheism (*ilhād*) means the restoration of humanity to its true nature, to faith in it by virtue of its being human. . . . The sacred (*al-muqaddas*) for atheism is the human being himself, the human being of reason, and there is nothing greater than this human being. It replaces revelation by reason, and God by humanity."[91] But an atheism that deifies Man is, ironically, close to the doctrine of the incarnation. The idea that there is a single, clear "logic of atheism" is itself the product of a modern binary—belief or unbelief in a supernatural Being.

90. Myth (Greek and biblical) had also figured in the so-called romantic poets of the 1930s and 1940s, such as Abū Shādī, Nājī, Abū Shabaka, and others. Imitative of Western poetic styles, their self-absorption left them little scope for meditating on the problem of cultural salvation (see M. M. Badawi, "Convention and Revolt in Modern Arabic Poetry," in *Modern Arabic Literature and the West*, London: Ithaca Press, 1985). For the "New" poets it is precisely this latter preoccupation that gives their interest in myth its motive force. Thus in his famous 1992 "Declaration on Modernity," Adonis compares the Arab Self invidiously with the Western Other and finds everything of value in the latter. "It is not only modernity that is absent in Arab life," he concludes, "but poetry itself is similarly lacking" (cited in Muhammad Lutfi al-Yūsufi, "al-Qasīda al-mu'-āsira" in Fandi Salih, ed., *al-Mu'aththarāt al-ajnabiyya fī al-shi'r al-'arabi al-mu'āsir*, Beirut, 1995, p. 57).

91. Adonis (Ali Ahmad Sa'id), *al-Thābit wa-l-mutahawwal*, Beirut: Dar al-Awda, 4th ed., vol. I, 1983, p. 89.

Although the fundamentalist (*asūli*) form of Islamic thought that prevails today is itself mythic, he argues, it is a form of myth that has acquired for believers the character of law—of commandment—and so is not apparent to them as myth. For Adonis myth is plural, even anarchic, while the religious law is monotheistic and totalitarian. In marking the unconscious truth of contemporary religious discourse, myth clearly has a very different function from the one modernist European poets give it when they use it to ground secular experience.[92]

Democratic liberalism and myth

I began this chapter with the view of radical anthropologists who criticize the modern liberal state for pretending to be secular and rational when in fact it was heavily invested in myth and violence. I then proceeded to problematize the secular as a category by investigating its transformations. I now conclude with a contemporary liberal political theorist who argues that a secular, liberal state depends crucially for its public virtues (equality, tolerance, liberty) on political myth—that is, on origin narratives that provide a foundation for its political values and a coherent framework for its public and private morality. This brings us back to secularism as a political doctrine, and its connections with "the sacred" and "the profane."

Margaret Canovan maintains that if liberalism gives up its illusion of

92. In recent years Western scholars of Islam have produced some noteworthy analyses of myth in Islam. Thus Jaroslav Stetkevych claims that the Qur'an is a fragmentary presentation of an Arabian national myth that founds Muhammad's authority as an archetypal priest-king. I find his attempt at introducing Victorian assumptions about sacredness and nationalism into a very different cultural tradition ingenious but unconvincing (see J. Stetkevych, *Muhammad and the Golden Bough*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996). A very different approach to myth in the Qur'an has been tried—in my view more fruitfully—by Angelika Neuwirth. Unlike Stetkevych and Adonis, Neuwirth is not primarily concerned with mythic narratives but with the temporal structures of Qur'anic rhetoric. She describes in detail the way its style invokes as well as reenacts what she calls mythic time. In doing so she stresses the importance of the Qur'an as *recitation* and not merely as text—that is, as being not simply read for its informational content but read out and heard in a total engagement with the divine (see A. Neuwirth, "Qur'anic Literary Structure Revisited: *Surat al-Rahman* between Mythic Account and Decodation of Myth," in *Story-telling in the Framework of Non-fictional Arabic Literature*, ed. S. Leder, Wiesbaden: Harassowitz, 1998).

being the party of reason, it will be better placed to defend its political values against its conservative and radical critics.[93] The central principles of liberalism, she reminds us, rest on assumptions about the nature of mankind and the nature of society that are frequently questioned: "all men are created equal," "everyone possesses human rights," and so on. But no dispassionate observer of the human condition would find these descriptive propositions unproblematic, says Canovan. For men and women are not in fact equal, they do not all exercise human rights in the world as we know it.

Canovan points out that in the eighteenth century the ideas that eventually formed the core of liberal thinking were attached to a distinctive conception of nature as deep reality. In the succeeding century liberals invoked nature as a realm more real than the social world, an understanding that gave them grounds for optimism about political change. The terminology of natural rights referred not simply to what men (and later women too) *should* have, but to what they *do in fact* possess in the reality of human nature that lies beneath the distorted world as it now appears. However, for the conservative opponents of liberalism the inequalities and injustices in the world directly reflected the unregenerate nature of human beings.

Why did the ancestors of liberalism employ the terminology of nature in this way? Simply because in their thought the idea of "nature" served to explain and justify things. To insist that manifest social inequalities and constraints were "unnatural" was in effect to invoke an alternative world—a mythical world—that was "natural" because in it freedom and equality prevailed. But over time their assumptions about the nature of "man" exposed liberals to uncomfortable criticism. This weakness emerged most fully at the turn of the nineteenth century with the rise of sociological realism, and the simultaneous emergence of a new vision of nature as essentially violent and conflict ridden. What eventually resurrected the liberal idea of natural rights in the face of the vision of an essentially ruthless nature was not more effective theorization but Europe's experience of its own horrors in the shape of Nazism and Stalinism in the first half of the twentieth century. Thus the liberal myth has facilitated the entire project of human rights that is so much a part of our contemporary world, and that brings with it a moralism wrongly said to be uncongenial to secularism as a system of political governance.

93. Margaret Canovan, "On Being Economical with the Truth: Some Liberal Reflections," *Political Studies*, vol. 38, 1990, p. 9.

Canovan concedes that there are skeptical liberals who admit the fragility of liberal institutions and who stress the importance of secular citizenship and the need for conscious commitment to secular political arrangements in which religion is kept separate from the state. For them myth might seem less important. But there is no doubt—she insists—that in the beginnings of what we now recognize as liberalism, the myth of nature was inspirational, and that as such it enabled great transformations to be effected. Yet now liberal political discourse is again being exposed to attack. She thinks that liberal principles such as the universality of human rights are difficult to defend in the face of a sociologized nature. For when nature is interpreted positivistically in terms of statistical norms, then different norms of behavior and sentiment can claim to be equally natural. The result, we are informed, is a crippling relativism.

The defense of liberal principles in the modern world cannot, Canovan argues, be effectively carried out by making abstract arguments more rigorous, as Rawls has tried to do. This anticipates—albeit in another register—Stuart Hampshire's distrust of the use made of "reason" and "reasonable" in Rawls's exposition of political liberalism. "Why should an overlapping consensus among 'reasonable' persons about basic liberal values be either required or expected?" asks Hampshire. "The answer is to be found in the history of the myth of reason itself. Plato, discussing justice in *The Republic*, threw off the brilliant and entertaining idea that the soul is divided into three parts, just as the city-state is to be divided into three social classes, and in a just person's soul the upper part, reason, ensures harmony and stability, and in a just city the upper class, philosophers trained in mathematics, will impose order in a well-ordered society. . . . The corollary in ordinary and conventional speech has been that the desires and emotions of persons are supposed to issue from the quarrelsome and insubordinate underclass in the soul, and that they should be left in their proper place and kept away from the serious business of self-control."[94] The picture of human nature that has sustained liberalism from its inception, says Hampshire, is one in which passion and struggle, not reason and order, are central. Thus while Hampshire wants to do away with the myth of Reason in contemporary liberal theory, Canovan appeals to the reason of myth.

Canovan believes that liberalism can be defended only by recognizing and drawing openly on its great myth. "For liberalism never has been

94. S. Hampshire, "Liberalism: The New Twist," *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 40, August 12, 1993, pp. 45–46.

an account of the world," she writes, "but a project to be realized. The 'nature' of early liberalism, the 'humanity' of our own day, may be talked about as if they already exist but the point of talking about them is that they are still to be created. The essence of the myth of liberalism—its imaginary construction—is to assert human rights precisely because they are *not* built into the structure of the universe. The frightening truth concealed by the liberal myth is, therefore, that liberal principles go against the grain of human and social nature. Liberalism is not a matter of clearing away a few accidental obstacles and allowing humanity to unfold its natural essence. It is more like *making a garden in a jungle that is continually encroaching*. . . . But it is precisely the element of truth in the gloomy pictures of society and politics drawn by critics of liberalism that makes the project of realizing liberal principles all the more urgent. *The world is a dark place, which needs redemption by the light of a myth*."[95] The liberal project of redemption in a world of injustice and suffering that Canovan urges us to recognize in mythic terms allows once again the sacred character of humanity to be affirmed, and the liberal project re-empowered. It permits the politics of certainty to be restored, and retrieves the language of prophecy for politics in place of moral relativism. Thus what has often been described as the political exclusion of women, the propertyless, colonial subjects, in liberalism's history can be re-described as the gradual extension of liberalism's incomplete project of universal emancipation.

The image Canovan employs to present and defend liberalism is striking: "making a garden in a jungle that is continually encroaching" and a "world [that] is a dark place, which needs redemption by the light of a myth." This image is not only an invitation to adopt a mythic approach; it is already part of the myth. It fixes on (explains and justifies) the violence lying at the heart of a political doctrine that has disavowed violence on principle. That is not to say, incidentally, that this violence is "intrinsically mysterious, mystifying, convoluting, plain scary, mythical" and "a sign of the existence of the gods," as Taussig has proposed. The liberal violence to which I refer (as opposed to the violence of illiberal regimes) is translucent. It is the violence of universalizing reason itself. For to make an enlightened space, the liberal must continually attack the darkness of the outside world that threatens to overwhelm that space.[96] Not only must that outside there-

95. Canovan, p. 16, italics added.
96. The gardening metaphor can also be found in nineteenth-century colonial discourse. Thus Lord Cromer, virtual British ruler of Egypt from 1883 to 1907,

fore be conquered, but in the garden itself there are always weeds to be de-stroyed and unruly branches to be cut off. Violence required by the culti-vation of enlightenment is therefore distinguished from the violence of the dark jungle. The former is to be seen as an expression of law, the latter of transgression. Political and legal disciplines that forcefully protect sacred things (individual conscience, property, liberty, experience) against what-ever violates them is thus underwritten by the myth. Liberalism is not merely the passion of civility, as Hampshire and others have asserted. It claims the right to exercise power, through the threat and the use of vio-lence, when it redeems the world and punishes the recalcitrant. There is no fatality in all this—as Adorno and Horkheimer claimed—no necessary un-folding of an Enlightenment essence. It is just a way some liberals have ar-gued and acted.

The liberal political scientist and Middle East specialist Leonard Binder reaches the same conclusion about the necessity of violence as Canovan but he does so through an explicit set of propositions about the possibilities and limits of *rational discourse,* apparently not through the in-vocation of myth: "1. Liberal government is the product of a continuous process of rational discourse. 2. Rational discourse is possible even among those who do not share the same culture nor the same consciousness. 3. Ra-tional discourse can produce mutual understanding and cultural consen-sus, as well as agreement on particulars. 4. Consensus permits stable polit-ical arrangements, and is the rational basis of the choice of coherent political strategies. 5. Rational strategic choice is the basis of improving the

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reviewing the reforms carried out under his authority, concludes, with imperial confidence: "Where once the seeds of true Western civilisation have taken root so deeply as is now the case in Egypt, no retrograde forces, however malignant they may be, will in the end be able to check germination and ultimate growth. The seeds which [Egyptian rulers prior to the British occupation] planted produced lit-tle but rank weeds. The seeds which have now been planted are those of true civil-isation. They will assuredly bring forth fruit in due season. Interested antagonism, ignorance, religious prejudice, and all the forces which cluster round an archaic and corrupt social system, may do their worst. They will not succeed. We have dealt a blow to the forces of reaction in Egypt from which they can never recover, and from which, if England does her duty towards herself, towards the Egyptian people, and towards the civilised world, they will never have a chance of recover-ing" (*Modern Egypt,* vol. II, London: Macmillan, 1908, pp. 558–59). This trope of garden making in the heyday of imperialism clearly lacks the melancholy of Canovan's postimperial gardening myth.

human condition through collective action. 6. Political liberalism, in this sense, is indivisible. It will either prevail worldwide, or it will have to be de-fended by nondiscursive action."[97] But what Canovan calls the liberal myth is, I would suggest, part of the deep structure of Binder's abstract argu-ment. Liberal politics is based on cultural consensus and aims at human progress. It is the product of rational discourse as well as its precondition. It must dominate the unredeemed world—if not by reason then, alas, by force—in order to survive.

In fact liberal democracy here expresses the two secular myths that are, notoriously, at odds with each other: the Enlightenment myth of pol-itics as a discourse of public reason whose bond with *knowledge* enables the elite to direct the education of mankind, and the revolutionary myth of universal suffrage, a politics of large numbers in which the representation of "collective will" is sought by quantifying the *opinion* and *fantasy* of in-dividual citizen-electors. The secular theory of state toleration is based on these contradictory foundations: on the one hand elite liberal clarity seeks to contain religious passion, on the other hand democratic numbers allow majorities to dominate minorities even if both are religiously formed.

The thought that the world needs to be redeemed is more than merely an idea. Since the eighteenth century it has animated a variety of intellectual and social projects within Christendom and beyond, in Euro-pean global empires. In practice they have varied from country to country, unified only by the aspiration toward liberal modernity. But the similarity of these projects to the Christian idea of redemption should not, I submit, lead us to think of them as simple restatements of sacred myth, as projects that are only apparently secular but in reality religious. For although the New Testament myth may have assisted in the formation of these secular projects it does not follow that the latter are essentially Christian. They embrace a distinctive politics (democratic, anticlerical), they presuppose a different kind of morality (based on the sacredness of individual con-science and individual right), and they regard suffering as entirely subjec-tive and accidental (as bodily damage to be medically treated, or as corrective punishment for crime, or simply as the unfinished business of universal empowerment).

In secular redemptive politics there is no place for the idea of a re-

97. Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988, p. 1.

deemer saving sinners through *his* submission to suffering. And there is no place for a theology of evil by which different kinds of suffering are identified. ("Evil" is simply the superlative form of what is bad and shocking.) Instead there is a readiness to cause pain to those who are to be saved by being humanized. It is not merely that the object of violence is different; it is that the secular myth uses the element of violence to connect an optimistic project of universal empowerment with a pessimistic account of human motivation in which inertia and incorrigibility figure prominently. If the world is a dark place that needs redemption, the human redeemer, as an inhabitant of *this world,* must first redeem himself. That the worldly project of redemption requires self-redemption means that the jungle is after all in the gardener's own soul. Thus the structure of this secular myth differs from the one articulating the story of redemption through Christ's sacrifice, a difference that the use of the term "sacred" for both of them may obscure. Each of the two structures that I touch on here articulates different kinds of subjectivity, mobilizes different kinds of social activity, and invokes different modalities of time.

And yet Christianity's missionary history managed to fuse the two—to fold the spiritual promise ("Christ died to save us all") into the political project ("the world must be changed for Christ")—making the modern concept of redemption possible.

A kind of ending: reading two modern texts on the secular

So how, finally, do we make anthropological sense of the secular? It is difficult to provide a short answer. Instead I conclude with two contrasting accounts that relate myth, symbol, and allegory to definitions of the secular: Paul de Man's essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality,"[98] and Walter Benjamin's book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama.*[99] Taken together, they indicate that even secular views of the secular aren't all the same.

De Man's famous essay is primarily concerned with the romantic movement and with the way it has been written about in modern histories. The romantic image, says de Man, has been understood as a relationship between self and nature (or subject and object), but this is mistaken. At

98. In P. de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.
99. W. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* London: Verso, 1977.

first romantics rediscovered an older allegorical tradition from the Middle Ages, but that rediscovery occurred in a world where religious belief had begun to crumble faced with the discoveries of modern knowledge. It was—as Weber had said—increasingly a disenchanted world. In the medieval world allegory was simply one of a set of figures whose meanings were fixed by the Church's teachings for the purpose of biblical interpretation, and thus of exerting its authority. Because ecclesiastical disciplines were now no longer unchallenged, and belief in the sacred had begun to be undermined, de Man informs us that for the early romantics allegory was rediscovered in a different predicament. By virtue of the conventional succession of the signifier by the signified, allegory essentially played out an inescapable temporal destiny in which self and nonself could never coincide. *Early* romantic imagery therefore constituted the site of a reluctant coming to terms with the secular—a world in which there are no hidden depths, no natural continuities between the subject's emotions and the objects of these emotions, no fulfillment of time. It could be *seen* that the real was not sacred, not enchanted. And yet—so de Man puts it—this painful clarity about the *real* world that the early romantics at first had (in contrast to the mystified consciousness of religious believers) did not last. Very quickly a symbolic (or mythical) conception of language was established everywhere in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European literature and painting, allowing endlessly rich meanings to be recovered. Once again, de Man observes, symbolic imagination (or mythic interpretation) began to obscure the reality of this-world.

In his study of German baroque drama known as *Trauerspiel,* Walter Benjamin describes a different trajectory, one that directs the reader to a secular world that is not merely discovered (through clear-sighted knowledge of the real) but precariously assembled and lived in contradictory fashion. Although de Man also displays a sense of the precariousness of secular life in his writings, he retains a commitment to the secular as "the real" that Benjamin doesn't have.

Thus when Benjamin distinguishes between subject and object he begins not with the contrast between self and nature (as de Man does) but with the opposition between persons. It is the obscurity of intentions not of objects that generates suspicion, desire, and deceit in the exercise of power, and that makes a simple resort to sincerity impossible. Benjamin's baroque is a social world to which allegory and not symbol is central. The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century plays that Benjamin analyzes—prima-

rily German but also English and Spanish—reflect a conception of history that is no longer integrated into the Christian myth of redemption. That is one aspect of their secularity. Another less obvious aspect is displayed in the emblematic character of Socrates' death. The legend of Socrates' judicially imposed suicide, Benjamin maintains, constitutes the secularization of classical tragedy, and hence of myth, because it substitutes a reasoned and exemplary death for the sacrificial death of a mythic hero. Although baroque drama does not quite represent the complete triumph of enlightened reason—thus Benjamin—it does signify the impossibility of classical tragedy and myth in the modern world. It aspires to *teach* the spectator. Its movement typically revolves around the person of the monarch, at once tyrant and martyr, a figure whose extravagant passions demonstrate the willfulness of sovereignty. Its theme is not tragic fate (from which nothing can be learned) but the mourning and sorrow that are invested in the dangerous exercise of social reason and social power.

Given the social instability and political violence of early modern times, there is a continuous tension in baroque drama between the ideal of restoration and the fear of catastrophe. The emphasis on *this-worldliness* is a consequence of that tension. Skeptical detachment from all contestable beliefs was conducive to self-preservation. In a striking sentence Benjamin observes that even "The religious man of the baroque era clings so tightly to the world because of the feeling that he is being driven along a cataract with it."[100] Thus Benjamin presents the emerging salience of the secular world in early modernity not by assuming the triumph of "common sense," or by invoking criteria acceptable to his secular readers for determining what is worthy of belief. He displays actualizing provincial rulers as they seek desperately to control an unruly world as allegorical performances.

Why is allegory the appropriate mode for apprehending this world? Because, says Benjamin, unlike romantic *symbol* (timeless, unified, and spiritualized) baroque *allegory* has a fluid temporality, it is always fragmented, and it is material. Allegory expresses well the uncontrollable, indeterminable, and yet *material* world of the baroque princely court with its intrigue, betrayal, and murder. In brief, this world is "secular" not because scientific knowledge has replaced religious belief (that is, because the "real" has at last become apparent) but because, on the contrary, it must be lived in uncertainly, without fixed moorings even for the believer, a world in

100. Ibid., p. 66.

which the real and the imaginary mirror each other. In this world the politics of certainty is clearly impossible.

That de Man attributes the secular attitude to the early romantics while Benjamin places it in the earlier, baroque period is really beside the point for my purposes. What is worth noting is that through his account of baroque allegory Benjamin provides a different understanding of "the secular" than the one de Man does in his discussion of romantic symbolism. For Benjamin takes allegory to be not merely a conventional relationship between an image and its meaning but a "form of expression." Citing Renaissance sources, Benjamin argues that emblems and hieroglyphs do not merely show something, they also instruct. (Language is not an abstraction that stands apart from "the real"; it embodies and mediates the life of people, gestures, and things in the world.) And what the emblems have to teach is more authoritative than purely personal preferences. The interweaving in such communication of what today many would separate as the sacred and the profane remains for Benjamin an essential feature of allegory.

This in at least two senses. To begin with, there is the *power* of a sign to signify: for in allegorical textuality, "all of the things that are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things, [a power] which raises them onto a higher plane, and which can, indeed, sanctify them." Actuality is never translucent even to the agent, says Benjamin. It must always be (provisionally) read. The representation (or signifier) and what it represents (signified) are interdependent. Each is incomplete, and both are equally real.

Second, the *interdependence* of religious and secular elements in allegorical writing implies a "conflict between theological and artistic intentions, a synthesis not so much in the sense of a peace as a *treuga dei* [Truce of God] between the conflicting opinions."[101] In other words, it is this conflict between the two poles that creates the space for allegory—so Benjamin maintains—and thus makes possible the particular form of sensibility called baroque.

In both de Man and Benjamin the secular is clearly opposed to the mythical. For de Man this means the exclusion of symbolism, for Benjamin the inclusion of allegory. The two approaches seem to me to have different implications for research as well as for politics. The one calls for

101. Ibid., op. cit., pp. 162–77.

unmasking a collective illusion, for seeing through an "enchanted world,"[102] the other for exploring the intricate play between representations and what they represent, between actions and the disciplines that aim to define and validate them, between language games and forms of life. Because Benjamin tries to maintain a continuous tension between moral judgment and open inquiry, between the reassurance of enlightenment and the uncertainties of desire, he helps one to address the ambiguous connections between the secular and modern politics.

102. I do not want to be taken as saying that de Man's views on unmasking are simple. Far from it. Thus in "Criticism and Crisis" he writes: "In the same manner that the poetic lyric originates in moments of tranquility, in the absence of actual emotions, and then proceeds to invent fictional emotions to create the illusion of recollection, the work of fiction invents fictional subjects to create the illusion of the reality of others. But the fiction is not myth, for it knows and names itself as fiction. It is not a demystification, it is demystified from the start. When modern critics think they are demystifying literature, they are in fact being demystified by it; but since this necessarily occurs in the form of a crisis, they are blind to what takes place within themselves" (de Man, p. 18). Literature, he maintains, is concerned with naming, but what it names is not an absence—as critics who seek to demonstrate its ideological function suppose—but "nothingness." However, it seems to me that there is, in de Man's statement, a wish to evoke an echo of the sacred within a "disenchanted" world.

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Thinking about Agency and Pain

I suggested in the previous chapter that the secular is best approached indirectly. So I explored some ways in which the notion of myth was used through several centuries to shape knowledges, behaviors, and sensibilities we call secular. In this chapter I explore it through the concept of agency, especially agency connected to pain. Why agency? Because the secular depends on particular conceptions of *action* and *passion*. Why pain? For two reasons: First, because in the sense of passion, pain is associated with religious subjectivity and often regarded as inimical to reason; second, because in the sense of suffering it is thought of as a human condition that secular agency must eliminate universally.[1] In the latter part of this chapter I discuss some examples of agency from Christian, Muslim, and pre-Christian history in which pain is central. But I do so less for the sake of understanding the justifications some religious people give for the existence of

1. Lawrence Grossberg observes that "agency—the ability to make history as it were—is not intrinsic either to subjectivity or to subjects. It is not an ontological principle that distinguishes humans from other sorts of being. Agency is defined by the articulations of subject positions into specific places (sites of investment) and spaces (fields of activity) on socially constructed territorialities. Agency is the empowerment enabled at particular sites and along particular vectors" (Lawrence Grossberg, "Cultural Studies and/in New Worlds," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 10, 1993, p. 15). I agree with Grossberg that agency and subjectivity must be analytically separated, but I disagree that agency must be identified with "history-making" and "self-empowerment," as this chapter makes clear.