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DOI

[10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199988457.013.23](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199988457.013.23)

Publication date

2017

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

The Oxford Handbook of Secularism

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Citation for published version (APA):

Jansen, Y. (2017). Beyond comparing secularisms: a critique of religio-secularism. In P. Zuckerman, & J. R. Shook (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism* (pp. 369-386). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199988457.013.23>

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Beyond Comparing Secularisms: A Critique of Religio-Secularism

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The Oxford Handbook of Secularism

Edited by Phil Zuckerman and John R. Shook

Print Publication Date: Feb 2017 Subject: Religion, Religion and Society

Online Publication Date: Jan 2017 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199988457.013.23

Abstract and Keywords

“Religio-secularism” denotes the tendency to understand specific cultural and political conflicts in terms an opposition between religion on the one hand and secularism on the other. Religio-secularism as a cultural-political paradigm tends to obscure the intricacies of political, socioeconomic, cultural-historical, religious, and ideological dimensions of specific situations (and often conflicts) that require complex analysis and evaluation. Religio-secularism, especially when it becomes the primary or exclusive framework for understanding cultural and political conflict, serves as an ideological barrier rather than an illuminating paradigm. Critique of the increasing grip of religio-secularism on political thinking, in contrast to the captivation with “postsecularism,” takes a reflexive attitude toward religio-secularism and its distorted lens through which to view the historical world. Other lenses should be used to survey contemporary events and situations related to religion, and this is particularly so with regard to conflicts over religion, religion in the public sphere, and secularism.

Keywords: religion, religio-secularism, secularisms, Islam, France, Europe

IN public debates across the world today, and especially in Euro-Atlantic contexts, we often hear the thesis that secularism is a plausible answer to the renewed relevance of religion in the public sphere. Secularism, broadly understood, then means that there should be clearly distinguished political and religious fields within nation-states and larger political constellations such as the European Union and that the two fields need to be more or less autonomous. In more demanding versions of secularism, which are closely connected to its classical French and American understandings, these fields need to be strictly separated.

Beyond Comparing Secularisms: A Critique of Religio-Secularism

The resurgence of religion as a politically relevant phenomenon has accordingly been traced to the period surrounding the end of the Cold War in the 1980s and 1990s. Key historical events include the Iranian Revolution, the Afghan War, the Rushdie affair, the French headscarf affairs, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the emergence of neoconservatism and of the religious right in the United States, and religious social movements of various political stripes in South America, the Islamic world, India, and China.

This widely shared thesis is challenged in this chapter. Has there been a more or less global and spontaneous religious resurgence after the end of the Cold War, and has secularism been a relatively consistent and clear answer to that resurgence? A vast interdisciplinary field connecting philosophy, (intellectual) history, sociology, cultural anthropology, religious studies, and literary studies has developed in recent years to raise complex questions for both religion and secularism.

Questioning Secularism

With regard to secularism, two different ways of raising questions are available. The first has been elaborated by authors writing within the field of modern liberal and republican political thought, the intellectual tradition in which the concept of secularism was coined. Authors connected to this tradition have analyzed a variety of *different secularisms* that are (p. 370) available in different national and regional traditions, and they have evaluated them on the basis of how tolerant or intolerant they are toward religion, how neutral and effective they are in organizing and governing the political field and/or public spheres, or how necessary they are for liberal democracy (Bader 2007). The guiding questions are these: How much secularism, and what kinds of secularism, can be found in diverse global contexts, and how much secularism do we actually need, for what purposes, and do we need it at all? Authors writing within the political theoretical field differentiate, for example, between liberal secularism, theological secularism, narrative secularism, philosophical secularism, political secularism, and moderate secularism. This “multiple secularisms” approach is advanced by scholars such as Tariq Modood (1998), Cécile Laborde (2008), Charles Taylor and Jocelyn Maclure (2011), and many others.

A related yet substantially different approach is familiar to the humanities and cultural anthropology. This approach questions the use of a secular-religious paradigm or framework for understanding issues and conflicts having complex cultural-political dimensions. This approach does not seek types of “good” or “bad” secularism but instead investigates and historicizes the concepts of religion and secularism themselves, and even the secularity-religion distinction itself. Scholars have traced and problematized the connections of both concepts to ideas about belief, faith, culture and reason in modern (post-Reformation) traditions of thought (Gauchet 1985; Asad 1993; Smith 1998; Derrida 2000; Dubuisson 2003; Masuzawa 2005; Taylor 2007; Nancy 2007; Hurd 2008; Batnitzky 2011; Josephson 2012).

Beyond Comparing Secularisms: A Critique of Religio-Secularism

An aspect to these critiques of secularism has been understood, or summarized, in terms of a “postsecularism.” This term is not felicitous, because the genealogy of the concepts of secularism and religion, their interrelations, and their ability to assist in understanding societies and societal conflict are at stake, rather than the goal of going “beyond” secularism. I prefer a term proposed by sociologist Markus Dressler (2014), who has introduced the notion of “religio-secularism.” Religio-secularism is characterized by the usage of key terms—religion, secularity, and secularism—as if they were adequately defined and stable, analytical terms, and as if the boundaries between them were stable. Religio-secularism, when it is typically used, serves as a largely unquestioned and exclusive framework for understanding contemporary cultural-political conflicts all over the world having religious dimensions and other dimensions as well—socioeconomic, political-historical, intercultural, and interethnic dimensions (Hurd 2015).

Dressler says that “the potential of the notion of the ‘post-secular’ is limited since it ultimately remains within the logic of religio-secularism” (2014). For example, a tendency to remain within the religio-secular paradigm is seen in the work of anthropologist Talal Asad (1993, 2003). He was one of the first to question religio-secularism more broadly, but he remains focused on religion and secularism, with a strong penchant toward critiquing secularism rather than religion (Bangstad 2009; Mufti 2010; and see Jansen 2011, analogously, about Saba Mahmood’s reading of the work of Nasr Abu Zayd). A substantial trend within the criticism of religio-secularism takes a reflexive approach to ask what it means to rely on religio-secularism as a lens for investigating culture, ethnicity, and religion in politics (and religion in political conflict specifically). This criticism will be especially helpful where religio-secularism has been highly influential for theorizing about minorities and minoritization (e.g., in France and Turkey) and about conflicts concerning global politics in which struggles over religion and/or secularism are involved, including the ongoing French head-scarf affairs (Jansen 2013).

(p. 371) Specifying Religio-Secularism

The critique of religio-secularism focuses on the ways that secularism and religion have been defined in semantic continuity with each other. Dressler has formulated this problem well:

In the most general way, I use the notion of “religio-secularism” to put emphasis on the manner in which the concepts of religion and the secular have been intertwined, forming a semantic continuum constituted by the oppositional way in which they are pointing to each other without being able to be defined independently from one another. It also points to how secularism and religionism are corresponding worldviews and practices. The question of the political can be

Beyond Comparing Secularisms: A Critique of Religio-Secularism

regarded as the vantage point through which this antagonism/binary is constantly reinforced. (2014)

Religio-secularism stems from a tradition (primarily liberal or republican, Euro-Atlantic) of explaining political violence in terms of religious violence. This tradition has its roots in the historiography of the early modern wars during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that labeled them as “wars of religion.” This view had been mostly superseded by the more secular historiography of the twentieth century, which concentrated on the worldly, political, ideological, (inter-)cultural, and socioeconomic dimensions of history and conflict. However, during the Cold War, there developed a tendency to discuss historical conflicts once again in terms of spiritual and religious value conflict, such as a struggle between (Christian) capitalism and (atheist) communism. Historian Jonathan Herzog (2011) invented the term “military-spiritual complex” for this spiritualization of worldly conflict (see as well Stevens 2010; Moyn 2015). This tendency’s reinforcement during the late 1970s and 1980s and beyond has not been well-researched, nor has its role in theorizing about political conflict after the end of the Cold War (but see the recent work of Su 2016). After decolonization and the end of the Cold War, novel power constellations arose for which religion increasingly played a defining role for redrawing political boundaries set during the Cold War and/or the process of decolonization. Afghanistan is a representative case (Mamdani 2004), and so is Iran, several African countries, the Philippines and India (Hurd 2015, Mahmood 2015, Su 2016).

In philosophy and political theory, religious worldviews (rather than socioeconomic and cultural developments) became increasingly important as focal points for political analysis in the last decades of the twentieth century. From 1985 onwards, John Rawls grounded his view of justice on the prevalence of a deep value pluralism due to citizens adhering to “comprehensive doctrines” disagreeing about the good life, causing political disagreement and even conflict. This doctrine of deep value pluralism was naturalized and globalized in political theoretical debate, instead of interpreted as part of a Post Cold War and deeply Christian American intellectual landscape. Today, the abundance of debates about “religion in the public sphere” within political theory shows how normal it has become to assume that religious (or metaphysical) worldviews define our political identities to a large extent.

In reaction to these developments, some scholars have tried to understand how calling post-Cold War conflicts “religious” has a performative dimension, which produces them, at least partly, *as* religious. To further explore this point, philosopher Jacques Derrida has coined the term *mondialatinisation* (translated as “globalatinization”; 2000: 23). As Derrida puts it: “the world today speaks Latin (most often via Anglo-American) when it authorizes itself in the name of religion.” (2002 64). Looking at the long-term development of *mondialatinisation*, (p. 372) anthropologist Richard King interprets it as a conceptualization of the (orientalizing) process whereby expressions of cultural difference have tended to be translated as “religious” in the Western imagination: “judgments over what is religious and what is not, particularly when formulated from the

perspective of philosophy, or the philosophy of religions, should be looked upon in terms of their disciplinary role as a form of epistemological border control at the margins of ‘western civilization’” (2009: 48; see as well Meighoo 2016)).

We can now apply this methodological and historical introduction to contemporary debates about secularism and religion.

Secularism

Comparative constitutionalism allows one to distinguish at least eight fundamentally different (and inconsistent) meanings of secularism in constitutional contexts alone (Bader 2010). Hence, as Stuart Hall once said about multiculturalism, secularism, over the years, has come “to reference a diffuse, indeed maddeningly spongy and imprecise, discursive field: a train of false trails and misleading universals. Its references are a wild variety of political strategies” (Hall 2001: 3) I limit myself here to the three most common meanings, for initially specifying the mutual autonomy of political and religious spheres, without having the pretense to be able to leave the spongy field.

First, in political and constitutional contexts, secularism broadly refers to the *separation* of religion and politics, which has historically been characterized as a separation of church and state. In principle, the state does not interfere with religions, and religions stay at a distance from state power. Some people take this to mean that religious affiliations should not be visible in public spaces or that religious authorities may not make political statements, but such questions are highly contested.

Second, in cultural and scientific contexts, secularism usually refers to the notion that religion (as belief) should be replaced by scientific insights or at least by a skeptical stance toward “final truths” to oppose religion taken as dogmatic belief. This secularism is part of the antireligious inheritance from the Enlightenment age, demanding more than just a separation between church and state (between religion and reason). To paraphrase Sigmund Freud, the goal should be: “where religion was, shall be secularity.” In Charles Taylor’s (2007) words, the goal is the “subtraction,” the departure of religion. Secular stances about the moral life, for example, are found among natural scientists like Richard Dawkins and among cultural scholars and artists who view literature, philosophy, and art as modern sources for morality “after” theology.

Third, in liberal political philosophy, offering elaborations upon basic concepts of liberal democracy, secularism usually refers to the idea that positions about civic matters based on a particular conception of the good life—often seen as typically religious—have a limited applicability within political debates about constitutional values and that we need a ‘secular’ public sphere. Influential philosopher Jürgen Habermas, for example, argues that to play a political role, such ‘particular’ conceptions of the good require *translation* into terms that are accessible for all and terms potentially agreeable to many, at least in

Beyond Comparing Secularisms: A Critique of Religio-Secularism

principle. Without that translation into what Habermas sees as ‘secular’ terms, those conceptions of the good remain too particular (as dogma, “belief,” or “doctrine”) to ever join an overlapping consensus about (p. 373) constitutional essentials – although religious traditions may carry great semantic resources for giving meaning to life (Habermas 2008; see Lafont, this volume).

These three common meanings of “secularism” and dominant political theories defending secularism today—mostly in the liberal and republican traditions—presuppose religio-secularism (as defined in the previous section). This is related to the liberal historiography of the early modern ‘wars of religion’, when liberal theorists leave unexplored the question of how religious these wars actually were, and whether it was ‘secularism’ that came out of them or, at least partly, religious homogenisation cum minority formation (Asad 2006; Cavanaugh 2009; Diefendorf 2014). Instead, they may recount how religious conflicts were reduced thanks to the separation of church and state, the privatizing of belief, and the introduction of religious freedom. In a word, secularization and secularism “tamed” the holy fire of religion. Additionally, political theories defending secularism also tend to define religion as a product of secularity. Under the influence of secularization, the story goes, premodern cultural-religious traditions encompassing all of life including politics were transformed into modern religions concerning only nonpolitical dimensions to life. Religion is hence both the beginning and the end product of secularity, and secularity is likewise religion’s product. This viewpoint is possible through the shifting definition of religion as (1) a body of thought and practice about the good life that can be more or less politically irrelevant (*adiaphora*) and also (2) from another perspective, a blanket term covering “competing universalisms” concerning everything about life. Liberalism’s historical horizon and manner of distinguishing secularism and religion sustain worries that religion can rapidly reacquire political and highly competitive dimensions, making religion dangerous. These worries remain effective today, in a context where neoliberal thinking takes people to normally be motivated by incentives provided by ongoing competition in the course of daily life. An ambivalence therefore characterizes liberal discourses concerning religion and secularism. Although liberalism depicts itself as a neutral way to separate religion apart from governing, it also regards religion as a power requiring regulation, turning it into an object of policy for containment or marginalization. As a result, secularism is neither the neutral foundation for the state nor the social condition toward which religions are destined. Instead, secularism must continually frame and shape religion in a number of ways (Asad 2003; Dressler and Mandair 2011; Hurd 2015; Mahmood 2015).

We can now turn to typical problems and solutions arrived at by contemporary liberal discourses in cases where the secular-religious distinction is politically dominant. This dominance is neither given nor necessary. One can read Veit Bader (2007; see this volume), who has countered that dominance. Still, it has increasingly prevailed for cases such as the headscarf issue in France and Turkey and now throughout Europe. Let us therefore turn to France, a country where religio-secularism has taken center stage in

Beyond Comparing Secularisms: A Critique of Religio-Secularism

social conflicts displaying intermingled religious, racial, gender, class, and intercultural aspects. In recent years, the *laïcité* form of secularism has acquired the status of a needed prerequisite for the realization of freedom and equality, core values of liberal democracy.

Laïcité

Since 1989 the French headscarf affairs have been almost exclusively understood in the context of *laïcité*, the French conception of secularism. *Laïcité* played a large role in the 2004 ban on wearing headscarves in public high schools. Since then, the ban has been expanded in a (p. 374) number of ways. A mother wearing a headscarf may not bring her toddler inside a public school building, and women cannot wear a *burqa* in the streets of France.

These French developments have been extensively evaluated from the stance of liberal theory. Liberal philosophers critical of *laïcité* often distinguish a more liberal and tolerant (Lockean) type of secularism from a more “scientific,” rationalistic, authoritarian (Hobbesian or Rousseauian) secularism. Many variants fall in between these options; theorists can take what was earlier labeled as a “multiple secularisms” approach. For example, Charles Taylor and Jocelyn Maclure (2011) perceive an antipluralistic and antimodern form of secularity when French citizens proclaim secularism as the only true doctrine. These two thinkers make a plea for a different form of secularism leaving room for individuals’ and groups’ divergent views and practices (see also Laborde 2008; Baubérot 2010). This stance places much weight on religious freedom, a freedom diminished by any secularism becoming in effect a “theological” doctrine, especially when it acquires state power. Interpreters applying this stance fail to interrogate the concepts of “religion” or “secularity,” however. If secularists are authoritarian and proclaim themselves as holders of truth, this stance assigns that kind of secularism over to the side of “religion” (theology) and recommends the type of tactics usually reserved for controlling religion.

Invariably, then, these liberal interpreters subscribe to a quite minimal interpretation of secularism, which often adds little to the key concepts of freedom and equality that form the basis of liberal democracy. It is for that reason that Charles Taylor has lamented that it is now too late to ban the word “secularism” but, at the same time, that this is *the* reason for continuing to use it (2009: xxi), without questioning the political or conceptual necessity of secularism itself within a liberal democracy.

Therefore, even if moderate, narrative, liberal, tolerant secularisms can accommodate religion, including its practices, more successfully than die-hard, truth-claiming *laicism*, they remain wedded to the idea that we should treat “religion” as a separate category in need of a special principle, while at the same time preframing the position of minorities—such as, saliently today, Jews and Muslims in Europe—as “religious.” Doing so tends to

hide from view all of the majority–minority relations, power inequalities, class and colonial history, everydayness, migration histories, histories of imaginaries, and stereotypes in intercultural memory that are relevant to understand the position of these minorities—as well as the genealogy of the concept of ‘minority’ itself (Nordmann 2004; Badiou 2006; Bowen 2007; Jansen 2013; Hurd 2015). Therefore, a liberal critique of authoritarian secularism made from the position of religio-secularism will not provide sufficiently sociologically and politically informed evaluations of societal questions – as Karl Marx already knew in the nineteenth century considering the so-called ‘Jewish Question’ (Marx 1978; Farris 2014). Liberal interpretations tend to be solely concerned with the legitimate place of religion in the public sphere, not with the validity of “religio-secularism” itself.

Remaining within the French context, we should seek out other factors to conflicts surrounding headscarves and other contested religious practices. The principle of *laïcité*, insofar as it is constitutionally defined, does not entail a ban on headscarves, nor a prohibition against religious symbols or religious expression in the public sphere (Bowen 2007). Instead, a complex mixture of political, sociological, psychological, and postcolonial motives has aligned to produce the headscarf law (Nordmann 2004; Balibar 2004; Bowen 2007; Jansen 2013). Moreover, the famous Stasi Commission, advising on the headscarf law in 2003, did not base its conclusions on any definition of *laïcité* but relied on the additional goal of maintaining public order—an order (p. 375) perceived by many (including sociologist Alain Touraine and political scientist Gilles Kepel) to be threatened by inimical Islamists in France (Jansen 2010, 2013).

In 1989, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu ([1989] 1999) already said that the debate over secularism betrayed underlying motives bearing racial and colonial traces: a resistance to the long-term presence of Arabs in France. For Bourdieu, secularism was the respectable version of an older colonial mentality, largely due to Algeria. Others have pointed to the role of class politics, gender politics, migration history, the role and organisation of the French police, the introduction of security discourses and practices, and the possibility of basing political success on populist themes (see Jansen 2013). The French context hence suggests that the growing literature on the interconnections between race and religion (Anidjar 2008; Darian-Smith 2010; Meer 2014; Topolski and Nathan 2014; Vial 2016)) should be enlarged to deal with the interconnections of race, migration, and religio-secularism. Leaving France, we can examine broader contours to the critique of religio-secularism.

Europe and the Position of Ethno-religious Minorities

Beyond Comparing Secularisms: A Critique of Religio-Secularism

Increasingly, religio-secularism is more or less taken for granted when dealing with various aspects to the lives of ethno-religious minorities at a global scale—including their legal definition and their regulation as “minorities” (Hurd 2015). For historical reasons, within Europe, this situation concerns Jews and Muslims in particular, but other minorities, especially those connected to recent migration histories, are affected by this trend as well.

The status of Jews and Muslims has been increasingly thematized in terms of their religious (bodily) practices, such as religious clothing, ritual slaughter, and circumcision. These practices, treated within religio-secularism, allow secular, liberal, or humanist values to be contrasted against orthodox religious values. However, for Jews and Muslims, their practices and the meanings they convey are situated in cultural and historical contexts too complex to be grasped within religio-secularism. This is no less true if we apply expansive definitions of secularity and religion. Interpreting religious practices in contemporary social contexts requires far more attention to the memory of Christian and modernist ideas about Judaism and Islam (about the ‘Semite’, about race and racism), to the legacies of these cultural memories in the present, and additional social factors. Yirmiyahu Yovel succinctly formulated this point in regard to the position of the Jews in modernizing Europe during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On the dynamic relation between minorities and majorities during this transformational period, he wrote:

Jews ... provided Europeans with a mirror, a crooked, passion-laden mirror, in which to see a reflection of their own identity problems. The “Jewish problem” was basically a European problem: that is, not only a problem for Europe but a reflection of Europe’s own problem with itself, of how, in an age of rapid transformation, Europeans were understanding their own identity, future, and meaning of life. (1998: xi)

This mirroring effect upon minorities, a manifestation of both Christian and secular insecurities surrounding the transformations of modernity, is now at work with regard to Muslims (p. 376) (and again relevant once again for Jews). On the one hand, Muslims are described in terms of religious orthodoxy and stubborn piety, but on the other hand, they are regarded as more modern, globalized, and intangible than European majorities. At a time when actual situations are tragically confirming such stereotypes, we have entered an immensely complicated semantic field. We can only thematize these mirrorings by admitting how the categories of “religion” and “secularity” do not cover the reality of these intercultural relations but partly help to produce them in the first place. Discussing debates about religious practices in abstraction from broader cultural matters, focused only through the secular-religious framework, omits crucial perspectives.

Notions of Jewishness and Muslimness, and of Judaism and Islam as well, are varied, unsystematic, and interwoven cultural constructs that cannot be separated from Islamophobia and anti-Semitism—although they are not entirely produced by them, either. We need to take more seriously the triangular dynamic to self- and other-

Beyond Comparing Secularisms: A Critique of Religio-Secularism

definitions among Jews, Muslims, and other Europeans (whether labeled as secular, Enlightened, Christian, or Judeo-Christian). Debates on 'religion in the public sphere' therefore get it wrong when they limit themselves to the question of how religious peoples and populations fit into secular nation-states, and secular European and international institutions. Debates should no longer be about the "Muslim question" as a present-day equivalent of "the Jewish question," that is, about how Muslims could (or should) integrate into a secular Europe. Rather, these debates should be about the "European question," about how European cultures can and should deal with minorities on the basis of their specific (and nearly always deeply problematic) histories of actual 'minority-making' (Anidjar 2012). And this has to happen while an expansion of *jihadism* (or *takfirism*) within Europe and right-wing extremist reactions against the Muslim presence are both fueled by framing violence in terms of a clash of absolute values—religious and secular values.

More Historical and Sociological Critiques of Religio-Secularism

Religio-secularism's framework is not only misleading with regard to the status of specific minorities; its problematic assumptions make our understanding of religion as well as secularity quite rigid. Public discourses applying religio-secularism tend to advance highly idealized images of secularism as a Euro-Atlantic political tradition of a radical separation between church and state, privatized religion, and near total freedom of speech, a tradition "normal" for contemporary Western societies. Islam may then be viewed as a highly problematic religion that must adapt to this political tradition. Besides misrepresenting Islam, this framework misrepresents Western secularism. It is indeed the case that each modern state does differentiate between religion and politics, just in as many nonmodern societies, but that distinction is everywhere a matter of degrees and one that does not lend itself to any easy, radical separation. The contrary of secularism, then, could not point just to theocracy. The state and religion are always, to varying degrees, interwoven throughout governmental policies and actions, no less than the entanglement among all other forms of human association, even the most "private" relations (Bader 2007). With better insight into the diversity (p. 377) and extent of disciplinary and governmental power (as Foucault's work shows), any notion of a strict separation of church and state is exposed as chimerical. In France, for example, the official doctrine is *laïcité*, although there are many forms of government involvement with religions. Examples include the extensive subsidization of the Catholic tradition's cultural preservation, subsidies for special schools, and the formation of an Islam de France by choosing representatives for the French state (Bowen 2007; Jansen 2013).

As for religion, the idealization of religion as just a matter of belief, in that "free" domain of individual conscience, is also far from evident in the real world. Religions, and differences among them, are shaped by envioning political processes from local up to international scales. Conflicts between "religious sects" (an oft-heard term) in countries like Syria and Egypt are not largely the result of opposed religious convictions. They arise from complex social processes involving religious interests and goals, inherited colonial issues, postcolonial interferences during and after the Cold War, current political interests of global actors, and so on. Therefore, the near exclusive focus of US foreign policy institutions on freedom of religion and belief could not amount to just an apolitical advocacy of universal human rights. As Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (2015) has argued, such advocacy may contribute to the hardening of boundaries between religious groups, the establishment of power inequalities, and the obscuring of other dimensions to conflict—the impact of authoritarian state power in particular.

Religio-secularism, as we have discussed, owes much of its ambivalence toward religion to the dominant interpretation of the European "wars of religion": religion incited people to violence because the alleged absoluteness of their religious knowledge consummated a holy fire that legitimized and even encouraged violence. Historical research has placed

Beyond Comparing Secularisms: A Critique of Religio-Secularism

this interpretation into better perspective. Material, territorial, and other motivations also played crucial roles in those wars. After the Peace of Westphalia (1648) the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (“whose realm, his religion”) was in vogue across Europe as powerful political interests invoked it to determine which religion had the upper hand (Cavanaugh 2009). That does not mean that truth claims of religious belief are not historically relevant but rather that they always stand within contexts where they sometimes lead to violence, and often do not, depending on other circumstances beyond religion itself. Religious and nonreligious motivations are deeply entwined, so a strict methodological division between religious and secular motives and practices can no longer be reliable for conducting the historiography of the early modern wars (Diefendorf 2014).

Another historical argument questions religio-secularism from the secular side. Neither organized religion nor deep religious belief enjoy any monopoly on political violence, as demonstrated by the various totalitarianisms of the twentieth century, as well as the globalizing capitalism of our own day. Large-scale crimes against humanity, along with the neglect and dispossession of many peoples, has been carried out in the name of racial, national, and economic ideologies. Religion, moreover, has no monopoly on strong conviction nor on ideology—as certainties about the proper functioning of capitalist markets can display. Going further, seemingly secular economic concepts such as “debt,” “obligation,” and “trust” in the economic realm have deep cultural connections with their theological legacies (Graeber 2012).

These interwoven histories between religion and secularity undermine the stance that people of literal religious belief, those who believe in God(s) or heaven, are the ones most capable of fanaticism. Far more political violence is hidden within the pursuit of secularism (p. 378) than anticipated by the presumption that fanaticism and violence are natural by-products of religion. Moreover, historical religions often operate with a concept of transcendence that exceeds all worldly frameworks and expectations and even our utopias; and some say that religions (properly understood) build up foundational reserves to secular ideologies and political violence (Latour 2013). Therefore, it is vital to seek out new concepts that can shed light on what the political problematization of religion is really about so that we can directly debate particularism, violence, securitization, dogmatism, and ideology anywhere on the political spectrum and even fault sheer human blindness, impotence, and aggression. Particularism and dogmatism are especially important for our argument. Religio-secularism tends to make us forget that they are common to both religious and secular doctrines and worldviews, because it automatically associates religion with particularism and dogmatism and tends to present secular arguments as more intrinsically inclined to reasonability; finding that particularism is not exclusive to either side arouses another problem almost invisible to the secular-religious framework.¹

There is one additional urgent reason for stepping outside of the religio-secularism framework. The implicit definition of religion in terms of particularism misleadingly suggests that religions are by nature closed systems of absolute truth claims. This may

Beyond Comparing Secularisms: A Critique of Religio-Secularism

provoke religious groups into actions that appear to fulfill those crude expectations. We see this happening all over the world. In America, the religious right-wing political movement permits religious opinions to justify antidemocratic and racist opinions and attitudes, and some conservative religious groups will not hold themselves accountable to science or to freedom and equality.² Freedom of conscience plays a complicated role here. On the one hand, it raises a crucial barrier against coercion by the government or political majorities. On the other hand, freedom of conscience can also become a license for refusing to reconsider or compromise any traditional visions, modern ideologies, or complicated neo-liberal combinations of traditionalism and capitalist ideology. This license is especially detrimental where it proves profitable to be religious or to lead a religious organization (Posner 2008; Vatter 2011; Brown 2015). However, religious traditions can testify against an interpretation of religion in terms of particularism and dogmatism. Much religious reasoning is not dogmatic and stays open to discussion. And the very same text-centered traditions said to embody absolute truth claims—“because the Bible says so”—all have extensive hermeneutic and/or heterodox traditions. The meanings of holy scriptures within religions are always reinterpreted in relation to novel contexts in which they emerge (Boyarin 2003; Abu Zayd 2006 — this is not necessarily a culturally secularist or Protestant view, as I argued *pace* Saba Mahmood in Jansen 2009). Religious traditions are intimately familiar with internal sources of critique and renewal, and in addition to that, they are often in discussion with each other, instead of contemplating only their own truth claims.

Genealogies of Religion, Postsecularism, and the Critique of Religio-Secularism

Among those who have criticized religio-secularism since the 1990s, many begin from examining the concept of “religion” and tracing the modern origins of this concept (Asad 1993; (p. 379) Smith 1998). For this genealogical approach, liberalism and secularism are usually taken to be closely related and studied as legacies of Protestant, Christian, and colonial contributions to the concept of religion. Hence according to its genealogies the concept of religion, as it is employed in liberal and secular frameworks, has Eurocentric presuppositions and pretensions and/or operates from unquestioned Christian assumptions. Here we return to the problem captured by Derrida’s play on words, *mondialatinisation*. This approach interprets the conceptual history of ‘religion’ in terms of a collection of doctrines or beliefs containing certain truth claims about the good life, and emphasizes that this interpretation arose within a specifically Christian context, developed during colonial expansion and incorporated into liberal and secular traditions (Asad 1993; Spinner-Halev 2005; Brown et al. 2009; Brown 2012; Josephson 2012). Bringing the interpretation of religion from such a genealogical, “postsecular” line of reasoning, to a further stepping back from religio-secularism, is an eminently useful line of research to be developed in the future. Let me explain. In *Genealogies of Religion*, Asad (1993) discussed Immanuel Kant’s work on religion. Kant forms a crucial intellectual connection between Protestant Christianity and modern philosophy and secularism. Kant distinguishes religion as a universally singular category, one accessible to everyone in principle, from the religiosity of particular “cults.” Those cults are religious traditions replete with holy books, religious laws, and religious practices, which Kant regards are merely the exterior vehicles for an inner, moral, and universal religion ([1793] 2003). The more cultic, the less serious the religious core matters; religion concerns “meaning,” not “practice.” Protestantism is, according to Kant, closer to true religion than Catholicism—and much closer than Judaism and Islam. Kant notoriously claimed that the “yoke of external observances” to which the Jews submitted should be cast off (Kant [1793] 2003 185; see Mack 2003; Jansen 2013). In the wake of this kind of conceptual history, Western modernism inherited ideas about what religion is (universalistic and truth-claiming) and what ‘cult’ is (particularizing and articulating specific traditions). Asad’s tracing of the Kantian-secular understanding of “religion” is connected to his critique of secularism as a norm for today’s world. For instance, he connects it to a critique of the interpretation of the headscarf as a religious “symbol” or “sign”—reducing it to a question of “meaning”—which is how the headscarf is invariably perceived in France and elsewhere. The wearing of a head-scarf is, according to Asad, not a contingent sign but rather the participation in a practice that constitutes a “religious way of being” (2006: 501).

Similar critiques, interestingly, have been offered in regard to other religions. They have been put forward with the Indian context, for example, by S. N. Balagangadhara and Jakob De Roover (2007), who go so far as to claim that only monotheisms—which they call

Beyond Comparing Secularisms: A Critique of Religio-Secularism

“Semitic” (*sic!* see Anidjar 2008; Meer 2014) can be called religions—which implies a very ‘Kantian’ interpretation of ‘religion’. Other traditions, such as Hinduism in their view, operate through the rearticulation of ritual practices and stories but not through the transfer of doctrines and claims on truth. Jürgen Habermas (2008), by contrast, endorses the notion of religion as a “way of being” when he paraphrases contemporary Christian authors like Nicholas Wolterstorff. Ironically, these authors draw from the Protestant tradition itself to argue against the secular-Kantian interpretation of religion as universal and belief-centered.³

These debates all help to revise or parochialize the concept of religion as simultaneously both a matter of doctrine and choice, an interpretation that arose out of the interaction between the Protestant tradition, modern liberal thought, and other cultural traditions through colonial interactions (King 2009; Masuzawa 2005; Josephson 2012). (p. 380) And this interpretation is, curiously, what has been seen as the “postsecular” aspect to these debates. But if we do call them debates about “postsecularism,” the notions of religion and secularity have been left more or less intact. This in turn suggests that while “secular” or “Christian-modern-secular” individuals and cultures may feel at home within “secular” societies, there also will be a specific group of religious citizens for whom secularity presents a problem—a situation which then becomes interpreted in terms the ‘return’ of religion in the public sphere. I recommend departing from the religio-secularism framework altogether instead. In contrast to the Protestant-modernist and Kantian conception of religion, Asad presents an interpretation of medieval religious practices, where inner meaning and outer practice are not easy to distinguish from one another, because they occur together and are “performed” in unison (1993). However, this alternative can be interpreted beyond the religious-secular domain: Asad’s interpretation of medieval Catholicism coheres with a post-Kantian, pragmatic philosophical anthropology and a philosophy of language that affirms the interwovenness of meaning and practice, and of concept and affect, and the mutual constitution of rationality and culture. In other words, the Kantian dichotomy between religion and cult is analogous to the dichotomy between subject and object, which has been corrected in twentieth-century philosophy in many different ways. The radical separation between doctrine and practice, and the inner and outer, is simply untenable because individuals are always involved in learning processes, in language use, and in social practices. This is an insight shared by philosophers such as John Dewey, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Wendy Brown, Charles Taylor and Bruno Latour, despite their differences.

The suggestion that religion (and secularity) in the Kantian sense applies to modern European traditions, but not to others, is therefore conceptually problematic and falsely suggests deep cultural difference between “secular” (including modern Christian, or, ironically today, Judeo-Christian) and other “religious” cultures and groups. As we depart from religio-secularism, we can see how it is indebted to a modernist philosophical framework needing radical revisions.

Reviewing Religion in Politics from Outside Religio-Secularism

Leaving religio-secularism behind may be uncomfortable for secularists and liberals, especially if attention must be redirected to affective, doctrinal, and social and political dimensions of both religious and secular beliefs and practices. Due attention here risks destabilizing the distinction between conduct (practice) and belief (doctrine) that has been crucial to liberal judgments about what the freedom of religion does and does not cover (Malik 2013). The constitutional protection of belief remains crucial for the protection of minorities today, perhaps especially in Europe, despite all the difficulties with religio-secularism. One comforting thought is that some flexibility to the concept of religion has been allowed within juridical proceedings for a long time, which have recognised that belief and practice do undeniably overlap; secular doctrine is more inflexible in this regard than secular juridical practice (Bader 2007; but see Danchin 2012 and Moyn 2014 on the status of Muslims with the European Court of Human Rights).

(p. 381) Moreover, even discourses well aware of the historical dimensions and relativity of the concepts of religion and secularism can also carry their own authoritarian weight. Balagangadhara and De Roover (2007; 2012)), as already mentioned, claim that Hindu traditions are not essentially religions in the sense of doctrines about religious truth. Instead, they form a part of a culture of transferring practices and stories. Further, they argue that Hindu fundamentalism is a typical result from the importation of religion, during India's colonial period. On the basis of that reasoning, Balagangadhara and De Roover depict conversion as a practice typical of religious (truth-claiming and theological) traditions, not cultural traditions such as Hinduism. One's religion can be freely chosen, but no such choice is inherent to cultural tradition, such as the Hindu culture. This may sound reasonable as a theoretical position. As a practical matter, however, some Indian *dalits* ("untouchables") try to escape Hindu caste traditions by converting to Islam, Buddhism, or Christianity. Conversion therefore has become a highly politicized issue, and this intellectual debate reproduces the politics of the *hindutva* movement of Indian nationalism. This problem illustrates how a more culturally orientated concept of religion may not elude a political interpretation and would not automatically be less political than an interpretation in terms of doctrinal orientation.

Another conclusion is available, however. If the cultural and political dimensions to religion always intersect and interact with religious belief and practice, then a person's way of being religious is simply one aspect of that person's everyday life. Whether this "religious being" allows room for progressive explanations is not a philosophical question but clearly a historical-political question, and one that can lead to different answers, depending on the local situation. However that interpretation proceeds (in terms of piety or theology and so on), we should not unduly focus on just religiously motivated action. If we postulate that religious practices acquire meaning only in a cultural context, and hence within a political-historical-legal-institutional context, then we cannot separate "the

Beyond Comparing Secularisms: A Critique of Religio-Secularism

religious” from the worldly dimensions of certain practices and arguments. Hence, we require additional perspectives from beyond the framework of religio-secularism to understand and evaluate cultures and conflicts (Marsden 2005; Bangstad 2009; Jansen 2011; Schielke and Debevec 2012; Darian-Smith 2010; Hurd 2015; Shortal 2016).

Conclusion

The basic argument against religio-secularism is that it tends to obscure the intricacies of political, socioeconomic, cultural-historical, religious, and ideological dimensions to situations requiring analysis and evaluation, while also failing to sufficiently problematize the concepts of “religion” and “secularity” themselves. Religio-secularism, especially if it becomes the primary or exclusive framework for understanding cultural and political conflict, serves as an ideological barrier rather than an illuminating, or even “Enlightening,” paradigm.

Critical reflection on the increasing grip of religio-secularism, in contrast to the captivation with “postsecularism,” takes a reflexive attitude toward religio-secularism and its distorted lens through which to view our historical world. Other lenses should be used to survey contemporary conflicts, especially when today’s events are framed as conflicts over religion, religion in the public sphere, and secularism.

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(p. 386)

Notes:

(1.) John Rawls saw this very well, which is why he talked about “comprehensive doctrines” and public reason instead of religion and secularism, but he remained wedded to the idea that systems of dogmatic truth claims that have religious or metaphysical dimensions form a central part of people’s political identities. Cécile Laborde (2013) discusses this view in Rawls, leaving it unclear, however, whether she herself wants to step out of the Rawlsian framework or bring it back to a more classical religion–secularity distinction.

(2.) We see it in Daesh (ISIL) and Al Qaeda and in *jihadism* or *takfirism* more generally.

(3.) Saliently, Sayyid Qutb employs the term of Islam as a “way of life,” at least that is what is given in the English translation from 1964 (Qutb [1964] 2005; Jansen 2011). To my knowledge, how the existentialist terminology of “ways of being” entered the Islamic discourse still needs to be traced.

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