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## Beyond belief: secularism, religion and our muddled modernity

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### ABSTRACT



This article argues that the very idea of religion, as the genus of which the various ‘world religions’ are the species, is a modern invention, and thus comparisons between religions – including those pertaining to their capacity to recognize and adapt to the necessary distinction between matters of religion and matters properly belonging to secular society and the state – rest upon a deep conceptual error. Religion is made or produced, it goes on to show, in part by the interventions of the state; the claim that secularism is the process by which politics and religion come to be ‘separated out’ is therefore untenable. It concludes by asking how we might understand religion and secularism in the light of this, if it is no longer possible to understand them in the conventional way; and also what the implications of such alternative understandings might be for the narrative of modernity of which the secularization thesis is a part.

### KEYWORDS

Religion; secularism; modernity; postcolonialism

According to a longstanding narrative, one that has shaped the self-understandings of people in many parts of the world, ‘we’ moderns discovered certain truths about the world that marked us off from our historical predecessors, thereby constituting us as ‘moderns’. We discovered that society and nature are not cut from the same cloth, for nature is devoid of meanings and purposes. We discovered that all humans are potentially autonomous individuals, and yet also that they are shaped and constrained by ‘society’. And we discovered that between them, ‘nature’ and ‘society’ covered all possible phenomena: ghosts, spirits and gods were creations of the human mind, individual and collective. These discoveries began to be made in early modern Europe, were elaborated and refined during the Enlightenment, and formalized into a coherent body of knowledge in the nineteenth century, providing concepts and categories – including nature, society, economy, politics, religion and others – that could be deployed to provide knowledge of all times and places.<sup>1</sup>

The idea that modernity allowed us to recognize and institutionalize a distinction between the religious and secular domains has been a central element of the above narrative, and has also functioned as a thesis in its own right – the ‘secularization thesis’, as it is often

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termed.<sup>2</sup> According to this, the Reformation and the ‘wars of religions’ that devastated Europe, and growing social differentiation that created different social sub-spheres, led to the ‘recognition’ that politics and religion were distinct, and that it was inimical to both public peace and welfare, and to the free exercise of religious freedom, to confuse the two. Following this discovery – at different rates in different European locales – religion came to be relegated to the realm of private belief and collective worship, while the public political realm emerged as ‘secular’: all of this presided over by a state that allowed free religious belief and practice but was neutral between religions. In short, religion and politics (or the state), which had previously been ‘mixed up’, were now ‘separated out’. This outcome, despite the circuitous historical paths it followed, simply translated into practice a truth that had been discovered about the world – namely, that religion and state attend to two different domains of human existence and correspondingly belong to different domains of social life. Hence it was expected that as such recognition dawned elsewhere, there too religion would be recognized to be a matter of private and collectively held beliefs, and practised accordingly; and correspondingly, that the domain of politics and the state would become properly secular. Some proponents of the secularization thesis additionally expected that the processes thought to be driving this – rationalization, science, enlightenment, industrialization, and urbanization were among those commonly mentioned – would also result in a decline of religious observance in general.

These expectations and predictions have been comprehensively falsified, as much as anything can be. In Charles Taylor’s words, ‘for those who see secularism as part of modernity, and modernity as fundamentally progress, the last few decades have been painful and bewildering’, not only because religion has not declined and withered away, but on the contrary, because ‘Powerful political mobilizations that appear to center on religion seem to betoken a return of what had already been safely relegated to the past’.<sup>3</sup> In part as a result of this, and in part also as a consequence of a wider questioning of the teleological narrative of modernity, there has been an efflorescence of revisionist writings on religion and on secularism; some of these taking the form of anthropological and historical works that have circulated widely, while others, issuing from scholars of religious studies, are less well known outside their discipline.<sup>4</sup> The aim of this essay is to draw upon works emanating from different disciplines to show that when these diverse writings are taken together, as they usually are not, they undermine the conceptual assumptions – rather than simply the empirical claims and predictions – of the secularization thesis, and force us to reconsider the meanings of, and the connections between, religion, state/politics and secularism.

I begin by drawing upon the abovementioned literature to show that the very idea of religion, as the genus of which the various ‘world religions’ are the species, is a modern invention; and thus that comparisons between religions – including those pertaining to their capacity to recognize and adapt to the necessary distinction between matters of religion and matters properly belonging to secular society and the state – rest upon a deep conceptual error. Religion is made or produced, I show in the second section, in part by the interventions of the state; the claim that secularism is the process by which politics and religion come to be ‘separated out’ is therefore untenable. The concluding section sums up how we might understand religion and secularism in the light of this, if it is no longer possible to understand them in the conventional way; and also considers what the implications of such alternative understandings might be for the narrative of modernity of which the secularization thesis is a part.

## Inventing religion

The secularization thesis is accompanied by a historical narrative, one in which religion and politics overlapped in the medieval period, as evidenced by the pervasiveness of religious concerns in all aspects of life, and by conflicts between Church and State, Popes and monarchs. In this account, the Reformation helped lay the basis for a subsequent separation of religion and politics by redefining religious faith in more individualist terms, with less emphasis on institutional intermediaries between each person and god. The wars of religion that devastated Europe were one of the immediate consequences of the Reformation, and these intensified rather than lessened the intermixing of religion and politics. However, the destructive effects of these wars led eventually to religious toleration, which laid the foundations for the separation of politics and religion, presided over by a state which allowed different forms of religious worship and belief, while remaining equally disengaged or neutral with regards to all of them.

This historical narrative assumes that religion and politics (or more specifically, the state) are transhistorical entities, thus allowing for comparison as to how 'religion' and 'state' relate to each other across different historical periods and in different places. A growing body of research suggests, however, that 'religion' – the universal category or genus of which 'religions' (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam etc.) are the particular instantiations or species – is a modern invention.<sup>5</sup> It was invented when the heterogeneous practices by which humans connect themselves with other humans and non-humans were brought under the rubric of 'religion', seen as a universal and natural human propensity, internally differentiated according to the things that are 'believed'. Protestantism was a central moment in the development of this novel understanding: emphasizing the need for every man to establish a direct relation with scripture and with God, the Reformation elevated belief and sincerity above subordination to Church authority and merely outward observance of religion. This was at once cause and consequence of the increased importance accorded to 'interiority', Bible reading, and the production of catechisms. It is this changed understanding of what it means to be a Christian that can be seen at work, for instance, in John Locke's defence of religious toleration. According to Locke, a particular and peculiar feature of man's desire for salvation is that it requires sincere belief for it to be efficacious: 'I may grow rich by an Art that I take not delight in; I may be cured of some Disease by Remedies that I have not Faith in; but I cannot be saved by a Religion that I distrust, and by a Worship that I abhor'.<sup>6</sup> Because of this, the case for toleration (exempting Catholics and atheists) that Locke makes is not only that the absence of toleration leads to civil strife, but also that since such religious belief cannot, in any case, be engendered by coercion or penalties, those seeking to forcibly 'save' others are adopting a means that defeats their end:

no Religion, which I believe not to be true, can be either true or profitable unto me. In vain therefore do Princes compel their Subjects to come into their Church-communion, under pretence of saving their Souls. If they believe, they will come of their own accord; if they believe not, their coming will nothing avail them ... Men cannot be forced to be saved whether they will or no. And therefore, when all is done, they must be left to their own Consciences.<sup>7</sup>

At the core of Locke's defence of toleration is an identification of religion with belief and conscience; from this it follows that coercion is the domain of the state, belief and

worship are the domain of religion, and that to mix the two domains is, as it were, a category mistake.

Deism and the associated idea that a 'natural religion' to be found amongst all peoples – with its historical variants demonstrating the many forms this natural and universal propensity could take – also contributed to the emergence of 'religion'.<sup>8</sup> 'The concepts "religion" and "the religions", as we presently understand them', Peter Harrison argues in an influential historical study, 'emerged quite late in Western thought, during the Enlightenment',<sup>9</sup> when "religion" was constructed along essentially rationalist lines, for it was created in the image of prevailing rationalist methods of investigation ... inquiring into the religion of a people became a matter of asking what was believed'.<sup>10</sup> That these developments more-or-less coincided with the European 'discovery' (and usually, conquest) of other peoples, as many scholars have observed, furthered this view: 'At the same time that the genus of religion was coming to be thought of as ideally an internal, private, depoliticized entity, interactions with previously unknown peoples were beginning to create new species of individual religions',<sup>11</sup> and 'The creation of a propositional religion enabled discussions of the merits of other "religions", conceived to exist similarly as sets of beliefs'.<sup>12</sup> That is, once 'religion' had been invented, the heterogeneous practices of other peoples, and also peoples of earlier times, were brought under its rubric. In the course of the nineteenth century, this category had become sufficiently naturalized to enable a new intellectual discipline to arise, that of 'comparative religion'.<sup>13</sup> At the end of that century, a World's Parliament of Religions was held in Chicago, with delegates representing ten 'religions' attending this parliament. By the early decades of the twentieth century many universities, especially in the United States, were teaching 'world religions', that is, were teaching students about religion by exposing them to the beliefs and practices of the major religions of the world.<sup>14</sup>

This invention of religion is, however, as scholars of it increasingly agree, anachronistic at best and quite outrightly mistaken at worst. Recent scholarship, in Brent Nongbri's summary of it finds that 'no ancient language has a term that really corresponds to what modern people mean when they say "religion"', and that the 'terms and concepts corresponding to religion do not appear in the literature of non-Western cultures until after these cultures first encountered European Christians'.<sup>15</sup> Most ancient cultures and non-Western peoples had neither a word for 'religion' nor for the particular religion that they were deemed to be adherents of. 'Hindu' was a term used by conquerors who invaded the Indian subcontinent to describe the practices and customs of the 'indigenous' people living south of the river Indus. 'Hindu', and later 'Hinduism', did not come to be used in their present sense of denoting a religion until the British started to do so in the eighteenth century, and 'it is not until the nineteenth century proper that the term "Hinduism" became used as a signifier of a unified, all-embracing and independent religious entity in both Western and Indian circles',<sup>16</sup> something that became possible only once it had been reconceived as 'a set of hard and fast doctrinal presuppositions'.<sup>17</sup> But this 'Western inspired abstraction', which abstracted from the rituals and practices of Vaishnavites and Saivites and others, of high castes and low castes, 'bore little or no resemblance to the diversity of Indian religious belief and practice',<sup>18</sup> not least because their 'religion' was not principally a matter of belief. No less a figure than Max Muller, the 'founding father' of comparative religion, gave unwitting testimony to this,

confessing that he eagerly quizzed the first trickle of Indian students to arrive at Oxford about their religion, only to discover that

they hardly understood what we mean by religion. Religion, as a mere belief, apart from ceremonies and customs, is to them but one, and by no means the most important, concern of life, and they often wonder why we should take so deep an interest in mere dogma, or as they express it, make such a fuss about religion.<sup>19</sup>

As R.C. Zaehner notes, 'it is perfectly possible to be a good Hindu whether one's personal views incline towards monotheism, monism, polytheism or even atheism'.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, 'Buddhism' was not always there, waiting in the wings to be discovered: according to Philip Almond, the later part of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the Victorian period witnessed 'the *creation* of Buddhism',<sup>21</sup> as a consequence of Western imaginings and scholarship. And when European (and American) ideas about religion came to Japan, according to Helen Hardacre, 'they entered a society that had no equivalent concept, no idea of a distinct sphere of life that can be called "religion" nor did it have the idea of a "generic religion" of which there are local variants like Christianity, Buddhism, and so on'.<sup>22</sup>

The case of Islam is arguably more complicated: when in 1962 Wilfred Cantwell Smith argued that 'religion' was a misleading and unhelpful fiction, he also suggested that Islam was a 'special case' and a partial exception to this claim. Unlike the examples surveyed above, where the religion in question was named and invented late in the day and by outsiders, 'Islam' was a designation internal to the tradition, and dated back to its origins; moreover, the Arabic term *dīn*, according to Smith, is closely equivalent to what we have come to mean by 'religion'.<sup>23</sup> A number of scholars concur; according to Abbasi the *dīn-dunyā* distinction in medieval Islam 'represents an autochthonous Islamic binary akin to the modern religious and secular',<sup>24</sup> and he concludes that 'premodern Muslims did indeed possess a concept akin to the modern sense of "religion" long before the rise of the modern West ... furthermore, they were the first historical community to sustain a rich and robust analytical discourse around the idea of religion'.<sup>25</sup> Others, however, have pointed out that the translation of the Arabic *dīn* as 'religion' is a late and problematic development, for earlier translations into Latin, French and English frequently rendered *dīn* as 'law'; it is not until modern times that the equation of *dīn* with 'religion' became established or stabilized.<sup>26</sup> In recent times some scholars of Islamic traditions have begun to question whether *dīn*, as the term has been used in Islamic texts and practices, in fact corresponds to the concept of religion,<sup>27</sup> and more generally, whether 'religion' is an accurate or useful term for understanding Islam.<sup>28</sup> In *What is Islam?*, Shahab Ahmed contests the tendency 'to regard Islam somehow as the most naturally equivalent non-Christian candidate to the modern Western category of religion', arguing that 'To conceptualize Islam in terms of the religious/sacred versus secular binary is both an anachronism and an epistemological error the effect of which is to remake the historical object-phenomenon in the terms of Western modernity'.<sup>29</sup>

The secularization thesis assumes that religion is a meaningful category and a constant, even if its 'contents' (the different religions) are variable. But as contemporary scholarship frees itself from the naturalization of the idea that religion is principally a matter of beliefs and that the different religions are different belief systems, it finds the very category of religion to be deeply misleading and unhelpful. This is because 'religion'

brings a vast array of practices, rituals, beliefs and, more generally, forms of behaviour and of life under a single rubric, overlooking the heterogeneity of these practices, which were not necessarily described, understood or lived as 'religion' by those now classified as Hindu, Buddhist and so on. The scholarship I have been drawing on<sup>30</sup> – to bring its different strands together – finds the concept/category of 'religion' to be a 'Christian theological category',<sup>31</sup> through which 'concrete set[s] of practical rules attached to specific processes of power and knowledge' were now 'abstracted and universalized',<sup>32</sup> thereby creating 'a new historical object: anchored in personal experience, expressible as belief-statements, dependent on private institutions, and practiced in one's spare time',<sup>33</sup> with this object 'projected outwards in space and backwards in time', creating the illusion that religion has always been 'a natural and necessary part of our world'.<sup>34</sup> In the alternative account that emerges from recent scholarship, far from being a 'natural and necessary' universal which however takes different forms, 'religion' is 'a fundamentally Eurocentric term',<sup>35</sup> 'a modern invention which the West, during these last two hundred years or so, has exported to the rest of the world',<sup>36</sup> and one 'which authorizes and naturalizes a form of Euro-American secular rationality'.<sup>37</sup>

### Making the religious and the secular

Thus far I have been confining myself to drawing upon a scholarly literature that shows how religion was 'invented'. But it is not that religion was merely invented, but that in being invented it was also brought into being, made real; a misdescription and a reification nonetheless became a force in the world. Stung by the Western and Christian dismissal of the practices that organized and gave meaning to their social lives, non-Western elites sometimes reinterpreted and redefined these practices in ways that were deeply influenced by Western understandings of 'religion'. 'As Christianity came to be viewed as the embodiment of Western civilization' in Japan, writes Isomae Jun'ichi, and as Japanese elites sought to emulate the West in order to avoid being colonized by it, 'other religions sought to demonstrate that they were not inferior [and] had systematic doctrines'.<sup>38</sup> In the course of the nineteenth century, movements of religious reform such as the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj in India sought to redefine and reform Hinduism (often by claiming that the 'popular' forms of it represented a degradation of an original Hinduism, or else that they represented 'survivals' of aspects of the religious beliefs of the 'pre-Aryan' inhabitants of India), such that the riotous pantheon of gods was downgraded, and Hinduism emerged, like other 'proper' religions, as a philosophy and a set of coherent beliefs subscribed to by its adherents.

The most important of the forces in producing religion has, however, been the state, usually through one of the chief modalities of state power, the law. This has been so even in the United States, often regarded as the paradigmatic example of a separation between state and religion. Such a separation rests upon the conception of religion outlined and discussed in the first part of this essay, and, where religion has not been willingly conceived and practised in accordance with this conception, courts have stepped in in order to define – and circumscribe – it as such. The First Amendment prohibiting the federal government from establishing a religion or prohibiting the free exercise of religion, and the 'wall of separation' between Church and State enunciated by the U.S. Supreme Court after the Second World War, did not simply recognize the distinct and



separate character of existing entities: they also served to remake one of those entities, by interpreting freedom of religion clauses to apply to those forms of religious practice that accepted that religion was a matter of private belief and worship.<sup>39</sup> Subsequently, a series of judgments of the Frankfurter Court declared in effect that 'believers who wish to enjoy liberty must forgo the possibility of bringing their beliefs to bear in the public square, [and] must accept the Court's view of religion as essentially private'.<sup>40</sup> Where the followers of a religion have claimed that religious liberty mandates respect for certain social practices, rather than simply beliefs and forms of worship – polygamy is an example – U.S. courts have either declared that there are limits to religious liberty, and/or deemed the practice at issue to not be a true or essential part of religion.<sup>41</sup> Conversely, the Supreme Court has permitted certain practices, such as Sunday closing laws and publicly sponsored Christmas displays, on the grounds that these were now 'secular' practices and ends, no longer anchored in their religious origins. In either case, far from being 'neutral' regarding religion, the higher U.S. courts have actively defined and sought to remake it such that it can be sequestered from the state, and in the process the judiciary have been obliged to act as arbiters of theology. If this has been so in the United States, where Christianity had become equivalent to belief and been privatized over preceding centuries, it has been much more the case where 'religion' had not already been so remade – as an examination of some non-Western cases will demonstrate.

In post-Independence India, reforming governments engaged in modern nation-building passed a slew of legislation directly impacting religion, including legislation prohibiting Hindu temples from barring the entry of so-called Untouchables, prohibiting the practice of young women being 'dedicated' to a temple as courtesans (*devadasis*), banning animal sacrifices, regulating religious endowments, and comprehensively reforming Hindu 'personal law' (including by legalizing inter-caste marriage and divorce, banning polygamy and granting daughters equal right to inheritance). State legislation and a series of court judgements thereby not only 'flagrantly violated the principle of separation of state and religion', in doing so they 'were led into the exercise of interpreting religious doctrine on religious grounds', to identify 'those practices that were *essentially* of a religious character' and should not be interfered with, and those that were not and were a legitimate subject for reform.<sup>42</sup> The contradiction did not go unnoticed, but the naturalization of a conception of religion as belief – and the commitment, amongst a significant section of the elite, to reforms conducive to 'modernization' – meant that it was rationalized and endorsed. As a legal scholar sympathetic to the reforming drive of the postcolonial Indian state explained, 'Paradoxically, the secular state, in order to establish its sovereignty and confirm its secularity, is required to undertake the most basic possible reform of religion ... to reduce these two great religious systems [Hinduism and Islam] to their core of private faith, worship, and practice'.<sup>43</sup> Another legal scholar noted, however, that to identify 'private faith, worship, and practice' as the 'core' of Hinduism and Islam was 'not religion as understood by its practitioners'; Marc Galanter went on to observe that what was being instituted by the Indian state and judiciary was 'not freedom for religion as it is (in India), but freedom for religion as it ought to be'.<sup>44</sup>

Prior to the British occupation, Egypt had a number of different legal 'systems', including *sharia* law, though 'law' is something of a misnomer, for *sharia* was 'a complex set of social, economic, moral, educational, intellectual and cultural practices', a 'non-state,



community-based, bottom-up jural system'.<sup>45</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century, European legal codes were introduced, as were Mixed Courts staffed by European judges, soon replaced by National Courts. One result of these far-reaching changes was that the courts administering *sharia* law had their jurisdiction drastically curtailed to matters involving personal or family status, and pious endowments. However, this process was not simply, or even, one in which the *sharia* courts came to be 'restricted' in their jurisdiction, such that – as in a common interpretation – 'Law began to disentangle itself from the dictates of religion, becoming thereby both more modern and more secular'.<sup>46</sup> Hussein Ali Agrama has shown how this was not merely a delimitation (as if *sharia* continued to operate as before, but now within a more restricted compass) but rather a transformation. The legal categories of the new, codified law 'divided up life in ways that did not correspond with *Sharia*', and these 'new divisions of life came to be seen not in term of *moral practices*, but of *multiple individual interests*'.<sup>47</sup> These legal changes introduced new conceptions of the private and the public, new notions of evidence (ones in which the forms of moral enquiry characteristic of *sharia* were now eliminated), and 'an entire network of new legal professions, professional and educational organisations, methods of instruction, and forms of scholarship'.<sup>48</sup> In short, the legal reforms undertaken in Egypt from the latter nineteenth century did not 'separate' religion from the state but rather sought to reconstitute religion, and in doing so to demarcate the public and the private, and interests and ethics, in novel ways aimed at producing new forms of behaviour, subjectivity and affect. The policies pursued by Egyptian reformists and nationalists from the latter nineteenth century, in Charles Hirschkind's summation of them, 'involved the legal and administrative intervention by the state into the domain of religion, so as to render it consonant with the secular-liberal and technocratic discourses central to the states' own legitimacy, functioning, and reformist goals'.<sup>49</sup>

The pressure on Japan from Western powers to open up to foreign trade was accompanied by demands that it allows freedom of religion, namely, freedom for Japanese to convert to Christianity, and for missionaries to operate freely in Japan to facilitate them doing so. Following the Meiji Restoration, the Japanese state thus had to define and demarcate 'religion' as a prelude to conceding its 'freedom'. It was not until the late 1870s that the term *shūkyō* stabilized as the repurposed Japanese word for religion, while cognate terms such as *shinjin* – more closely identified with 'the practice-oriented aspect of religion' of ordinary people – were now treated as 'subordinate to the doctrinal aspect', and disparaged by the state as harmful superstitions in need of eradication.<sup>50</sup> Engaged in a project to create a singular and unified Japanese subjectivity, the Meiji state embarked on a mission to relegate this newly invented category to the private sphere, where it would not be a source of disunity or a challenge to the state; the Constitution adopted in 1889 guaranteed freedom of religion and formalized the distinction between the religious and the secular. Having been produced thus, 'religion' now became available as an object of scholarship; by the end of the century a Japanese Association for Comparative Religion had been established and Japanese intellectuals were contributing scholarly articles on 'Japanese religions' to Western journals.<sup>51</sup>

Shortly after bringing religion into being and institutionalizing a distinction between the religious and the secular, the Meiji leadership discovered that suitably reinterpreted, Shinto could be useful to the state and the emperor system. This required abandoning the

Meiji state's earlier efforts at organizing and systematizing a Shinto religious doctrine, and 'boldly turn [ing] the tables, repositioning Shinto outside the scope of religion'.<sup>52</sup> Once again, what was at issue was not just redefinition, but reshaping – preaching, praying, conducting funerals and prayers and selling charms at Shinto shrines were now discouraged, for shrines were henceforth to be 'sites for the performance of state rites';<sup>53</sup> and thousands of the local or civic shrines, where prayers, funerals and the like were conducted, were eliminated by being merged.

'While there were no Japanese religions before the mid-nineteenth century', concludes Jason Josephson, 'by the end of the Meiji epoch, religion had been formulated as a Japanese legal category. The resulting process produced religions in Japan ... not invented out of whole cloth but ... assembled via a process of *bricolage* that splintered, fused, and transformed Japanese traditions to fit a new mold'.<sup>54</sup> And having been produced, religion then – or rather, simultaneously, because the two depend upon and define each other – was separated from the secular: 'By the end of the Meiji period', writes Trent Maxey, 'the premise that a boundary between the religious and the secular should govern the political and social order of the nation-state had been institutionalized'.<sup>55</sup>

According to the secularization thesis that this essay has been contesting, religion came to be distinguished and separated from public affairs and the state, creating a secular polity on the one hand and the freedom to profess religion on the other. Drawing upon a growing body of critical literature, the first part of this essay has shown, however, that 'religion' is a modern and Christian invention. What is more, having been invented, religion – the second part of this essay has shown, again drawing upon a wide range of writings – was produced or made real in significant part by the state. Far from religion coming to be 'separated out' from its unhappy mixing with politics, states have helped to produce religion, and to do so as part of defining and demarcating the (often shifting) boundary between this invention and secular politics.

### Beyond belief: religion and secularism in contemporary conflicts

If the secularization thesis is mistaken, the implications of this extend beyond recognizing an intellectual error. I will conclude by considering two such implications or consequences. The first concerns how we might more productively characterize contemporary controversies involving religion, taking the Danish cartoons affair as my example. The second concerns how a reconsideration of the secularization thesis might require a reconsideration of the narrative of modernity of which it is an element.

When the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published twelve cartoons portraying the Prophet Muhammad in September 2005, it immediately provoked outraged expressions of offence and injury amongst many Muslims in Denmark and beyond, including large and, on occasion, violent demonstrations. These in turn led to fervid defences of the right to free speech, and condemnations of the protests as religious bigotry, extremism and fundamentalism. The publication of the cartoons in *Jyllands-Posten* was accompanied by a text claiming that some Muslims demanded special rights that were incompatible with a secular and democratic society, and also incompatible with the protection of free speech that is a constitutive element of such a society. Thus from the outset the issue was framed as a question of free speech versus censorship, and the subsequent

protests that the cartoons were designed to elicit, and the condemnations of these, only seemed to confirm that these were the issues at stake. Those offended did not – for the most part – contest this framing of the issue, but pointed out that hate speech legislation already restricted free speech, and sought the extension of such legislation to cover offences to their religious sensibilities. Liberals who were sympathetic to an already demonized group argued that whether the reaction of (some) Muslims was fully justified or not, freedom of expression needed to be accompanied by civic responsibility; and given that the European-Muslim minority community was already marginalized, such deliberately provocative forms of ‘free expression’ added to their sense of being besieged, and were hardly conducive to integration or to a successful multiculturalism.<sup>56</sup> But the common response to the first of these arguments was that there was a distinction between hate speech and mere representation, or satire; representing Muhammad, even in insulting terms, was not the same as, say, portraying Jews as engaged in a global conspiracy, and thus inciting hatred of them. And as for the second, numerous politicians, scholars, journalists and others seized the opportunity to present themselves as doughty defenders of freedom, unwilling to sacrifice fundamental principles to mere expediency and to the appeasement of fundamentalists and fanatics.

In an important essay published a few years after the Danish cartoons controversy, Saba Mahmood revisited the way the controversy had been framed and had played out. The puzzlement of many liberals at the strength of the Muslim reaction, she suggested, arose from their identification of religion with belief, and relatedly, their sense that there was a fundamental and obvious distinction between symbols and icons and the sacred figures they represent or symbolize. As she summarized the thinking behind this bemused reaction, ‘As any modern sensible human being must understand, religious signs ... are not embodiments of the divine but only stand in for the divine through an act of human encoding and interpretation ... Muslims agitated by the cartoons display an improper reading practice, collapsing the necessary distinction between the subject (the divine status attributed to Muhammad) and the object (pictorial depictions of Muhammad). Their agitation, in other words, is a product of a fundamental confusion’; consequently, ‘Muslims [needed] to stop taking the Danish cartoons so seriously, to realize that the image (of Muhammad) can produce no real injury given that its [i.e. religion’s] true locus is in the interiority of the individual believer and *not* in the fickle world of material symbols and signs’.<sup>57</sup>

If, however, belief and representation are not, as this essay has suggested, always the right way of characterizing ‘religious’ matters, was there some other way of framing this controversy that might lead to a better understanding of it? Mahmood offered such a reading, suggesting that for some devout Muslims their relationship with Muhammad was ‘predicated not so much on a communicative or representational model as an assimilative one’, such that Muhammad signifies not a historical figure, ‘but the mark of a relation of similitude ... a figure of immanence in his constant exemplariness ... not a referential sign that stands apart from an essence that it denotes’.<sup>58</sup> The intense sense of injury that some experienced derived not from their ‘beliefs’ being violated, ‘but from the perception that one’s being, grounded as it is in a relation of dependency with the Prophet, has been shaken’. For many Muslims, Mahmood concluded, ‘the offense the cartoons committed was not against a moral interdiction (“Thou shalt not make images of Muhammad”), but against a structure of affect, a habitus, that feels wounded’.<sup>59</sup>

Muslims are not, as I have argued, the only people for whom religion is not principally a matter of belief, nor the only people who fail to make a distinction between ‘mere’ representation or symbol and the original thing itself; for such a distinction is not part of obvious common sense (available to ‘any modern sensible human being’), but rather part of a ‘semiotic ideology’ or a ‘representational economy’. It is not a distinction made, for instance, by many of those now termed ‘Hindu’. Richard Davis writes, ‘Vaisnava and Saiva theologians locate their holy icons within an aesthetics of presence. As an instantiation of the godhead, the image is ultimately the message’.<sup>60</sup> An idol or image or *murti*, once its eyes have been pierced and appropriate ceremonies observed, partakes of the *shakti* (power) of the god; for most Hindus, it *is* a god.<sup>61</sup> As Diana Eck explains,

the *murti* is more than a likeness; it is the deity itself taken ‘form’. The uses of the word *murti* in the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita suggest that the form *is* its essence. The flame is the *murti* of the fire ... or the year is the *murti* of time ... the *murti* is a body-taking, a manifestation, and is not different from the reality itself.<sup>62</sup>

This is one reason why it is profoundly misleading to describe ‘Hindus’ as ‘believing’ their gods exist – they *do* exist, in the *murtis* that are part of everyday life in India.

Examples could be multiplied, but these are sufficient for the point I am seeking to make, namely, that the categories and presumptions encoded in the secularization thesis are ‘our’ categories and presumptions, not human universals. Webb Keane, from whom Mahmood and I borrow the terms ‘semiotic ideology’ and ‘representational economy’, has shown that both the idea of religion as belief and the related distinction between a representation and the original, between symbol and the real, has deep roots in Protestantism. Once the locus of being Christian was identified in conscience and belief (as we saw in the case of Locke, for instance), and thus equated with sincerity and the free exercise of one’s agency, those who worshipped material objects were seen as confusing subject and object, confusing worship of God with worship of icons and idols made by humans, thus failing to see where agency and responsibility properly lay. Christian missionaries to the non-Western world, Keane shows, were confounded when they encountered such ‘confusions’ amongst those they sought to convert, and were moved to denounce them as ‘fetishism’, as a failure of religion rather than a form of it: for such missionaries, ‘the fetishist is not only mistaken, she denies her own agency. To surrender one’s agency to stones, statues, or even written texts is to diminish one’s responsibility’.<sup>63</sup>

When we read a controversy such as the Danish cartoon affair through categories such as ‘belief’ and ‘representation’ we follow, I suggest, in the footsteps of these missionaries, and miss the opportunity to reframe such controversies – in this case, by at the very least making *intelligible* why (some) Muslims greeted the Danish cartoons with such horror. To reframe a controversy will not, it is true, necessarily tell us ‘what is to be done’ – whether, for instance, images of the Prophet should be banned or not – but it may at least allow for a better understanding of the nature and stakes of the conflict; may cause us to pause before we rush to judgments wholly informed by our categories to ask instead, in Judith Butler’s words, ‘what would judgment look like that took place not “within” one framework or another but which emerged at the very site of conflict, clash, divergence, overlapping?’<sup>64</sup>

There is now a considerable body of work showing that there are many other ways of thinking, practising and relating to time, space, subjectivity, suffering, land, labour,

sociality and our relations to the dead and to non-humans, than our modern Western ones— and that these modes of thinking and being often survive, and sometimes even thrive, in the circumstances of our global modernity.<sup>65</sup> That these works have not, for the most part, led us to treat exchanges and conflicts that arise out of or are inflected by such differences with greater circumspection and thoughtfulness, is because we are still in thrall to a narrative that assures us that even if ‘our’ categories are modern and Western, this does not diminish their truth value. It rather indicates that such truths could only be vouchsafed once humankind (or some section of it) had reached a certain level of intellectual maturity, and once social developments facilitating such maturity had historically occurred. It is modernity that affords us the privilege of being able to see what our historical predecessors could not see, or fully see, including that religion *is* principally a matter of belief, representations *are* different from that which they represent, and politics *is* different from religion. Those who fail to embrace these discoveries, by continuing to organize and inhabit their world through different categories, are – whether through ignorance or wilfulness, but in either case by definition – ‘pre-modern’ or ‘non-modern’. That they inhabit the world differently from us does not confer any legitimacy on their categories or their ways, but only indicates that they are some steps behind in the journey towards enlightenment that ‘we’ moderns have traversed.

This is, of course, the narrative of modernity with which this essay began. It will be seen that the secularization thesis is not only an element of this narrative, but also, and because of this, partakes of the same formal structure as the narrative of modernity. Both are teleological, implicitly or explicitly presuming that to be modern is to be epistemologically privileged, to have access to truths that were not previously available, but which once available, apply to all (what I have dubbed the ‘Once was blind, but now can see’ story of modern knowledge).<sup>66</sup> This narrative is what enables us to ignore or dismiss other ways of knowing and inhabiting the world.

Like the secularization thesis, this narrative is coming under sustained challenge; indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, it is coming undone.<sup>67</sup> To challenge this narrative and the assurances and consolations it offers, I submit by way of conclusion, is a necessary task, and one possessed of some political urgency. At least some of the conflicts in the world today arise not out of disagreements within or different interpretations of the same framework but out of the clash of different, seemingly incommensurable frameworks. Often this is not recognized, and even where it is dimly registered, the narrative of modernity is at hand to assure us that these alternative frameworks are outmoded, medieval, backward, unenlightened and so on; those holding on to them are not yet modern, and once they become so, they too will see and inhabit the world as ‘we’ do. The resulting ‘denial of coevalness’, to borrow a phrase from Johannes Fabian, has been a defining part of our modernity, authorizing conquest and colonialism. But these ‘others’ are part of the same global modernity that was ushered in by the conquest of the Americas and the subsequent centuries of slavery and colonialism; they inhabit the same time and belong to the same world, but they sometimes inhabit it differently. The secularization thesis and the narrative of modernity are obstacles to seeing this, and thus obstacles to the task of thinking how best to navigate difference in a world where everyone is equally modern – but not always in the same way.

## Notes

1. For an account and a critique of this narrative and this knowledge, see Sanjay Seth, *Beyond Reason: Postcolonial Theory and the Social Sciences*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.
2. The literature on this is too vast to list, but for an influential engagement with the secularization thesis, and a partial defence of it, see Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
3. Charles Taylor, 'Religious Mobilizations', *Public Culture*, 18(2), 2006, p 281.
4. As Timothy Fitzgerald notes, the separation between religion and politics is reproduced through 'the academic separation of the history of the state and political theory, on the one hand, and the history of religion, on the other', *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories*, Oxford University Press, 2007, p 11. One result is that scholars attending to these domains seldom read each other's work.
5. Such rethinking was anticipated by Wilfred Cantwell Smith in his remarkable *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991, first published in 1962, where he argued that the term 'religion' was reifying and distorting. However Smith's substitute concept of 'faith' continued to cling to the notion of some 'essence' of religious experience. See Talal Asad, 'Reading a Modern Classic: W.C. Smith's "The Meaning and End of Tradition"', *History of Religions*, 40(3), February 2001. Among religious studies scholars the questioning of the transhistorical and even eternal character of the object of their studies seems to have taken off in earnest from the 1980s, with the XVIth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions serving as something of a turning point. See Ugo Bianchi (ed), *The Notion of 'Religion' in Comparative Research: Selected Proceedings of the XVI IAHR Congress*, Rome: L'Erma Di Bretschneider, 1994.
6. John Locke, 'A Letter Concerning Toleration', in *A Letter Concerning Toleration and Other Writings*, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010, p 31. Not only can a religion embraced without genuine belief not ensure salvation, it is in fact an affront to God: 'true and saving Religion consists in the inward perswasion of the Mind; without which nothing can be acceptable to God', p 13.
7. Locke, 'A Letter Concerning Toleration', p 32.
8. See, among others, Peter Byrne, *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion: The Legacy of Deism*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1989 and Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
9. Peter Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p 1. The words 'religion' and 'the religions' enter the English language at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth centuries, p 39.
10. Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions*, p 2.
11. Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013, p 106. See also Guy Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010.
12. Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions*, p 26. The traffic was not only one way. Peter van der Veer shows the important ways in which the colonial encounter shaped European understandings of secularism and religion, in his *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.
13. Chairs in the comparative history of religions were created in Geneva, Holland (four Chairs, one at each of the universities), and the Collège de France and in Brussels in the late nineteenth century.
14. For an excellent study of the rise of 'world religions' and a critique of the presumptions that inform it, see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
15. Nongbri, *Before Religion*, p 2.



16. Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'*, London: Routledge, 1999, p 100. See also Geoffrey Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793–1900*, New Delhi: Sage, 2006; P J Marshall, 'Introduction', in P J Marshall (ed), *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970; Brian K Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians and the Colonial Construction of Religion*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005; and on Sikhism, Arvind-Pal S Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.
17. Marshall, 'Introduction', in Marshall, *The British Discovery of Hinduism*, p 43.
18. King, *Orientalism and Religion*, p 98.
19. Max Muller, *Anthropological Religion*, London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1892, p 155.
20. R C Zaehner, *Hinduism*, London: Oxford University Press, 1966, pp 1–2. This is not only the judgment of a leading scholar of Hinduism, but also the judgment of the Supreme Court of India, as in a case in 1963 that turned upon whether a party to a case who disavowed belief in Hindu rituals and 'scriptures' was or was not a Hindu. The court found that 'the fact that he does not believe in such things does not make him any less a Hindu ... He was born a Hindu and continues to be one until he takes to another religion ... whatever may be his personal predilections or views on Hindu religion and its rituals': Chandrasekhara Muladiar v. Kulandaivelu Mudaliar, quoted in Marc Galanter, 'Hinduism, Secularism, and the Indian Judiciary', in Rajeev Bhargava (ed), *Secularism and Its Critics*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, p 273 (fn 12).
21. Philip C Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988, p 12.
22. Helen Hardacre, 'The Shinto Priesthood in Early Meiji Japan: Preliminary Inquiries', *History of Religions* 27(3), February 1988, p 300. Josephson similarly writes, 'before the 1870s the Japanese had no indigenous concept of religion analogous to that formulated by the West', and thus 'there were no Japanese religions before the mid-nineteenth century', Jason Ananda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012, p 256.
23. See chapter 4, 'The Special Case of Islam', in Smith, *Meaning and End of Religion*.
24. Rushain Abbasi, 'Did Premodern Muslims Distinguish the Religious and Secular? The *Dīn-Dunyā* Binary in Medieval Islamic Thought', *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 31(2), 2020, p 186.
25. Rushain Abbasi, 'Islam and the Invention of Religion: A Study of Medieval Muslim Discourses on *Dīn*', *Studia Islamica*, 116, 2021, p 103.
26. As the entry on 'religion' in the *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* notes, 'Prior to the twentieth century, the English word "religion" had no direct equivalent in Arabic nor had the Arabic word *dīn* in English. They became partially synonymous only in the course of the twentieth century as a result of increased English-Arabic encounters and the need for consistency in translation', quoted in Nongbri, *Before Religion*, p 39.
27. Ahmet Karamustafa, for instance, argues that *dīn* is not cognate with religion, and concludes, 'it is clear that "religion," in any of the specific forms it took in Western history, is not an automatically suitable category to use in describing Islam', 'Islamic *Dīn* as an Alternative to Western Models of "Religion"', in Richard King (ed), *Religion, Theory, Critique*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, p 169.
28. As, for instance, at a workshop on "'Religion" in Muslim Traditions', held at Williams College in 2019. Summaries of the papers presented at this workshop are available at <https://themaydan.com/2019/08/roundtable-religion-in-muslim-traditions-workshop-may-4-5-2019-williams-college/>.
29. Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016, pp 188, 210.
30. Though I have not cited them in the text, two works that deserve mention as contributors to this line of thought are Daniel Dubisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge and Ideology*, William Sayers (trans), Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University



- Press, 2003; and William T Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
31. King, *Orientalism and Religion*, p 40.
  32. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, p 42.
  33. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, p 207.
  34. Nongbri, *Before Religion*, p 7.
  35. Josephson, *Invention of Religion in Japan*, p 9.
  36. John Hick, 'Foreword', to Smith, *The Meaning and the End of Religion*, p vii.
  37. Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity*, p 6.
  38. Isomae Jun'ichi, *Religious Discourse in Modern Japan: Religion, State, and Shinto*, Galen Amstutz and Lynne Riggs (trans), Leiden: Brill, 2014, p 38.
  39. As one legal scholar puts it, the First Amendment 'is a charter for religion as well as for government', for 'it is congenial to those religions that favour private and voluntary observance', and not congenial 'to religions that purport to supply obligatory principles of governance of society or which believe that it is necessary to extirpate error': Marc Galanter, 'Hinduism, Secularism, and the Indian Judiciary', in Rajeev Bhargava (ed), *Secularism and its Critics*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, p 283.
  40. James Hitchcock, *The Supreme Court and Religion in American Life: Vol 2, From 'Higher Law' to 'Sectarian Scruples'*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004, p 140.
  41. Supreme Court decisions outlawing polygamy in Utah rested upon the judgment that 'the Mormons rejected some of the basic tenets of Christianity, hence were thought to be in violation of the moral foundations of society itself, that is, rested upon an interpretation of what is and what is not part of Christian doctrine. James Hitchcock, *The Supreme Court and Religion in American Life: Vol 1, The Odyssey of the Religion Clauses*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004, p 152.
  42. Partha Chatterjee, 'Secularism and Tolerance', in Bhargava (ed), *Secularism and Its Critics*, pp 357, 359. See also Donald E Smith, *India as a Secular State*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963, and V P Luthera, *The Concept of the Secular State and India*, Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1964.
  43. D E Smith, 'India as a Secular State', in Bhargava, *Secularism and Its Critics*, p 227.
  44. Marc Galanter, 'Secularism East and West', in Bhargava (ed), *Secularism and Its Critics*, pp 255, 258.
  45. Wael B Hallaq, *An Introduction to Islamic Law*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009, pp 163, 169
  46. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press 2003, pp 211–212. Asad is summarizing an interpretation that he will go to criticize.
  47. Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012, p 59.
  48. Agrama, *Questioning Secularism*, p 56.
  49. Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, p 41. Thinkers self-consciously working within the Islamic tradition were often well aware that new forms of statecraft were transforming or supplanting *din*. The Indian/Pakistani Islamist Abul A'la Maududi is an example. See Humiera Iqtidar, 'Theorizing Popular Sovereignty in the Colony: Abul A'la Maududi's "Theodemocracy"', *The Review of Politics* 82(4), 2020.
  50. Isomae Jun'ichi, *Religious Discourse in Modern Japan*, p 39.
  51. Josephson, *Invention of Religion in Japan*, p 246.
  52. Isomae Jun'ichi, *Religious Discourse in Modern Japan*, p 54.
  53. Trent E Maxey, *The 'Greatest Problem': Religion and State Formation in Meiji Japan*, Cambridge: Harvard University East Asia Center, 2014, p 239.
  54. Josephson, *Invention of Religion in Japan*, p 257.
  55. Maxey, *The 'Greatest Problem'*, p 241.

56. This does not exhaust the range of reactions, but my aim is not a comprehensive survey of these but rather to briefly give a flavour of some of the most common reactions to the affair.
57. Saba Mahmood, 'Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?', in Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood (eds), *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2013, pp 67, 68. Mahmood's essay first appeared (in a different version) in *Critical Inquiry* in 2009.
58. Mahmood, 'Religious Reason and Secular Affect', p 70.
59. Mahmood, 'Religious Reason and Secular Affect', p 72.
60. Richard Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997, p 33.
61. On this see Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, esp. chapter 1; and the essays in Joanne P Waghorne and Norman Cutler (eds), *Gods of Flesh Gods of Stone: The Embodiment of Divinity in India*, Anima, 1985.
62. Diana L Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998 (3rd edn), p 38.
63. Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, p 77.
64. Judith Butler, 'The Sensibility of Critique: Response to Asad and Mahmood', in Asad et al., *Is Critique Secular?* p 98.
65. In addition to the works by Asad, Mahmood, Hirschkind and Keane already cited, others include, to name only a few which I particularly admire: Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007; Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003; and Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. My own contribution to this literature is *Subject Lessons: The Western Education of Colonial India*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.
66. Sanjay Seth, 'Once Was Blind but Now Can See: Modernity and the Social Sciences', *International Political Sociology*, 7(2), June 2013, pp 136–151.
67. Seth, *Beyond Reason*.

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