BOOK REVIEW SYMPOSIUM: A SECULAR AGE BEYOND THE WEST

INTRODUCTION

A Secular Age beyond the West: Religion, Law and the State in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. Edited by Mirjam Künkler, John Madeley, and Shylashri Shankar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. 440. $120.00 CAD (cloth); $34.99 CAD (paper); $28.00 USD (digital). ISBN: 9781108417716.

KEYWORDS: secularity, marker-state, differential burdening, religiosity, post-colonial independence

In *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor offers a magisterial account of secularization's historical processes in defining the relationship between the religious and the nonreligious in the North Atlantic World.[1] The feature that most interests him was the emergence of what he calls "Secularity III" in Western Christianity (but not Eastern Orthodox Christianity). Three phenomena characterize Secularity III: exclusive humanism (one that does not appeal to the divine), the presence of meaningful options between belief and unbelief, and its availability to large numbers of people, not just elites. How North America and Western Europe, historically dominated by Protestantism and Catholicism, created a context where its citizens are free to believe or not believe and to switch faith without the threat of political or social sanction is Taylor's main focus.

Taylor poses and responds to three questions:

1. What does secularity mean today in the North Atlantic world?
2. How did this come to be—that is, what were the processes explaining its emergence?
3. Why did secularity come to command the space that it did?

To the "what" question, Taylor points to the emergence of exclusive humanism from the mid-eighteenth century, which weakened appeals to divine transcendence. On the "why" question, he highlights the emancipation of social and intellectual life from religious authority. His answer to the question of how Secularity III emerged spans several histories, philosophies, and methodologies, eschewing the crude linear path of what he calls "subtraction" stories[2] (where religion is successively pushed out of various areas of life such as science, philosophy, and administration).

Building in part on existing work in the sociology of religion, Taylor differentiates between three distinct dimensions of secularity: Secularity I (where political authority, law, science, education, and the economy are emancipated from the influence of religious norms and authority), Secularity II (the decline on a sociological level of religious belief or practice), and Secularity III (where it becomes possible to not believe and still aspire to lead a fulfilled life). University of California at Berkeley sociologist Richard Madsen has usefully referred to these three dimensions as the political,

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1   Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

2   Taylor refers to Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).

social, and cultural arenas of secularity, respectively.[3] Though Taylor is most interested in the cultural dimension, his narrative acknowledges that change in one dimension often causes change in the other.

Taylor wrote in *A Secular Age* that his account of developments in the West would clearly contrast with "the majority of Muslim societies, or the milieux in which the vast majority of Indians live."[4] He also convened an ongoing series of roundtables in Vienna over several summers, inviting experts on non-Western societies and religions to respond to his book and elucidate these assumed contrasts with Muslim societies, India, and other contexts outside the North Atlantic World. It is in response to this challenge of comparison that our own volume came about, titled *A Secular Age beyond the West*.

Our endeavor was to see what kind of similarities and contrasts there were between the trajectories of Latin Christendom and those of other religions and geographies. Our starting point was to ask what secularity meant in the world beyond Latin Christendom, and how and why these meanings came to be. As social scientists, we were most interested in how changes in the political dimension (Secularity I) as manifested in institutional and legal arrangements impacted on the cultural conditions of belief (Secularity III).[5] How has secularity played out in countries where religions other than Western Christianity have been historically dominant? In particular, we applied Taylor's lens to contexts where the majority of citizens practiced Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Eastern Orthodox Christianity. The eleven case studies in the book span India, China, Japan, Israel, Russia, and six societies in the Muslim world—those of Egypt, Morocco, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and Indonesia.

The authors focus on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries because analyzing contemporary and post-independence conditions of belief soon elucidated that these had been strongly conditioned by the colonial or imperial experience, which would therefore need to be taken into account. In addition, the scholarly expertise of most contributors does not extend into eras earlier than the eighteenth century. Those, we thought, were best left to a different set of scholars.

The chapters in *A Secular Age beyond the West* make distinct historiographic and theoretical contributions to the debate, three of which we outline.[6] First, rather than the emergence of an "unbelieving ethos," most of the societies we examined witnessed the onset of a neo-Durkheimian age against the background of anticolonial and other anti-Western struggles where religion was tied to ethnic or national identity. This link continued in the postcolonial and postimperial era irrespective of whether the independent regimes were democratic or authoritarian. Post-independence policies often enshrined religious markers of citizenship or left religion largely unfettered in the public sphere. This, when combined with the fact that patterns of practice and belief in the divine more often than not pervaded the social and cultural fabric, explains the

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3 Richard Madsen, "Secularism, Religious Change, and Social Conflict in Asia," in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 248–69.

4 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

5 The contributors, a group of political scientists, historians, sociologists, and scholars of religion and law, met regularly for nearly a decade. Our shared interests in examining the interplay between religion, law, politics, and history in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East produced exciting workshops in Florence, Istanbul, Onati, and Bellagio, and a six-month research group at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in Bielefeld, Germany.

6 Though a discussion of Secularity I cannot be separated from a state's policy of secularism, we, like Taylor, make a distinction between secularity and secularism. Secularism denotes the ideology that legitimates the separation of religious and political authority, the expulsion of religious law from the legal system, and sometimes even the exclusion of religion from the public sphere. Our cases illustrate that the relationship between secularism and Secularity I is complex, and the two phenomena often intertwine in counterintuitive ways.

forceful charisma of religion for political elites. Hindu nationalism in India, political Islam in Egypt and Pakistan, right-wing Zionism in Israel, and Islamic rule in Iran are symptoms of this phenomenon.

Second, the state played a central role in shaping the institutional arrangements of conditions of belief and practice in which the options not to believe or to switch freely were rarely available to citizens. Our analysis suggests that Taylor may have underemphasized the significance of legal, political, and other factors in framing and influencing the conditions of belief and practice that he foregrounds in his account.[7] Indeed, the state's impulse to religiously mark its citizens has been so pervasive across cases with different religious traditions and regime types that we speak in the concluding chapter of "the marker state." That even nominally non-theistic traditions are not immune against the marker state is underlined by André Laliberté's essay in this symposium, which suggests that even China is highly involved in suppressing, co-opting, or molding religion with overt preferences for Buddhism and Daoism, an increasingly hostile attitude to Islam, and Christianity at the mercy of political vicissitudes.[8]

Third, there is no one-size-fits-all process of institutional differentiation driving secularity's rise across our cases, any more than there was in the case of the North Atlantic world. While differentiation played a large role in facilitating the emergence of a pluralism of outlooks in religion and other worldviews, it did so often as a consequence of sudden historical breaks, often disruptive and violent, such as the establishment of colonial administrations with all the attendant breaches in notions of authority, meaning, property rights, social organization, law, and cosmology.

These conclusions prompt the following six questions for research that connect with ongoing debates.

First, to what extent do modes of managing religion in earlier centuries continue to inform the constitutions, laws, court judgments, and policies of these—and other—countries? Several chapters in our book touch on this issue, including the different meanings assigned to the term *religion*, and the difficulties judges face in determining the state's approach to proselytization, the political use of religious motifs, and social justice. Such perspectival issues problematize how inter- and intrareligious conflict was managed in precolonial and premodern eras. For example, in the case of India, different types of pluralisms (insular pluralism allowing all to exhibit their faiths in public; Gandhi's participatory pluralism contingent on intercultural communication, judgment, and choice; Vedanta's equal validity of all paths to divinity) abounded through the centuries and continue to inform interpretations of religion-state relations by courts, political parties, and civil society.[9] Similarly in Japan, as another reviewer, legal scholar Frank S. Ravitch points out,

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7 Peter Berger writes that governments generally follow one of two strategies, fundamentalism and relativism, to tackle competing religious and non-religious beliefs. In several countries studied in our volume, governments instituted laws that sought to "restore" a moral and epistemic order through political means (fundamentalism). Relativism, making an ideology out of moral equivalence, nonjudgmentalism, and "tolerance," was a path less likely to be followed. Peter Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), especially 9–12. Fundamentalism has become even more prevalent in the shadow of a pandemic unleashed by Covid-19 when exclusionary ideologies have found willing ears among citizens wracked by insecurity and isolation.

8 André Laliberté, "How Do We Measure Secularity?," *Journal of Law and Religion* 36, no. 2 (2021) (this issue).

9 See S. Radhakrishnan, "The Ethics of the Vedanta," *International Journal of Ethics* 24, no. 2 (1914): 168–83; T. N. Madan, "Perspectives on Pluralism," *Seminar*, no. 484 (1999); Rajeev Bhargava, "An Ancient Indian Secular Age?," in *Beyond the Secular West*, ed. Akeel Bilgrami (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 188–214; Elaine M. Fisher, *Hindu Pluralism: Religion and the Public Sphere in Early Modern South India* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

"religion as culture" or *shuukyou no bunka* (宗教の文化), reflects a melding of religion, pre-Meiji era "superstition," and culture in a scientific and outwardly disenchanted modern world.[10]

Second, within the same country, distinct varieties of secularity can be created simultaneously by different elites jockeying for control of the state. This has received scant academic attention, especially in comparative work where models are often presented as the model of an entire society. Not only may models of secularity change in a short amount of time, as Selçuk Esenbel illustrates in her review of the chapter on Erdogan's Turkey in this symposium,[11] but there are also typically a variety of models being championed and partly put into practice by different social actors within the same society at any moment in time (Amjad Khan indicates this in his commentary on Pakistan).[12] For legal scholars, the question becomes one of figuring out how judges can adjudicate between warring models of secularity, without becoming puppets of a faction.

Third, how does Secularity I interact with the religious Other in specific contexts? As the chapters in our volume indicate, even within the same broad religious type (such as Islam), there are multiple shades of secular-religious encounters and dialogues inflected by sectarian variety, regime type, elite ideological orientation, and contingent historical events. A concept developed in our introductory and concluding chapters—that of the differential burdening of religion—attempts to provide a tool for gauging the impact of these contextual factors on different types of state regulation of the religious field.

Fourth, as Robert Hefner has pointed out, further work can be done with a core insight of the book, namely that a key to understanding religiosity and secularity in society and subjectivities lies, not in a high intellectual history of mentalities, but in how different distributional coalitions establish regimes of religious-or-secular truth within particular social fields.[13] Future scholarship might examine how these different truths manifest themselves, are invoked, challenged and reproduced in the law and in courts.

Fifth, our cases also prompt examining modes of borrowing "models" or understandings of the secular across the Global South. Existing studies still mainly focus on North-South relations of "institutional borrowing" of constitutions and policies, building on former colonial and imperial connections. However, as our and other historiographic work shows, including that by Clemens Six[14] in this symposium, intellectual debates in the colonies were instead often informed by conversations and experiences elsewhere in the Global South. In particular, relevant debates in Japan, China, Turkey, and India had an important role in shaping how post-independence elites, including judges, thought about religion and the secular in Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

Sixth, many of these questions highlight the problematic of how we define selfhood. For Taylor, "the buffered self"[15] comes with modernity, but our cases and other accounts show that pre-

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10 Frank S. Ravitch, "Religion as Culture in a Secular Age," *Journal of Law and Religion* 36, no. 2 (2021) (this issue).

11 Selçuk Esenbel, "Reflections from Home on Secularism and the Possibility of Muslim Democracy," *Journal of Law and Religion* 36, no. 2 (2021) (this issue).

12 David Martin pioneered this approach for Western Europe in *A General Theory of Secularization* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978). For Khan's essay, see Amjad Khan, "'Secularity without Secularism': The Case of Pakistan," *Journal of Law and Religion* 36, no. 2 (2021) (this issue).

13 Robert W. Hefner's review of our volume in his talk, "Secularity and Religion-State Dynamics beyond the West," panel presentation on *New Directions in the Study of Comparative Secularity Across Asia*, Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting, March 22, 2021.

14 Clemens Six, "Transnational Perspectives on a Global Secular Age," *Journal of Law and Religion* 36, no. 2 (2021) (this issue).

15 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 262–64.

modern eras too experienced such skeptical distances toward transcendence and divinity.[16] In other words, "the buffered self" may be less the exclusive hallmark of modernity that Taylor makes it out to be.

Moving to answer these questions will require larger and more interdisciplinary collaborative networks, including between social scientists and legal scholars, better bridging between local (area studies) expertise and the social sciences, and less one-dimensional inflection of research through the West's experiences. We hope our volume can contribute to that research agenda.

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16   An early example from 600 BCE India is Charvaka philosophy, which held that materialism is the only way to understand and live in the world.