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Title

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Journal

Berkeley Undergraduate Journal, 28(2)

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Publication Date

2015

DOI

10.5070/B3282028740

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DECONSTRUCTING SECULARIZATION THEORY

Religion, Secularity, and Self-hood Since the Onset of Western Modernity

By Nicole Owens

The secularization thesis is a prominent paradigm within the sociology of religion. It holds that modernity has made religion increasingly obsolete. This paper refutes the secularization thesis, arguing that religion was essential to modernity (particularly in its pertinence to the development of capitalism and democracy). Yet if religion is embedded within modern civic and political life, then what do we mean when we speak of “the secular”? I argue that secularity is a set of orientations and sensibilities *towards* religion that have evolved through their own repeated iteration within academia on religion. The discourse of the secular is crucial to the modern political project of governance; it creates and reifies power relations not only between the populace and the elite, but also between the west and the less modernized regions of the Middle East. However, the discourses of religion and secularity are entirely subject to changing cultural conditions. I posit that postmodernity—an era characterized by rampant consumerism and mobility—has engendered a new form of religiosity in which the individual is able to combine tenets and traditions from a multitude of traditions without experiencing cultural or cognitive dissonance in so doing. Because of religion’s reflexivity to societal change and the consistent impact it has made on the fruition of such development, the secularization thesis must be replaced by a more robust paradigm built upon the interconnectedness of the postmodern world and the longstanding interaction between religion, secularity and structures of power.

I. Introduction and Overview

The secularization thesis holds that as modernity progressed, religion came to occupy a decreasingly prominent place in the public and private spheres of Western life. As one considers the longstanding interdependence between the hallmark processes of modernity and forms of religion, it becomes evident that the secularization thesis is far too reductive in its analysis of history to adequately predict religion's future (or lack of it). In order to draw conclusions regarding whether religion could ever feasibly be eradicated from Western life, it is necessary to analyze its historical interaction with institutions of power from modernity's beginning to the present in a way that the secularization thesis fails to do. By analyzing the interplay between religion and three of the most obvious features of modernity—science, capitalism, and democracy—I will call into question some of the archaic conceptions of religion and secularity that underpin classic secularization theory. I will then consider how the forces of postmodernity may shape religion in the years to come, and how the West's collective religious future will be inevitably influenced by the norms constructed through the modern secular academy.

The secularization thesis implies that secularity itself is some vague form of un-religion that compensated for religion's supposed absence as modernity went on. I will argue instead that the discourse of secularity is one of modernity's "series of interlinked projects"¹ because it performs a rationalized and calculated function: it determines sensibilities *towards* religion in a manner that is advantageous to the Western nation-state's politics. Secularity operates within culturally authoritative structures to inculcate the population with ideals meant to regulate their behavior and belief systems. In my discussion of the relation between secularity and religion, I will focus on the public university because of its status as a culturally authoritative structure which both produces and sanctions what counts for generally accepted knowledge. A sufficient examination of how secular forces mediate religiosity must pose the following questions: How does the secular state validate its authority through the medium of public pedagogy? Whom does it privilege or alienate in doing so? What sociopolitical goals does this process of discipline serve? What broader cultural values rooted in the narrative of modernity facilitate this relationship?

The largely concealed nexus between secularity and religion becomes most conspicuous when considering how versions of religious and ethical values were imposed on students through course material in the public university. As the American nation-state began to take form, a secular pedagogy was necessary to attract the masses and transform them into docile citizens in favor of the government's intended mode of politics: "The rationale for building colleges in the early Republic was explicitly understood as civilizing the population, taming it and creating out of its diversity a common culture of shared values and behaviors."² After the Enlightenment, the emerging public university sought to efficiently instill democratic principles within its subjects by eliminating the multiplicities of belief and practice inherent in a large population. This initiative was especially problematized by religion, which was becoming increasingly perceived to be at odds with the rationality and logic in which the modern democratic order depended upon for its justification.

Robert A. Orsi, scholar of religion and American history, holds that "good" religion is a certain brand of religiosity which took shape in the American university during the nineteenth century in response to felt contradictions between religion and logic. "Good" and "bad" forms of religion were communicated to students through the teaching of various scholarly works: "[Good] religion, then, is epistemologically and singular, rational, respectful of others, noncoercive...

1 Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity (Cultural Memory in the Present)* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), 13.

2 Robert Orsi, "Snakes Alive," in *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005), 184.

unmediated and agreeable to democracy (no hierarchy in gilded robes and fancy hats).”³ “Good” religion effectively did away with the rigid and dogmatic fundamentalism present in pre-Enlightenment religious traditions such as Catholicism and Puritanism. The nondenominational morality of the secular social code replaced divine mandate as impetus to behave civilly, and was instituted to counter the values intrinsic to “bad” religion that undermined the harmony of democratic order. Orsi posits that academics within religious studies capitalized on existing racial- and class-based tensions that were inextricably connected to forms of “bad” religion to unite the population against a common enemy and, by doing so, shore up the elite’s position of power. The public university can be classified as a vehicle by which secularity works to either alter or reaffirm power relations with the goal of managing the nation-state’s sociopolitical future.

At the heart of the aforementioned relationship between secularity and religion is the disciplinary mechanism by which institutions establish and retain hegemonic control over the production of truth. (“Truth” can be defined in Michel Foucault’s words as “a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements” about the nature of the world.)⁴ I will suggest that an institution maintains its authority over truth production by systematically informing within its subject a perspective of disdain, fear and repugnance towards an Other who threatens the existing relations of power. For an institution to retain disciplinary power over its subjects in an economical manner—that is, without the application of excessive outright force—it must offer some means of benefit to them. In this circumstance, the secular nation-state offers its subjects security from the perceived threat of religious otherness through the elite’s administration of both overt and symbolic forms of domination. After establishing how secular pedagogy was implemented to manage religious difference, I will address the resulting form religion has come to take within the Western imagination by recalling references to religion in recent political and academic discourse.

Centuries after secularity was first introduced into the Western world, ideas about proper religiosity are almost unrecognizable compared to their pre-modern antecedents. As the staple features of modernity became obscured or obsolete, the sociopolitical power dynamics in the West became substantially subject to global influence. The influx of new information and cultural saturation began to obscure the existing power relations and brought about the possibility of a new relation to one’s own identity. Until the mid-20th century, self-identity was rigid and inextricably tied to a fixed set of culturally constructed markers. These markers included one’s job, familial/gender role, socioeconomic status, and organized religion. In modernity, self-identifiers such as these were what some have referred to as “totalizing discourses”: they provided a network of institutions and symbols which combined to provide an individual with long-term meaning.⁵ As modernity came to an end, people began to embrace a new orientation towards themselves and their surroundings that was not predicated upon any sense of locational or doctrinal fixedness. After considering how the shift in economy and culture affected ideas about self-identity, I will discuss what types of perspectives on religion it engendered and how they may work to reinforce ideals and judgments about religiosity that continue to be disseminated by the secular academy.

II. Religion and Modernity

3 Orsi, “Snakes Alive,” 188.

4 Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 132.

5 Robert J. Lifton, “Protean Man,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 24.4 (1971): 298-304.

Modernity has been identified as the period of time between the 14th and 20th centuries, during which a great number of paradigmatic transformations took place in the realms of science, art, industry, economics, and governance. According to traditional secularization theorists, it is also the era in which certain developments and ideals led to the dissolution of organized religion's claim to its subjects and the broader social order. In the following section, I will acknowledge how the advancements in science made during the Enlightenment came to challenge organized religion's status as a truth provider and, consequently, individual attitudes towards faith.⁶ I will then discuss how these attitudes contributed to the formation of the widely accepted notion that modernity somehow destroyed religion, and how this notion ignores the integral role the latter played in shaping the features of the former.

A. *Religion and Science*

Contemporary critics of religion such as Richard Dawkins have relied upon the axioms of science and logic as grounds for their endeavor to expose the futility of religious belief. Their viewpoint operates from a popularized conception of science that suggests its incompatibility with religion and the foolishness of the latter. The sentiment that science possessed great potential to provide meaning originated in the Enlightenment era but continued to gain credence as additional discoveries and inventions contributed to the bolstering of Western industrial society. One of the most religiously controversial products of science was Nicolaus Copernicus' heliocentric model of the universe. The Catholic clergy preferred the Ptolemaic theory that placed earth at the center of the cosmos because it was consistent with their interpretation of select verses within the books of Joshua, Psalms, and Isaiah. During the 1616 Inquisition, a committee of religious authorities gathered to deliberate on the subject of heliocentrism, one member stating that the theory was "foolish and absurd in philosophy, and formally heretical since it explicitly contradicts in many places the sense of Holy Scripture."⁷ The Catholic Church's initial rejection of what has become an elementary scientific fact contributed to the stigmatization of organized religion as being ignorant, rigid, and oppositional to science.

Another instance of science coming into conflict with religious dogma came in the form of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*; yet, the Catholic clergy reacted much differently to this proposition than it did to the theory of heliocentrism. Although Darwin was preceded by scientists whose work indicated the presence of evolution in the development of humankind (Catholic biologist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, for example), his publication was lauded as evolutionary theory's seminal text. The Catholic clergy was ambivalent in their response to the circulation of the *Origin of Species*; some members saw Darwin's theory as a direct affront to the creation narrative presented in the Book of Genesis, while others did not find the resulting allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament as necessarily heretical. As time passed, the Catholic church became more accepting of evolutionary theory as it became further corroborated by scientific research, going so far as to make an official statement about the subject during the 20th century: "The pastoral letter, issued on Aug. 12, 1950 by Pope Pius XII, confirmed, in broad terms, that there is no intrinsic conflict between Christianity and the scientific theory of evolution."⁸ The

6 In my analysis of science and organized religion, I focus primarily on the Catholic Church because of its historical status as a highly systematized and influential institution.

7 "Consultant's Report on Copernicanism (24 February 1616)," University of Minnesota, <http://www1.umn.edu/ships/galileo/library/1616docs.htm>.

8 John Farrel, "Catholics and the Evolving Cosmos," *Wall Street Journal*, Aug 27, 2010, <http://www.wsj.com/>

Catholic church's growing receptivity and ability to encourage flexibility within their belief system implies that the dynamic between science and organized religion in the modern period is more complicated than the one presented by secularization theory. Even so, it is impossible to dispute that many members of organized religion have refused to acknowledge the veracity of science and thus reaffirmed the notion that science and religion are fundamentally contrary to one another.

B. *Religion and Capitalism*

While the discourse of science undoubtedly introduced the principles of rationality, efficiency, and orderliness into the processes of modern life, religion played a fundamental part in determining how they took form. Classical literature by Max Weber, as well as more recent scholarship on the 17th and 18th centuries, have refuted the proposed separation of religion and modernity, suggesting instead that the era developed on some level in response to the theological changes in religious belief and practice. In his canonical work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber examined the concomitance of Protestant teachings and the expansion of capitalist economics during the 1800s. He asserts that the skilled workforce was comprised of Protestant laborers who were motivated by a conception of salvation which was contingent upon the degree to which believers dedicated themselves to their work. The strong work ethic was a relatively novel development in the tradition's value system that stemmed from the growing popularity of Calvinism, a Protestant doctrine which taught that salvation was only achievable through fulfilling social duties and performing good works. Calvinist teachings led to an enormous amount of anxiety within the Protestant population and prompted them to seek tangible indicators of their sanctification: "The self-discipline and moral sense of duty and calling at the heart [of the Protestant] ethic were vital to the kind of rational economic behavior that capitalism demanded (calculation, punctuality, productivity)."⁹ The Protestants associated the wealth they accrued from capitalistic labor as a sign of salvation; however, under their Calvinism's strict commandment of asceticism, Protestants were discouraged from spending their money on worldly pleasures. What resulted was a mass of wealthy Protestants dutifully laboring on, with nothing to do with their money but to reinvest it in the growing capitalist market. As their principal investments gained interest and additional income, Calvinist Protestants became increasingly confident that they had secured a spot in Heaven. This type of faith-based labor and investment blurs the distinction between the sacred and the profane and further complicates traditional ideas about both religion and economics. Weber's work can hence be seen as a direct antithesis to the secularization theory's contention that modern processes made religion insignificant, showing instead how a theological movement worked to actuate the arguably most dominant feature of modern life.

C. *Religion and the Roots of Democracy*

Instances of religion's influence over processes of modernization are found even before Weber's

articles/SB10001424052748703846604575447493644515142.

⁹ Rogene A. Buchholz, "The Protestant Ethic as an Ideological Justification of Capitalism," *Journal of Business Ethics* Vol. 2, No. 1 (1983), 51.

18th century Protestant laborers. In his “Religion and the Rise of Liberal-Democratic Ideology in 17th Century England,” sociologist of religion David Zaret traces how the emergence of democratic political philosophy during early modernization resulted from disputes among religious groups. Liberalism surfaced in England as a response to sectarian clashes over political authority, namely the implementation of “the Puritan ideal of godly politics.”¹⁰ Many scholars have argued that Protestantism’s implication of the “priesthood of all believers”¹¹ or emphasis on individual conscience was the basis for liberal democratic politics; however, Zaret contends that the Christian commonwealth was quite unforgiving at this time due to Puritanical reign. Biblically-based tolerance and its consequences did not ensue until intellectuals grew tired of the constant clash of rivaling sects. Puritanical strife led to a series of sociopolitical conflicts that necessitated not only a reevaluation of religious dogma, but a new conception of the will of God’s bearing on political enterprise; liberal democratic ideology was thus born from the Christian reaction to the oppressive and coercive nature of Puritanical religion in the late 1600s.

After the English civil wars, Puritans gained control of the parliament but experienced internal division when it came to deciding how to discipline the population into sober, industrious believers. Puritan clerics, who credited themselves with divine mandate to counter the forces of sin and impiety, forged relationships with local authorities and encouraged asceticism. Those in higher positions of social power envisioned themselves as God’s magistrates who were tasked with preventing and punishing acts of blasphemy, swearing, and Sabbath-breaking. Despite its concentration on governing religious performance and behavior, Puritanism was still beholden to wider Protestantism’s emphasis on inner belief and conscience. The Puritans’ somewhat counterintuitive value system kindled dissent among sects—since there was no consensus regarding what proper personal religion actually consisted of but such extensive guidelines on personal religion’s outward expression, each sect thought the other was perverting God’s true vision for His people. The resulting hostility and altercation between Puritan sects became “fertile ground for social radicalism”¹² that not only challenged the ideology of rival religious groups, but also the authority possessed by dominant institutions such as the state. For the members of the Christian commonwealth who were not authoritative actors within it, the clash of differing sects imbued a sense of anxiety over what doctrine was the real truth and could thus offer salvation. Anxiety and dissonance around doctrinal truth claims characterized religious thinking during this time period and provoked public intellectuals to reevaluate the relationship between religion and government. The pervasiveness of sectarian conflict led many to conclude that religion could no longer serve to support the social hierarchy and order in the way it had prior to the 17th century.

Political theorists’ responses to the problem of doctrinal anxiety laid the groundwork for future democratic systems as it signified a movement towards a policy of religious tolerance among the various Christian sects: “doctrinal anxiety receded before the claim that there was no singularly true creed, only a plurality of reasonable beliefs.”¹³ Calvinist, Arminian, Lutheran, Episcopal, and Presbyterian religious leaders began to promote the ideal of religious tolerance, which quickly gained popularity because of its apparent rationality. Philosophers, such as John Locke and the Cambridge Platonists, wrote extensive treatises to challenge the archaic Puritanical stance that rationalism was depraved and should not be applied to the sacred domain. Propositions

10 David Zaret, “Religion and the Rise of Liberal-Democratic Ideology in 17th-Century England,” *American Sociological Review* 54.2 (1989), 168.

11 Robert D. Woodberry and Timothy Shah, “The Pioneering Protestants,” *Journal of Democracy* 15.2 (2004), 48.

12 Zaret, “Liberal-Democratic Ideology,” 171.

13 Zaret, “Liberal-Democratic Ideology,” 172.

about tolerance and reason within the church were also extended to matters of government, eventuating in a call for a mutually beneficial separation of religion and politics. In his 1689 “A Letter Concerning Toleration,” Locke wrote:

The toleration of those that differ from others in matters of religion is so agreeable to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to the genuine reason of mankind, that it seems monstrous for men to be so blind as not to perceive the necessity and advantage of it in so clear a light... I esteem it above all things necessary to distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion and to settle the just bounds that lie between the one and the other. If this be not done, there can be no end put to the controversies that will be always arising between those that have, or at least pretend to have, on the one side, a concernment for the interest of men’s souls, and, on the other side, a care of the commonwealth.¹⁴

Locke and his contemporaries reshaped religious philosophy by encouraging believers to remedy the civil unrest by accepting those whose beliefs differed from their own and keeping faith partitioned from politics. Their work advocated for the embrace of rationalism, reiterating that it could be used to both prove the existence of their Creator and assuage sectarian unrest (albeit only through a policy of religious tolerance). The widespread intellectual sentiment in reason’s capacity to reveal and reaffirm religious truth was an externality of science’s growing presence within Western society: “because of the success of the new science, there was an insistence on a simpler, doctrinally less elaborated religion, and one more accessible to reason.”¹⁵ The ethos of science and rationalism permeated religious discourse as Locke and his colleagues used the precepts of reason in determining God’s will for the social and political orders.

D. Natural/Civil Religion

The linking of science and religion by reason signifies the transition from what Zaret refers to as providence-in-society to providence-in-nature. This axiomatic transformation was bolstered by the aforementioned work of John Locke and the chaos of the English Revolution: many were unable to reconcile the idea that a divine entity plays an active role in determining the political order in a time period that exemplified immense social disarray. Christians conceded the notion that God played an active role in determining and maintaining social organization and insisted instead that his providence was found exclusively in nature: “Order and harmony in nature were evidence of God’s existence; and in nature God’s glory was not troubled by the religious conflicts that had disturbed the social order.”¹⁶ Providence-in-nature was a facet of a larger concept: natural religion. Natural religion was a new way of deciphering not only God’s presence in the physical world, but also his accessibility through the intermediates of reason and rationality. Because the political upheaval taking place called into question the legitimacy of providence-in-nature, no particular sect or religious ideology was able to distinguish itself as the sole authority on how to correctly actualize a godly politics. Natural religion blocked any single religious group’s ability to claim oligarchical power since they could no longer call upon divine mandate for exoneration.

¹⁴ John Locke, “A Letter Concerning Toleration,” trans. by William Popple, <http://www.constitution.org/jl/tolerati.htm>.

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, “A Secular Age” (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 224.

¹⁶ Zaret, “Liberal-Democratic Ideology,” 174.

Thus, natural religion became “the ideological basis of the separation of religion and politics in liberal democracy.”¹⁷

Natural religion’s advancement within sixteenth and seventeenth century political theory had tremendous consequences for personal religiosity. The emphasis the doctrine placed on tolerance and the importance of proper conduct was a direct contradiction of Puritanical dogma: namely, the idea that man was obligated to God because of his sinful nature and the Biblical notion of a covenant between believer and Divine. Instead, natural religion depicted a God whose nature and goals were strikingly similar to mankind’s. John Tillotson, an Archbishop of Canterbury in the mid-seventeenth century, wrote that “the laws of God are reasonable, that is, suited to our nature and advantageous to our interest.”¹⁸ The kind of relation to the sacred which natural religion worked to promote served as a moral code that advocated for civil tolerance and obedience to authority. Gone were the old days of revelation and sensationalism which had only brought division and strife to the commonwealth. Following Locke, liberal intellectuals in favor of natural religion thought that the newfound separation of religious creeds and political authority was jointly agreeable, one arguing that “[it has not] appeared that divinity has been greatly bettered by policy or that policy has been anywhere mended by divinity.”¹⁹ Natural religion was thus the beginning of a paradigmatic shift in religion’s incorporation into government and how religious difference was managed within the social body.

After centuries of iteration within political discourse, natural religion gradually became embedded in the Western value system. Its commitment to keeping religion and politics separate was easier said than done, however, which is indicated by the American Supreme Court’s changing perception of what is commonly referred to as the “religion clause” found within the First Amendment of the Constitution. While it was generally agreed upon by the founding fathers that church and state should be separated, there was much confusion about how this separation would manifest itself on the ground. In its conception, argues political philosopher Michael Sandel, “the First Amendment was enacted in part to protect state religious establishments from federal interference.”²⁰ The separation of church and state was a defensive measure taken to prevent state-sponsored religious establishments from being unnecessarily inhibited by the federal government. After the religion clause was put into effect, the federal government was hesitant to intervene in any state’s religious regulations, even in cases where they enacted tax laws to benefit the Christian church. Similar policies were enacted by other states that valued the church’s work of teaching morality, social harmony, and industriousness. Politicians including Thomas Jefferson and James Madison fought vehemently against the state imposition of religious commandments and circulated pamphlets condemning these efforts, yet states continued to impose religious-based statutes on their populace. The wall of separation between church and state remained a contentious issue until the 1868 ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, which held the states subject to the same standards of neutrality as the federal government.

Yet, this neutrality of federal and state governments was ambiguous. It became problematic in situations where religious claims seemed discordant with accepted processes of modernization. The basis of government neutrality was to protect the believer and non-believer alike from being encumbered by religious pressure, but, in several circumstances, there was no clear-cut, mutually agreeable solution to problems of this type. To illustrate this point, Sandel invokes a 1878 Supreme

17 Zaret, “Liberal-Democratic Ideology,” 174.

18 John Tillotson and Ralph Barker, “*Sixteen Sermons on Several Subjects*,” (London: R. Chiswell, 1700), 292.

19 Zaret, “Liberal-Democratic Ideology,” 175.

20 Michael J. Sandel, “Religious Liberty: Freedom of Choice or Freedom of Conscience,” ed. R. Bargava (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 75.

Court case in which the Mormon church challenged federal laws banning polygamy because of an accused direct infringement of their religious rights: “the Court nonetheless upheld the conviction, arguing that the First Amendment protected religious belief but not practice . . . adding that polygamy was less conducive than monogamy to democratic government.”²¹ The Supreme Court’s reasoning as to why polygamy should not be tolerated is a direct response to a perceived threat to the modern democracy that theoretically protected the plurality of its population’s beliefs; the problem, however, comes in the fact that many of these beliefs translate into practices which undermine democracy. Attempts to reconcile government neutrality with the plurality of religious belief were made as recently as the 1960s, when the Supreme Court presided over a number of cases contesting the issue of teaching creationism versus evolution in public classrooms. The Court was faced with a dilemma: either exclude education about the origin of humanity altogether or contradict the Constitution by upholding a doctrine that had been deemed anti-religious. Either way, it was becoming increasingly apparent to the government and populace alike that religion was not something that could be easily extracted from the public sphere.

Ideas about providence-in-nature and separation between church and state continued to resurface in American politics, as evidenced by Robert Bellah’s elaboration on civil religion. Originally conceived of in Jean-Jacque Rousseau’s 1762 *On the Social Contract*, civil religion is a form of deism that provides a moral and ideological foundation for patriotism and the nation-state’s political endeavors. Civil religion allows politicians and various state-makers to employ the trope of an almighty deity as leader of the population without estranging those who did not adhere to the teaching of a singular and specific figurehead: “The God of civil religion is not only rather ‘unitarian,’ he is also on the austere side, much more related to order, law, and right than to salvation and love . . . He is actively interested and involved in history, with a special concern for America. Precisely because of this specificity [about the United States], the civil religion was saved from empty formalism and served as a genuine vehicle of national religious self-understanding.”²²

The God of civil religion was constructed during 16th century sectarian conflict and the resulting Deist movement yet remains omnipresent in relatively recent political dialectics. Bellah uses the example of John F. Kennedy’s January 1961 Inaugural Address, during which the admittedly Catholic president alluded to an unnamed God using particularly cryptic language (emphasis added):

I have sworn before you and *Almighty God* the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago. The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and to abolish all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe- *the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God*... Finally, whether you are citizens of America or of the world, ask of us the same high standards of strength and sacrifice that we shall ask of you. With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, *asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God’s work must truly be our own*.²³

21 Sandel, “Religious Liberty,” 77.

22 “Civil Religion in America,” Robert N. Bellah, http://www.robertbellah.com/articles_5.htm.

23 Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” web.

Kennedy's rhetoric is indicative of the West's perception of the God-human dynamic during the waning of modernity. He acknowledges that the United States has an essential obligation to fulfill God's work on earth and the agency to either deliver or destroy His creation. Despite the ambiguity surrounding who this God actually was, Kennedy did not shy away from making repeated appeals to His existence and will. If secularity negates religion, as the secularization thesis would have it, how was the President able to make blatant references to God in a ceremonial event emblematic of American political culture? Bellah answers that "the separation of church and state [the political concept most commonly associated with secularity] has not denied the political realm a religious dimension."²⁴ Religious metaphors and motifs are incorporated into political discourse to inspire the democratic population to act morally and productively: "[Civil religion] develops an active, transformatory agenda . . . it is undoubtedly powered by the escalating demand for military, and hence fiscal power, and hence economic performance by industrious, educated, disciplined populations."²⁵ A disciplined population was essential to the process of creating a democratic order.

III. Secular Pedagogy and Religious Otherness

Religious phenomena are deeply rooted in American political institutions and everyday life, yet it is evident that contemporary attitudes towards religion are drastic departures from what they were before the onset of modernity. Several renowned scholars have identified public pedagogy as partial causation for this transformation of religious perspectives. In the following section, I will problematize the popular notion that secularity is simply the opposite of religion in order to emphasize how the secular pedagogical institution acts to inculcate its subjects with specific orientations towards varying forms of religion. I will then explore how the political elite utilize the resulting religious norms to reify their control over the nation-state.

A. *Genealogy of the Secular*

Talal Asad, a prominent post-structuralist anthropologist of culture, refers to modernity as a Western project that brought about a disillusionment from the previous romantic age and set universal standards of progress, but does not claim that modernity made religion irrelevant as many of his contemporaries do. He counters the popular idea that secularity is the antonym of religion and offers an alternative to this reductive mode of thinking in his assertion that secularity is a discourse in itself, subject to changing ideology and social circumstances just as religion is. His methodology involves studying how normative statements about religion, secularity, and modernity were constructed and altered throughout history via their interactions with various infrastructures of power. For post-structuralist scholars like Asad, the best approach to understanding secularity's effect on the subject is by tracing the genealogy of the myth, the cornerstone upon which both secularity and religion are constructed.

Myth has had myriad meanings over the course of its linguistic existence. In ancient times, the term denoted a story that was employed in order to encourage the principles of

24 Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," web.

25 Taylor, "A Secular Age," 107.

bravery, honor, and unity within the populace. It was not until after the Enlightenment that the term became analogous to fable or a distortion of reality and was used as a medium for the exploration of possible actions and their repercussions. A prime example of the use of myth as an obviously fictive but nonetheless useful explorative exercise was Freud's incorporation of the Oedipus myth into his psychoanalytic theory. For Freud, myth served as a means of investigating the repressed undercurrents of human thought. Although it was still used in culture for creative or aesthetic purposes, myth came to be perceived as irrational compared to the irrefutable nature of scientific explanation that became standardized during the Enlightenment period. Secular discourse aimed to differentiate itself from religion by constructing itself as being non-mythic, therefore rational. Asad criticizes other scholars' of religion attempts to expose secularity's true basis in myth and thus it's necessarily religious nature; he concludes that secularity is not a form of religion although the two discourses may possibly have common mythical roots.

After detailing the etymology of the myth, Asad asserts that the grammar of secularity justifies its own production of knowledge and power through its ties to the modern nation-state. It is not a new form of religion created for humanists and atheists as some have suggested—it is a widely known collection of narratives and values that allow deistic civil religion to flourish. Asad states that secularity is comprised of two supporting myths which combine to reinforce power relations between the laymen and elite. The first myth inherent to secular discourse is that rational knowledge can abolish human suffering if it is ordained by an enlightened elite. By this utilitarian logic, the enlightened elite is justified in maintaining their elevated position for the betterment of wider society. The second myth becomes somewhat problematic when juxtaposed with the first and is undoubtedly linked to the work of providence-in-nature political theorists of the 17th century: each individual should be empowered to determine their own destiny according to their personal sensibilities, but still have less agency than the intellectual elite.

The actualization of these secular myths is easily observable in Western cultures. Secular education, the primary channel through which knowledge is passed down, acts on the subject to induct them into the enlightened class. Those who do not directly benefit from the knowledge granted by the intellectual elite via secular pedagogy are situated near the bottom of the social hierarchy. The uneducated population's general lack of formal knowledge begets the existence of an elite tier of society to function as logical decision makers in their stead. In this manner, pedagogy and its consequential power relations further solidify the arrangement of social order through the creation and instruction of new forms of knowledge. Secular pedagogy was a fundamental player in the emergence of the modern nation-state because it facilitated democratic attitudes. "Direct-access character" and "grounding in secular, homogeneous time"²⁶ fostered a sense of national unity because all members of the nation-state were situated within a common secular experiential frame of reference. The secular educational system and various sectors of commercial and governmental media are tasked with mediating images and ideologies to be projected onto the subject in order for them to appropriate the necessary democratic mindset.

Asad implies that the end goal of secularization has less to do with eradicating religion (this would impose a negative definition on secularity and define the category by what it is not) than it does with cultivating certain attitudes and dispositions towards religiosity that would not otherwise be so ubiquitous. Secular discourse situates its subject in an imagined sociopolitical landscape that enables them to play an active role in redemptive politics characterized by the ideals of moral responsibility and individual sanctity. Redemptive politics are central to the

26 Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity (Cultural Memory in the Present)* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), 2.

modern state's ability to maintain its power and are taught to the subject through pedagogical institutions such as the university.

B. *Secular Education and Civil Discipline*

During modernity—that is, before search engines and online catalogues functioned to quickly and easily provide a surplus of highly specialized knowledge—the intellectual elite were products of the university, where they learned technical/professional skills and often appropriated the ethical outlooks championed by instructors and classmates. For these reasons, the public university was an exemplar incubator for civil religion, a product of secular discourse which played an integral part in buttressing the political order. The American university system was designed to bring together a diverse and disorganized mix of subjects and somehow unite them into a controllable, unified body that would be useful to the nation-state.

The administrators and faculty of the university were charged with selecting curricula which would cultivate the discipline of the disparate masses into a democratic assemblage more likely to support their nation's mode of politics. Consequently, the incorporation of religious studies into American universities' program was not done to encourage tolerance towards religious difference. Rather, it was a calculated measure designed to alienate those who posed a distinct threat to the democratic system of power relations which privileged the enlightened elite: "Fear was central to the academic installation of religious studies. Religious difference overlapped with ethnic and racial otherness, and this combination produced and fed upon the pervasive and characteristically American idea that dangers to the Republic were germinating in the religious practices of dark-skinned or [ethnic] peoples congregated in areas beyond the oversight of the Christian middle class."²⁷ By incorporating scholarship that was predicated by and imbued with apprehension towards religious otherness into university courses, the intellectual elite effectively secured their position as producers and arbiters of truth.

As secular pedagogical apparatuses interacted with various forms of religion and implicitly encouraged religious scholars to approach their subject matter in a confrontational manner, a continuum began to take shape that determined the validity of religious practices. This continuum was largely based on the measures of progress and rationality that characterized the modern era within which it was installed: "One way that [scholars of religion] contributed to social order was by constructing and authorizing scales of religious practice and imagination that went from 'primitive' to 'modern'—where modern or mature meant the domesticated Protestantism tolerable within the academy- and mandating movement up the developmental ladder as prerequisite for modern life."²⁸ Religions that were not deemed complementary to or reflective of facets of modern life were presented by academia as archaic traditions that no longer occupied a legitimate space in the contemporary landscape.

Courses in the modern university's curriculum were riddled with scholarship on religion that ranged from epistemologically reductive to blatantly misinformed. Much of the modern work on non-Western religiosity distorted the assortment of beliefs, rituals, and practices that characterized the religion of interest until it demonstrably resembled the secular ideals promoted by the university. An example of this distortion can be found in Tomoko Masuzawa's *The Intervention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Masuzawa studies how Buddhism was dealt with by religious scholarship during

27 Orsi, "Snakes Alive," 186.

28 Orsi, "Snakes Alive," 186.

the nineteenth century and finds that, in the process of being deliberated over by academics, the original grouping of phenomena identified as Buddhism had been redefined beyond recognition. Masuzawa's text exemplifies the tendency of modern religious scholars to approach and present their subject matter in a way that rendered it more in keeping with the ideals of Western politics and civil religion. The Buddhism being espoused by European intellectuals within academia entirely ignored the "localized, nationalized and indigenized Buddhisms actually found in modern Asia" and instead presented "a textual construction . . . a project that put a premium on the supposed thoughts and deeds of the reputed founder and on a certain body of writing that was perceived to authorize, and in turn was authorized, by the founder figure."²⁹ Western intellectuals based their categorization of Buddhism on a relatively small collection of ancient texts that were practically obsolete in regards to the lives of self-identifying Buddhists in Asia at the time. Masuzawa implies that the European religious scholars selected and manipulated these texts in a way that would allow them to construct Buddhism as a world religion similar to Christianity in its structure and philosophical significance. The new history of Buddhism advocated for by the European scholars featured a trope that was frequently celebrated by the liberal West: "According to the prevailing scholarly opinion, the origin of Buddhism was an exemplary case of a great man heroically standing up against the faceless collective power of society and tradition, thus evoking an image that the modern West has come to champion and idolize."³⁰ This recategorization of a disparate assortment of historical writings and practices under the new heading of essential Buddhism was useful because it enabled modern intellectuals to completely restructure the content and implications of Buddhist theology in a manner that made them more pertinent to Western sociopolitical values. By doing so, academics were able to reduce the danger to democracy that religious otherness presented.

C. *Fundamentalism as Anti-Democratic*

Some religions were not so easily incorporable into the Western mold because of their perceived rigidity and demand for total devotion on the part of their followers. The maintenance of the democratic order required the population's firm allegiance to the nation state, an allegiance which could very easily be undermined by a sufficiently totalizing ideology. To mitigate this threat, religious scholarship demonized religions in various ways. Some intellectuals, such as controversial American political scientist Samuel Huntington, have implied that religions such as Islam prevent the installation and preservation of democracy in regions where belief plays a considerable role in the population's civic and personal lives. By equating Islam with a lack of democracy rather than examining the other sociopolitical factors at play (such as educational deficits, colonial entanglement, and low GDP³¹), Huntington typifies the attitude of many contemporary public intellectuals towards religion that doesn't coincide neatly with Western ideals. Others have taken their criticism of particular faith traditions a step further. Bill Maher and Christopher Hitchens, for example, have vehemently argued that the logic of religion excuses and even promotes oppression and terrorism. In this mode of thinking, religion is by definition violent and bigoted.

29 Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Intervention of World Religions, Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 2005), 136.

30 Masuzawa, *The Intervention of World Religions*, 136.

31 Alfred Stepan and Graeme B. Robertson, "An 'Arab' More Than 'Muslim' Democracy Gap," in *Journal of Democracy* 14:3 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 39-42.

An alternate perspective born of the norms constructed by secular pedagogy is one that is not blatantly opposed to certain religions, but only followers who interpret religion in literal or extreme ways.³² Instead of demonizing an entire religion as being prone to brutality and disorder, some public figures have erected a new effigy of otherness to project their anxiety upon: the fundamentalist. These religious subjects are not in compliance with the normativized model of “good” religiosity promulgated by government institutions and are therefore seen as irrational, dangerous, and unwilling to assimilate to modern liberal culture. In his piece “Secularism, ‘Religious Violence,’ and the Liberal Imaginary,” Brian Goldstone examines how the idea of “bad” religion in the form of fundamentalism enables the secular state to capitalize on the fear of its people in order to justify imperialist actions, as evidenced by Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood’s work on the unique place that Islam occupied within the liberal imaginary of the early 2000s. Goldstone posits that the secular state gains power and credence by depending on the category of religious otherness to discipline and integrate the liberal subject for specific purposes. It does so by claiming to protect the “plurality of identities and beliefs”³³ of its subordinates from the forces of intolerance, coercion, and irrationality which underpin religious zealotry.

In terms of religious fundamentalism’s relation to the nation-state, Goldstone invokes political theorist Romand Coles’ statement that “political liberalism’s vitality will thus require that we repeatedly remember such mortal and never-too-distant conflict” or the threat which bad religion poses to democratic society on the basis of past instances of religiously-motivated injustices.³⁴ Examples of these religiosity-laden injustices include the 1993 Waco scandal, multiple incidents of child molestation involving the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS) church leader Warren Jeffs, and the 2001 World Trade Center attack—all of which were perceived to involve a fundamentalist figure whose actions were triggered by divine revelation.

Secularity, and the American political order which it supports, is thus dependent on the category of religious otherness to not only justify its control but also the means by which control is maintained, especially in cases where the prospect of impending religious injustice is swiftly answered with calculated militaristic intercession. Multiple instances of how the secular government uses the category of religious otherness to mobilize and reify its own power are seen in Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood’s essay “Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency,” in which the authors discuss the post-9/11 American reaction to the threat of Islamic fundamentalism. A major player in the campaign against Islamic radicalism was a liberal feminist organization which blamed the Taliban for the oppression and abuse of Afghani women. Despite the complex nature of the actual situation in Afghanistan, the Taliban’s religious extremism functioned as a singular explanatory framework that allowed the U.S. government to garner support for its imperialist motivations for intervention (in this case, the American military presence in the Middle East).

Mahmood and Hirschkind suggest that American national media was a major actor in fear-mongering support for the invasion because of its homogeneous depiction of Islam as a religious tradition. The American public’s experience of Islam was linked to images and conceptions of headscarves, public prayer, textual literalism, a political system dominated by corrupt religious

32 “Logical Path from Religious Beliefs to Evil Deeds,” Richard Dawkins, <http://old.richarddawkins.net/articles/1700-logical-path-from-religious-beliefs-to-evil-deeds>.

33 Brian Goldstone, “Secularism, ‘Religious Violence,’ and the Liberal Imaginary,” in *Secularism and Religion-making*, ed. Markus Dressler and Arvind-pal Singh, (New York: Oxford UP, 2011), 106.

34 Goldstone, “Liberal Imaginary,” 113.

laws, and an overall hatred of secularity/modernity.³⁵ In the face of the menace Islam posed to the modernized world, the populace became more willing to support their country's administration of violence towards fundamentalists.

Goldstone, Hirschkind, and Mahmood contend that the modern state seeks to normativize and privatize religion so that it will not raise dissent in the public sphere or question secularly-valORIZED ideals. Secularity is justified and valued by people under the protection of the state because religion is seen as an origin of social evils that will inevitably impinge upon the liberty and safety of the populace. The state legitimizes its rule by identifying religious violence as the enemy, and by regulating institutions such as public universities to tailor subjects' sensibilities towards "good" and "bad" forms of religion. After these sensibilities are intentionally developed within the liberal subject, the subject offers their support for the secular government's interventionist policies because of their promise to provide protection from the impending invasion of religious otherness. As evident in the history of the American academe and its occupation within pedagogical institutions, secularity does not reject religion; it either renders it compatible with Western values through a total reformation of content or uses its otherness to reinforce the dominance of the ruling elite and their desired system of government.

IV. Religion and Postmodernity

Because of its simplistic approach to explaining the past, the traditional secularization theory does not offer contemporary scholars of religion means to predict what the religious domain will look like in the future. It would be difficult to use any quantitative measure to gauge what religion's current status is since its explicit expressions have been replaced by deistic civil religion. The belief in God no longer engenders one's participation within a church or even their belonging to a particular tradition. It then becomes necessary to consider other factors at play within the contemporary landscape which may offer insight into how religiosity will operate within the Western world in times to come. As modernization led to a more fragmented and atomized world, the notion of the "individual" became a progressively eminent mode of evaluating one's own subjectivity. In this section, I will employ the writings of social theorists Zygmunt Bauman, Robert Jay Lifton, and Carlo Strenger to analyze how facets of postmodern personal identity may create novel forms of individual religiosity in the future (taking for granted that these new forms will be in some part determined by the ideas about "good" and "bad" religion that have become deeply seated within the Western cultural value system).

A. *Liquid Postmodernity*

While secularity and conceptions of a world governed by a Godless science became increasingly embedded within the ethos of American society, the general structure of American self-identity underwent a drastic reformation. This shift was undoubtedly contingent on the rise of postmodernity, an era in which established institutions such as the family and the church were supplanted with a more individualistic and self-determined society. Postmodern conditions are key to the reconceptualization of the religious self that is currently taking place within liberal

35 Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood, "Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency," *Anthropological Quarterly* 75.2 (2002): 348.

America. As the institutions and ways of life that characterized modernity were eroded, a new relation towards self-identity emerged as a means of coping with the rapid pace of social change. The new sense of self is a departure from the more fixed, defined self common in Western modernity: it is able to consolidate seemingly conflicting tastes, sensibilities, and orientations to the world without experiencing much in the way of cognitive dissonance from doing so.

The term “postmodernity” has come to stand for both the events that signified a disjuncture from modern ways of life and, more generally, the markedly accelerated rate of societal change propagated in the late twentieth century. Multinational capitalism and the outsourcing of labor replaced the industrial city center and demolished the unionized workforce. The economic dealings of these multinational corporations were obscured and intertwined in the abstract globalized market, allowing the distribution of wealth and resources to further polarize among socioeconomic classes. Strong political leaders who formerly unified their constituents through their charisma and moxie lost their credibility due to publicized scandals or the loudness of competing voices.³⁶ The increased access to digitized information systems enabled by the ubiquity of the computer and internet exposed populations to new perspectives and ideological systems from which they had been previously sequestered. With this newfound access to an abundance of knowledge came both enlightenment and disillusionment: people became more cognizant of the infinite options and possibilities their world presented but alienated from the traditional institutions that once anchored them. The almost infinite supply of readily available (and often controversial) information in the hyper-connected global network made continuous social and personal change the norm.

The emphasis on change found within postmodernity generated a recalibration of personal identity in order to keep up with the dynamic climate of what Bauman calls “liquid life”. The individual lives in conditions of constant uncertainty and has tremendous difficulty locating itself in relation to the ever-shifting surroundings. Bauman describes this state of life as characterized by an “acceptance of disorientation, immunity to vertigo and adaptation to a state of dizziness . . . looseness of attachment and revocability of engagement are the precepts guiding everything [the liquid individual engages] and to which they are attached.”³⁷ For the liquid individual, the idea of long-term commitment—whether to an endeavor, traditional ideology, or interpersonal relationship—has become almost unthinkable due to the increased capacity for emotional and physical mobility.

Bauman’s theorization of the liquid individual is echoed in Lifton’s work on the protean man, a hypothetical figure whose identity is as diffuse, polymorphous, and fluid as the era he lives in:

One encounters in the protean man what I would call strong ideological hunger. He is starved for ideas and feelings that can give coherence to his world, but here too his taste is toward new combinations. While he is by no means without yearning for the absolute, what he finds most acceptable are images of a more fragmentary nature than those of the ideologies of the past; and these images, although limited and often fleeting, can have great influence upon his psychological life.³⁸

36 Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 203.

37 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Life* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 4.

38 Robert J. Lifton, *History & Human Survival* (New York: Random House, 1970), 324.

Here we arrive at a dilemma. In the past, mankind's longing for the absolute was satisfied by totalizing ideologies which provided meaning or context to the seemingly arbitrary and disordered nature of life. That is no longer the case, for postmodern conditions have made it all but impossible to remain grounded by the traditional symbols and institutions which stood for these totalizing ideologies. Lifton depicts the protean man as being spiritually homeless because of his lack of long-standing ideological commitments to mediate his identity and actions. Because of this, Lifton posits that the protean man has no superego and is thus symbolically fatherless. Strenger, a psychoanalyst, also situates this apprehension towards commitment as a symptom of living within a fatherless society. Strenger's conception of fatherlessness is both literal (in that much of the current generation grew up in a household with an absentee parent for varying reasons) and metaphorical; Strenger follows fellow psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in likening the "paternal role" to "the symbol for cultural authority itself . . . For people born into Western culture, this implies a huge tradition that reaches from Judeo-Christian sources . . . through the canon of Western literature, art, philosophy, and science."³⁹ Strenger's argument suggests that traditional Western canons, including extensions of organized religion which dictate how religious subjects should feel and act, have been made practically obsolete and are therefore ineffective modes for understanding one's own self or its relation to the larger world. Strenger's and Lifton's respective work indicate that for the postmodern individual, the prospect that committing to any single ideology might offer access to a universal truth—an absolute—seems absurd and outdated.

B. *Religious Hybridization*

What, then, is the relation between the postmodern individual and religion if the latter can no longer function as a totalizing ideology? Perhaps the best way of answering this question would be through considering how Bauman's concept of hybridity can be applied to religious discourse to form the "new combinations" Lifton's protean man seeks. Bauman argues that relatively affluent (that is, above the poverty line) Westerners partake in a culture of hybridization that can be likened to what some have called "no brow culture", or one that indiscriminately appropriates various tastes regardless of their geographical or historical origins. Bauman's description of the hybridized individual centers on the transcendence of spatial borders of territories and symbolic boundaries of cultures:

Hybrid culture is manifestly *omnivorous* - non-committal, unchoosy, unprejudiced, ready and eager to savour everything on offer and to ingest and digest food from all cuisines... [it] is an ideological gloss on achieved or claimed extraterritoriality. Exempted from the sovereignty of territorially circumscribed political units, just like the extraterritorial networks inhabited by the global elite, 'hybrid culture' seeks its identity in freedom from ascribed and inert identities, in a licence to defy and neglect the kinds of cultural markers, labels or stigmas that circumscribe and limit the movements and choices of the place-bound rest: the 'locals.'⁴⁰

The construction of the hybridized individual entails a continuous process of selection from a global and infinite domain of values. In the context of religion, the hybridized individual alternately

³⁹ Carlo Strenger, prologue to *The Designed Self: Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Identities* (New Jersey: Analytic, 2005), Xv.

⁴⁰ Bauman, *Liquid Life*, 32.

builds, reformulates, and deconstructs their personal brand of religiosity. Being religiously mobile allows the individual to identify with the “good” aspects of various religions while circumventing any tenets that may inconvenience their existing lifestyle. As they sample beliefs and practices, they effectively differentiate themselves from “the locals”—the fundamentalists, literalists, and anyone else whom remains bound to a single and scoffed-upon organized religion. Religious hybridity grants the postmodern individual access to the absolute without the constraints of organized religion.

Religious hybridity not only tolerates the plurality of reasonable beliefs across religious traditions but selects the “good” components and reintegrates them into an entirely new constellation of beliefs, practices, and rituals. A religiously hybridized individual might attend a Pentecostal church on Sunday, practice Reiki and belly dance in their spare time, and cite Eckhart Tolle’s *The Power of Now* as their most influential religious text. Religious hybridity takes Locke’s call for religious toleration one step further, resulting in a nondiscriminatory and semi-polytheistic line of deism. Concomitant with religious hybridity is the underlying acknowledgement that all religions must on some level offer access to the absolute. This vaguely unitarian reasoning strips the Divine of its specificity and erects a new quasi-godhead, a Jesus-Muhammad-Buddha whom can be accessed through any and all religious channels. The Absolute’s will is quite obscured outside of its mandate for human beings to act morally and completely tolerate one another. However, this is not to say that postmodern religious hybridity is any less authentically “religious” than the religiosity displayed in romantic and modern times. If religion is considered to be a collection of ideologies, practices, and social institutions, it becomes apparent that religious hybridity has the potential to thoroughly satisfy (if not exceed) those criterion due to its ability to transcend symbolic boundaries. As the logic of science caused a reinterpretation of religious dogma in early modernity, so to is the logic of consumerism working within postmodernity to bring about a reconceptualization of religious self-hood.

V. Conclusions and Implications

The secularization thesis operates out of a highly sanitized conception of modernity to conclude that religion has lost its relevance and value in Western societies. Historical inquiry reveals the contrary: religion has not only acted as an indispensable instrument in the propagation of modernity, but is also distinctly responsive to past and current sociopolitical developments. Its various visible manifestations and philosophical imports have certainly changed over the last four centuries, but in no way have these changes reduced the relevance of religion to Western life. Religion still functions as a mode self-understanding, an object of social contention, and an elemental component of political discourse. The fatal mistake the secularization thesis makes is its assumption that any deviation from pre-modern forms of religion is emblematic of an overall weakening of religiosity. As Taylor comically states, “Does the fact that clergy can no longer haul people before church courts for not paying their tithes mean that we are less religious? . . . We can’t just identify ‘religion’ [with pre-modern] Catholicism, and then count every move away from this as decline.”⁴¹

The evolution of religion in the past four centuries is mirrored by the growing complexity of secularity. While the secularization thesis identifies the secular as anything that appears to be religiously vacuous, I have shown that the discourse of secularity has produced its own deeply

41 Taylor, “A Secular Age,” 427.

held beliefs and values—namely tolerance and democracy—which organize and discipline a community of like-minded individuals. In modernity, secular education performed a dual political function: it distributed requisite knowledge to future elites while homogenizing the value systems of the greater population in an effort to make them more easily governable. Tolerance and democracy are still taught through secular pedagogy and used as a rubric in evaluating “good” and “bad” forms of religion. Aspects of academically-deemed “good” religion are inducted into the domain of civil religion, an ideology derived from deistic interpretations of religious doctrine used to legitimate the secular government’s power. Civil religion remains a predominant fixture of political reasoning and conversation used to govern the population and corroborate the nation-state’s sovereignty. The discourse of secularity, much like any other ideological system, works through cultural institutions such as the university to alternately promote and condemn orientations toward religion depending on their compatibility with the existing sociopolitical ethos and projects.

If the secularization thesis can no longer be relied upon as a working paradigm for the study of religion and secularity, how will current and future social scientists perform inquiries into these subjects? The theories of post-structuralist thinkers like Foucault and Asad may offer an avenue towards a more useful analytical framework. Rather than trying to arrive at universal definitions of what categories like religion and secularity actually are, future scholars should instead ask how these terms have metamorphosized over the course of history according to the hallmark ethics and institutions of the temporally relevant epoch. As we delve further into postmodernity, this methodological approach will become particularly fitting on several counts. Post-structuralism acknowledges the interconnectedness and complexity that typifies the relationship between abstract ideologies and institutions like church, state, and school. Post-structuralist scholarship has the potential to show how discourses which initially appear to be oppositional do not necessarily work on an inversive scale but can coexist and interact with each other; by calling into question the validity of binary oppositions—secularity as the antonym of religion, for example—scholars are better able to understand how and why these dichotomies were enacted and popularized. Moving away from these binaries will, to some extent, disallow future scholars of religion from projecting their own moral sensibilities onto their subject of inquiry as they have done in the past.

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