



## Introduction: Thinking about Secularism

### I

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## II

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### III

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

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

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

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

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

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

the growing habit of reading imaginative literature<sup>15</sup>—being enclosed within and by it—so that images of a “pre-modern” past acquire in retrospect a quality of enchantment.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## IV

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

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

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

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

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

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

## What Might an Anthropology of Secularism Look Like?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### A reading of origins: myth, truth, and power

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

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

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