

- 1) Talal Asad argues that "the concept of the secular cannot do without religion" (Asad 1994: 200). Using at least two appropriate readings from class, discuss why you do or do not agree with this statement.

### The Secular as Remainder: A Discursive, Non-Oppositional Tool to Accommodate Religious Diversity

Accustomed as we are to negative definitions in relation to an "other", far too many have twisted the meaning of the secular to be simply one of wholesale opposition to religion. I will attempt, as Asad does at much greater length, detail, and abstraction, to recontextualize the secular in terms of discursive ideal types. This will involve highlighting historical examples of functional secularization as a means to reduce religious conflict or otherwise deal with diversity. Religion indeed is necessary for a concept of the secular to exist, but in discursive terms, religion is in fact only the object of secularization. Rather more convolutedly, secularization's objective is to create a secular discursive space by removing its object, religion, from said space. Religion's actual antithesis is atheism, and secularization impinges upon discourses on both extremes from an ideal-type middle extreme whose worldly manifestations of church-state relations exist along a spectrum. Religious conflict occurs both when diversity at popular levels of discourse is not mediated by a secular state and also when a secular state takes its definition of the secular beyond that of a "remainder" and enters popular discourse.

Religion as a concept signifies a system of supernatural beliefs which can be held by individuals and most any group or organizational category, even higher than states or civilizations, as evident in the "global religions" whose explicit objective is a world composed entirely of believers. This essay on the ideal type secular and functional secularism will return to the state, but the initial relationship with religion must be compared at the individual level. A single person can create her own religion, and it needn't be believed by anyone else, or even herself<sup>1</sup>. In accordance with Talal Asad's statement, if not precisely his definitions, the secular, by contrast, cannot exist independently or internally within an isolated individual<sup>2</sup>, but only in higher levels of discourse as *a remainder*, after all religious reference has been excised<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, fantasy and sci-fi novelists do this frequently, though none have "caught on" to the extent of Scientology. Religions which have no living believers don't cease to be religions, just much less important for worldly analyses such as Byrnes's. In talking about Europe, it is important for him to define religion as a "social tradition that encompasses and defines a community of believers rather than a body of beliefs, a social ethic, or a cultural system." (Byrnes, pg. 31) This essay considers ideal-type references to precisely such "bodies of belief" in discourse levels, including those such as law which discuss people in the abstract, and so rejects the necessity of believers.

<sup>2</sup> My own "anthropology of religion" begins, as has probably been theorized by countless others, as every pre-social and early human formulated systems of explanation for events and existence according to his or her whimsy. On becoming social or certainly upon encountering other societies, internal religions (inchoate, personalized theologies preached by one's "inner voice" from the pulpit of the mind) had to be externalized, shared, spread, debated, with only the most "persuasive" becoming the "official" religion among a group of people. Those who hadn't formed their own, internal religions would be likely to adopt those of another. Then and now, each person may have a unique, personal religion; it is simply much less likely to be created "from scratch" but rather an interpretation or alteration of more popular doctrines. A solipsistic secularist would have to separate schizophrenically from his or her own religious stream of consciousness. Secular interpersonal discourse, on a functional level, includes any conversation which is not about religion; ideally, only conversations which are devoid of any religious reference could be considered secular.

<sup>3</sup> This will get even more awkwardly mathematical later. If the secular is what remains after religion is subtracted, it should be called a "difference", but that seems like too general a term. While there is an obvious attempt at division, it would sound strange/more confusing to call it a quotient, especially since the division isn't perfect/exact/or valid in all contexts with greater or lesser degrees of secularization. In short, the division is idealized. In all contexts, the term "remainder" describes "what's left over", and also implies the imperfection of all actual divisions between secular and religious.

The secular, which in the absence of religious reference appears speciously antithetical to religion on many levels, is only meaningful among the known but un-expressed presence of religious ideas. Such an absence is not an opposite, nor is it an eradication to non-existence; it is nothing more than a non-expression, an admission that religion is not germane to the discussion at hand. When an individual describes himself as “secular”, he makes a statement to another person in opposition to the discussion of religion<sup>4</sup>. A secularist, by contrast, favors a doctrine of “secularism” and a process of “secularization” within a bounded context<sup>5</sup>. The secularist will gladly discuss religion, especially with regard to the normative preference that religious references be removed from a certain discourse, usually public and/or official. In both cases, his own, personal religious beliefs—whether devoutly or merely “culturally” religious, agnostic, non-religious, or atheist—are neither in conflict nor relevant to his identity as a secular person or secularist beyond how they influence his normative views of religious conversation and secularism, respectively.

The concept of “the secular” I will support here is of that which remains after a full withdrawal of religion from discourse, especially official discourse. Or, to alter Asad’s claim, the secular cannot do without a state or other authority to establish and enforce this absence from discourse.<sup>6</sup> Following the development of the concept through history, Asad finds strong parallels with the mythological formation of religions, requiring first an authoritative establishment of what was supernatural, thereby distinguishing religion from the profane, first unholy and later merely mundane concepts and systems of belief. This process similarly opened a space for non-religious existence and governmental function, as annual budgets and the like clearly did not require supernatural blessing to be fiscally responsible or functional. Indeed, to include religious reference in such obviously non-religious official documents would likely alienate non-religious and minority-religion-believing citizens alike.

Having established four discursive ideal types (in ascending order: the internal/personal, interpersonal, public, and official<sup>7</sup>), it is worth noting that the most consequential application of secularism is at the level of the state. It was not until the interests of the state triumphed over those of religion that the secular could be anything but the slowly

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<sup>4</sup> This is the same as saying, “Please do not discuss religion with me. I will not discuss religion.” In discursive terms, it means, “Please keep religious references within a lower level of discourse than our current one.”

<sup>5</sup> It would be strange for a secular person to need to express this to a government, whereas the secularist’s target is precisely a government. The desire to secularize an interpersonal conversation can be accomplished much less formally by declaring one’s religious views to be private. Violation of secular norms might be treated in a secular society by mild rebuke and post-hoc removal of religious reference; in an atheist state outlawing such references, criminal prosecution of the violator may follow.

<sup>6</sup> I realize that this makes it quite impossible to have a secular discussion about religion. By even mentioning religion, a discussion *becomes* religious. By “religious”, I refer to anything of/about/pertaining to religion in addition to beliefs in religion. All discussions referring to religion in some way are religious, even those which attempt a “neutral”, non-believing, or non-promotional discourse (i.e., what is generally, wrongly considered secular by most people). The expansive, secular nationalism of groups like the “Freedom From Religion Foundation” should ideally, like political science, progress to the point where their defining purpose is meaningless, to a totalitarian point when such organized action is no longer “necessary”. In a world of 100% believers in one religion, or secularism, such terms are obviated. This is off to a pedantic start, I see.

<sup>7</sup> Internal = thinking about religion, interpersonal = talking about religion with another person, public = talking about religion in a public space in which passerby may constitute an audience, display of religious symbols and identifiers (whether by people wearing crosses, headscarves, etc., or on flags and places of worship), official = statements, including laws, of those employed by the state,

expanding non-religious realm, ascending ultimately in and with modernity to a more respected code of official state conduct<sup>8</sup>. Over the course of this multi-century process, official discourse was forced to secularize by the prevalence of religious conflict at lower levels, namely interpersonal and public. These conflicts were the very real results of the Protestant Reformation, described in Philpott's *Revolutions in Sovereignty*, after which a territory with one official religion only remained tenable by conversion or removal of other believers from the territory.

As the work of Philpott and Nexon (in Byrnes) show, secularization was created not as a solution to religious conflict, but only to palliate the forces which threatened either to depopulate or pull apart the early modern European state. Early secular experiments at the state level were not highly successful even in this minimal regard, as populations within state borders tended to homogenize as either Protestant or Catholic, though it could be said that interstate war had to end with one religion in the land before the issue of diversity could be addressed. In that era, the tenuously held dictum that a territory such as France, whose "*politique*" compromise officially ended persecution of Protestants in exchange for a cease-fire for the preservation of the nation, had no official religion was enough to distinguish it from other territories<sup>9</sup>. What is seen today as only a highly imperfect compromise bearing only the barest resemblance to official secularization may well have been radically secularist to territories which maintained an official religion<sup>10</sup>. Theocracies today are similarly wary of any attempt to wrest the highest power in a state away from Higher Powers, and their majority populations would likely find themselves making anti-religious accusations akin to French Catholics of the Westphalian era if secularization achieved the slightest success.

While religious conflicts have by no means disappeared in the modern world, secularists enter into them as new actors, often in alliance with a nominally or formally secular, modern state. The theory of human development suggests that as societies modernize, their populations become both less religious and more tolerant of other religious beliefs, but ongoing intra- and inter-state religious conflicts continue to rage among all states where religion is still "very important" to significant portions of the countries. As emphasized in most treatments of post-Kemalist Turkey, such as those found in Byrnes's volume, secularization itself creates new conflicts when the religious majority sees secularism as preventing the practice of their religion. Such extreme secularization, in the form of legal restrictions on religious displays and practice, can amplify conflicts until they affect not only all levels of discourse below the official but also life itself within state borders.

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<sup>8</sup> As I've found no other space for empiricism, it is worth noting the work of Inglehart on "Human Development" that even if secularization has been effectively separated from modernization, there is still the striking correlation of modernization with "secular/rational values" among populations in developed countries, the U.S. being the obvious outlier. Asad on page 32 also ascribes a kind of "sacredness" to the functions of the modern state, itself based on quite mundane rights which are said to be as inviolable as sacred religious creeds of pre-modernity.

<sup>9</sup> Philpott's discussion of the French *politique* experiment is discussed on pg. 129-134, as if it was both caused by the "clash between Calvinism and Catholicism at its deepest" and a short-to-medium term solution to the problem.

<sup>10</sup> Stemming from my strict definition of a secular state as having a total absence of religious reference in official discourse, I define a theocracy as any state which has an official religion, whether or not actually ruled by religious clerics. The majority of states fall somewhere in between and when called either secular or theocratic should be interpreted as favoring one or the other extreme while not necessarily approaching or being near it.

Such divisive effects are not unlike those of the Reformation, pitting instead government and other secularists against devoutly religious citizens. The problem, I would argue, stems from an interpretation of secularization strongly critiqued by Casanova, which advocates government activism in lower discourses, above and beyond the mere removal of religious reference from official discourse. In summary, secularism which interferes with popular religious practice can defensibly be called anti-religious, a departure from the secular as a discursively limited and non-oppositional remainder toward one of at least partial antithesis.

For authors such as Casanova, contemporary applications of secularism have gone inappropriately far beyond palliative, to the point of “secularist nationalism” in which secularization becomes a good in itself as a concomitant of modernization, while religion is an obstacle to be overcome. Rather than easing tensions between religious groups or reducing problems within governments, “secularization as solution” shows rife and troubling signs of exacerbating them. Europe, as arguably the most secular region of the world, defines secularization as much more than the mere removal of religion from official discourse. By Casanova’s account, Europeans have two definitions which become increasingly problematic as they are used interchangeably: “There is, firstly, secularization in the broader sense of secularization of societal structures or diminution in the social significance of religion. There is, secondly, secularization in the narrower sense of decline of religious beliefs and practices among individuals.” (in Byrnes, pg. 86) These are qualitatively different secularizations than the kind I propose, in that they work primarily on the internal/personal, interpersonal, and public levels, while making no mention of the state government, which is again the arbiter of any process which affects an entire society. Both are obviously repugnant to religious believers and easily co-opted by xenophobic members of the majority culture, believers of the majority religion, or perhaps most frighteningly, atheist and anti-religious activists.

Furthermore, Casanova argues that secularism, an impossible ideal which can only be partially realized and which prevents even the acknowledgement of cultural religious heritage, actually facilitates the preferential treatment of the majority religion over all others, as bias finds its way “subconsciously and compulsively into public secular codes.” To avoid this, rather than reopening the door to religion by including Judeo-Christian references in the EU constitution, it would be preferable to retreat from any preference for reducing personal belief and practice (internal discourse), which is understandably offensive. Whenever secularization encroaches upon religion in terms of personal beliefs or casual conversation, it becomes anti-religious, not creating secular spaces (expanding “the secular”) but angry believers instead. Indeed, the goals of a leading American NGO, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, has explicitly more modest goals

of establishing the secular by “educat[ing] the public on matters relating to nontheism, and to promote the constitutional principle of separation of church and state”<sup>11</sup>.

As Asad rightly clarifies from the beginning of his *Formations* book, religion and the secular needn't necessarily imply any processes of proselytization (spreading of religion or secular nationalism) or imposition of either upon individuals or populations by force. The early modern and secular nationalist applications can be viewed as minimal and maximal applications of secularism, reflective of highly religious and secular contexts in time and space. In the “secular as remainder” ideal type, secularization is a political tool to accommodate religious diversity or to remove superfluous religious references from contexts with no inherent religiosity, not as an end in itself. Following a secular ideal which forbids religious reference within an official level of discourse, while not impinging upon the two lowest, falls not between religion and secularism, but state atheism and theocracy<sup>12</sup>.

Returning to the initial prompt of this essay, it is necessary to restate that the secular “cannot do” without religion as its *object of primary concern*, not as an “other” against which to define something. The level of a group or discourse's secularity must be measured by the extent to which religion is either believed or referred to, against an objective baseline of *zero*. Whether a contextual space which has been secularized, becoming “the secular” to the current extent for that context, still refers to anything religious determines where it ranks in a state-atheistic to theocratic spectrum. It is this objective measure, based on any Weberian ideal type<sup>13</sup> which of course needn't be my own, which can be used to determine whether something is secular, relatively secular for a given era or other comparative unit, or merely hiding behind a secular façade while obviously favoring a particular religion.

Religion, and reference to it, is in the previous relationship a unit of measure to assess secularity. Use of religion to define the secular negatively would be a false opposition because the secular as remainder—at only the highest level of discourse—is not religion's antithesis. To illustrate this, I conclude with a brief consideration of actual, direct oppositions. Opposition to religion can take many forms, none of which include the secular as I have defined it.

A first opposition is literal non-religiousness, having no religion, and related to Asad's analysis and my assertion that religion was ontologically prior to the secular. Before the secular could exist, there had to be significant aspects of human life which were not religious, and by Asad's account of the Middle Ages, the supernatural was for quite some time

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<sup>11</sup> See [www.ffrf.org](http://www.ffrf.org), openly made up of “atheists, agnostics, and skeptics” and more than openly demonized by religious groups and “War on Christmas” people as promoting state atheism, despite their modestly stated aims.

<sup>12</sup> It is necessary at this point to introduce a spectrum which illustrates how different ideals of secularism, theocracy, and state atheism differ in their attention to the reality of religious diversity and to each other. See the Spectral Appendix and its explanation.

<sup>13</sup> I attempt to use the ideal type in the Weberian sense, as outlined in “Objectivity” in Social Science and Social Policy”, in his *Methodology of the Social Sciences*.

all-encompassing. For Asad, the crucial separation was that which created a “natural” space<sup>14</sup>, without which a secular one would be either impossible or inconceivable.

It is likely that religion itself followed a similar model of space creation, as humans were freed from an all-encompassing need for basic, physical survival. Before religion existed, the world was non-religious. It could not have been secular, by my definition, as there could have been no remainder or removal of a non-existent concept. In the contemporary world, many who simply do not believe in a religion and make no religious claims are also non-religious. On a scale of 0 to 1, then, religion would be a 1, while the fully secular, pre-religious and contemporary non-religiousness would all be 0, though categorically different zeroes arrived at by different processes (the remainder after secularization of a discourse or other space, original non-existence of religion, and either ignorance of religion’s existence or personal choice, respectively). Absence in the case of the secular is not opposition because, in the absence of any religious reference, no ontological claims are made. In practical terms, reaching a secular zero, beyond being next to impossible, is also of questionable desirability.

Atheism and anti-religiousness are more complex conceptions, but their opposition to religion is explicitly adversarial, and both could be placed in the numerical scheme as -1<sup>15</sup>. Atheism makes a positive statement of belief that all religions are false, while anti-religiousness is more opposed to the practice of religion. Both are undoubtedly prominent in secularist movements, but few outside the context of an atheist state such as existed at the height of totalitarian communism seek to inject their particular religion-opposing beliefs into official discourse or policies. It is only worth mentioning these here in relation to the secular because of the frequent misinterpretation (or intentional misuse) of religious advocates claiming that secularism is functionally synonymous with these beliefs.

For secularism, religion is *the object to be removed from discourse*, leaving only the secular in its public and official wake. It is not defined negatively, opposed to religion, but rather in relation to religion as an object about which one has a normative opinion. Restricting normative prescriptions for secularization to the highest levels of discourse would go a long way toward reducing the secular’s highly assailable and understandably mistaken status as religion’s antagonistic opposite. That status should be reserved for militant atheists, who, being protected by the secular state to express anti-religious views without fear of violent retribution, would probably welcome the attention. It would also make the growing numbers of minority believers (and non-believers generally) more comfortable in states which they share with a preponderant religious majority.

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<sup>14</sup> “The idea of ‘nature’ is itself internally transformed. For the representation of the Christian God as being sited quite apart in ‘the supernatural’ world signals the construction of a secular space that begins to emerge in early modernity. Such a space permits ‘nature’ to be reconceived as manipulable material, determinate, homogeneous, and subject to mechanical laws.” (Asad, pg. 27)

<sup>15</sup> This is just going to confuse things further with my state policy spectrum, which goes from 0-10. Oh well.

To study “the secular”, one must separate an ideal type from the many functional versions of secularization which have existed and continue to be applied and proposed. For clues as to how well a particular version will be received by a state’s population, one must consider how it impacts levels of discourse in society. This depends in large part on how or whether a state, just as necessary to the secular as religion, secularizes itself and the discourses below it. It is all too easy for the secular to be portrayed as, or to become religion’s most strident opposites, atheism and anti-religiousness, rather than its remainder in a secularized discourse. This essay has proposed a recontextualized version of the secular and the policy prescription that where individual religious practice is impeded, causing cognitive definitional dissonance, anger, and conflict, secularization should retreat upward though never heavenward.

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## A Convoluted, 3-Extreme Spectrum of the Secular Ideal, Fundamentalist Imperialisms of State Atheism and Theocracy

NOTES: This is mostly about the official/state level of discourse, as described in the midterm paper.

The middle extreme is silly, while the poles are scary. At poles believers, non-majority believers, and non-religious need protection. At center, majority believers feel threatened/oppressed, underappreciated.

Governments at 2-7 are likely to declare themselves 5 or “secular”, or make the claim that the population has “freedom of religion”.

Speculative causal claims for 0-4.5: the government wants to change its population to be less religious.

For 5.5-10, the demographics of the population are the driving force behind individual leaders’ religious beliefs as well as government policy and involvement in religious matters.

Why is 5 an impossible extreme? The state would not be able to regulate cults or militant atheists which may have beliefs at either pole and may want to overthrow the gov’t. On a more superficial but still problematic level, gov’t officials would be prohibited from answering simple questions like, “What is your religion?”

Suggested and highly unsubstantiated contextual rankings, on which the criteria are admittedly based: USA = 6-7, “Secular” Europe = 4-4.5 or 5.5-6, PRC post-Mao = 2-3, PRC Cultural Revolution = .5-1.5, Soviet Union = .5-4, Saudi Arabia 7.5-8.5, Afghanistan under Taliban = 9?, Spanish Inquisition = 9.5, etc. etc.



# A Convoluted, 3-Extreme Spectrum of the Secular Ideal, Fundamentalist Imperialisms of State Atheism and Theocracy

Population Demographics above Line, in Pink

<--"OTHERING" BEGINS



The state believes religion is BAD (undesirable).

The state believes religion is GOOD (desirable).

State goal is 100% internal & global atheism. Religious people are expelled or executed. Religious practice is illegal.

Similar to 0, but religious policy is not a priority (not actively pursued). Citizens are often jailed for religious "crimes".

All members of gov't must disavow religious beliefs (declare their atheism). Restrictions are placed on registered places of worship. Non-registered places of worship are regularly raided/shut down, leaders punished severely, believers also punished. Religious identifiers are banned in public.

State leaders regularly, publicly disparage religion and particular believers. Believers are often subject to harassment by authority figures.

Religious organizations are not tax exempt, may be taxed more heavily or have to pay for special permits. Permits are needed for public religious events and ceremonies (but not secular ones). Violations of secular laws by officials may be a crime.

SECU-LAR STATE =4.5-5.5  
NO LAWS ON RELI-GION

Many in gov't are likely to hold religious beliefs but feel it is inappropriate to express them publicly.

Organizations whose purpose is religious are tax-exempt. Religious "heritage" is publicly celebrated, with gov't leaders present. Flag, currency, pledge of allegiance, etc. have religious references. Not being of majority religion is "an issue" for politicians & gov't workers. Secularization cases reach courts.

State leaders regularly, publicly make positive statements concerning their own religion (not being an active believer likely to disqualify one from leading the state). Blasphemy is a crime, but rarely prosecuted. Constitution contains religious references. Non-believers are treated differently by police, justice system, other authority figures. Many laws impede practice of minority religions.

Blasphemy is a serious crime, often prosecuted, sometimes severely. All members of gov't must declare religious belief. State may declare one or more "official religion". Identifiers of minority religions are banned in public.

Similar to 10, but religious policy is not a priority (not actively pursued). Non-believers are often jailed for religious "crimes".

THEOCRACY=8-10

State requires everyone to be of the same religion. Non-believers are expelled or executed. State actively proselytizes beyond its borders,

Totalitarian, Imperialist Theocracy

If realized, all have same religion, religion is objective truth. All is religious and so, "religion" ceases to exist.

goal is global religious hegemony.

Totalitarian, Imperialist State Atheism  
If realized, world is non-religious.

STATE ATHEISM= 0-2

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10