

20 Aziz al-Azmeh: *Secularism in the Arab World* (2020)

Introduced by Florian Zemmin

Introduction

Aziz al-Azmeh (b. 1947 in Damascus) has, since 2002, been a professor at the Central European University, which is now located in Vienna after being forced out of Hungary as a consequence of repressive measures of Viktor Orban's government. After achieving an MA at the University of Tübingen, al-Azmeh completed his PhD in Oriental studies at Saint Anthony's College in 1977. While his academic training and career predominantly took place at European institutions, and his historiographical works extend to classical Muslim scholars and Islam in late antiquity, al-Azmeh has also continued to address contemporary issues in Arab countries, not least questions of modernity and secularity. Most of his monographs and contributions were published in Arabic, and al-Azmeh's eminence in Arabic debates is further underlined by his being awarded the Republican Order of Merit in 1993, by the Tunisian president Ben 'Ali, for services to Arab culture. Whether the secularist politician Ben 'Ali was also motivated by al-Azmeh's advocacy of secularism cannot be ascertained.

By contrast to a prominent stance in Arabic debates, al-Azmeh is known for conceiving of secularisation not as a particular ideology, but rather as a universal historical process to be acknowledged in Muslim societies, too. This conception, and what it is countering, is indicated in the title of his 1992 book *al-'Almaniyya min manẓūr mukhtalif* (*Secularism from Another Perspective*), an English translation of which was published in 2020, including a new preface, an excerpt from which we reproduce below. While the book as a whole provides a historical trajectory of secularity, in the preface, al-Azmeh positions his own theoretical considerations concerning secularity in relation to other positions and approaches. He notably advocates sociological and historiographical analyses, as opposed to what he considers culturalist and identitarian conceptions of civilisation. Al-Azmeh sees a culturalist agenda behind theories of there being multiple configurations of modernity or – with explicit reference to the *Multiple Secularities* research program – of secularity. Moreover, he draws direct connections between such current theoretical programs and certain historical ideologies. This is not the place to sketch possible responses to al-Azmeh's rhetorically sharp criticism, which partially makes for a productive challenge and partially seems to border on polemics. The fact that al-Azmeh continues to defend secularisation as an objective and potentially universal historical process is, in any case, significant when mapping current theoretical positions in debates about secularity, and potentially refining them.

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Bibliographical Information

Aziz al-Azmeh. *Secularism in the Arab World: Contexts, Ideas and Consequences*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020; xxx–xlii.

Secularism and the Sociology of Fate

In a gentler version of Carl Schmitt's decisionism, post-colonialist academic work, in some of which Schmitt assumes oracular status, transposes what it sees as moral or political imperatives into cognitive ones. Correlatively, it privileges identity, understood in terms of culturalist differentialism, as a category of analysis and as the locus of irreducible value and voice conjoined. The sociological redactions of destiny and fate to be found in work on Islamism are of this type: Islam, which overdetermines societies nominated as Muslim, being their ethnological nature, becomes ineluctable destiny. In this perspective, sociology is the least of inputs. Note the discursive precipitation of decisionism here: this sociology of fate is primarily an apologetic discourse for special pleading, and primarily rhetorical, its sociologistic facet being related to the residual language of the academic milieu in which it is communicated. Discussions of secularism are particularly apt here, as Islamism and secularism appear as a contrastive pair. Charles Taylor opens his grand and vastly learned *A Secular Age* with an explicitly contrastive reference to Islam,¹ suggesting that the issue of secularism in Europe has to a large extent come to be relevant because Islam is perceived as a recalcitrant and bothersome presence, an impression to which many Muslim organisations and individuals have been contributing amply and enthusiastically.

The sociologistic redaction of destiny is the outcrop of historicist vitalism: the idea that societies are held together by trans-historical dispositions that trumps actual historical dynamics, except in so far as it deranges the authentic nature of society. Historicist discourse here typically involves topics of decline, often conflated with change overall, taken for disease, senescence, infection, estrangement of essence, decomposition, de-specification. The result of such diremptions of essence will, according to this perspective, inevitably be an inauthentic grotesque, what Spengler termed a Pseudomorph. Note that the [p. xxx/xxxi] conceptual morphology of vitalism here is meta-

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1 [note 44 in the original] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

physical, and more specifically Neo-Platonic, one of substance, plenitude of being, and privation of being.

Civilisations² and similar figures of organism do not change in real ways, but can be adulterated, soiled, and, indeed, defiled by forms of derangement – such are modernity or secularisation, both in this perspective, conditions of inauthenticity and heteronomy. One may well note the way in which organismic metaphors lend themselves to sonorities of pathos. The diseased and unnatural humour is treatable homeopathically, with the restoration of tradition, by return to roots, carried by nostalgia and identitarian reaffirmation. Thus, the idea that Arab societies, being in essence on this reading Islamic societies rather than societies that contain actual Muslims, need to and will inevitably return to an initial condition of purity after confrontations, challenges, and periods of contamination with extraneous agents, colonial regimes, and modernising elites, that had deranged the body politic and the body social, but did not sully the fastness of origins.

What is missing here is the concrete: that traditions and practices are plural and arranged in a system of internal distribution and relations domination in any given social unit; that judgements upon the activity or inactivity of cultural elements and upon analytical utility of culture is dependent on the precise object of analysis; that tradition and the appeal to tradition under the aspect of culture is here rather, as in atavism and primitivism, more a politico-discursive resource for those who invoke it than an actually identifiable entity. If tradition were to be taken for an entity, it would rather be an object of anthropological study in so far as it is a hypothesis put forward to account for observed repetition, rather than to be this repetition itself³ – this last point is especially pertinent to any comment on Asad. In contrast: Clifford Geertz, often referred to as a patriarch of culturalism, was nevertheless an anthropologists' anthropologist and could therefore not be a cultural determinist of this or any other stripe. His [p. xxxi/xxxii] ethnographic work, which is of the highest possible order, impelled him to question very seriously and in practice the analytical value and operationalist use of the notion of culture. With reference to Bali, he highlighted “the tendency for the divisive effect of social institutions to predominate over the unifying power of cultural ones”, affirming that “few political elites can have as intensely sought loyalty by means so ingeniously designed to produce treachery as did the Balinese”⁴.

2 [note 45 in the original] Aziz Al-Azmeh, *The Times of History: Universal Topics in Islamic Historiography* (New York and Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007), ch. 2.

3 [note 46 in the original] As in conservative discourse generally, classically expressed by Edward Shils, “Tradition”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 13 (1971): 122–159 – but see Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, 32–34; Pascal Boyer, *Tradition as Truth and Communication. A Cognitive Description of Traditional Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. 2–4, 32–37, 79–86; Marc Augé, *Le sens des autres. Actualité de l'anthropologie* (Paris: Fayard, 1994), 28–29; Adam Kuper, *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), ch. 7.

4 [note 47 in the original] Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 45.

The sociological redaction of destiny would have things otherwise. Arab societies, and Iranian society as well, being congenitally predisposed to an ethnological destiny expressed in what is generally known as Islamic culture or Islamic civilisation, are captive to – and, to some, protected by – a congenital cultural incapacity for change of real consequence. The changes undergone by these societies over more than a century had been heteronomous, and in the final analysis a charade. Abidance is captive to the parameters of origin, of the initial condition.⁵ We have here a notion of culture as a prison of social instinct rather than as a field of human action, including improvement, culture being regarded as a self-subsistent thing rather than a property of individuals and groups,⁶ a *sui generis*, irreducible subject rather than an attribute, overdetermining history, society, and change.

To recapitulate: all revivalist and thus vitalist movements, and their associates and adjuncts within the academy, speak of a return to unadulterated origins, and of the ontological impossibility of departure therefrom. All invoke redactions of destiny, considered as inevitable forces of nature, compelling societies to regress to initial conditions prevailing before the Fall, now called colonialism or rule by secularising elites, invoked in their turn as clichés. Such are, for instance, the invocation of traditions with no regard to its social topography and on an impossible assumption of social and cultural homogeneity, or indulgence in “civilisational analysis” or “civilisational dialogue” rather than addressing history, again on an assumption of internal homogeneity for each unit involved. My assumption is that civilisation is [p. xxxii/xxxiii] not an invariant and homogeneous social form but, in the most suggestive phrase of Marcel Mauss, a hyper-social system of social systems. Civilisation in recent civilisationist discourse acts as a rhetorical figure of historicist continuity, rendering “civilisational analysis” an endless elaboration of clichés intended to represent an essence of congenital predispositions – all playing on vitalist and organismic metaphors in the sub-Spenglerian versions current today, with Huntington as a prime example.

At present, invocations of identity and native voice proffer a programme of what Taylor called, rather delicately, a politics of recognition – a politics that, when performed on the ground, at points of concrete application, has generally devolved more often than not to a politics of self-affirmative identitarian bluster, generally unmannerly to degrees that must surely challenge anyone’s appetite for recognition. Advocacy of recognition in these terms yields a communalist template premised on the self-enclosure of human collectivities, and their cultivation of origins, expressed in traditions, spawning particularistic and exclusivist claims to ethics and politics. Culture is here beyond the reach of sociological and historical analysis. Often counterposed to what is taken for

5 [note 48 in the original] This concept is very well thought through by Sudipta Kaviraj, “Outline of a revisionist theory of modernity”, *European Journal of Sociology* 46 (2005): 497–526.

6 [note 49 in the original] Dan Sperber and Nicolas Claidière, “Defining and explaining culture (comments on Richerson and Boyd, *Not by genes alone*)”, *Biology and Philosophy* 23 (2008): 283–292, at 291–292.

a teleology of the Enlightenment, this is a reverse, an oddly retrojective teleology that seeks the future in the ineluctability of the past.

Among other things, this decorous perspective yields nominal pluralisation and multiplication quite commonly, seemingly without end, with multiple modernities and multiple secularities emerging effortlessly and recognisably. If underdeveloped countries, including those identified as Islamic, cannot in this perspective really be said to have modernised or secularised but that they had rather been disfigured, or that they be unwilling and incapable congenitally of improvement, they can nevertheless condescendingly be included in the conversation politely, and said to have modernised or secularised multiply and in their own particular ways. This is all seemingly innocent, straightforward, and matter-of-fact, but adrift conceptually. I used the term *Islams*, which has often been misread without the intended irony, and placed in the flow of recalamations of voice and the cognitive Saturnalia of Difference and so forth. Yet this usage sought to reinstate and encourage a critical, properly historical analysis of the themes generally treated simplistically and stereotypically, not to dissolve a category – here, Islam – into senseless plurality, nor to dissolve the categories of Islam and of Modernity into skittish revelry, or a redemption of authenticity.⁷ *Islams and Modernities* [p. xxxiii/xxxiv] and other works were intended, in contrast, to reaffirm the purely nominal character of the category “Islam”, and to argue against its use as a classificatory, analytical, or causal concept.

What was most explicitly intended is not the effacement of general analytical concepts, but the reinstatement of history against culturalist claims for abidance. Multiplying secularities or modernities, and other targets of this rhetoric of categorical deflation, cannot free historical reality from either secularisation or modernity as objective historical dynamics.⁸ Such multiplications are unmistakably impelled less by the need to take due conceptual note of empirical findings than by a culturalist agenda. Infirmiting secularisation in “the longue durée of civilisational history”, such thinking in terms of “cultural diversity”, appealing to such matters as “spiritual ontologies” and searching for “cultural meanings”, yields, it is claimed, a “cultural sociology of secular modernities”.⁹ But such a procedure, it has been well noted, will have a scattering effect, depriving concepts of analytical utility,¹⁰ in effect effacing the concept entirely by the overlay of respectful multiplication. There is in this kind of advocacy a blanket reduction of social process and of history to culture; one cannot, it is claimed, see secularisation as

7 [note 50 in the original] Compare the historiographic multiplication of the Enlightenment in the most perceptive analysis of Jonathan Sheehan, “Enlightenment, religion and the enigma of secularization: A review essay”, *The American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 1061–1080, at 1066–1069, 1075–1076.

8 [note 51 in the original] Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, xiii–xiv.

9 [note 52 in the original] Marian Burchardt and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, “Multiple secularities: Religion and modernity in the global age”, *International Sociology* 28 (2013): 605–611, at 605–607.

10 [note 53 in the original] Sheehan, “Enlightenment”, 1075.

occurring “outside culture”,¹¹ whatever it is that may be understood from “outside” and inside, or from an entity that is so bounded.

These terms of the discussion perforce carry the semantic energy of the keywords just mentioned as they are used politically today, and carry the drift of a Spenglerian/Huntingtonian/Dugin orientation, judging matters in terms of predeterminative origins or persistences rather than by dynamic process. It works in terms of ethnological destiny, rather than by empirical considerations from sociology. It inflects undeniable empirical variety and unevenness towards vitalism and historicism, and causes the fact of variety to drift semantically to the sheer multiplicity of thin empirical wedges, each *sui generis*. For quite apart from empirical concerns, it seems incontestable [p. xxxiv/xxxv] that much of the intent propelling multiplicationism can be understood in terms of a protocol of intercultural courtesy reminiscent of “interfaith dialogue”, and a token of adherence to the celebration of diversity by means of conceptual diplomacy – a manifest case in point of transposing normative interest into cognitive propositions, the ought transmuting into an is. The term “multiple” here is itself the performance of an ethos, of belonging to a particular politico-cultural place rather than another, supporting particular constituencies against others in a conflictual environment, changing the valence of a statement from negative to positive, from the lack of advancement to multiple forms of development. Such multiplication amounts ultimately to mincing words, like saying gosh and golly, darn and sugar, to euphemistic usage, a socio-linguistic phenomenon of evasion and circumvention, a rhetorical figure of attenuation, belonging together with the apotropaic to a common class of quasi-magical enunciations.¹²

Yet concepts and categories, and these include modernity and secularism, are by definition general, pertaining to the whole class of phenomena that they organise, and cannot, as is sometimes charged, be “monolithic”: they can become monolithic only when voided of conceptual sense and rendered into fetishes, like the notion of identity in its various redactions as culture or religion and so forth. Concepts deployed comparatively cannot be held captive to nominal multiplication, each a multiple *sui generis*, but must rest on generic commonality: comparison between elements of a category indicates an analytical grid of variations in which differences are regarded as variant members of the class of phenomena constituting the category, not as *sui generis* individuals. Similarities and differences are variations rather than signals of the generic specificity of each term of comparison. In conceptual terms, variations indicate particular instances that mediate the general and the individual.¹³ Regarded thus, multiplication-

11 [note 54 in the original] Burchardt and Wohlrab-Sahr, “Multiple Secularities”, 606.

12 [note 55 in the original] Émile Benveniste, “Euphémismes anciens et modernes”, in *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris: Vrin, 1966), 308–314; “Euphemismus”, in *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*, eds H. Cancik et al. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1988–2001), s.v.

13 [note 56 in the original] A recent book written in this spirit and attentive to the weight of empirical detail is that of Murat Akan, *The Politics of Secularism: Religion, Diversity, and Institutional Change in France and Turkey* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

ism is a variant of nativism and identitarianism. One had better either use a concept in its generality, or drop it. [p. xxxv/xxxvi]

There is clearly in these discussions a fundamental confusion between the modernity/secularism package of analytical categories, and normative recognitions, misrecognitions, ambivalences, resistances, or denials of these processes. Both modernity and secularism are objective processes, correlative with each other, global, instantiations of which are related by a process of combined and uneven development [...]. As long as the discussion is misrecognised when pitched at the level of normative perception by actors or victims, and the actual process described in terms of triumph, disquiet, or grievance, the chances of a productive discussion are reduced substantively. Such a pitch has become quite normal, with secularism in India egregiously reduced to “a credo”,¹⁴ ignoring actual social and political processes and transformations, or, in a study of the German Democratic Republic, defined, with a lowering of the sociological gaze, as “an interpretative frame”,¹⁵ or, finally, as with Asad, pronounced with grandiose pathos to be a “regime of truth”.¹⁶ Truth itself is in this perspective multiple, voided of cognitive implication, with no reference to any regime of ascertainability and verifiability, thus used indifferently for any sort of bunk or fantasy: this is a regime of alternative facts.

Being general by definition, concepts are quite naturally applicable outside the immediate circumstance of their emergence and initial use. One is surprised that few post-colonialists have had qualms about using, outside Western Europe, the concepts of the economy and of society, which were made possible, named, and articulated in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively,¹⁷ yet declare loud reserve when the discussion pertains to the categories of secularism and religion, while often extolling Foucault as Weber is simultaneously declared to have been snarled by European conditions. Secularism in a world of solipsistic multiplicity and incommensurability is required conceptually to be entrapped in the frame of its conceptual emergence. Thus, we find secularism, very commonly today, [p. xxxvi/xxxvii] defined as post-Christian, a sort of “Christianity in sheep’s clothing”,¹⁸ and denied in other settings, at best relegated to one among many multiple and sui generis secularities. In parallel, the applicability of the category of religion to Islam is denied, on the specious presumption that it emerged in post-Reformation Europe.

14 [note 57 in the original] T. N. Madan, “Secularism and the intellectuals”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 29/18 (1994): 1095–1096, at 1095.

15 [note 58 in the original] Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, Thomas Schmidt-Lux, and Uta Karstein, “Secularization as conflict”, *Social Compass* 55 (2008): 127–139.

16 [note 59 in the original] See the discussion of Enayat, *Islam and Secularism*, ch. 2.

17 [note 60 in the original] On economy: Louis Dumont, *From Mandeville to Marx: The Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); on society: Wolf Lepenies, *Between Literature and Science: The Rise of Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

18 [note 61 in the original] Jonathan Sheehan, “Thomas Hobbes, D.D.: Theology, orthodoxy, and history”, *The Journal of Modern History*, 88 (2016): 249–274, at 251.

This last point shall be revisited below. Secularism is in this perspective construed as a movement within religion (one notes that culture and religion are often used interchangeably in this type of discourse, especially with regard to Islam), rather than what it was historically, part of a broader process of societal and cultural differentiation. There is an assumption not only of the overdetermination of society and of history by religion, but also of societal homogeneity. Correlatively, it is noteworthy that the grafting of secularism onto the history of Christianity is much in vogue now; like many others, including the majority of secularism's Islamist critics, Asad concurs entirely.¹⁹ This is a variation on an older trope of denigration directed at the Enlightenment, of the French Revolution, later at Marxism, and now at secularism. This is in the long tradition of denigrating all of these in their turn by construing them as eschatological movements, from Herder and de Maistre to Carl Schmitt, taking in the Frankfurt School, with a period of special flourishing in anti-Communist Cold War polemics that continue to thrive today.²⁰ Secularism as post-Christianity continuous with its Christian parent is a facile and impressionistic meta-historical position that collapses before historical investigation, not least given the pseudo-historical historicist readings of the relation between state and Church in Europe, which are exceedingly complex and by no means uniform, and cannot accommodate this assumption of continuity and internal emergence. It rests on superficial [p. xxxvii/xxxviii] associations, including ones between psychological states that characterise revolutions and messianic stirrings.²¹

In this historicist and vitalist regard, secularisation is taken in a rather cavalier manner for the subtraction of religion, curiously with its continued existence under another, spuriously secular signature, as Enlightenment or Communism. Subtraction in these discussions often refers to institutional transformations whereby religious institutions were turned around and taken over, but such transformation within is slight overall, differentiation having spawned different types of institution, and the subtraction argument is anchored more firmly in the anti-modern figure of nostalgia for the sublime than in empirical realities of history. Secularisation (and modernisation: the two are often interchangeable in many discussions) is thereby construed as

19 [note 62 in the original] It is appropriate here to indicate that Asad's ideas in this respect and in many others have for long been common in the Arab World, with a variety of inflections and in a variety of idioms. The post-colonial position is stated with greater penetration and sustained by broader reading, albeit without the emblematic authorities invoked in Europe and the US, by, for instance, the late, ex-Marxist culture-Islamist 'Abd al-Wahhāb Al-Masīri in a wide-ranging debate towards the end of his life: 'Abdalwahhāb Al-Masīri and 'Azīz Al-'Azma, *Al-'ilmānīya taht al mījhar* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1990).

20 [note 63 in the original] Richard Shorten, "The Enlightenment, communism and political religion: Reflections on a misleading trajectory", *Journal of Political Ideologies* 8 (2003): 13–37; Sternhell, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, ch. 8.

21 [note 64 in the original] Cf. Judith Shklar, "The political theory of utopia: From melancholy to nostalgia", *Daedalus* 94 (1965): 367–381, at 373, 375. For an excellent discussion, Shorten, "The Enlightenment".

a form of loss,²² of alienation, what Taylor regretted poignantly and eloquently as the “excarnation”, of “buffe[r]ed” selves, in the secular “wasteland”.²³ This is the consequence of “immanence” – hence the “immanent frame” web facility that many readers of this book will be familiar with – that had set aside transcendence with its sense of “fullness”,²⁴ a usurpation of the authentic, a privation of essence, a state of unwholesomeness, a disnature. All of these terms are nebulous and mystifying, emanating from anti-modern Romanticism, and convey pathos rather than determinate sense. In counterpart to this is generally suggested the mystique of reaffirmation – a premise for “recognition” – and, often enough, restoration of an idyll obscured by history, including that of an Islamic prelapsarian utopia or life taken for an Islamic discursive tradition. All of these are poetical terms redolent of the occult, once one subtracted the pop-psychological aspects and vocabularies that one encounters often in these types of utterance.

In the final analysis, the specious character of the subtraction and persistence model is that it posits a morphological continuity between historical formations that does not obtain in the real world, and extrudes all consideration [p. xxxviii/xxxix] of historical breaks, structural transformations, innovations, and functional differentiations that came with modernity, which are central to this discussion [. . .]. The fact is that the anachronism of the subtraction thesis is based on a prior, underlying analytical premise, that of the relation between secularism and Christianity, and this will bring us back to deterministic historicism, culturalism, and traditionalism, and their joint rhetorical trope, that of the return of religion as to an initial condition of authenticity and fullness to which history is irrelevant.

This prior analytical premise is conducted in the form of pseudo-historical narrative. I shall refer here to two types of analysis, influential in broadly different disciplinary academic milieux. One is in the broadest sense historical in orientation, represented in sociological analysis and in psycho-conceptual history, best represented respectively by the major work of Casanova and Taylor. The other type is distanced from history by a distrust expressed in the name given to the undertaking, called genealogical, with only a very remote claim to anthropology, represented here by various widely quoted essays by Talal Asad. Claiming to be an insider’s – “emic” is a common term – recasting of the past in light of the present, genealogists compose pedigrees, virtual histories of ethos positive and negative.

We are told, yet again, that secularisation is “identified with a particular civilizational trajectory”,²⁵ one that is described by Taylor at length with reference to the North

22 [note 65 in the original] This point stressed by Blumenberg, in his defence of modernity: Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. R. M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 116–120, 533, and passim.

23 [note 66 in the original] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 613–614, 722. 37–42, 138, 307–321, 448–490, 770.

24 [note 67 in the original] See the comments of Craig Calhoun, “Review of Taylor, *A Secular Age*”, *European Journal of Sociology* 49 (2008): 455–461.

25 [note 68 in the original] Taylor, *Secular Age*, 36.

Atlantic region, to which he adds psycho-historical factors of the embedding and disembedding of individuals in quite mystifying terms, full of pathos but eluding concrete sense, some that were highlighted already. This amounts to a comprehensive disapproval of modernity in the tragic mode, often without reference to the overarching and pessimistic Roman Catholicism of this position.²⁶ Reference to criticisms of capitalism by Marx, when speaking of fetishism of the commodities, of alienation, and of religion,²⁷ would have enriched considerably discussions of this attitude of discontent and disenchantment with civilisation, and taken it in a more constructive direction. [p. xxxix/xl]

Yet for all the high-grade philosophical skills one receives from Taylor habitually, his discussion of separate civilisational trajectories remains meta-historical, guided by the conflation of historical dynamics with an essentialist ethnology of the West as overdetermined by Christian traditions understood monolithically, and in a view of progress and of the Enlightenment blurred by melancholy aversion. The unstated assumption is that Europe's had been "societies of faith", a cliché that historical research has moderated very considerably and nuanced beyond the proportions that would make this supposition serviceable for the sort of argument discussed here. Casanova, some of whose arguments also stand on this silent presumption, is yet enough of a robust sociologist to state that the assumption that pre-modern Europeans were more religious than today is one "in need of confirmation";²⁸ the same will extend to super-Islamisation of Muslims both today and yesterday. Yet Casanova perpetrates a similar, common conflation, when he claims that secularism is the product of a specifically Western modernity, and that it is therefore "fundamentally and inevitably post-Christian"²⁹ – the postist locution having the effect rhetorically of disclaiming a break with previously regnant forms of Christianity, and discursively of extruding history, both as tendential dynamic and as conjuncture, and eliminating the weight of historical breaks. Casanova insists generously that the multiplication of secularism, like that of modernity, should "open the possibility that other religions may also play a role in institutionalizing their own patterns of secularization",³⁰ thus locating these processes within religion, with an unspoken assumption that religion, presumably taken for a culture in the sense of historicist culturalism, overdetermines the development of a particular historical formation.

Casanova claims further that secularism first arose as a Western theological category.³¹ This conveys a close fit with the traditionalist and civilisational – culturalist –

26 [note 69 in the original] See Matthew Rose, "Tayloring Christianity", in <https://www.firstthings.com/article/%202014/12/tayloringchristianity> (accessed on 27 April 2018).

27 [note 70 in the original] These are much more nuanced and complex than is usually admitted – see Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (London: Verso, 2010), ch. 5.

28 [note 71 in the original] Casanova, *Public Religions*, 16.

29 [note 72 in the original] José Casanova, "The secular, secularizations, secularism", in *Rethinking Secularism*, eds Craig Calhoun, M. Juergensmeyer and J. van Antwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 54–74, at 63.

30 [note 73 in the original] Casanova, *Public Religions*, 234.

31 [note 74 in the original] *Ibid.*, 61.

discourse here proffered, but its meaning is, on closer examination, uncertain. I am not aware of secularism as a Christian theological category as such, although secularisation in canon law applies to persons [p. xl/xli] and properties removed, temporarily or permanently, and in various proportions, from Church control, by dispensation or by force. Dubbing whatever is related to religion or the Church as “theological” is unhelpful, mystifying, and allows for impressionistic affirmations. I am not aware of secularism as a specifically Christian category either. Clearly quotation of New Testament fragments about giving to Caesar what is Caesar’s, wrenched out of context, and overinterpreted as the first and last word on Christianity and politics, is a show as poor as it is common. What one is left with is a drift that can be seen more clearly when Islam is spoken of, namely, the drift, presented as self-evident common sense, towards identifying past with future, and identifying culture, civilisation, and religion, and, indeed, towards rendering religion the defining element of both, the arbiter of destiny.

In this way, the idea that secularism, one outgrowth of social differentiation occurring with global modernity, might involve a common transgeographical social dynamic, however uneven and varied, and have common global characteristics, both graspable by an overarching concept, is made to devolve to an illusion or a lie, at best a colonial or elitist imposition or instrument of manipulation and justification. It is trumped by the inexorable march of sociological destiny. There is, with Casanova, and as a clear consequence of historicism, a meta-historical assumption of incommensurable historical itineraries, multiple modernities, denominated by him as post-Hindu, post-Confucian, and post-Muslim.³² Post-Muslim modernity in this register would be vulnerable to the view, becoming increasingly more common and emerging from similar assumptions, that Islam – without qualification – according to one historian working with the same meta-historical template, be necessarily at odds with modernity, which is incompatible with Islam’s “ontological and theological commitments”.³³ This is a specious and often contra-factual type of historical argument that Casanova shares with very many others – and these include Hindu and Muslim culturalists of various hues, cultural nationalists, and fundamentalists, who have been putting forward this point for a long time now.

Patronising multiculturalist impulses apart, the global dynamic of ideological post-colonialist vitalist historicism is one of European origin and impulse, [p. xli/xlii] one that was internalised and made local everywhere, in a variety of forms and to varying extents. It would be pertinent to stress here that the polemics against Eurocentrism are often incoherent in that they use the various possible senses of the term interchangeably, often misconstruing Eurocentred historical analyses as ideologically Eurocentric. This is why ideas about “provincializing Europe” are so manifestly delu-

³² [note 75 in the original] *Ibid.*, 64.

³³ [note 76 in the original] Michael Alan Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 292.

sional, for Eurocentrism in regarding modern history has solid empirical foundations, and is surely more than just an ideological gloss. There may well be ethical or political foundations for such postures of denial, but it is clearly illegitimate to transpose these imperatives into cognitive propositions, and to correct political asymmetries by a kind of cognitive decisionism and the assertion of cognitive nativism.

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