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Introduction: Seculars Crafting their Lives in Different Frameworks from the Age of Revolution to the Present Day

How do seculars relate to forms of government? This book contains a variety of contributions on the matter, which are all the product of the conference organised in October 2022 (see 'Acknowledgements'). Notwithstanding their different foci and approaches, all contributors share an interest in the experiences, choices and strategies of secular individuals and groups in their particular *Lebenswelten* ('life-worlds') with special regard to their relationship to the state.

Times and Places

When reflecting upon the particular relations between the state and religious or non-religious people, there is a good chance that for many, one of the first constellations to come to mind will be the separation regime in France. However expected this may be, it is actually not unproblematic. Indeed, the study of the relationship between the non-religious and public authority needs to go beyond clichéd visions of French *laïcité* and the 1905 law. The allegedly atheist nature of secular frameworks,[1] as created by separation policies, is quite often advanced but only rarely rooted in fact. This becomes even more evident when looking to other separation regimes or to very different ways of attributing social space to the non-religious.[2] Due attention to variations in time and space is thus essential.[3]

1 We use the concept of 'secular framework', as introduced by Jacques Berlinerblau, rather than the more common notion of 'secular state'. The latter may have a tendency to conflate with the option in favor of radical separation. Abstract notions of separation hardly ever, if at all, correspond with legal realities, let alone with factual practice. The notion of 'framework' also seems more flexible in its application to other levels of public policy than the state in the strict sense. See Jacques Berlinerblau, *Secularism. The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2022).

2 On the need to include the indifferent, see Chris Cotter, The Critical Study of Non-Religion. Discourse, Identification and Locality (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

3 The need for adequate distinctions and nuances has been called for for quite some time, notably by Jean Baubérot, but has only occasionally led to scholarly publications. A first endeavour after Baubérot's call is to be found in the acts of a 1993 Paris conference; see Alain Dierkens (ed.), *Pluralisme religieux et laïcités dans l'union européenne* (Brussels, Editions de l'Université de Brux-

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For the conference organisers, it seemed essential to take the age of revolution – more or less the 1789 to 1848 period, reflected in Eric Hobsbawm's classic book – as a point of departure.[4] This epoque obviously saw a fundamental redefining of the relationship between the state, religion and the citizen. At the same time, it is no wonder that the American, French and other revolutions often served as the main frame of reference for early secular groups. The political and societal impact of the era of revolutions was of such a nature that whatever secular framework subsequently took form has been informed – at least to a certain extent – by that era's legacies. Interestingly, this early epoch seems less present in secular studies nowadays, where it is instead the post-war period that globally dominates research. This is also the case for this volume.

Would this imply that the *longue durée* is not important? With two historians among the authors of this introduction, it is quite obvious that we adamantly advise against a generalised 'presentism' within the field and opt in favour of larger timeframes. But these need to be handled with care. The dangers of anachronism are lurking everywhere. This has for instance been observed in endeavours to 'discover' forms of atheism before its positive affirmation. As Anton Jansson argues in a thought-provoking review essay on the matter,[5] it is important to be careful about when to start one's narrative. While one should not begin too soon in (artificially) identifying forms of atheism, for example, (as in the case of the identification of anticlericalism), it is equally important not to start too late when identifying new types of relations between public authority and different *conceptions religieuses et philosophiques* ('religious and philosophical conceptions').[6] The first openings of some legitimate space for the non-religious, however timid, predate the appearance of the militancy of freethought societies, for example. To be clear, the humanist turn even comes much later.

The era of revolutions and its immediate aftermath, the emergence of early liberal constitutions in continental Europe, are touched upon in this volume by Nash and Tyssens. The former evokes Thomas Paine, Carlisle and Owen, critical and suspicious as they were of state authority as an ally of regressive forces, im-

elles, 1994). A later monography with a similar aim is Jean Baubérot and Micheline Milot, *Laïcités sans frontières* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2011), Kindle edition.

4 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution 1789–1848* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1975).

5 Anton Jansson, "Review Essay: The History of Atheism, Secularism, and Humanism: Recent Works and Future Directions," *History of Intellectual Culture* 2 (2023): 163–188.

6 We use the notion of 'philosophical conception' following the Belgian legislative framework. Here, organised post-war humanism is referred to as a *conception philosophique non confessionnelle*. We prefer this terminology to the potentially ahistorical and value laden options of 'life stance' or 'worldview'.

posing limits upon freedom and having irrational and intangible foundations to its powers. The latter demonstrates briefly how secular lawyers in the 1860s referred to the *laïcisation* of the legal system during the French Revolution and the echoes this had in the preparatory discussions of the Belgian constitution of 1831. The contestation of persistent religious remnants in the functioning of the state (the religious oath formula in courts) shows how secularist organisations were eventually becoming the core of advocacy networks that tried to resume or extend earlier *laïcisation* efforts. As shown by Kosuch, it was equally in the second half of the nineteenth century that pressure in favour of cremation was undertaken by dedicated secularist single-issue organisations in Italy. Promoting the incineration of mortal remains and its assignment to urban authorities was one of the main ways of loosening the chains of clerical power.[7]

Fundamental as these developments surely are, historians of atheism, secularism and humanism should not limit themselves to the second half of the nineteenth century (stretching to 1914). It is obvious why this period attracts so much scrutiny. It is precisely the temporal context for formal secular organisations with a distinct visibility, which have generated proper, easily identifiable source collections. However, this institutional source production can lead to a kind of silo perspective. It tends to marginalise earlier secular practices. It further obscures personal advocacy, whether or not contemporary to the organisations themselves. Finally, it imposes a binary view of conflict and change – the secular versus the religious with no middle ground – whereas realities at the grassroots level were often much more complex and surely less clear-cut.[8] For historians, this observation can be an incentive to develop a different approach of heuristics and methodology. Alongside a still valid organisational and 'political history', it is desirable to look beyond self-evident identifiers and discourses, for instance, by investigating practices and persons (preferably not the usual suspects), while mo-

7 This Italian example is representative of a broader tendency not to overemphasise any longer the national level and instead to pay more attention to other levels, such as the urban or otherwise local. See, for instance, Jeffrey Tyssens, "Early Secular Burials in 19th-Century Flemish Provincial Towns," *Secular Studies* 4, no. 1 (2022): 42–70.

8 Christopher R. Cotter, *The Critical Study of Non-Religion: Discourse, Identification and Locality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 10–12. Lois Lee has argued against these binary approaches for many years. See, e.g., Lois Lee, *Recognizing the Non-Religious. Reimagining the Secular* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 15–16, 41–42, 159–184. She has fostered a non-binary approach again in her contribution to the recent *Régimes de croyance – Régimes de verité* conference in Paris, November 23–24, 2023.

bilising older research strategies of a history 'from below', to be able to look across the habitual (macro) frameworks.[9]

No doubt, similar challenges remain at stake after the long nineteenth century, i.e. from the interwar period onwards until the humanist turn somewhere after World War Two.[10] One can expect that this other, less formally organisation-focused way of coming to grips with secularism/secularity and secularisation (i.e. by taking a bottom-up perspective, using the historical microscope, rediscovering forgotten narratives, etc.), might lead to renewed attention to the interwar period. Interestingly and paradoxically, in this volume, only passing attention has been given to that particular timeframe. This has been done mainly by Neef in focusing on (proletarian) freethinkers in Germany. Could it be that, globally speaking, the interwar years have received less attention for the same reasons that have governed the dominant perspective of the nineteenth century? Indeed, the interwar period does not lack organisations or their sources, but the organisations and their discourses seem to find themselves between two stools. During World War One, *Burgfrieden*, *Union Sacrée*, *Godsvrede* (in English: 'Sacred Union') put the political project of the freethinker societies in dire straits. It seems that these organisations had serious difficulties in overcoming this depreciation. However, while they did not, or only belatedly grasp and connect with a number of emerging liberal causes, that does not mean that body politics, new educational projects, democratic resilience and the search for a 'modern' humanism were not (or not yet) at stake. Often, these new issues were carried by networks or groups that were less exclusively identified as secular(ist), even if in these contexts, secular(ist) individuals did play key roles.[11]

As might be expected, the most frequent timeframe of the contributions to this edited volume is the second half of the twentieth century up until today. Surely this can be related to the disciplinary background of the majority of the authors. But

9 The same point is made in relation to bodies, emotions and affects in Monique Scheer, Nadia Fadil and Brigitte Schepelern Johansen, eds., *Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions. European Configurations* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

10 The specific starting point differs from country to country. Chronologically: the United States of America in 1941 (American Humanist Association), the Netherlands in 1946 (the *Humanistisch Verbond*), Belgium in 1951 (also a *Humanistisch Verbond*) and Germany as late as 1993 (with the *Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands*).

11 This is clear for instance when looking at end-of-life issues in this period or at some early manifestation of a new, self-identified humanism of secularists; see Niels De Nutte, "In the Face of Death. Societal Attitudes and Popular Opinion on Medical Aid and Dying in Belgium 1936–1950," *Secular Studies* 4, no. 1 (2022): 71–92; Jeffrey Tyssens, "Vergeten voorlopers van het vrijzinnig humanisme. Over enkele teksten van Georges Guy-Grand," in *Redelijkheid. Liber amicorum Johan Stuy*, edited by Marc Van den Bossche and Karl Verstrynghe (Brussels: VUBPress, 2023), 163–211.

one should also take into account the impact of the humanist turn at large, as well as the growing importance of secularisation in society.[12] The importance of this turn – which can be defined as a reorientation of the secular sphere after World War Two towards ceremonial and social service work and an accommodationist stance towards religion-related political and legal arrangements[13] – cannot be denied. The geographical spread has been as good as global, as humanist identifications occur in all continents today. This post-war shift coincided with a lessening impact of 'Latin' countries – predominantly catholic countries with Romance languages, France in particular – towards a larger sphere closely connected to an English language culture, obviously encompassing the Anglo-American context but not being limited to it.[14] It must be stressed, in addition, that the humanist turn also had a distinct undertone of suspicion regarding communism and communist regimes. This widespread suspicion of communism within the humanist sphere (individual humanists with communist sympathies notwithstanding) should not be conflated with specific American anti-atheist sentiment connected to anti-communism. The humanist turn did not penetrate the Soviet bloc, where very different scenarios unfolded. The chapters by Neef and Guigo-Patzelt on the German Democratic Republic

12 We continue to use the notion of secularisation to refer to the diminishing impact of religion (mainly christianity) in Western societies, but we do not attempt to reproduce the binary scheme inherent to secularisation theory. We refer to earlier remarks regarding a non-binary approach of religion and non-religion, and also to the body of historical work that attempts to shed light on the dynamics at play in these societal transformations. To quote just one example: Christoph De Spiegeleer, "Secularization and the Modern History of Funerary Culture in Europe. Conflict and Market Competition Around Death, Burial and Cremation," *Trajecta*, no. 2 (2019): 169–201.

13 This accommodationist stance has been accompanied by changing ways of relating to the state, which has come to be looked at as a (often complicated) partner of secular organisations and enabler of their practice, especially in countries where public funding has become the main source of financing the ceremonial and social service work of these groups. To complete the picture of the humanist turn, it has to be said that these developments have also triggered the emergence of counter-movements within the secular sphere which can be very critical of the humanist 'soft line approach' and renew classic and sometimes radical separationist and anti-religious freethinker motives.

14 Jeffrey Tyssens and Niels De Nutte, "Comparative Humanisms: Secularity and Life Stances in the Post-War Public Sphere," *Looking Back to Look Forward: Organised Humanism in the World: Belgium, Great Britain, The Netherlands and the United States of America 1945–2005,* edited by Niels De Nutte and Bert Gasenbeek (Brussels: ASP, 2019), 151–172. The notion of a humanist turn was coined by Stefan Schröder, *Freigeistige Organisationen in Deutschland. Weltanschauliche Entwicklungen und strategische Spannungen nach der humanistischen Wende* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2018).

highlight the often unexpected specifics of those central and eastern European dynamics at large. Surely the presence of these contributions on former communist states in our volume is quite unique.[15] The so-called 'popular democracies' form a particular outlier. As a consequence the humanist sensibilities occurred only slowly and often quite hesitantly in those countries after 1989. The inclusion of central and eastern European countries in our broad understanding of European secular humanism can show that the latter is by no means a coherent entity with a shared narrative. In Europe, the Northwest is not the South and both are *a fortiori* not the East (which is too often forgotten).

For the post-war period, specific attention has been given to the defining and redefining of relationships between state, philosophic conceptions and citizens, as well as to their financial implications (see the chapters by Schröder, Igwe, Madera, Vannieuwenburg and Husson). Particular attentiveness has also been given to individuals' and organisations' strategies with regard to these diverse institutional settings, Western and non-Western (we can quote Gutkowski on dealing with individual or family status in the Middle East or Lancien on the particular forms of cooperation between the state and secular interest groups in France). Strategies are also at the core of chapters that focus upon lower levels of decision making, regional and local (see Schröder, Genin, De Nutte and Testa).

Three chapters are dedicated to perceptions. Blankholm and Nikitaki consider secular ways of looking at (non-religious) services, personal identifiers and church influence. Hawley-Suarez broadens the scope toward general perceptions of the Mexican secular framework. Interestingly, the focus has been less on the ways of dealing with the so-called return of religion and the religious other, mainly the place of Islam (only Lancien touches briefly upon the matter).[16] Equally noticeable is the absence of scrutiny of recent right-wing appropriations of secular(ist) stances.[17] We will come back to that.

15 Some recent work on Soviet atheism includes Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

16 Often with implicit reference to Samuel P. Huntington's notion of a "clash of civilisations", the idea of a 'return of religion' was most prominently expressed by social scientists in the late 1990s and early 2000s, e.g. Martin Riesebrodt, *Die Rückkehr der Religionen. Fundamentalismus und der "Krieg der Kulturen"* (Munich: Beck, 2000).

17 As identified, for example, by Jean Bauberot in *Les 7 laïcités françaises* (Paris: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2015), 103–118 and and Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism. The Politics of a Modern Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 178–212.

Public Authority and the Secular Citizen

There are good reasons for deliberately using the notion of 'public authority' rather than the notion of 'state', which is the habitual way of dealing with this matter. Implicitly, with this key notion of 'church-state relations', only the 'central' state is really taken into account. Obviously, excellent research has been produced from that perspective,[18] but there are some problems with this approach. The exclusive focus on the 'state' already poses issues of comparison as centralised models and federal varieties can function according to a very different logic. But it is important to go beyond that differentiation and include lower levels of decision-making. We refer to all kinds of "localities", as Martinez-Ariño[19] calls them, but also to instances that can be somewhat larger, without necessarily becoming German *Länder*, Belgian *gewesten/régions*, French *départements*, and the like. There is no doubt that this perspective helps to correct a too unified view of national cases and fills in some blind spots as well.

Regional particularities are shown in Genin's approach to secular moral services offered today in the Belgian French-speaking community and even more so in Schröder's presentation of the specificities of Bayern in present-day German secularism. Lower levels are just as present in several chapters. In the historical contributions, the local level already comes to the fore. The contestation of the religious oath formula in Belgium resulted, as Tyssens shows, from the local response of judges that could allow dissidents to affirm without any religious invocation, a practice that was eventually curtailed by a central, high court decision. Another example is Kosuch's analysis of cremation in Italy, where the role of cities in organising crematoria was essential. In Belgium again, as De Nutte shows, *de facto* recognitions of secular organisations in Flanders occurred on a municipal level well before any subvention law was voted at the national level.

We have elaborated upon different levels within public authority, but we must also pay attention to the different sectors that subdivide it. Indeed, in the relationship between public authority and the non-religious, more is at stake than the simple financing of divine service, for instance. The recognition of a 'non-confessional community' in countries like Belgium already broadened the scope of state funds originally mobilised to pay clerics. But there is much more. As we might expect for countries with an old *laïcité* or *laicidad*, Lancien and Hawley-Suarez show how education is very much a core sector in the construction of

18 See, for instance, Gerhard Robbers, ed., *State and Church in the European Union: Third Edition* (Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG: Baden-Baden, 2019).

19 See Julia Martínez-Ariño, *Urban Secularism. Negotiating Religious Diversity in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2021), 13.

secular frameworks in France and Mexico. The elaboration of a service model within the world of secular humanist societies in the post-war period introduced humanist chaplains to hospitals and other types of care institutions, usually as volunteers, sometimes on the payroll.[20] The integration of non-religious actors into these sectors led some of these non-religious organisations to adapt their internal *modus operandi* to fit frameworks originally designed for religious actors, i.e. structural isomorphism as demonstrated by Schröder in this volume.[21] The sometimes uncomfortable adaptation to older 'pillarised' models (in the Netherlands for a long time or in Belgium still today) is one example of this. Fitting oneself into broader legal provisions for charities (in the UK and in the USA), such as tax-exemption schemes, is another.[22] This could even lead to a more fundamental repositioning of those organisations. What is clear, given the variety of public authority levels, models and sectors, is that the non-religious organisations today are very much path dependent. We will come back to this when we touch upon the emergence of the social service type of secularism.

In the thick forest of non-religious organisations, where do we find the individual?[23] We already stressed the importance of not being caught in a tunnel vision that obscures everything that happens 'outside' organisations' particular premisses. The individual advocacy of the non-religious citizen needs to be taken seriously. Agency of completely unknown freethinkers, secularists and the like – not necessarily card-holding ones, appearing as a 'militant' only once in a lifetime – was what led to the earliest breaking of old religion-determined practices. The oath question is an excellent example of this, and not only in Belgium by the way.[24] But

20 The service model is not necessarily limited to care in the strict sense, but in some instances extends to penitentiary institutions, army corps and airports (closed institutions, in short). Beyond these particular fields, in some rare instances this includes national public broadcasting.

21 This can even lead to phenomena of 'social hypercorrectness' where for instance the focus on particular ceremonies shows an unexpected pursuit of religion-like practices, usually at the expense of a classical secularist profile. For the concept, see Abdelmalek Sayad, "Immigration et 'pensée' d'État," *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 129, no. 1 (1999): 5–14. These adaptations have led to criticism but have also given rise to an enthusiasm that, following Levine or Engelke, one could indeed call a "joyous secularism". See Matthew Engelke, "Afterword: getting hold of secularism", in *Secular Bodies*, 200.

22 Different strategies employed by American secular organisations are shown by Joseph Blankholm in "Secularism and Secular People," *Public Culture* 2 (2018): 254–261.

23 We must add to this that relations of kinship, friendship and neighbourliness are very much under-investigated as well, although their impact on secularist militancy was and is of vital importance.

24 This was already shown in the pioneering study by Edward Royle, *Victorian Infidels. The Origins of the British Secularist Movement 1791–1866* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974).

the place of individuals does not need to be solely viewed in militant settings. Individual negotiations on very personal matters – such as those prominently present in Gutkowski's chapter on Lebanon – can be just as revealing. This obviously calls for an adequate identification of a set of features of those same individuals. The field has seen growing attention paid to this with some case studies on, for instance, African American or feminist freethinkers or even secularist practices of and with regard to children.[25] Class has been a focus of old, ethnicity, gender and age (to a lesser extent) have become more central. The tension between centre and periphery (Global North versus Global South; the urban versus the rural; the organised versus the free-floating) remains an issue.

This new focus on individuals, low-level situations, micro(hi)stories in short, eventually helps to achieve a better understanding of *laïcité*, 'secularity', 'separation', etc. compared to the way they are usually approached, i.e. in terms of (quasi-)constitutional norms and laws. Obviously, these regulatory elements are and remain essential but can only be genuinely understood when weighed by dint of their concrete implementations on the ground. A considerable distance between these two figurations can often be observed. This brings us to recall the so-called 'skinny definition' Jacques Berlinerblau advanced of 'political secularism'. In his words, that would be "legally binding actions of the secular state that seek to regulate the relationship between itself and religious citizens, and between religious citizens themselves".[26] The 'unpacking' of the notion of 'secular state' (or its less clearly 'secular' likes) that Berlinerblau calls for one way or another, needs to include these complex issues of problematic implementation, the adaptation to realities on the ground, negotiations with groups, families and individuals.

For that matter, these dynamics between different levels of public authority show how some clichéd representations of French *laïcité*-type systems actually miss the mark. The alleged anti-religious features of those secular frameworks are not really echoed by observable fact. As one of the authors of this introduction has already noted, this oppositional understanding, which we suspect to be somewhat indebted to current iterations of secular groups, ascribes a characteristic to secularism that does not belong to it, namely, that of a social or interpersonal dimension. Secularism concerns itself with institutions and organisational constellations as

25 Christopher Cameron, *Black Freethinkers. A History of African American Secularism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019); Laura Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism. Secularism, Religion and Women's Emancipation, England 1830–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Jeffrey Tyssens, "Working Class Children, Death and Secularity: Belgium in the 1890s," *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 4 (2017): 917–936

26 Berlinerblau, *Secularism. The Basics*, 5–6.

they relate to religion.[27] The interplay between different levels shows very interesting dynamics. Localities can make general norms more workable in particular contexts, whereas central institutions – such as the French *Conseil d'Etat* – invoke general principles to correct deviations of local authorities as well (notably when they seem to take hostile positions towards particular religious groups).[28] Even if the central state is looked at as such, administrative practices can also show less obvious ways of supporting philosophical groups. Lancien shows, for example, how the French state, for a number of years at least, used secondment mechanisms to give *de facto* support to the (moderate) secularist *Ligue de l'Enseignement*, the separation principle notwithstanding.

Varieties and Contexts between Two Types: The Birds and the Feathers

When secular individuals found groups or build organisations to articulate their philosophical, cultural and political claims, explicitly or implicitly, they most often do so in relation to public authority. As the chapters of this volume show, this is done in manifold ways. The self-understanding of such collectives, the way they organise and the agendas they pursue depend on the public context they act in, including different models of religion-state relations, historical paths of secularisation, legal regulations (Madera's chapter shows this in a comparative framework for the US and Italy), as well as socio-political frameworks and their level of religious normativisation. Like every other subject, non-religious groups and organisations are entangled in historico-cultural, as well as political frameworks and their "multiple secularities".[29]

However, at the latest with the founding of the International Humanist and Ethical Union in 1952, and the subsequent humanist turn, an international twofold typology took shape within the secular sphere alongside the lines of different

27 Niels De Nutte, "Secularists no more? The Belgian secular sphere's plight for life stance recognition in a model of mutual interdependence," Paper presented at *Secular States Struggling with Religious Freedom*, ETF Leuven, 4 May 2023.

28 See, e.g., "Burkini, crèches de Noël et laïcité: les décisions du Conseil d'État," Vie publique, last modified 22 June 2022, https://www.vie-publique.fr/eclairage/38383-burkini-et-creches-de-noel-decisions-du-conseil-detat-sur-la-laicité.

29 See Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Marian Burchardt, "Multiple secularities: Toward a cultural sociology of secular modernities," *Comparative Sociology* 6 (2012): 875–909.

ideal types of groups and organisations, and their respective political projects. LeDrew labels them "atheism" and "humanism",[30] Tyssens and De Nutte make use of the terms "protest identity" and "project identity".[31] In his chapter on Germany in this volume, Schröder calls them "secularist pressure group type" and "social service type" and argues here and elsewhere that the scope of tensions and conflicts between them exceeds the German example and can be observed in several other contexts – usually of post-war welfare states – as well.[32]

To understand the genesis of this development, one has to take into account changing relations between non-religious groups and organisations with public authorities in Western Europe after World War Two, as they play a key role in this process. Especially in the Netherlands and Belgium, and also a bit later in Norway and Germany, non-religious collectives began to focus on relating to legal and political arrangements that were originally designed for religious communities, especially Christian churches, and successfully claimed 'equal' treatment for themselves. This was accompanied by a certain kind of what one might call 'identity politics' today, with the concept of humanism at its heart. Like humanism, non-religion was re-interpreted as a life stance or philosophy that was built in parallel ways to dominant religious frameworks in the respective contexts and in peaceful co-existence with them. Humanist groups and organisations focused on social services for the non-religious, including moral counselling (see De Nutte in this volume for the Belgian case), educational services (see Lancien's chapter for France), hospice services or secular lifecycle ceremonies (see Schröder in this volume for the German case). The varying set of humanist social services provided in different contexts obviously depend on the existence of similar practices by religious communities and public support for them, e.g. through public funding (see the chapters by Husson for Belgium and Schröder for Germany). These specific incorporation systems not only generate but also (sometimes very narrowly) limit spheres of action for humanist groups and organisations. In some contexts, however, humanists have learned to relate to these systems in ways that lead to increasing fields of practice, growing membership numbers and public recognition – Belgium and Norway come into mind as two prominent examples.

30 Stephen LeDrew, "Atheism Versus Humanism. Ideological Tensions and Identity Dynamics," in *Atheist Identities. Spaces and Social Contexts*, edited by Lori G. Beaman and Steven Tomlins (Cham: Springer, 2015), 53–68.

31 Tyssens and De Nutte, "Comparative Humanisms: Secularity and Life Stances in the Post-War Public Sphere," 170–171.

32 Stefan Schröder, "Humanism in Europe", *The Oxford Handbook of Humanism*, edited by Anthony Pinn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 109–129.

As already mentioned earlier in this introduction, however, the humanist turn also brought about counter-movements within the secular sphere, which often relate to classical and rather radical separatist and anticlerical, sometimes anti-religious, freethinker frameworks (described in their historical genesis, e.g. by Kosuch in this volume for Italy), but sometimes also try to give politically secularist claims a modern outlook, as in the case of the *Giordano Bruno Stiftung* in Germany, founded in 2004 (see Schröder in this volume). Many of their adherents consider the accommodationist approach of humanism a betrayal of the secularist cause. They criticise non-religious organisations that benefit from legal and political arrangements designed for religious communities for legitimising and stabilising these arrangements instead of doing the right thing and striving for their diminishment. For them, humanism should not be understood as a philosophy or life stance on the same level with religious communities but as a meta-philosophy or meta-life stance, a guidepost for society as a whole, including a truly and completely secularised state. Tensions and conflicts between the secularist pressure group type and the social service type appear between different non-religious collectives but can definitely also be staged within one group or organisation.

To what extent can the twofold typology be generalised? While we think that using it heuristically may lead to fruitful analytical insights, there should be no doubt that we refute any essentialist understanding of this model and opt for deeply contextualising its application. As Gutkowski's chapter on the Middle East shows, the utility of the typology might be restricted to contexts in which christianity is the dominant 'religious other', as understandings of secularity and being non-religious with a predominant relationship to islam seem to transverse the majority of christianity-related cases in this volume. Furthermore, the model is stretched to its limits in contexts in which religious normativisation only allows for very narrow spaces of being openly non-religious and relating to public authorities as such (see, for example, Igwe in this volume).

The Other Secular Paradox?

What, after a conference such as the one we organised, would seem to be the optimal 'secular framework' for the non-religious? The original-goals-and-final-results question might seem to have an obvious answer, but that just seems a bit too simple. This is why the title of this subsection gives a nod to the recent book by Joseph Blankholm, one of the contributors to this volume. In his view, the result of an anthropological approach, the secular paradox would amount to seemingly contradic-

tory belief regimes of the non-religious and to their subsequent production and maintenance of networks, communities and practices (which are very much comparable to the belief regimes and networks, etc. of the religious).[33] We refer to something else, namely, the eventual conclusion that regimes that seem to offer the best chances for the secularists' project might just not, or not always, be all that favourable to the nones at large and to secularists more specifically.

It is precisely in this respect that the chapters relating to the German Democratic Republic (GDR) prove their specific added value to a more general study of secular frameworks and the endeavours of the non-religious. The support of militant atheism in the Soviet Union was already only a temporary phase in the communist party's policies and quickly became marginalised in the 1930s. Interestingly, that was not really a unique figuration. As Neef's chapter shows, in the German Democratic Republic, secularist or secular humanist organisations were hardly present, notwithstanding a German past with a very visible proletarian mass movement to foster church exit in the Weimar Republic notably. East German 'Scientific Atheism' had little to do with secularist organisations and their goals. Revealingly, as Guigo-Patzelt demonstrates, a state-sponsored movement of *Freidenker* only surfaced in the very last year(s) of the GDR.

This throws an unexpected light upon the alleged secularity/secularism of the so-called 'people's democracies' in central and eastern Europe. But the question needs not be limited to these state formations which have now disappeared (we are making abstraction of comparable cases such as the People's Republic of China). Other examples of (very self-conscious) secular frameworks like France seem to show comparable issues. Where French prisons, hospitals, etc. (the 'closed institutions' we already referred to) have catholic, protestant, muslim, buddhist, orthodox, jewish and even Jehovah's witness chaplains,[34] nothing comparable exists for the non-religious in the *laïque* republic. Which explains, no doubt, why some in this context, after the 'victory' of the secularist principle in 1905, do seem to look with some longing to models like the Belgian one where secular chaplains do exist and are even financed by public authorities. Similar reflections can be made with regard to the United States of America. Blankholm stresses the sense of a lack of secular service options in the US that his interviewees assume exist in Europe. Clearly the American wall of separation plays a role in this way of evaluating the

33 Joseph Blankholm, *The Secular Paradox. On the Religiosity of the Non-Religious* (New York: New York University Press, 2023), 26–28.

34 Nadia Beddiar, "La laïcité en prison, un principe emprisonné?," in *L'État et la religion dans l'espace public: approches pratiques et théoriques de la laïcité*, edited by Jérôme Grosclaude (Rouen: PURH, 2021), 146–147.

attraction of secular humanism. One could ask how these issues were or are perceived in contexts like the Turkish *laiklik* or what remains of it.

This is obviously not a hidden plea in favour of having the social service type exclusively adopted in every country. As we showed before, sensibilities differ between and within specific countries. Some have opted for a model of reasonable accommodation, as Cécile Laborde identifies as one of her ideal types,[35] that includes the non-religious as a group in and of itself. This may be a favourable model, but there may be a flip side to it. Reasonable accommodation in no way implies that different philosophical and religious convictions are really treated equally. Others have been less tempted by this approach and still prefer a separation model. But there are flip sides here as well. One may even doubt whether separation is all that complete in these contexts – it is not, at the end of the day – and it even poses the question of whether this is at all possible. However that may be, it appears clearly that this may imply discrimination for the non-religious as well, being excluded from specific services, even in the framework of public institutions like in France, while these services are considered to be something quite natural for religious citizens.

In a way, this brings us to an analysis we made in a publication in 2019, when we referred to sociologist Castells' conceptual trio of "legitimising", "resistance" and "project" identities (identities of social actors aligning themselves with dominant institutions, c.q. opposing them radically 'from the trenches' or trying to define a new position in order to transform the overall configuration).[36] Both resistance and project identities are focused upon the warranting of equal rights for people belonging to religious or philosophical minorities. Resistance identity, however, focuses upon the global transformation of existing settings into something completely new, the overall goals thus being negative and positive at the same time. A project identity seems to be more directed towards accommodation and work within existing settings. The overall goals would then only be positive. Some would reduce this tension, no doubt, to the one between a separation and a social service type, but that is not our view. Indeed, can we really speak about a sequence that is general and presents itself as almost a law of nature? We presume that surely this is not necessarily the case. Complex combinations between both identities seem to be at stake. Configurations can indeed be transformed, for instance when the religious other is transformed. Project identities can then again come back to sensitivities that we would ordinarily associate with a resistance identity. Hence, this volume goes against any determinist reading of the non-religious and of secular frameworks at large.

35 Cécile Laborde, "Political Liberalism and Religion: On Separation and Establishment," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 21, no. 1(2003): 68.

36 Tyssens and De Nutte, "Comparative Humanisms," 164–167.

Further Perspectives for Further Findings

In this last section we would first like to come back to the issue of times and places. We observed at the start of this chapter that the age of revolutions has traditionally been an important era of reference for the earliest manifestations of secular militancy. Interestingly, the number of essays in this volume that explicitly included that earlier period, stretching to about the mid-nineteenth century, remained quite limited. When the second half of the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries come into view, this appears to be closely related to the presence of secular organisations in different countries. Earlier manifestations of secular practices and their often still non-formal ways of being organised thus tend to remain below the historians' radar.[37] No doubt this echoes the configuration of the field of secular studies at large. Definitely, a number of historians are active within its context but due to the important impact of problem definitions and source collections related to secularisation or modern humanism, processes taking place after World War Two have received the most attention. There is no doubt that this attention is justified, but that does not preclude the utility of looking at earlier periods armed with the questions, definitions and insights that have recently grown within the large interdisciplinary field of secular studies.

However much present developments are at the heart of many research projects, some current issues of debate have only been 'lightly' researched until today. Intersectionality, an often-used concept nowadays, has hardly been touched upon, or at best only concerning the connected double plights of secular(ist) women (see Blankholm in this volume) and LGBTQIA+s (see Igwe's chapter), freethinkers in ethnic minorities, low cast secularists, working-class freethinkers, etc. A multivariate analysis of discrimination connected with being non-religious still needs to be scrutinised more extensively. In research on intersectionality, discrimination of the non-religious is rarely included, if at all. The entire political spectrum is of importance in identifying the non-religious. For example, what about the secular projects coming from the political (far) right? What would their consequences be for the way states relate to religious and philosophical conceptions? What is the impact of neoliberalism and its fostering of a scaling back of the state as a provider of funds and other means of support for churches and other religious bodies, c.q. secular service organisations?

As far as Europe is concerned, it becomes ever more clear that homogenising representations of secular frameworks for the whole of the continent do not

37 Those activities surely left their traces, but have to be looked for in other types of source material than those produced by formal secular(ist) organisations.

work. The usual focus on a set of countries in its west or northwest already shows considerable diversity. This variety would likely become even larger when due attention is given to regions and countries that are less frequently the object of papers on international platforms. We would welcome more research on the relationship between the state and the non-religious in Mediterranean countries like Spain and Portugal. The dynamics of research regarding central and definitely regarding eastern Europe need to be maintained. Secular frameworks in 'people's democracies' with different religious settings such as Poland, Romania or Bulgaria can offer interesting insights. A recent book on atheism and freethought in post-communist European countries already indicated how little unity the communist past has imposed on the region with regard to the manifestations of unbelief, reflecting, no doubt, different religious contexts (notably with the presence of christian orthodox churches).[38] One may now ask to what extent this is echoed in the relationship between the non-religious and their public authorities today.

Do the typologies that have been developed for different European countries have any relevance in non-European contexts where completely different religious figurations are dealt with? In connection with the already mentioned "multiple secularities" project, quite a lot of work is currently being done on the Asian context with contemporary[39] as well as historical foci.[40] This could lead to gainful comparative perspectives, as long as secular actors do actually appear in these studies. This cannot always be taken for granted. Sometimes the understanding of secularity seems to be confined to an abstract principle or a discourse without even touching upon respective individual or collective identities. Interesting work has been and is being done about the MENA countries, but that does not cover the whole problematic of countries with a muslim majority.[41] One can think of contexts like Indonesia, of course, but there is more at stake. It is necessary to go beyond the repetition of well-known historical facts regarding kemalism and come to sharper insights regarding its realities on the ground and its current transformations. The study of muslim populations in former central

38 Tomáš Bubík, Atko Remmel and David Václavík, eds., *Freethought and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe. The Development of Secularity and Non-Religion* (London: Routledge, 2021).

39 E.g. Mascha Schulz and Johannes Quack, "Who Counts as 'None'? Ambivalent, Embodied, and Situational Modes of Nonreligiosity in Contemporary South Asia," *Religion and Society* 14, no. 1 (2023): 126–139.

40 E.g. Max Deeg, Oliver Freiberger, Christoph Kleine and Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz, eds., *Grenzen der Religion: Säkularität in der Asiatischen Religionsgeschichte (*Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023); Ugo Dessì and Christoph Kleine, eds., *Secularities in Japan* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

41 Aziz al-Azmeh, *Secularism in the Arab World. Contexts, Ideas and Consequences* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

Asian Soviet republics – which sometimes seem to claim a secularist nature – can offer new perspectives altogether.

As we mentioned before, more attention needs to be given to 'lower' levels of analysis: Persons, networks, families, small communities and their respective strategies. This does not condemn the scholar to a kind of return to 'localism', notably because of the embeddedness of these small units of analysis in larger and even transnational entities. This is considered to be self-evident for the current situation, but the observation is equally valid for the nineteenth century for instance. One possible entry is the way networks of large cities – as scenes of secular policies in different fields – constituted important conduits of information and governance models. It also raises the question of what brokers – exiles and migrants for instance – were actually present in the field. Non-religion and its relation to public authority can be analysed in a *histoire croisée* ('entangled history') approach. Thus, complex exchange processes and connected policy transformations come into the picture.

The international frameworks of freethought have not escaped attention, but there is surely still a worthwhile field of research to be found on the ways public authorities – the local ones included – do not simply operate in a supposedly closed national setting. More attention needs to be given to large regional specificities as well. Would there not be a surplus value to be found in a comparison between Roman law and common law countries, notably, in the way litigation is used as a secularist strategy to modify public authority's position towards the different religious and philosophical conceptions?

Interconnectedness can also be looked at in relation to the materiality and spatiality of the secular sphere in different countries. This raises questions on the infrastructure in which the non-religious operate. There are public buildings such as crematoriums but also buildings of a more private nature. Secular venues in London, such as Conway Hall, accompanied a particular *modus operandi*, different from the one in an earlier building of the *South Place Ethical Society*.[42] This seems to contrast with the Belgian VLC's, i.e. the secular humanist community centres of today. In the latter case, very different types of spaces have been attributed to non-religious communities by local authorities, but that does not seem to have affected the essence of their ways of working. Whatever the impact of space may be, the cost of buildings and their compliance with safety requirements, for example, are of such a nature that public authority is usually present at a given stage, as a sponsor, as a landlord, at least as a regulator of some sort. It is well

42 Callum Brown, David Nash and Charlie Lynch, *The Humanist Movement in Modern Britain. A History of Ethicists, Rationalists and Humanists* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 62–63.

known that the materiality of cults constitutes a major part of the way public authorities regulate the daily practice of religions. Hardly anything is known about how these ways of regulating religious and philosophical conceptions function for non-religious groups and communities.

To sum up, several axes can be defined for renewals of perspective when tackling the relationship between the non-religious and the state. The field needs a multi-layered approach to public authority. The same goes for secular actors: persons, families, networks, and other non-formal figurations. In this framework, spaces and materialities of secularity can also be placed on the research agenda. The whole spectrum between the local and the transnational, with the complex interconnectedness between and within those different levels, can thus receive its due place. This does not exclude the need to fill the classic blind spots that persist today. Some timeframes and some countries or regions still need to excavate their basic facts and figures; developments which have been well studied in the past, can also be looked at again through the lens of secular studies scholarship.