

A New Time for Religion?¹
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Abstract

This essay reflects on current efforts to rethink the secularization thesis and on the implications of these for global attitudes towards religion, and by extension, towards religious minorities. While it endorses attempts to redress the deficiencies of secularization in general, it advocates a more sustained focus on the temporal implications of this important moment in our contemporary intellectual history. More than merely a narrative about events in modern history, secularization undergirds a modern historical consciousness whose point of departure is that humans alone make history. This not only reinforces a view of linear time in which intentions, actions and consequences follow each other according to narrowly rational presuppositions, but it unduly limits the possibility that religion might contribute significantly to human efforts at self-fashioning and self-assertion from within significantly different temporal matrices. By challenging the standard imbrications of secularization and modern time, this essay aims to help create a climate in which religious minorities can legitimately appeal to alternative temporal matrices for articulating their place in a just and pluralist society. It also seeks to advance the claim that religion might serve as a resource for achieving goals common to the religious and non-religious alike.

In recent years, scholars have rushed to fill the breach left behind by the erosion of the secularization thesis. This thesis, in its strongest form, posits that societal modernization entails the progressive loss of religious faith: people simply believe less and practice less religion than they did in the past. In its more attenuated form, the secularization thesis posits that modernization consists in pushing religion out of public space, such that politics, science, the economy, and other social subsystems are now regulated by their own internal logics, and religion, while not gone, is consigned to the private sphere. Even if, in this scenario, religion gains a distinctive freedom from state interference, this hardly offsets religion's loss of authority over other areas of life and society. In both cases, however, a net gain

¹ The essay submitted is the work of only the individual whose name appears on the front page as the author; any parts taken from other sources are appropriately referenced in the essay.

for modern societies is attributed to a net loss for religion.² Though far from uniform, the critical reappraisal of secularization has manifested itself in three reasonably clear, yet interrelated, foci. The first explores in greater detail the nature of religious experience. Perhaps best exemplified in the recent work of Hans Joas and Charles Taylor, this work foregrounds how religion is an irreducible means of articulating experiences of transcendence rather than a static matrix that suppresses creativity in the name of orthodoxy. The second focus involves a deepening interest in the “public” dimension of religion. Taking their cue from José Casanova’s justly influential *Public Religions in the Modern World*, many scholars have jettisoned the presupposition that religion’s proper place is in the private sphere in order to better explore its variegated mutation in and through the evolution of civil society. A third focus on “political theology,” proffered by Hent de Vries and Slavoj Žižek among others, seeks to revisit the theological underpinnings of modern society.³

Of course, both secularization and its critical reappraisal are all rooted in a specific grasp of the fate of Christianity in Western societies. But given the powerful influence this thesis has had on how the West relates to the non-West, both inside and outside its borders, it is no minor thing to reflect on how the demise of the

² Of course, one must take care to distinguish between these two approaches to secularization, prevalent in Anglo-American discussions, and another, largely German, discourse that uses secularization to refer to hidden continuities between pre-modern religion and modern secular society. For a detailed overview and critique of this discourse, see: H. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. R.M. Wallace (Cambridge, 1983).

³ Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbour. Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds., *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

secularization thesis might present new possibilities for re-casting the global context of attitudes towards religion and, by extension, towards religious minorities. It is for this reason that I want to lobby, in this essay, for a more thorough-going examination of the temporal horizon presupposed by secularization. More specifically, what seems to me necessary is a more self-reflexive approach that doesn't just identify, but instead seeks to capitalize on this new state of affairs for how we think of ourselves in time.⁴ If the critique of secularization rests on dissatisfaction with a certain vision of history, this in itself is hardly sufficient for understanding how secularization is deployed as a means of experiencing modern time, let alone for laying the ground for an alternative. Indeed, in my own field of modern European history, Jeffrey Cox has shown just how difficult it is for professional historians to dispense with secularization even when they themselves have conducted research critical of it. One of the last remaining "master narratives" of modern history, secularization promises to be exceptionally difficult to dislodge from its place in our critical repertoire.⁵

Secularization does not just take place in time, but delimits what we can know in time.⁶ As perhaps the preeminent axis for discriminating modern from pre-modern forms of life, it is one of the formal conditions for measuring historical progress as such. However, this chronological "time *in* which we are," as Giorgio

⁴ My interest is similar to Klaus Lichtblau's call for more self-reflexivity among sociologists tendering a variety of "diagnoses of the times": Klaus Lichtblau, "Sociology and the Diagnosis of the Times or: The Reflexivity of Modernity," *Theory, Culture & Society* 12 (1995).

⁵ Jeffrey Cox, "Secularization and Other Master Narratives of Religion in Modern Europe," *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 14 (2001).

⁶ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

Agamben points out, also “separates [and] divides us from ourselves, and makes us the powerless spectators of ourselves, observing in, without time, the time that runs away from us.”⁷ This is significant, for it means that one can thus talk about processes of “de-secularization” or the advent of a “post-secular” age, without fundamentally challenging the deeper ways that secularization helps to create and sustain modern time.⁸ As long as one presupposes the inviolability of time passing irreversibly, what Bruno Latour characterizes as the present that “abolishes the past behind it,” then one can write and re-write history without seriously revising the *having happened* of secularization as defining the very “flow” of modern history.⁹ This is why both “de-secularization” and “post-secular,” if taken merely as historical markers of a new era, have the potential to fall short of breaking through to the core of the problem. In both cases, what needs to be addressed—namely just how we have been so wrong about religion—is avoided by being made to seem secondary to the business of cataloguing, yet again, the course of modern history.

To better grasp the problem, one must first ask: how exactly does modern historical consciousness exact its temporal levy from religion? And to answer it, one must consider the evolution of what Constantin Fasolt has called the “religion of history.” Not reducible to professional historiography, according to Fasolt:

[e]very act of reading and writing history is...accompanied by tacit affirmation of this creed: “I believe that human beings are free individuals

⁷ Giorgio Agamben, “The Time that Is Left,” *Epoché* 7 (2002). 5.

⁸ Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Descularization of the World. Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999), Jürgen Habermas, “Faith and Knowledge,” in *The Frankfurt School on Religion. Key Writings by the Major Thinkers*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (New York: 2005).

⁹ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard, 1993). 68.

with the ability to shape their own fate and with responsibility for the consequences.” The ritual affirmation of this belief is constitutive of religion in the modern age. It enshrines one of the modern articles of faith. The modern faith is easy to believe—as easy as it needs to be in order to fulfill its religious purpose. It turns participants into the members of a church, but one that differs from the churches upheld by the historical religions. Historical religions put first-person speakers at ease with their neighbors by revealing the sacred will of God. History puts them at ease by revealing the sacred will of human beings. History does not conflict with the historical religions because it reveals historical religions to have been founded on beliefs that cannot be supported by the evidence. History conflicts with the historical religions because it *is* religion, a rival religion.¹⁰

As a ritual affirmation of the unity of human history and experience, history now fulfills the integrative function once performed by religion, and it does this by sacralizing free human action. This is true, not only of the great philosophies of history, but of the more recent neo-liberal celebration of untrammelled free-markets and the ‘end of history.’ The net result, however, has been to divest religion of the capacity for creativity, innovation and growth, at least, on its own terms. As J.G.A. Pocock has shown, in his analysis of Enlightenment historiography, the “construction of an ever more complex narrative of secular circumstances, contingencies and changes” has been “a principal instrument [for] the reduction of the divine to the human.”¹¹ By construing history as the arena of free human action, however, moderns have encased religion into a windowless monad whose internal mechanism might continue to function, but only because that mechanism is fundamentally incapable of adjusting to the dynamic of human self-fashioning in a radically contingent world. The immense distance between this monad and the real

¹⁰ Constantin Fasolt, "History and Religion in the Modern Age," *History and Theory* 45 (2006). 25.

¹¹ J.G.A. Pocock, "Historiography and Enlightenment: A View of Their History," *Modern Intellectual History* 5, no. 1 (2008). 96.

world is measured in the form of a single word: *belief*. By equating religion with belief, as James Carse observes, one is then able to compile a powerful historical index showing the intractability of religion in the face of innovation over time.¹²

Fasolt's point that history has usurped religion is not original, even if his conclusion that history is a form of religion might seem a brazen one to most working historians. In *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Hans Blumenberg surveys the many and diverse arguments that seek to connect modernity with its Christian past, and elaborates his own compelling thesis on how modern forms of thought "re-occupy" answer positions left vacant by receding theological ones.¹³ My point is somewhat different. What seems to me crucial is not just that history has taken over the erstwhile functions of religion by welding together all forms of human experience and action in an imagined space of universal synchronicity; it is that this space has crowded out the ways in which religion sustains itself as a vital force. Without denying or apologizing for the ways that religion can be constricting, it is fair to say that we are currently at a loss as to how to explain the ways that religion is also a creative and expansive force. And this is the result, not only of failing to understand what religion is, but of an abiding modern prejudice about what religion is not; that is to say, a viable, timely competitor for modern attention. My thesis is thus that history—as a way of relating to the past wherein human potential is nourished by encounters with tales of self-fashioning on the individual, group and species level—deploys secularization as a means of preventing

¹² James P. Carse, *The Religious Case Against Belief* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008).

¹³ Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983).

encounters with religion as an equally potent source for unleashing tremendous creative potential. According to the modern way of thinking, free self-fashioning is a distinctly non-religious enterprise, and when religion enters into the equation at all, it is either as a palliative, a succor from the day's events, or as the dead-hand of tradition.¹⁴ But as Carse points out, this doesn't explain religion's fecundity or longevity, nor answer the simple but vexing question of why people are religious.¹⁵ While it is true that modern society guarantees everyone the right to "choose" to be religious, Hans Joas is right to conclude that it is strikingly "inadequate to classify the actual experience constitutive of religious faith as a 'choice'. Religious faith is based either on traditions internalized in the process of self-formation—or on experiences of self-transcendence."¹⁶ What matters most is not choosing to be religious, but fathoming what it means that one is religious.

So what now, after secularization? If the presence and proliferation of religion in new and unexpected forms constitutes more than merely an exception to the rule of secularization, is it legitimate to think that we are we on the cusp of unraveling history? Let me be clear. My interest is not an "end-of-history" argument in the manner of Francis Fukuyama, a night in which all cows are black, and all history is reduced (yet again) to the present. On the contrary, my interest is not in the end of history, but in more history. How can we unleash temporalities and histories whose capacity to flood our historical consciousness might give depth to

¹⁴ Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim. America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

¹⁵ Carse, *The Religious Case Against Belief*.

¹⁶ Hans Joas, *Do We Need Religion? On the Experience of Self-Transcendence* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2008). 29.

the ideal of “multiple modernities?”¹⁷ I admit that I am inclined to think that religion may have much to contribute here by sensitizing us to temporal modalities (and much else) that otherwise have seemed intolerably burdensome to the modern. Repetition, to cite only one instance, offers its own potential for self-fashioning undertaken in the light of a past that is very much present, and there is evidence that modern society is experiencing a dearth of meaningful ritual precisely because of the proscription against repetitive time. In this context, might it not be possible to learn from the nourishing power of religious ritual, without sharing in its theological presuppositions, on the one hand, or succumbing to the modern prejudice that repetition is *de facto* stultifying on the other? Might religion not serve as a resource for even those non-religious who, like Bruno Latour, might want to conceptualize time as a “circle expanding in all directions...[in which] the past is not surpassed but revisited, repeated, surrounded, protected, recombined, reinterpreted and reshuffled?”¹⁸ The key, it seems to me, is to take more seriously than ever before Joas’s point that “religious traditions and institutions are not only rich repertoires of interpretations vis-à-vis...experiences of self-transcendence, but they enable us to have such experiences in the first place.”¹⁹ In light of this insight into religion as an enabling condition of certain kinds of experience (rather than just a storehouse of ‘old knowledge’), we might thus begin to see religion as a human and deeply creative enterprise. This would in itself not preclude anyone from advocating religious reform, of course, but it would impede us from taking ‘Reform’

¹⁷ S.N. Eisenstadt, ed., *Multiple Modernities* (New Brunswick N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2002).

¹⁸ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. 75.

¹⁹ 29

as the norm for how religion must evolve if it is to fit in the modern world.²⁰

Without suffering the burden of modern history, the religious themselves might even feel more at ease to embrace, on their own terms, a “secularism...[that] reanimates religion as part of its ideas of culture and civilization,” as Judith Butler has suggested.²¹

Viewing religion as a resource in this way would also, I hope, lead society to value religious minorities more. For religious minorities it is not enough to attain rights in the traditional sense as safeguards of religious practice. In the contemporary West, such safeguards clearly represent a necessary but not sufficient condition for living with dignity in the public sphere. In addition to this baseline legal protection, however, there must take place a weaving of the threads that connect minority and majority cultures in a web of mutual recognition as people inhabiting comparable lifeworlds. Of course, rendering what is unfamiliar (and even strange and alienating) into something comparable does not mean glossing differences or singing hymns to diversity that serve merely to shore up comforting isolationisms. Comparison preserves the differences it seeks to comprehend, and those who undertake it bear the burden of having to make plain their analytic presuppositions. Right now, the disintegration of the secularization paradigm has made it incumbent on Western commentators to clarify their understanding and misunderstanding of religion as constitutive of the modern project. It will, as I have tried to show, also force them to be more ecumenical in their approach to history,

²⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2007).

²¹ Judith Butler, "Sexual politics, torture, and secular time," *British Journal of Sociology* 59, no. 1 (2008). 14.

and just what counts as modern history by expanding their repertoire of historical time. But for this to take place will also require that religious minorities heed the call and participate more fully in the work of cultural translation, not by documenting how they have or have not yet ‘modernized,’ but by fostering a sincere inventory of the resources available in their faith for reaching goals common to the religious and non-religious alike.²²

The exhaustion of the secularization paradigm is not just another academic event whose meaning can be gleaned by plotting it on a timeline of just one more ‘post’ after another. What is truly at hand is the possibility for a learning process whose hallmark is a new readiness to encounter religion and religious interlocutors afresh. This does not mean forgetting history, of course, nor failing to look for ways of vivifying what is best in it, including collective aspirations of answering the call to justice. If the “Western trinity of modernity, enlightenment, and secularization” have become dubious starting points for cross-cultural exchange, as Dan Diner has observed, it is nevertheless not unwarranted to “presuppose that beyond cultural diversity men and women strive for the fulfillment of their personalities based on anthropologically similar, if not equal, universal assumptions for the advantages and sometimes the blessings of individual and collective security, freedom, and material well-being for the greatest possible number.”²³ In striving to maximize these advantages, it is also not unwarranted to think that religion will play a greater role than we have yet imagined.

²² Bassam Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism. Political Islam and the New World Disorder* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

²³ Dan Diner, *Lost in the Sacred* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009). 179.

