

What is a Religion? :

Rethinking Religion and Secularism

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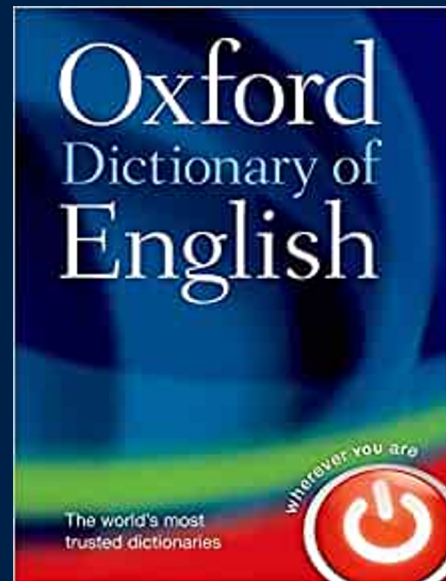


What is Religion?
What is “*Din*”?
What is Secularism?



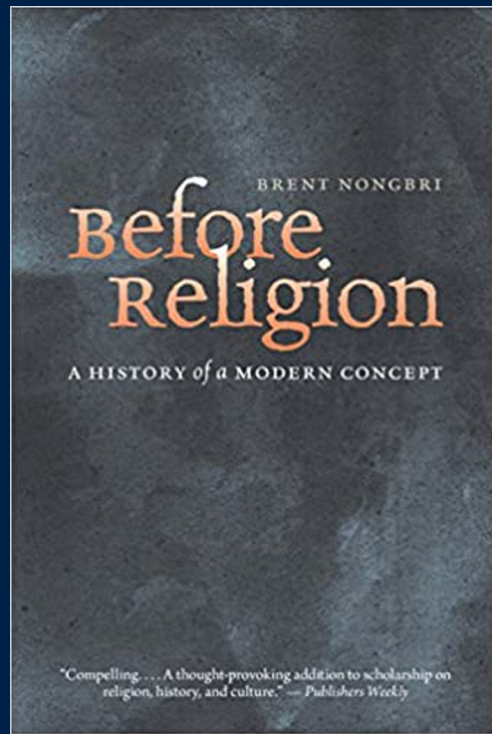
Two competing conceptions of religion

- Conventional approach:
 - Religion as an empirical/universal category found in all societies
 - Reflected in the *Oxford Dictionary of English* definition of religion as:
 - “The belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods.”
- The meaning of “religion” across cultures?
- Is religion as a modern category?
- *Rushain Abbasi “Islam and the Invention of Religion”



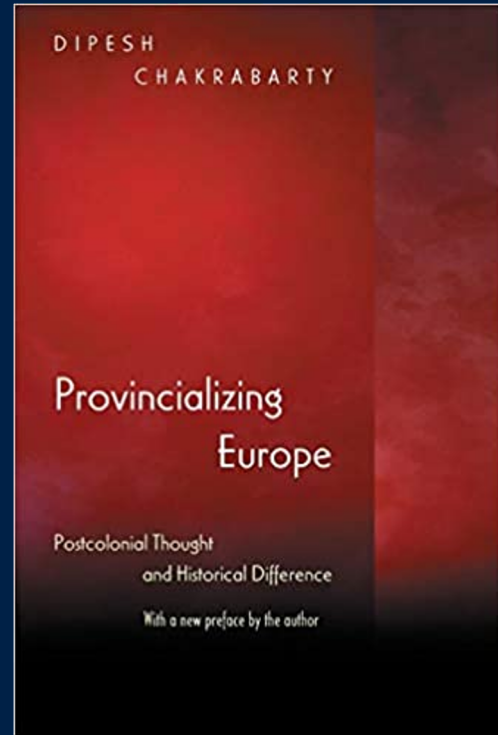
The current academic “orthodoxy”

- “religion is anything that sufficiently resembles modern Protestant Christianity. Such a definition might be seen as crass, simplistic, ethnocentric, Christianocentric, and even a bit flippant; it is all these things, but it is also highly accurate in reflecting the uses of the term in modern languages.” (p. 18)



What of Provincialising Europe

- Dipesh Chakrabarty's: *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000)
- Chakrabarty and the Subaltern Collective; decolonial studies
- Continues the trend of bringing forth the voices of the marginalized in recent historical studies



Islam as *Din*

The Gabriel hadith

Found in both
Bukhari and
Muslim's *Sahih*
collections

عن عمر بن الخطاب رضي الله عنه قال : بينما نحن جلوس عند رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم ذات يوم ، إذ طلع علينا رجل شديد بياض الثياب ، شديد سواد الشعر ، لا يرى عليه أثر السفر ، ولا يعرفه منا أحد ، حتى جلس إلى النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم فأسند ركبته إلى ركبتيه ، ووضع كفيه على فخذيه ، وقال : " يا محمد أخبرني عن الإسلام " ، فقال له : (الإسلام أن تشهد أن لا إله إلا الله وأن محمدا رسول الله ، وتقيم الصلاة وتؤتي الزكاة ، وتصوم رمضان ، وتحج البيت إن استطعت إليه سبيلا) ، قال : " صدقت " ، فعجبنا له يسأله ويصدقه ، قال : " أخبرني عن الإيمان " قال : (أن تؤمن بالله وملائكته وكتبه ورسله واليوم الآخر ، وتؤمن بالقدر خيره وشره) ، قال : " صدقت " ، قال : " فأخبرني عن الإحسان " ، قال : (أن تعبد الله كأنك تراه ، فإن لم تكن تراه فإنه يراك) ، قال : " فأخبرني عن الساعة " ، قال : (ما المسؤول بأعلم من السائل) ، قال : " فأخبرني عن أماراتها " ، قال : (أن تلد الأمة ربثها ، وأن ترى الحفاة العراة العالة رعاء الشاء ، يتطاولون في البنيان) ثم انطلق فلبث مليا ، ثم قال : (يا عمر ، أتدري من السائل ؟) ، قلت : " الله ورسوله أعلم " ، قال : (فإنه جبريل أتاكم يعلمكم دينكم)



Din in Qur'an and Hadith

- In the Qur'an, the word *din* is frequently and rather transparently used to refer to the beliefs, norms and practices that a given community adheres to, whether they be correct and approved by God, or otherwise.
- E.g. Q. 109:6
- Hadith: "That was Gabriel. He came to teach you your *din*."



For you is your religion
and for me is my religion.

Al-Kafirun [109]: 6



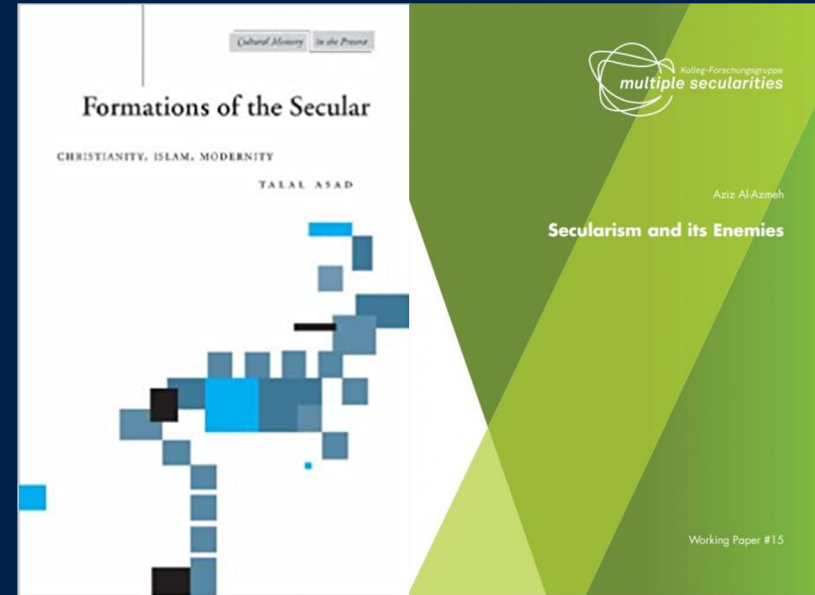
What is Secularism?

- Arguably this is also very difficult to define.
- Secularism as an “essentially contested concept”
 - Secularism is often viewed as the separation of church and state
 - Charles Taylor has suggested that secularism is better understood as managing pluralism equitably



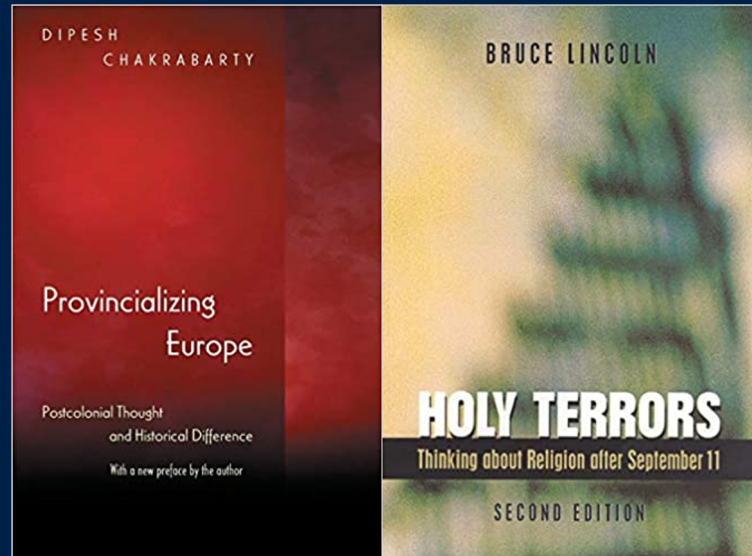
Contending Visions of Secularism

- Talal Asad: Secularity as a product of a distinctly European history
- Taylor: Modern states must be secular or else minorities will be persecuted
- Aziz al-Azmeh: Secularism is a natural development in global history and a defining feature of modernity



A History of the Secular beyond Europe?

- The problem of Eurocentrism
- Can religion even be defined?
 - Bruce Lincoln defines religion as consisting in four components:
 - A (transcendent) discourse; a practice, a community, and an institution.
- The best work on this remains unpublished, namely Rushain Abbasi's recently completed PhD



Inverting the Gaze: Secularism as a religion?

- This Islamic view resembles the conception of religion put forward by Émile Durkheim in his *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912; *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*)
- Others who adopt this reading include Carlton Hayes in his 1926 essay “Nationalism as a Religion”
- Could various modern ideologies could be viewed as religions?

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.

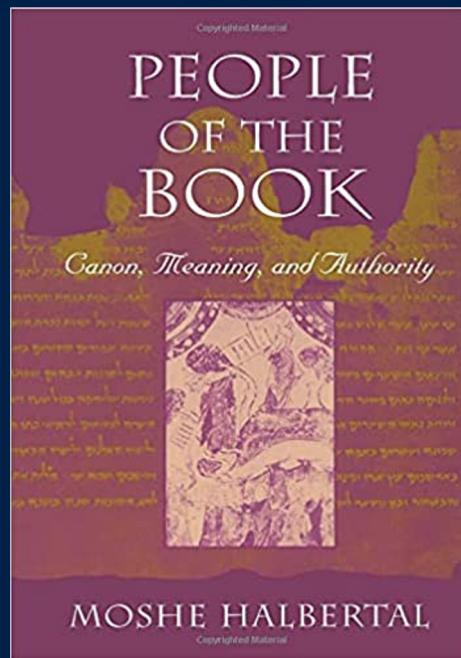
— *Emile Durkheim* —

Could Secular Ideologies be Religions?

- Depending on how one defines religion, we could view secularism as a “broad church” religion while various secular ideologies like liberalism, nationalism may be seen as “denominations” or “sects”.
- These religions are ones in which the secular (i.e. worldly) realm has been converted into an all encompassing system that has replaced “traditional religions”
- If so, the modern era is (ironically) a deeply religious one

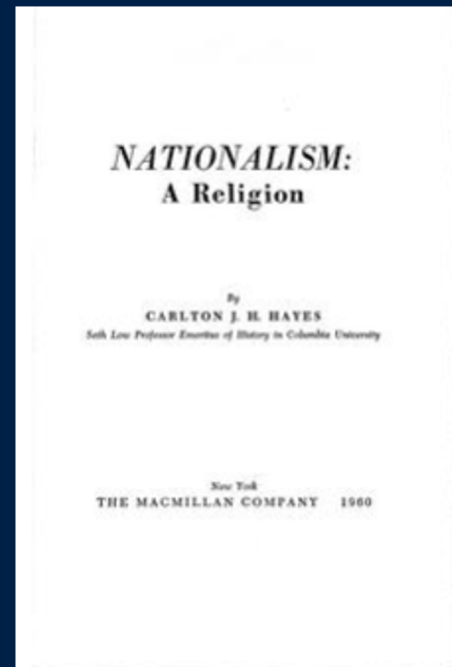
Islam and Secularism's Limitations

- A number of modern scholars, note that Islamic perspectives, premodern *and* modern buck the Western trend of secularisation in a form of marginalising religion from the political sphere.
- These perspectives remain discursively marginal, due to the hegemony of Western norms.



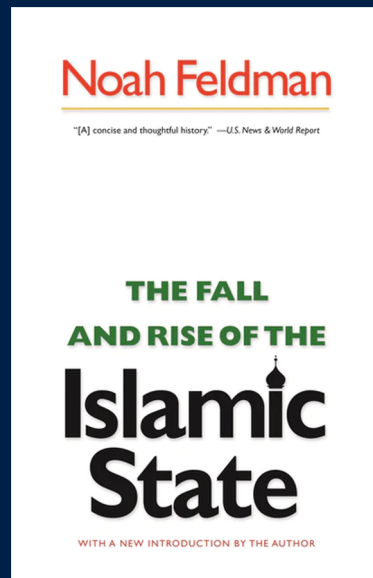
Modern Nation-states as Religious

- Sacred history: founding myths
- Sacred scripture: constitutions and the like
- Clerical class: judiciary, elected representatives
- Unequal in-groups and out-groups: citizens and foreigners
- The state as sacred and demanding allegiance
- The problem of sovereignty: the source of norms



Islam's Alternative History of the Secular

- Rushain Abbasi argues that Islam's 'worldliness' may have prevented the formation of a "secularism" from within Islamic civilisation
- Noah Feldman points out that the political realm was historically subordinate to the rule of law of the Sharia--that is it was rules based rather than despotic in nature.



The Implications of Secularism as a Religion

- This would create a contradiction in Secularism's self image. How can secularism be a neutral umpire between religions if is itself a religion?
- This question indicates the need for reassessing our conceptions or religion, politics and our social contract in light of a broader more inclusive conversation regarding our values.

IT'S TIME
TO **RETHINK**

Any questions?



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