

Preliminary Anthropological Reflections on Secularism and Secularity

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Abstract. *Anthropologists have been almost unanimous in rejecting the universalist claims of secularization theory. They have, however, engaged with notions of secularism (a political ideology of church-state separation) and secularity (a culture and habitus of areligiousness). In this article, four such approaches are sketched: Talal Asad's analysis of the interpenetration of secularism and history throughout Western history, studies of secularism as state ideology in Turkey and elsewhere, studies of secularism as an ideology of social closure against Islam in contemporary Western Europe, and studies of the role of secularity in the formerly socialist countries in the aftermath of an atheist state policy. Conclusions drawn from these approaches may point the way toward a more synchronized anthropological engagement with the secular as both an analytical and a folk concept.*

Keywords: *secularization, secularity, secularism, anthropology, politics, culture.*

Raktažodžiai: *sekuliarizacija, sekuliarybė, sekuliarizmas, antropologija, politika, kultūra.*

Although the secular might not be altogether useless as a concept, there is a big difference between being not altogether useless, and being enlightening. Having no stable meaning, and bearing the meaning it does nearly entirely in its polythetic contrasts to another problematic category (religion), the use of “the secular” as an analytical concept retains only the ability to minimize the complexity of real lives, to obscure our understanding of contemporary history, and to mislead us into thinking that we might someday experience the luxury of escaping from our interpretive rivals (Starrett 2010, 649).

Thus concludes anthropologist Gregory Starrett his summary critique of the uses of the concept of secularism in the social sciences. If secularism, he argues, describes events, actions, ideas or objects that are “non-religious,” then it can refer to three rather different aspects of this “non”-status: something that harms or diminishes religion (like legal restrictions, the desecration of sacred places, or anti-religious propaganda), something that is unconnected or irrelevant to

religion, or homologues to religion (like civic ritual, “sacred” national symbolism, or the worship of charismatic individuals). In the real world, it is unlikely that individuals experience their lives neatly divided between secular and religious concerns, let alone defining themselves as living a religious or secular life altogether (Starrett 2010, 646). Moreover, what purchase can secularism have as an analytical concept, he asks, if it is used in almost limitless variety in countries like the United States, Turkey, France, or the Soviet Union that have embraced an ideology of secularism/laicism (ibid, 645).

Not all anthropologists have been so critical of the notion of secularism. They are, however, almost unanimous in rejecting the universalist claims of secularization theory. Anthropology’s own engagement with the issue of secularism is much more recent than sociology’s and theorized to a much lesser degree. It began to evolve during the 1990s with two main perspectives – a more nuanced rereading of the historical trajectory of secularism as a project that is entangled with capitalist liberal democracies in Western European nation-states throughout the modern era, and ethnographic explorations of secularism as a lived cultural reality.

The former approach has been most decisively influenced by Talal Asad through his seminal work “Formations of the Secular” (2003). Despite several shortcomings and criticisms, Asad’s narrative of the *longue durée* of secular-religious entanglements merits acclaim – and continues to be referenced – for its effort to provide a coherent theoretical reflection on the secular from an anthropological viewpoint (cf. Cannell 2010). Asad starts from the dismissal of the straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular but remains also unconvinced by the suggestion of philosopher Charles Taylor that secularism arose in close connection to the modern nation-state as the lowest common denominator among conflicting religious doctrines and as an attempt to define a political ethic independent of religious convictions. Asad, by contrast, claims that the secular and the religious exist as two distinct modes of being in the world and it is the intentions that make a discourse or an action either “religious” or “secular.” Modernity, in his view, constitutes a bundle of projects by power elites to institutionalize a number of principles – constitutionalism, moral autonomy, democracy, human rights, civil equality, industry, consumerism, freedom of the market, and secularism. These projects employ technologies that generate new experiences that, then, constitute “disenchantment”. They do not make a coherent totality but account for distinct sensibilities, moralities, and aesthetics which, taken together, constitute the political doctrine of secularism (Asad 2003, 12–14). It is these attitudes and practices that the anthropology of secularism should pay special attention to.

Religion and secularism should not be seen as disparate, Asad argues, but rather as interpenetrating processes throughout history, both of which are profoundly implicated with the political. He states:

The secular, I argue, is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it nor a simple break from it. I take the secular to be a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life. To appreciate this it is not enough to show that what appears to be necessary is really contingent – that in certain aspects “the secular” obviously overlaps with “the religious.” It is a matter of showing how contingencies relate to changes in the grammar of concepts – that is, how the changes in concepts articulate changes in practice (Asad 2003, 25).

“The secular” should not be thought of as the space in which human life emancipates itself from the controlling power of “the religious.” Both “the secular” and “the religious” are intertwined in the ideology of the liberal state, which depends upon political myths for the legitimization of its public virtues of tolerance, equality, and liberty. Asad sees the secular not merely as an idea about the world but as a way of life that means more than just the absence of religion; in this respect his approach is rather typical for anthropological engagements with the topic.

The fact that Asad’s empirical material is drawn almost exclusively from Western European history has provoked the most serious of criticisms that were raised against this theory. One example of such critique is Sindre Bangstad’s 2009 article “Contesting Secularism/s” where he rejects the applicability of Asad’s theory to the Islamic world. Bangstad accuses Asad of using a model of agency and selfhood that is derived from a Western notion of liberalism and cannot be transferred to the context of Islam. Recent ethnographies of Muslim lives have shown the inappropriateness of the religious-secular binary that is crucial for Asad’s approach. Bangstad points to the example of Muslims living in “Western,” secular environments: the transformations they are experiencing place them in the interstices of “the religious” and “the secular.” They are entangled in the logic of the secular state but this entanglement does by no means reflect assimilation, a shift from religious to secular. In fact, it appears much more useful to view societies and individuals as more or less secular rather than assuming they are either one or the other.

The majority of anthropologists who have engaged with the issue of secularism agree that little is actually gained by seeing a multitude of local vernacular practices and state-level politics as outcomes of “the secular” in terms of a unified historical force. They approach secularism as an issue in the governance of religion through church-state separation that operates in ways specific to each case. Rather than focusing on secularization as a set of historical processes that characterize modernity it appears more fruitful to try discovering shared features of such concrete cases of religious politics. While some shared features of beliefs and practices may be extracted from the comparative study of the latter, people’s experiences of belief in a world of pluralism, of the clash of modern claims of selfhood and opposing “religious” modes of being in the

world can exhibit a great diversity of possible realizations. “The secular” as vernacular practice operates across a wide range of scenarios and in a complex dialectic with diverse socio-historical contexts (cf. Baldacchino, Kahn 2011; Bowen 2010). In the following I will present brief sketches of three such scenarios of secularism as politics, as a historical practice of state sovereignty which have been studied by anthropologists.

(1) Studies on secularism as an element of modern governance have focused especially on Turkey (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2002; Özyürek 2006; Tabar 2009). In 1923, the Turkish Republic was founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk with a laicist state ideology; since the introduction of multiparty politics in 1946 the secularist regime has been challenged by Islamic opposition parties. In recent years Islamism has become increasingly powerful as a political ideology and in recent years Turkey has for the first time been governed by an Islamist party. Anthropological studies have documented that secularism is more than the Turkish Republic’s preferred historic mode of self-representation; it also constitutes a kind of vernacular practice, a form of secular culture and, of increasing importance with the rise of political Islam, a politics of identity that makes claims to authenticity through various strategies of public representation. Nowadays there are numerous similarities in the identity politics of both secularists and Islamists. Both claim to represent a version of national identity that is closer to primordiality and the “true” culture of Turkey and both manifest identity through habits of consumption in everyday life that use and display items of material culture which exhibit authenticity. Moreover, there is no simple distinction between Islam as ritualized and secularism as austere and civic – throughout history secularism has been manifest also in the medium of the mythical, the ritualesque, and the quasi-religious, as becomes clearly apparent in the cult of Atatürk. Both Islam and secularism nowadays claim to represent modernity, albeit in different guises. Islamism simultaneously counters and appropriates symbolic references of high-class status and modernity which used to be indicative of being secularist. Even the actual historic identification of secularism with high class/urban and religious with low class/rural has become blurred with the rise of a new Muslim capitalist class. Still the rhetoric persists that integrates neoliberal symbolism of the market with the secular state ideology. Thus a reconfiguration of the secular and the religious is taking place in the context of new imaginations of state, public, and citizenship that is generated by neoliberal capitalism.

The Turkish case shows that, if secularism and religion ever were clearly identifiable separate cultural fields, they definitely are no longer, with their characteristics being at the same time extolled in identity politics and blurred in the practice of everyday life. In fact, it can be argued that this blurring of the boundaries of the secular and the religious, of religion and politics constitutes the essence of secularism, which lies in the precariousness of the boundaries

it establishes, whereas a religious ideology (like Islamism) stakes a claim to defining unambiguous boundaries between faith and politics (Agrama 2010, 495). Secularism is thus not to be understood as a unified ideology but as an ensemble of questions, stakes, and answers that are the outcome of a historical process. As Hussein Ali Agrama concludes his anthropological study of secularism in Egypt, secularism does not merely denote the separation of religion and politics, but “an ongoing, deepening entanglement in the question of religion and politics, for the purpose of identifying and securing fundamental liberal rights and freedoms” (2010, 502). As the above-mentioned studies of the Near Eastern context show, secularism can be viewed as an element of state politics that strive for hegemony in an increasingly complex political field, contesting, negotiating, and interpenetrating with religious ideologies that oppose secularism’s governing ideas of pluralism and liberalism, a “particular entanglement of religion with power” (Starrett 2010, 635). Saba Mahmood (2005) has shown in her often-cited study on Egypt that secularism means the regulation of religion through state and civic institutions rather than the abandonment of religion. What most studies of secularism in the Near East have in common is a focus on secularism and religion as elite projects of cultural capital shifting between traditional religious and lay intellectuals. In practice, it has also become apparent that there is much more to it than a zero-sum game with two players. Secularism and religion are interlinked in a complex relationship of only seemingly contradictory processes where there may be moves that not only counter but even actively advance the interests of the other.

(2) In the context of Western European democracies, the secularist discourse is currently serving a rather different purpose. It is being employed as a powerful ideology of social closure, especially against Islam that is nowadays perceived as the archetypal “other” to the liberal civic order. Secularism is at the same time a topic of academic debate and a populist discourse fueled by the anxieties of people who sincerely feel that the separation of church and state is under threat by the building of mosques or the wearing of the headscarf by Muslim women (cf. Bowen 2007; Bunzl 2005; Eyerman 2008; Özyürek 2005, 2009). Dutch anthropologists Oscar G. A. Verkaaik and Rachel Spronk (2011) point toward the role of body politics in the current debates about the relationship between civil secular liberalism and the religious. Building upon Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, they argue that secularism in the public imagination is no longer predominantly about political arrangements but about sexuality: “sexuality has replaced religion as the body-politics through which hegemonic ideology becomes internalized, naturalized, co-modified and authentic” (Verkaaik, Spronk 2011, 85). New sexual regimes that organize moralities and desires have become prevalent in Western Europe since the 1960s and 1970s and juxtapose modern notions of the liberal/liberated self and outdated understandings of a religious regulation of sexuality. Verkaaik and Spronk note that “in postwar

Europe the meaning of freedom and autonomy changed from ‘free from the state’ or ‘free from foreign occupation’ to ‘free from oppressive religious/sexual regimes’” (2011, 85).

Many progressive Western Europeans maintain a passionate distrust of religious authority in the realm of sexual norms, even if many other aspects of post-1960s freedom and autonomy have been under attack from neoliberal, neoconservative ideologies. The growing visibility of Islam in Europe has revived fears of religious sexual regulation that the established Christian churches have for a long time been unable to conjure up and sparked efforts to defend the prevalent regime of body politics under the banner of “national integration.” The outcome is a complex entanglement of various strands of identity politics that are blurring the “traditional” boundaries of secular and religious discourses. “Sexuality is now as holy as religion is sexy” (Verkaaik, Spronk 2011, 86). The state has become a defender of sexual identities and their free public expression and thus sets the terms of how one is to think about sexuality in the context of the nation. Therefore, religious identities now willingly or unwillingly contain an element of transgression in them, by maintaining that the state has ultimately no right to interfere in private (i.e., religious) matters, by defending the right to wear headscarves in the name of true liberalism.

By contrast, nation, class and secular values often come together nowadays in various forms of “secular populism.” Verkaaik and Spronk cite the example of Geert Wilders’s right-wing populist “Party for Freedom” in the Netherlands, which claims to represent the working segment of the population, promote Dutch national values and defend the rights of homosexuals and women (ibid). Questions about the true match of political rhetoric and reality aside, such slogans illustrate an intertwining of notions of sexuality with “an eroding nationality and a watered-down class consciousness” (ibid). The contemporary recreation of political secularism in populist terms that takes place in many Western European countries thus produces a normative discourse that excludes religious subjects (especially migrant, even more especially Muslim) and simultaneously fuels anti-elitist sentiments and strives for protection from neoliberal market fundamentalism.

(3) Only a handful of ethnographic studies have yet focused on the role of secularism in the former socialist world (for a recent overview of Soviet anti-religious policies, see Froese 2008). They have asserted that the legacy of socialist atheist politics have not been washed away by the often-recognized resurgence of religion, which in many cases is better described as the re-entry of powerful churches in the public sphere, but rather continues to serve as one *Weltanschauung* among many in the pluralist field of post-socialist societies. Sonja Luehrmann (2005, forthcoming) has investigated the politics of de-secularization in the post-Soviet Russian republic of Mari El with the simultaneous rise of Protestant Evangelism and the revitalized pre-Christian local religion.

Julie McBrien and Mathijs Pelkmans's (2008) research addresses the present-day situation of secularism as a way of life in Kyrgyzstan. They start by pointing out that secularists in Central Asia are by no means avowed atheists but rather people who, while participating in life-cycle rituals and asserting their identity as Muslims, are not interested in religion. The current situation is the outcome of the Soviet system that created both national and religious categories in terms of a romantic, cultural nationalism: Soviet policy attacked the public manifestations of Islamic religious life but largely ignored those aspects related to the home and family life. By the end of the Soviet period, national identity was closely tied to Muslimness, but a Muslimness that had been stripped of much of its "religious" content and could be made comparable with Soviet ideals and a political culture of secularism. In contrast to these ideas of religion as a component of ethno-national identity, Muslim and Christian missionaries that arrived after 1990 held that the categories Muslim and Christian were essentially religious categories. These missionaries were perceived as a threat by the secularists: the Muslim missionaries were seen as a radicalizing force that strained the relationship of religion and culture, and the Evangelical missionaries were seen as undermining the national idea. Moreover, secularists nowadays feel threatened by the fact that they no longer have the discursive upper hand in debates with the others as they used to have.

The most obvious case for a long-term sustained secularism is Eastern Germany/the former GDR. The number of church members declined from 94 % in 1946 to about 30 % in 1989 and even further to 25 % today, with about 50 % of self-proclaimed atheists. To date there has been little anthropological research on the issue (but see Peperkamp, Rajtar 2010), but numerous sociological studies have provided a rather comprehensive picture (see Pollack 2003; Pollack, Pickel 2000; Schmidt-Lux 2008; Wohlrab-Sahr et al. 2008, 2009). In East Germany secularism was obviously sustained even after the lifting of state repression of religion by a durable disposition of areligiousness of individuals and a long-standing distance of the majority of the population from the churches. The case illustrates that a long-term success of a state-sanctioned policy of atheism can only be achieved by more than repressive means. It has to become a part of people's independent thought and practice, engrained in the habitus. Only through the dialectic of secularist politics and the development of specific subjective and collective logics of secularity can such a secular habitus be created.

Secularization in the GDR operated along three lines of legitimization: a link to an earlier tradition of critique of religion (a strong labor movement and Communist party in the Weimar Republic); the disillusionment in the aftermath of World War II, which was a fertile ground for efforts to start a new biography and a new society; and the idea of a fundamental dichotomy of religion and politics, religion and science, propagated with reference to a "scientific worldview" in explicit opposition to the "idealist worldview" of Christianity and the bourgeoisie. The establishment of notions of rationality as

a key theme in individual self-making had a lasting influence even outside of the context of a politicized critique of religion. These factors worked together with the socialist state's explicit anti-religious propaganda to achieve a secular way of life that was transmitted in the familial environment across generations. Ideas of religious transcendence were replaced by the ideals of community, honesty, truth, and work.

After the fall of socialism and the demise of the GDR, the secular habitus was reinforced rather than challenged by the new social environment of Eastern Germany as church membership and religiousness have continued to decline. There are three main reasons for this: (1) the Protestant churches, formerly important proponents of civic activity, lost in importance to other actors in an expanding civil society; (2) the disclosure of the *Stasi* (secret police) involvement of many church functionaries robbed the churches of much of the social capital they had accumulated as the main agents of opposition to the socialist regime; (3) as the Eastern German churches were incorporated into the overarching structures of national German church organizations, they came to be perceived by many as "Western" and therefore, distant and hierarchical.

The notion that East German secularism means more than just a critical distance to the church is further supported by the fact that all kinds of new spiritualities, whose triumphal advance into the religious void of Eastern Germany had been forecast after the *Wende*, are nowadays facing the same lack of interest in religious matters as the Christian churches.

What conclusions can be drawn from this sketchy introduction to the checkered anthropological field of secularism studies? From an anthropological perspective the secular can take on three forms:

(1) Secularization, a historical trajectory of declining influence of church and religiosity in society. Anthropologists have rejected the idea of a global process of secularization, but the concept may be fruitfully employed to describe micro-historical, local processes (as in the case of Eastern Germany). It is widely agreed that secularization should be seen as interpenetrating processes of "the religious" and "the secular," not as a unidirectional shift from the former to the latter.

(2) Secularism, a political project of church-state separation that is linked to specific groups and interests in concrete socio-historical settings. As a typical elite project, secularism struggles for hegemony in the public realm against different religious interests and its success depends on the long-term anchoring of secular moralities and liberal ideas of the self among the population. The key symbols that secular politics relies on can differ widely across various local contexts and are also subject to change in accordance with broader issues of governance and its contestation.

(3) Secularity denotes an individual *Weltanschauung*, an areligious habitus shared across certain groups in society. It is most likely reinforced by secularist

state politics, but at the same time transmitted through socialization and sustained by the belief in humanist, rationalist or liberal moral values and/or a late-modern notion of independent selfhood. These “cultural” dimensions give secularity a certain independence from secularist political agendas, but still position it within a pluralist ideological field where it negotiates its position in society vis-à-vis different kinds of religious ideologies.

In conclusion, I would argue that anthropological research should focus its attention on the ethnographic exploration of the dialectic of secularism and secularity. As there is a general agreement about the fruitlessness of upholding the notion of a general process by which “the secular” is replacing “the religious,” the task on hand for anthropologists is to produce ethnographies of the secular in various scenarios of ideological pluralism rather than to speculate, in Asadian fashion, about the *longue durée* of the secular. In terms of its analytical value, it appears useful to approach secularism by following Brubaker and Cooper’s (2000) deconstruction of identity and distinguish between secularism as an analytical concept (which is of limited value) and a folk concept which, in turn, can be divided into ideology, on the one hand, and an everyday understanding, on the other.

In order to situate the secular in a wider context, a number of questions that pertain to contemporary social worlds in neoliberal settings are especially relevant: does the retreat of the state, the key proponent of secularism throughout the 20th century, in the neoliberal present signify the rise of new entanglements of the secular with political and anti-political ideologies and social forces that might even subvert its liberal foundations? Or does the post-political age of today, where “the multitude” is replacing “traditional” political constituencies, open up new interstices for the secular to thrive as an individualized politics of selfhood? Or is secularism in retreat from the advance of religion as the new handmaiden of neoliberal/neoconservative interests in the rollback of liberalism and civil rights and the further erosion of the state?

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Parengiamieji antropologiniai apmąstymai apie sekuliarumą ir sekuliarybę

Santrauka

Antropologai beveik vienbalsiai atmetė sekuliarizacijos teorijos universalistinius teiginius. Tačiau jie aptarė sekuliarizmo, kaip politinės ideologijos, atskiriančios bažnyčią ir valstybę, bei sekuliarumo kaip nereligingumo *habitus* ir kultūros sąvokas. Šiame straipsnyje analizuojami keturi požiūriai: Talalo Asado sekuliarizmo ir istorijos abipusė skverbtis Vakarų istorijoje; sekuliarizmo, kaip valstybės ideologijos, Turkijoje ir kitose valstybėse studijos; sekuliarizmo, kaip socialinio uždaro ideologijos, islamo atžvilgiu studijos šiuolaikinėje Vakarų Europoje; sekuliarumo vaidmens buvusiose socialistinėse valstybėse po patirtos ateistinės politikos studijos. Minėtų keturių požiūrių analizės išvados leidžia ieškoti būdo antropologijai toliau įsitraukti į sekuliarumo sąvokos (tiek analitinės, tiek vartojamos plačiai) analizę.