

Editorial Foreword

As a rule, *CSSH* does not do special issues. We tell this to the many intellectual entrepreneurs who come to us with good (and bad) ideas for special issues. The reason for this policy is that special issues take up valuable space that could be given to individual submissions, of which we have no shortage. Special issues also tend to be uneven, with weak papers slotted in among the strong ones, whereas the individual submissions we publish are selected for their strength. Finally, with our traditional use of “rubrics,” under which we group related essays for comparative effect, every issue of *CSSH* contains several special issues.

All of this we say to assure you that what you are about to read is not a special issue. It is, however, a special occasion. Over the last few years, *CSSH* has seen a dramatic increase in manuscripts dealing with secularism. Any alert observer of the social sciences and humanities would have guessed this trend. We are not the only journal experiencing it, but it is problematic for *CSSH* in unique ways. When a concept as generic and value laden as secularism is applied by so many scholars to so many places, times, and problems, the concept is in danger of losing its comparative utility. The special occasion we mark in this issue is one of accumulation and, yes, troubling excess. All of the essays presented here deal specifically with secularism, all came to us as individual submissions, and each author suggests, in their own way, that the current mania for studies of the secular has reached a tipping point. Our goal in this issue is, quite frankly, to tip the secularism literature over, not in hopes of disrupting a fad—we are not dealing with an intellectual fad plain and simple—but in hopes of spilling important ideas in the most promising directions. The contributors to this issue suggest several new possibilities for research that engages rigorously, and in less formulaic ways, with the sociopolitical and economic forces driving the current profusion of secularism studies. We want to encourage studies of this metacontextual kind.

We would also like to use this occasion to announce a new *CSSH* standard for future submissions on secularism, the secular, secularization, and secularity. If you send us anything on these topics, it should be as sharp and insightful as the essays that follow, and it should move beyond them analytically, posing new questions and building new interpretive frames. We are convinced that a more productive phase of comparative work will result from a critical awareness of dominant trends in the secularism manuscripts we receive at *CSSH*, and the rubrics we have devised for this issue sum up the major tropes.

THE SECULAR AS GOVERNANCE The separation of church and state was a principle dear to eighteenth-century American revolutionaries, but U.S. legislators, judges, and citizens have found it hard to keep the “wall of separation” in place, and current scholarship on secularism is more or less unanimous in portraying the wall as a mobile partition, if not a mirage. It is ultimately the state that decides what counts as religion, whereas religious bodies rarely determine the limits and functions of the modern state. The countries that receive closest attention in this issue—Egypt, India, Turkey, France, Algeria, and Israel—are known for the religious contests waged in their public spaces, whether the regime is conspicuously secular or officially tied to a religious tradition. For three of our contributors, secularism entails relentless state involvement in religious matters both public and personal, but this involvement is not always antithetical to religious practice; it can encourage a proliferation of religious organizations and interests, even as state actors attempt to marginalize religious authority or submerge it in the institutional life of the state.

Hussein Ali Agrama uses the complexities of the Egyptian government’s relationship to Islam to reconsider the practical limits of secularism as an idiom of sovereignty. The setting requires careful scrutiny. In contemporary Egypt, state authorities can use secular intent, modern concepts of public order, and the rule of law to justify legal decisions in which private individuals are declared Muslim heretics and divorced against their will. Agrama shows how a blanket depiction of these decisions as “non-secular” is not as sensible as it might initially seem to observers from the “paradigmatic secular states” of Europe and North America. Is Egypt a secular state? Agrama contends that the question can be answered only in the “problem space” constructed by secular discourse itself, where normative ideas of religion and a realm beyond religion are continually debated in the interest of establishing, or thwarting, state sovereignty.

Nandini Chatterjee, working with changes in marriage laws in nineteenth-century England and British India, shows how civil marriage, an institution now associated with secular lifestyles, was originally a legal innovation ordained by the state to meet the religious needs of Christians who did not belong to the Anglican Church. It was not at first an attempt to provide an alternative to religious marriage ceremonies, but was instead an attempt to widen the denominational range of these ceremonies. In India, religious communities of diverse sorts expected British authorities to provide sanction and legal protection for their marriage and inheritance laws. As Chatterjee illustrates in the case of the Brahma Samaj, the colonial state was enlisted in the task of creating new personal status laws for new religious movements. The laws of civil marriage were adapted to this cause, but in India, as in England, Chatterjee suggests that “the ideology of secularism had little to do with it.”

James McDougall travels analytically between colony and metropole, exploring French state policy toward its Muslim subjects in Algiers and Paris. Although the ideological consistency of French laicism is a stereotype strongly held in France and beyond, the facts on the ground were messy. In Algeria, French authorities tried to maintain a discrete distance from religious associations, coopting their leadership with small salaries, but otherwise leaving them underfunded. Algerians, for their part, used religious associations to lobby the state, to compete for influence, and even to mobilize against the French. In Paris, by contrast, the government's attempts to cultivate its own image as a Muslim power failed to impress an immigrant Muslim population that was reluctant to play along. Rank and file Algerians looked skeptically at the state-supported Paris Mosque and instead established their own religious associations that were separatist in orientation. Whatever strategy French officials used to manage Islam and Muslims, it produced social fields that combined religious authority and statecraft in ways that were unexpected and nearly impossible to control.

THE SECULAR AS CRITIQUE Although the study of secularism has a venerable pedigree in mainstream social science—Weber, Durkheim, and Marx all had important things to say about it—the bulk of recent work on the secular has counterhegemonic pretensions. It is polemical, or at least critical, and these tendencies make sense only in relation to the larger context supplied by the War on Terror, which is related historically to the colonial encounter between Muslim populations and European powers. Of the eight essays featured in this issue, six deal directly with Muslims or Muslim societies. This ratio is true to our general pattern of submissions. Many of the controversies that have fueled the secularism literature—veiling in France and Turkey, the Rushdie affair, the Danish cartoons, suicide bombings, and so on—involve Muslims, their advocates, and their enemies. Just as updated versions of the classic secularization thesis are still used to discredit those who reject a future of science, free markets, popular sovereignty, and sustainable development, so the new literature on secularism is deployed against liberal modernists (and illiberal Islamophobes) who use secular powers to discipline Muslim critics and to justify wars against Islamist movements and Muslim-majority states. But what happens when this familiar political script is modified?

Joyce Dalsheim generates ideologically disturbing effects by applying to Jewish settlers in Gaza and the West Bank many of the arguments commonly applied when defending Muslims against criticisms rooted in secularist thought. Jewish settlers base their politics on religious beliefs at odds with basic notions of political liberalism, yet as Dalsheim correctly notes, analysts who defend Muslims against secularist hegemony (Asad, Mahmood, and Butler are her examples) would be reluctant to make similar arguments on

behalf of Israeli settlers. What does refusal to generalize the critique of secular liberalism signify? Dalsheim suggests that these questions point to undeveloped spaces in the politics and theory of scholars who criticize the inconsistencies of liberal thought and practice. Indeed, it is liberal thought, not religious beliefs or practices, to which many critics of secularism would turn first in pursuing their own criticisms of the Jewish settler movement.

Khaled Furani reminds us that secularism was the route to critical awareness preferred by Edward Said, whose simultaneous construction and deconstruction of Orientalism provided key archetypes and intellectual tools for what would become the critique of secularity. The origins of Orientalism, Furani argues, can be traced to the birth of the secular worldview; they go hand in hand, and Said's eager embrace of secularism suggests that he was unaware of the extent to which his commitment to humanist ideals made him a partner in the political epistemologies that endow both Orientalism and secularism with immense power to essentialize and stigmatize. Furani invites scholars to reconsider the necessary relationship between the secular and the religious, an attraction that prompts progressive Arab poets to saturate their verses with religious imagery, and leads progressive social scientists and historians to build complex criticisms of the secular on close engagement with religious actors whose views they can appreciate, but cannot believe or endorse. Where Dalsheim sees kinks and inconsistencies, Furani sees the potential to extend Said's unfinished work into new analyses of modernity that more accurately diagnose how the secular became a medium in which Self and Other could be represented.

THE SECULAR AS ANALYTICAL FRAME The fact that the limits of the secular are notoriously hard to define, and seem to provoke intense (sometimes lethal) debate, has led several of our contributors to conclude that the secular functions, and is perhaps meant to function, as a problem-space, a social field in which debate occurs and power is wielded, but resolution is not to be found. If this is the case, then the usefulness of the secular as an analytical frame is limited, and we are left to ponder the obvious allure of the concept. We can also immediately sense that other concepts might serve us better as means to interpret the relationship between religion and state sovereignty, between that which belongs to Caesar, and that which belongs to God.

Gregory Starrett offers us a tour de force analysis of the "secularism industry" as it functions in studies of Egypt and beyond. Borrowing a term from the intellectual arsenal of philosopher W. B. Gallie, Starrett argues that secularism is an *essentially contested concept*, one whose use is morally necessary, but whose meaning will shift endlessly, breeding confusion and, at best, momentary insight. Concepts of this kind have the look and feel of analytical significance, but they are in fact analytical traps that prevent us from asking the right questions. In a freewheeling discussion of authors ranging from Harvey Cox

and William James, to Charles Taylor and Max Weber, Starrett makes the case for retiring secularism as an analytical concept and re-engaging with the complexity of real lives, in which the secular, as a normative concept, has currency only in relation to a similarly vexed category, “religion,” against which all notions of the secular acquire their distinctiveness.

Kabir Tambar, as if having read Starrett’s essay, heads into the terrain between religious devotion and the public spaces in which aspects of devotional practice are now displayed as evidence of pluralism. Focusing on Turkey’s Alevi minority, Tambar considers the “aesthetics of visibility” that has turned the *semah*, a dance that is part of Alevi worship, into a publically acceptable form of folklore. Alevi youngsters today form *semah* dance troupes, and they perform the ritual in settings that cannot be construed as religious: ethnic festivals, public parks, bars, and supermarket grand openings. The price of inclusion in public space, for Alevi Turks, is the transformation of what was once a distinctive—and by Sunni Muslim standards, heretical—act of worship into a harmless bit of heritage. Puzzling over moments when Alevis must themselves decide if a *semah* is folklore of worship, Tambar suggests that the public culture of nationalism has brought Alevis into the managed sphere of Turkish pluralism, but this accommodation has produced a sharp awareness of the misfit between *semah* as performed for the nation and *semah* as performed for God. This experiential gap, which can bring Alevi worship to a standstill as people argue over the meaning of the dance, is already too complex for terms like “religion” or “the secular” to explain. The concepts Tambar invokes in their place, which emphasize formal contexts of seeing and being seen, are perhaps more vivid ways to depict Alevi interactions with God and the other sovereign power that watches over their community: namely, the Turkish state.

THE TWO SECULARISMS Despite the reach and analytical sophistication of these essays, the authors share certain perspectives. None is a strong advocate of secularism as policy, for instance, yet none seems to speak from an avowedly religious position. This lack of identification is puzzling. Is it secular? All of the contributors seem to believe that, whatever else is problematic or interesting about it, secularism is best treated as a modern phenomenon. Again, this stance is puzzling, since state intervention in religious life is as old as state formations themselves, and comparisons across historical periods could be revealing. Finally, all of our contributors seem to agree that secularism is best comprehended as an aspect of state policy and, more generally, as a context for thinking about morality and knowledge that is clearly distinguishable from religious habits and attitudes.

John Bowen brings all of these ideas together in his commentary on the themes of this issue. Drawing on years of research in Indonesia and France, where he has worked with Muslim and non-Muslim populations whose

relationships to the state vary tremendously, Bowen suggests that secularism almost always comes down to two things: a dilemma of rule (expressed in state policy) or a claim to modern status (backed up by historical links to European values and Enlightenment ideas). The two secularisms cannot adequately explain each other. One is rooted in discrete structures of governance, the other in mythic charters and ideologies of legitimation that often distort analysis and critique. Greater potential, Bowen contends, lies in meticulous studies of how the secular is used to create and resolve dilemmas of rule. Like most of our contributors, Bowen is suspicious of secularism's ability to create normative frameworks that privilege certain intellectual genealogies over others; nonetheless, he insists that comparative insights can still be gleaned from the study of secularism if we approach it not by asking what defines "the secular" as an abstract quality, but instead by asking "how state actors try, with more or less success, to domesticate religious authority." The latter is the more concrete question. It is also the more inclusive one, since it compels us to move beyond the modern, Eurocentric settings in which the secularism literature has typically flourished. This expanded platform is the workspace in which we hope future comparative research will be done.