

Religion and Secularity

Transformations and Transfers of Religious
Discourses in Europe and Asia

Edited by

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CONTENTS

List of Figures	vii
List of Uncommon Abbreviations	ix
List of Contributors	xi
1. Introduction	1
<i>Lucian Hölscher and Marion Eggert</i>	
2. The Influence of Foreign Knowledge on Eighteenth Century European Secularism	9
<i>Heiner Roetz</i>	
3. The Religious and the Secular: Semantic Reconfigurations of the Religious Field in Germany from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Centuries	35
<i>Lucian Hölscher</i>	
4. The Origin of the Concept of <i>Laïcité</i> in Nineteenth Century France	59
<i>Sylvie Le Grand</i>	
5. Secularization, Re-Enchantment, or Something in between? Methodical Considerations and Empirical Observations Concerning a Controversial Historical Idea	77
<i>Volkhard Krech</i>	
6. The Concepts of 'Religion' and 'Secularism' in the Hebrew Language and Their Manifestations in Israel's Socio-Political Dynamics	109
<i>Yochi Fischer</i>	
7. Laiklik and Its Introduction into Public Discourse in Turkey	131
<i>Anat Lapidot-Firilla</i>	
8. Civic Piety: Visions of Secularity in Constitutional Iran	155
<i>Nahid Mozaffari</i>	

9. Equality in Hierarchy: Secularism and the Protection of Religions in Sri Lanka	175
<i>Sven Bretfeld</i>	
10. Japanese Discoveries of 'Secularization' Abroad and at Home, 1870–1945	193
<i>Hans Martin Krämer</i>	
11. Discursive Formations Surrounding 'Religious Freedom' in Modern Japan: Religion, Shintō, the Emperor Institution	217
<i>Jun'ichi Isomae</i>	
12. Religionizing Confucianism and the Re-Orientation of Confucian Tradition in Modern China	231
<i>Chen Hsi-yüan</i>	
13. The Historical Formation of the 'Religious-Secular' Dichotomy in Modern Korea	257
<i>Jang Sukman</i>	
Index of Objects and Terms	281
Index of Personal Names	284

INTRODUCTION

Lucian Hölscher and Marion Eggert

The concept of 'secularization' was introduced at the turn of the nineteenth century—in the wake of many heated debates, some of which are described and discussed in this volume—into the general Western discourse on the relationship between religion, the state, and society at large. In the course of the twentieth century it became the most prominent paradigm not only for describing, but also for regulating the societal dynamics of religion (Krech): In many parts of the world the constitutional separation of state and church, of a secular and a religious sphere, has been recognised as one of the basic principles of liberal constitutionalism, even if the choices of whether and how to implement this separation have differed widely, depending on place and time. Concomitantly, the theory of secularization has long played the role of a master narrative about the converging modernities in an industrializing and globalizing world.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, secularization is again surprisingly contested, both as a blueprint for political arrangements and, more importantly for our context, as a scholarly model of historical change. Whereas most scholars would now dispute the existence of a coherent process of secularization in today's world, a few highly acclaimed experts still defend the idea, and do so on the basis of an impressive amount of empirical data. Others try to clarify the concept by dissecting it so that it becomes more applicable to differing situations. Yet another approach is that of Charles Taylor who, on the basis of philosophically interpreted cultural history, argues against the inevitability and appropriateness of secularization, while in fact treating a deep-running process of erosion of religion as historical fact, albeit one that should be consciously countered.

This ongoing debate unquestionably provides the background to the present volume; however, our aim is not to enter this debate, but rather to furnish it with historical and semantic reference points. Rather than contributing to an overarching model of a universal historical process—or even progress—we wish to excavate the historical and semantic particularities of the dynamic relationship between religion, politics and other societal spheres in different cultures throughout Eurasia. For

as soon as the concept of secularization is extended to religions other than Christianity and to other parts of the world, the limits of any universalizing theory become obvious: In the case of religions without dogmas and defined membership, criteria for secularization as they apply to the Christian world are rather pointless. Answers to the questions whether the concept of secularization is a useful heuristic tool for detecting societal processes, what forms these processes take, and what significance they have necessarily differ, depending on the region of the world one has in mind. One expedient indicator of the relevance—if any—of the concept of secularization or related notions in a given society is whether a corresponding term exists, and how it is used. Thus, our approach is both *socio-historical* and *semantic*.

First, we ask about the country-specific structures and processes of secularization in the last two centuries. Studying examples that range from France and Germany, Turkey and Israel, Iran and India to the Far Eastern nations of China, Korea and Japan, the contributions present quite different national models of secularization, describing as they do the specific experiences of each country and their widely divergent ways of handling the problems of religious plurality, individual religious choices, and societal demands on uniformness and loyalty. Offering this spectrum of cases, we try to avoid both the idea of a coherent path of secularization all over the world, and any pre-mature assumption that the application of the concept is limited to Western Christianity. Indeed, secularization has been, and still is, a powerful force in many societies, outside Europe as much as within. But it means very different things in each cultural and societal framework.

Second, we start with the evidence given by the terms used in each linguistic community. Starting with philological questions such as what are the most important words used to translate the European notions 'religious' and 'secular', we go on to ask how contemporaries defined these notions and how the meaning of these notions changed over time, from discourse to discourse. However, in focussing on the usage and meaning of key words in each national culture, we are not interested in linguistic similarities and dissimilarities as such, but rather in the social, political and cultural realities indicated by these notions in the contemporary context of their usage. In other words, we view notions as concepts representing social structures. We are not looking for semantic equivalents for the term secularization in the various national languages, but rather are watching out for semantic differences and changes of meaning: Translations are not substitutions of equivalent expressions; rather they are acts of semantic

transformation, with semantic extensions and connotations changing in step with the respective cultural and social frameworks.

Starting with the evidence of language also has the advantage of making it clear that we subscribe to neither an essentialist nor a functionalist theory of religion. We do not regard either religion or secularity as a given in the societies under our scrutiny; instead we take these concepts as hermeneutic tools for understanding the conceptual matrixes even of those societies that operate very little, if at all, with these terms. By looking for the way that these Western terms have been translated (which is the case for all the societies studied here), for the use that is made of these translated terms as well as for other terms or binaries that they have either replaced or alongside which they operate, we open windows into the discourses concerned with religion (or anything resembling it) and its respective place in a given society. Thus, our investigations are not confined to situations and developments which were defined by contemporaries as being religious or secular, but we feel free to describe situations in these terms according to our own historical and systematic interests.

In other words, the terms 'religion' and 'the secular', though derived from the object-language of certain historically defined religious discourses, are used here as meta-language to grasp and describe both these discourses and others that have employed different terminology. Though the terminological tension that we experience here poses a methodological problem, this problem is rooted in precisely the episode of history on which we are focussing, and shared, unavoidably, by all scholarship dealing with phenomena of globalization and modernity in a comparative way. 'Modernity' causes so much debate because of its two-fold dialectic complexity: It is both a Western export, forced upon civilizations world-wide in the wake of imperialism, *and* a result of entangled history in which the West was remodelled as much as other parts of the world; again, it is shaped both by the globalization of Western patterns *and* by their unique appropriation, re-configuration, and combination with indigenous patterns of multiple modernities. These dialectics inevitably inform our study of religious re-configurations as well: While we start by observing the concepts of 'religion' and 'the secular' as Western exports, we do not aim at mapping a history of uniform influences but at observing variations and particularities; and we assume that this terminology—and the conceptualization of the world that is expressed by it—is not of European ownership, but originated as a result of the European encounter with other, and especially with Asian, cultures in the course of its colonialist expansion.

This assumption is thrown into historical relief, and its plausibility demonstrated, in the first chapter of the book, which is devoted to the considerable influence exercised by the awareness of Eastern cultures, and especially of Confucianism as an ethico-political doctrine, on the Christian discourses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Roetz). Without these influences the religious discourse of authors such as Voltaire would never have taken such a hostile attitude to Christianity as in fact it did. But the influence went far beyond the group of inner-Christian opponents to Christian orthodoxies: It promoted the semantic extension of 'religion' from a highly normative concept for the only true worship of God to a more general concept for religious cults of equal value. This trend went along with the emergence of a concept of the 'secular', which identified a political and social sphere of religious coexistence and toleration. Some decades later the radicalized concepts of 'religion' and 'secularity' were exported from Europe to the East, in most cases by creating new autochthonous notions on the basis of older elements (Chen, Jang, Krämer, Isomae). Transported as much by Eastern travellers to Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century as by Christian missionaries and merchants going to China, Korea and Japan, these concepts had considerable influence on East Asia's Westernization and modernization. Hence, the ideas of 'religion' and 'secularity' may be called the products of a transportation of ideas in both directions (Roetz).

Looking at the semantic history of secularization also teaches us not to forget the degree to which the West was transformed by the very same processes through which it became a transformative power, and how recent some of the formations are that we now regard as constitutive of Western modernity. Starting with the studies on the French and German concepts of secularity (*laïcité*, *Weltlichkeit*), it becomes very clear that 'secularity' and 'secularization' are historically young concepts. While having been applied retrospectively to earlier periods of history, they were introduced to the religious-political discourse no earlier than the middle of the nineteenth century (Hölscher, LeGrand), the conceptual prehistory going back to the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century notwithstanding (Roetz). The linguistic evidence—overlooked by many studies on secularization—demonstrates that only from the mid-nineteenth century onwards were 'secularity' and 'secularization' used as conceptual means of arguing for or against the religious disenchantment of the modern world. It is only from then on that the concepts of 'secularism' and 'secularization' began to shape the understanding of the place of religion in society, the former bringing into focus belief systems outside and antagonist to religions, the

latter the shrinking frame of reference for religion in the process of differentiation of social spheres.

Given that the religious/secular divide was such a recent and by no means uniform phenomenon in Western countries, that its implementation was still under way and its conceptualization contested, there is little wonder that the way it made its effects felt in the various regions and cultures that came under the sway of Western imperialism differed greatly from place to place. And it is not surprising that the notions formed and the uses made of the social realities behind these concepts had their own, often contradictory, trajectories in each of these places. Many of these differences can be related to the particular religious situation of the societies in question, as well as to their specific perception of the reasons for Western dominance. In the Islamic world, where the model of 'religion' represented by Christianity carried little surprise and the power of religion in society was very much a given, 'secularization' became the main issue of debate, appearing to some as a threat, but to many as the key to Western success and the most promising road to modernity and renewal of state power. In religiously pluralistic East Asia, on the contrary, where Christianity had been associated with a different form of civilization and (at least mercantile) intrusion since its (re-)introduction in the sixteenth century, what caught the imagination of intellectuals was the Christianity-derived concept of 'religion'. Especially after the Opium Wars in China, when missionary activities were often backed by Western powers, it was the interdependence of religion and the state rather than their separation that seemed to guarantee a nation's strength and progress. Freedom of religion and the religion-secularity divide were regarded as secondary ingredients in the mix of factors driving modernization. They appeared to some as relevant only to Europe with its pope and its religious wars. Adaptations of the new model of the state-religion relationship to this demand of Western constitutionalism could take rather awkward forms (Krämer). With 'science' becoming the new catch-word from the early twentieth century onwards, religion lost some of its appeal, but continued to appear to some as a panacea against the threat of loss of state sovereignty, which as a result perpetuated earlier movements to religionize Confucianism (Chen, Jang).

Even stronger was the influence of the Western concepts on countries and regions under direct European colonial rule, such as Iran and India. Just as they adopted the liberal constitutional separation of the 'religious' and the 'secular' sphere in the late nineteenth century, so they also echoed the European disputes about secularism und religious hegemony in the

early twentieth century (Mozzafari, Bretfeld). But needless to say, here, too, the religious tradition of these countries shaped their adaptation of the European import: The example of Turkey and Israel demonstrate particularly well how the European concepts which were first adopted for nation building soon turned into semantic tools for establishing autochthonous models of secularity. In Turkey from the 1920s onwards the fundamental principle of *laïcité* was observed only as far as the national and political interests were concerned (Lapidot). In Israel the old Jewish semantic tradition of *dat* (law) and *hiloni* ('stranger') began to undermine the imported European distinction of religion and secularity (Fischer).

The comparative, historical and semantic perspective on the concepts of 'religion', 'secularity' and 'secularization' that this volume attempts to achieve thus allows us to see that the concepts of 'secularity' and 'secularization' are far from being based on Christianity alone. While it is true that they first emerged in mid-nineteenth century Christian Europe, their evolvment is best seen as one of the developments produced by Europe's opening up, in the course of its expansion, to non-European and non-Christian influences, developments which then in turn soon gained significance for other parts of the world. Even more importantly, they are offshoots of modern societies, with only limited roots in the discourse of ancient and medieval Christianity. For in Christian discourse, up to the mid-nineteenth century the dichotomy 'religious' and 'secular' was still part of an inner-religious semantic structure which can be grasped equally well or better by the binary of the 'spiritual' and the 'temporal': The concepts stood for a kind of religious-political division between the eternal concerns of the church and the temporal concerns of state and society.

In the same vein, in non-European (esp. non-monotheistic) cultures the adaptation of the Western concept of differentiated religion, and of the notions of secularity that went with it, was part and parcel of an encompassing process of re-configuring society, often called modernization, in which the sources of legitimation of power as well as of social consensus had to be redefined. Taking up the concepts of (differentiated) 'religion' and 'secularization' was part of a larger epistemic restructuring that responded to the needs of a more complex and more interdependent age. To the degree to which these developments were triggered by encroaching Western power, they were usually understood as Westernization, and even today, any discourse on secularization tends to have implications concerning the cultural self-positioning vis-a-vis the West. Awareness of the plurality at the roots and the diversity of the development of this

concept, as made possible by the synopsis of the articles in this volume, might help to remedy this situation.

By providing these insights, the volume presented here may be able to add three methodological aspects to the international debate on religion and secularization: First, the value of taking into account the wide range and historical variability of national and cultural models of secularization in an intercultural comparison; second, the necessity and potential of a conceptual history approach, which is able to clarify our own concepts as much as their fluctuating meanings in different historical and cultural contexts; and third, the importance of focussing on the transformations that concepts undergo during transport and exchange, on the trajectory of their own that they acquire by travelling from one part of the world to another, entering different political debates and epistemic horizons. Globalized secularization means nothing other than diversified secularization.