

# Can Secularisation be Universal? [A Postmodernist Conspectus]

Written by Pia Muzaffar

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PIA MUZAFFAR, FEB 3 2008

### I. The Resurrection of Religiosity

It is a trite but commonplace observation that we are witnessing a resurgence in religion and religious fundamentalism; that the secularist progression envisaged by linear models of social development has not come to fruition. This essay seeks both to contest the notion that secularisation can be seen as a universal or absolute process and, further, to problematise certain critical approaches which understand 'religion' as a site of autonomy and resistance against these totalising discourses. Thus I first briefly outline the historically specific processes by which 'secularism' as a definitive social condition can be said to have arisen, in order to contextualise universalising claims. I then go on to argue that even certain 'postmodern' approaches can fail to move beyond Eurocentric assumptions about individual rights, social criticism and dissent, and the nature of 'religion' and its relationship to 'society'; that in fact such analyses retain the *telos* implicit in liberal or Enlightenment conceptions of human development and social change.

### II. Historical Specificity and Religious Decline in the West

European secularisation has long been understood as the crystallisation of multiple material processes and ideological transformations taking place in the specific context of post-Reformation Western Europe. For Weber (1930), an important transformation in the conception of the individual/society relationship could be located in ascetic Protestantism's rejection of the passion and ritual associated with Catholicism, and its construction of the individual as one who enjoys a personal and somewhat contractual relationship with God unmediated by church or clergy. And, as Marx recognised (1974, vol. I:83), this created conditions particularly conducive for the emergence of market capitalism, characterised by rational, formally free and equal individuals engaging in contractual relations without the socially binding obligations of feudalism. Turner, though differentiating between different strands of 'individualism' – namely, the "pessimistic" Calvinist kind and the more optimistic, rationalist kind characteristic of Enlightenment thought and early political economy – identifies in both a "critical and dissenting character... the dissent of Protestants from Catholicism and the dissent of the bourgeoisie from feudal relations of property" (1991:161;171). This liberal notion of public criticism as a right of the free individual relies, furthermore, on a particular conception of the state as a rational-legal sovereign sphere detached from the destabilising consequences of religious difference and conflict in the *civil* sphere, in which rational criticism in the form of belief and opinion can occur (Asad 1993:202-7).

The specificity of this experience is well illustrated by one example in which 'secularisation' and all it connotes is patently inappropriate in understanding the relationship between religion, society and the individual. In contemporary Saudi Arabia (commonly characterised as a highly traditionalist or fundamentalist society) there exists a well-

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established form of social criticism which is substantially different from the Kantian understanding of public dissent as an individual right and, significantly, as something essentially oppositional (Asad 1993:212-5). In the Saudi context, 'civil society' is not a neutral, value-free sphere but innately Islamic, and government is legitimate (*shar'iyya*), but its legitimacy is bound up with certain implications of the concept of *ash-shari'a* – specifically, with a notion of duty and "divinely sanctioned law-and-morality" (1993:212). The Muslim is not sovereign, but "an individual inhabiting the moral space shared by all who are bound together by God (the *umma*)" (1993:219): thus social criticism is better characterised as advice (*nasiha*), and is not so much a 'right' as a duty, one which is institutionalised and inherent in the government's very existence.

Clearly, then, it was a *unique configuration* of factors including (though not limited to) the development of Enlightenment ideals, political liberalism and state rationalisation, and the advance of modern market capitalism, which together produced the particular conditions under which economy, politics and religion were separated into the pristine spheres we understand as constituting the secular society. 'Religion' took on its peculiarly modern definition as something private, characterised ultimately by belief, and the public domain of civil society became a neutral space, an overriding framework of secular, rational objectivity. "[M]edieval religion was a great cloak... Once it became an individual affair, it lost its all-embracing capacity and became one among other apparently equal considerations" (Dumont 1971:32). Furthermore, this separation of religion from politics made it possible to construct the former as a "transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon" (Asad 1993:28). This concept of 'Natural Religion', which could be clearly differentiated from the emerging knowledge structure of natural science (and thus be acceptable to it), permitted religion to be defined as consisting of a set of beliefs, ethics and practices and therefore something essentially comparable and common to all societies (1993:40-1) – a reductionist "lowest common denominator" (Sykes 1975:195) understanding of religion. Thus, despite the enormous flaws in a universalist conception of the secularisation process, religion itself was constructed as a monolithic category regardless of context. This then permits ethnocentric and reductionist explanations of contemporary social processes which define religiosity against what it is not – as *nonmodern*, *non-Western*, *non liberal*, *nonrational* – and therefore the result of having 'failed' to implement conditions conducive to secularisation. Such 'explanations' demonstrate the "Europeans' ability again and again to insinuate themselves into the preexisting political, religious, even psychic structures of the natives and to turn those structures to their advantage..." (Greenblatt 1980:227).

### III. History Making and Historical Time [A Critique of the Critique]

Within less mainstream discourses, of course, the notion that secularisation/ modernisation is universal or replicable is presently very unfashionable. Critical approaches emphasise the totalising force of Western, rationalist knowledge; of cultural imperialism, bound up with material domination and the globalising "modern juggernaut" (Sahlins 1988:4). It is claimed that the "postmodern condition" in which the world now finds itself, characterised by "widespread, destabilising change" (Haynes 1997:715;725), and its disillusionment with grand narratives like secularisation and myths of universal progress, is causing a resurgence of religion as a 'local' strategy of contestation, a rational reaction against 'modernity' and 'Westernisation'. Postmodernism – and particularly postcolonialism – "encourages the rejection of centres and systems, engenders the growth of local identity, makes available information and thus teaches people to demand their rights... fosters ideas of freedom and eclecticism, [and] challenges the state" (Ahmed 1992:129). I want to argue, however, that these concerns, though well-intentioned, are ultimately misplaced. It is possible to expose in them a latent *telos* centred around assumptions about the relationship between society, religion and the individual, and about agency, progression, and the creation of history: assumptions which remain rooted in a

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highly ethnocentric and peculiarly universalising narrative of human development and social change.

A Nietzschean concept of genealogy (Foucault 1987), considering how truths are constructed and solidified through a gradual, dynamic process of inclusion and exclusion – producing ‘histories’ – is instructive here, since notions of secularisation and progress are rooted in specific understandings of history and historical time. “[H]ow, by way of what practices, are structures of history produced, differentiated, reified and transformed?” (Ashley 1987:409) Advocating ‘local’ discourses and ‘local’ autonomy merely reinforces the idea that Europe or the West constitutes the site where universal history is produced, and other (local) sites can either permit themselves to be incorporated – reproducing this discourse – or seek to ‘make their own histories’. The vacuity of this relativism belies a more subtle process by which one conception of history is translated onto another site: it is the very concept of *history as progress* which must be interrogated. Jahn (2000) locates a formative moment in the Europeans’ encounter with the Amerindians, whose utter Otherness presented Christian theology with a problem: how to reconcile the essential humanity of all men with the “state of nature” with which they were now confronted? This was solved, Jahn argues, by the creation of a progressivist hierarchy of human societies in which some were more advanced than others – a “dual modality of historical time... events as at once contemporaneous and noncontemporaneous” (Koselleck 1988:249). Furthermore, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Christian linear salvational teleology came together with secular rational prediction to produce the peculiarly modern concept of progress (Koselleck 1988:17); and the Calvinist emphasis on “good works” contributed to the idea that man makes his own history (Weber 1930:xiii).

This thread, though just as historically and culturally specific as the secularisation thesis, can be seen to run right through subalternist or poststructuralist efforts which couple ‘agency’ and ‘subjectivity’ in the essentialist-liberal-humanist tradition (O’Hanlon 1988), implying that agency – to act effectively in the world, to act purposively and autonomously, to ‘make one’s own history’ – necessitates a consciousness of the ‘self’ *contra* knowledge structures and systems (Asad 1993:15-6). Agency cannot produce stasis; history making is emancipatory, active, self-consciously dynamic. Religion is therefore a strategy by which to make one’s own history which, even if historical and contextualized (unlike characterisations discussed above), remains rooted in these particularist notions of history making and historical time. There is no space here for an alternative conception of history making. In Islam, however, the perfect moral/social/political foundation already exists; it has already been revealed. So this peculiar notion that humanity progresses, that man makes his own history, that men move further and further from the binds of material and cultural domination, “accelerating forward into an open future” (Asad 1993:18), that man *owns himself*, that he *as an individual* possesses certain rights – none of this can be meaningful to the Muslim whose self-consciousness is one not of self-ownership, nor one constituted by an individualistic opposition to the social structures in which she is embedded, but rather a consciousness of her status as ‘slave’ to God, as “indissolubly bound to God” (Asad 1993:221): the Muslim strives not to progress according to some external, lineal, rationalised model of development; but rather to engage in the continuing process of self-realisation. “Man is a ‘choice’, a struggle, a constant becoming. He is an infinite migration, a migration within himself, from clay to God; he is a migrant within his own soul” (Shariati 1979:93).

In summary, there is a clearly a need to relativise understandings of religion in different societies if we are to avoid ahistorical claims about the universality of secularisation and the singularity of ‘modernity’. However, many ostensibly critical – or ‘postmodern’ – approaches remain mired in thoroughly ‘modern’ conceptualisations of historical time, and therefore fail to divest themselves of the progressivist frameworks of a lingering Eurocentric heritage.

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false consciousness or ideology and, similarly, for Geertz religion is a means by which rational beings can account for and give meaning to “irrationalities” such as “ignorance, pain and injustice” (1973:108). This ahistorical and functionalist view even prevails in contemporary accounts: Haynes (1997:713) asserts that “secularisation, involving social differentiation, societalisation and rationalisation, occurs except when religion finds or retains work to do other than relating people to the supernatural”. See also Keddie (1998).

<![if !supportFootnotes]->[2]<![endif]-> Note the disdain with which one writer refers to a characteristically ‘irrational’ and reactionary Islamicism: ‘Everything from the inflow of ever-larger quantities of Western consumer goods to changes in feminine dress and behaviour, often *resented by traditionalist men*, to Western films and TV is *seen as part of a veritable plot to undermine local ways* and products and to make of third world men and women consumers of the least useful and most degrading of Western imports and customs...’ (Keddie 1982:276; emphasis added)

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