

Looking Back to See Forward: Romanticism, Religion and the Secular in Modernity

Written by Mark Cladis

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MARK CLADIS, SEP 21 2015

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Lessons from the Romantics

Santayana famously warned, 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.' What of those who cannot learn from the past failures of theories of secularisation? In this article, I urge that we learn from the past, note the limits of past theories of secularisation as applied to Romanticism, and suggest some helpful way to rethink religion and the secular in the twenty-first century.

As a scholar in the academic study of religion, I often investigate the largely unexamined religious backgrounds, perspectives and practices of what are otherwise considered secular thinkers, discourse and institutions. My current research focuses on the central democratic, religious and environmental perspectives and practices that informed one another in eighteenth and nineteenth-century British Romantic literature and its subsequent and sustained legacies in America. This investigation employs a triscopic approach: a methodology that involves careful attention to the three-way intersection of democracy, religion and the environment. In most accounts of British Romanticism, the religious aspects of Romanticism (Protestant and Catholic, orthodox and heterodox, deistic and pantheistic) are neglected, or, if included, are narrativised as belonging to a process of secularisation. Romantic portrayals of religion are either belittled or privatised. While it is expedient to claim that British Romantics eschewed religion in lieu of secularised thought, it is more accurate to say that they often dissociated religion—here understood as normative beliefs, practices and perspectives about the divine—from strictly denominational church dogmatics and politics, and engaged religion, broadly understood, in the service of progressive social and environmental aims—both national and global. By applying an interpretive lens that acknowledges the religious traditions that in fact permeated British Romanticism, we gain insight into not only its dynamic religious dimensions but also its political, economic and environmental dimensions.

Although scholars, highly influenced by secularisation theories, routinely assumed that religion was waning during the height of British Romanticism (roughly 1800–1860), it turns out that participation in religious institutions was actually increasing during this time. More importantly, close readings of the salient texts of many if not most of the Romantic authors manifest powerful religious images and themes. Only an opaque lens, such as a prior interpretive commitment to secularisation and its worldview, would obscure sight of such palpable religiosity. This is not to claim, of course, that all Romantic texts look alike or have the same commitment to or notion of religion. It is to claim, however, that our theories of secularisation have often prevented more nuanced readings. Not only did scholars neglect the (often radically progressive) religious beliefs and commitments that were evident in many texts; they also failed to note how Romantic literary production was itself understood as a religious *practice*. Wordsworth's *Prelude*, for example, or Coleridge's 'Religious Musings' were understood as a form of religious (and political) practice that shaped author and reader alike. The early compositions of Wordsworth and Coleridge were religiously, politically and

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environmentally progressive, and the three—the religious, the political and the ecological—augmented and supported each other.

Religion, then, contributed importantly to both the content and the expression of many Romantic *public* visions. Many Romantic authors identified with dissenting, Christian traditions that put them at odds with the religious and political establishment of the day. The expression of their radical religious views was understood as political stances and practices and hence they were frequently deemed enemies of the state and suffered accordingly. Theologically, they tended to advance a theology that was part panentheistic, part Christian orthodoxy. Spirit, it was commonly held, is infused throughout nature, and to such an extent that it becomes practically impossible to know where ‘spirit’ ends and nature begins. And social protest, as I have said, was understood as a religious practice. The poetic, religious task of many Romantic authors was to offer vivid, detailed descriptions of the horrors of war, poverty and various unjust social policies, thereby inspiring the appropriate human emotions and sympathy in otherwise prejudicial

Secularism in Modernity

‘Religion’, as a category, was certainly being transformed during the Romantic era, as was the concept of ‘the secular’ and the active, democratic ‘citizen’. Religion, politics and the secular were not (and are not) stagnant terms. This article is not the place to give a detailed account of such changes during the Romantic era, but I hope that I have said enough about religion and Romanticism to show that our past theories of secularisation have not served us well and that our current discussions of religion and the secular in modernity could benefit from more nuanced accounts of each of the key terms, religion and the secular. In the remainder of this chapter, then, I wish to reflect broadly on these key terms, especially on ‘the secular’. For the sake of expedience and candour, I will identify what I consider to be the good, the bad and the ugly notions of ‘the secular’. The context for my reflections is my own political and cultural home, namely, that of the US: a deeply and diversely religious society that struggles with how to navigate differences, religious, political and otherwise. I believe that my reflections, however contextualised, can be usefully extrapolated to other, similar cultural, political contexts.

Secularism: Good Sense

Secularism in the good sense is characterised by three ideal features: 1) when participating in the public and political realms, citizens do not normally assume that others necessarily share their religious perspectives or perspectives on religion; 2) citizens do not treat religious perspectives in public debate as a special case subject to special exclusion or special privilege; and 3) government neither officially sponsors nor hinders religion, upholding the First Amendment. The first two features of secularism (in the good sense) pertain to constraints on citizens, and the third on government.

The first constraint on citizens amounts to an acknowledgment that we live in a pluralistic society and that we therefore should not assume that everyone shares our perspectives, whether, for example, those perspectives be religious or anti-religious.[1] The second constraint acknowledges that fellow citizens are free to bring to democratic deliberation whatever perspectives they deem appropriate, provided that they do so in such a way so as to honour the first constraint. A premise here is that all voices are to be heard and none are initially to be treated as special, subject to exclusion or privilege. I add the qualifier, initially, to indicate that over time a particularly insightful voice can gain authority and hence in some sense be deemed ‘special’—that is, especially knowledgeable and helpful. Conversely, a consistently unreasonable or foolish voice can eventually be deemed poorly informed or worse. Religious perspectives, then, are treated just like any other more or less comprehensive views—such as those of Marxism, pragmatism, secular humanism or hedonism.

When a perspective (religious or otherwise) is offered in public debate, citizens speak and listen—or write and read—in a distinct manner that acknowledges the constraints of secularism. This distinctive manner entails, among other things, the principle of non-privileging and the principle of focused attention. The first principle pertains primarily to the speaker, the second to the listener. The speaker, understanding that no assumptions can be made about the comprehensive views of her fellow citizens, will not privilege her speech—that is to say, will not expect all to deem it self-evidently true and without need of justification. Rather, she will attempt to offer arguments and reasons

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in such a way that will garner some support from or will appeal to a diverse audience. Due to no fault of her own or her audience, she may not be successful. Persuasion, even when advancing good ideas, is not guaranteed because 'public reason' or an overlapping consensus does not always favour every good perspective or idea.

Secularism in the good sense, then, admits but does not privilege religious perspectives or reasons into democratic deliberation. In practice, this principle of non-privileging often amounts to a constraint on the interlocutor offering the religious reason or perspective. The *principle of focused attention*, in contrast, applies primarily to the listeners. When religious reasons are offered in democratic debate, listeners ought to focus on the particular issue at hand and avoid introducing negative global judgments on religion in general or on a particular religion associated with the offered religious reason. This recommendation to avoid negative global judgments is not a form of religious apologetics. Such global judgments are rarely productive or satisfying. To disparage or to dismiss out of hand an entire tradition such as Hinduism or Christianity (or Marxism or pragmatism, for that matter) entails caricatures or at the very least essentialising. The principle of focused attention does not, of course, require that one accepts as compelling any offered religious reasons or the religious traditions to which the reasons may be connected. It simply requires that, whenever possible, the focus of the conversation or debate remain on the specific issues at hand. This principle of focused attention safeguards against dismissing or deriding an interlocutor simply on the basis of his or her religious identity.

Both principles are supported by and belong to a larger set of skills and virtues associated with excellence in the practice of democratic, public engagement. Such virtues include but are not limited to attentiveness, discretion, humility and sensitivity to audience, as well as courage, honesty and judgment.[2] Religious perspectives in public debate do not uniquely or especially call for the need of public engagement virtues. These skills and virtues would dissuade throwing dogmatically one's beliefs into the faces of others. But here the vice and the corresponding virtue do not necessarily run along religious versus nonreligious lines. A non-religious Marxist, feminist or environmentalist may be as likely to fail to exhibit the appropriate virtues as, say, a Christian or a Buddhist.

Secularism seeks to uphold both the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment: to prohibit government from officially funding or otherwise sponsoring religion and to guarantee the free exercise of religion. This commitment to the First Amendment is the third ideal feature of secularism in the good sense. Secularism seeks to protect citizens from all manner of theocracy (the imposition of religion) as well as to safeguard citizens' liberty of conscience (including the free exercise of religion or atheism). The First Amendment is a legal expression of a central cultural aspiration of secularism, namely, that each citizen be treated with dignity and respect regardless of their religious perspectives and perspectives on religion. To treat a fellow citizen with dignity and respect does not require agreement with a citizen's views, but it does require that one assumes (at least initially) that the citizen, whether religious or non-religious, is reasonable and deserves a 'hearing'. The First Amendment, then, grants rights with respect to religion (the prohibition of religious coercion and protection of religious expression); and secularism, in turn, envisions and aspires to cultural practices that are informed by and that support the First Amendment.

Secularism: Bad Sense

Secularism in the bad sense is characterised by three positions: it holds that 1) religion is a discrete, sui generis phenomenon; 2) religion is not self-critical or open to critique and exchange (because, it is held, religion is radically subjective or based on dogmatic authority or both); and therefore 3) religious citizens can and should accept the privatisation of religion, that is, they should keep their religion out of politics. These three positions presuppose a narrow, parochial view of religion that is unconvincing in the face of actual, lived religion. Generally speaking, religion is a culturally complex, historical institution that cannot be separated easily or radically from other institutions, whether they be moral, aesthetic, economic or political. Generally, religions are dynamic and change in response to and in dialogue with individuals, communities, events and developments both within and outside a given religious tradition. Generally, religion is a pervasive aspect of a person's identity, an aspect that both informs and is informed by other aspects of one's identity, including one's various beliefs, ideals, authorities, attitudes and practices—all of which are embedded in and respond to local, national and global sociohistorical and physical circumstances.

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The good and useful ways that religion can be generalised, then, undermine the narrow, parochial way that religion is understood by secularism in the bad sense. The social history of the narrow, parochial view is complex. One explanatory narrative points to various eighteenth and nineteenth-century German, French, and British Enlightenment and Romantic thinkers who (supposedly) promoted the view that religion is ultimately inward, subjective, and private. Another explanatory narrative argues that the narrow, parochial way of conceiving religion was (supposedly) strategically forged at a time when it was tactical for European nations to conceive of religion as a discrete, private arena separate from the state and from science. Jointly, these explanatory narratives suggest that in modernity it was convenient for many European constituencies to establish a pact of nonaggression between 'religion' and 'the secular'—the new emerging privatised view of religion would not interfere with politics and science, and the new emerging laicised view of the secular would not interfere with religion.

Insofar as these accounts are correct, secularism in the bad sense fails to be self-reflective and investigate the ways in which it operates with (and helped to create) a concept of religion that has little traction with actual lived religion. This is bad enough. But secularism in the bad sense becomes all the worse when governments attempt to enforce the narrow, parochial view of religion. It can be plausibly argued that US foreign policy sponsors good religion abroad, namely, religion that has been suitably reformed—that is, privatised.[3] Secularism in the bad sense, then, has fashioned a notion of religion that has little relation to how most religion is lived, and now governments such as the US are attempting to impose and normalise this fanciful view of religion.

Secularism: Ugly Sense

It is one thing to attempt to privatise religion for the sake of a pact of non-aggression; some among the religious themselves have contributed to the pact. It is another thing to promote aggressively the view that religion is a destructive, superstitious relic of the past that has no place in modernity. In this view, secularism is the modern age of humans enlightened and freed from the shackles of religion. Secularism is the essence of modernity and religion is the antithesis of all that is modern. This is the ugly sense of secularism.

Its origins may be innocent enough, but its continuing effects are menacing. Theories of secularisation supported the view that religion was increasingly an anomaly in modernity and was hence retrograde; proponents of secularisation wished to protect progress and save the world from backsliding into an inferior, religious state. The declension theories, however, turned out to be largely wrong, and yet the hope for secularisation persisted among many. Secularists of this sort continue to maintain that religion is the antithesis of modernity and enlightened humanity. They would like to keep religion not only out of politics but off the planet as well. And if you object to their view, you yourself risk being branded as a sympathiser with the unenlightened barbarians. In the meantime, the world's abundant and diverse religious populations are doing the things that everyone else in modernity is doing—building skyscrapers, farming, investing in the market, designing computers, raising children, writing books, cooking, and teaching in universities. Their very presence in the world poses a mystery to these secularists. For, given the unmitigated evil that (in their view) accompanies religion, how can religion persist in modernity? Even if Marx, Freud, Tylor and Durkheim provided suitable explanations for the *origin* of religion, there appears to be no accounting for its *persistence*. Perhaps cognitive science will do better. Meanwhile, the religious populations are stigmatised—implicitly or explicitly—by these secularists, and religious resentment is growing all around us.

Religion, the Secular and Modernity

My hope is that having identified secularism in the good, bad, and ugly senses, we can approach more judiciously issues pertaining to religion, politics and the secular in the twenty-first century. At the heart of my *normative view* of secularism in the good sense is a commitment to honour diversity in our public and political life and a reasonable hope that from such diversity comes promising outcomes. This commitment and hope evinces J. S. Mill's conviction that 'only through diversity of opinion is there, in the existing state of human intellect, a chance of fair play to all sides of the truth'.[4]

In addition to this normative conclusion, I also hope that my reflections have suggested that we revise our *empirical narratives* of the birth of modernity. At the beginning of modernity we see not the absence of religion but its

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abundance—and an abundance of modern developments for how to accommodate it, even while those very developments were often being informed by religion. This should tell us something of significance about ourselves and about contemporary struggles to achieve democratic societies. Modernity—for all its multiplicity—has for the most part engaged with, wrestled with and been informed by religion, in one form or another. My initial comments on religion and Romanticism were intended to illustrate this point. The pervasive religious aspects of Romanticism demonstrate the failure of previous theories of secularisation. Modernity has never been a monolithic intellectual, cultural force antithetical to religious belief and practice. Religion informed a central chapter of modernity, namely the Romantic era, and to this day religion continues to shape the identity of individuals in their public and their private lives. It is, then, not much of a stretch to claim that religion continues to shape modernity. Our theories of the secular and our democratic institutions need to acknowledge this pervasive religious presence.

Notes

[1] On this feature of secularism, see Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 93 and 98.

[2] For an excellent discussion on democratic virtues—‘practical wisdom and tact’— in public engagement, see Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, pp. 85-86.

[3] For a convincing version of this argument, see Saba Mahmood’s ‘Religious Reasons and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?’ *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), pp 64-100.

[4] J. S. Mill, *‘On Liberty’ and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 49.

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