

# 'Nations under God': Problems of Meaning in Contemporary Rhetoric

Written by Timothy Fitzgerald

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TIMOTHY FITZGERALD, DEC 22 2015

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Given that so much of the media is, understandably, preoccupied at this historical moment with the turbulence occurring in states with large Muslim populations, many readers will immediately if not exclusively think of 'Islam'. The expression, 'nations under God', immediately conveys vivid images that the reader might involuntarily imagine: TV images of 'the Middle East' full of sand and violence; 'failed states'—Iraq, Libya, Iran, Egypt, Palestine and Syria; incessant turbulence and war; of presumably oppressed women wrapped in the allegedly dehumanising burqa; and of strange, bearded men shouting 'Allah' while shooting guns.[1]

I am not saying that these images are necessarily confined to Islamic contexts. They arguably represent a more basic discourse that legitimates rational liberal modernity against all perceived forms of backwardness and irrational barbarity. Whether the topic is occasioned by Muslim or some other militancy, there is a discourse on 'religion' or 'faith' and 'its' propensity to irrational violence, a discourse that tacitly constructs our rational, liberal civility compared to their medieval barbarity, and our secular, logical reasonableness compared to their wild inability to settle their differences through negotiation, free market relations and respect for private property.[2] Whereas we are modest, peace loving and only reluctantly violent, they are lost in superstition and the authors of their own misery.

Liberal journalists and academics, in our largely sincere attempts at factual reportage, tend unconsciously to reproduce these ancient 'us and them' narratives. Recently, such a wide and deep stream of Europhone media propaganda received stimulation by the 'revival' of the 'medieval Caliphate' by a group called ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). The idea that the contemporary declaration of a new caliphate straddling the Iraq-Syria border is a 'medieval revival' feeds into the wider discourse sketched above. In Europhone discourse, the medieval is the pre-modern, and the opposition between the modern and the medieval, like that between modernity and tradition, is a conceit that derives from the European enlightenment assumption. We are modern and progressive; they are traditional, medieval and backward.

But this self-serving presumption about the progress of nations is an illusion that has become transformed by various rhetorical devices into common sense reality. There is no neutral observational data from which we can infer that Euro-American ideas, goals or policies represent progress or enlightenment. It is as much an unfounded belief or act of faith as the Millenarian belief in the second coming.

This problem of the habitual reproduction of collective self-delusion is not confined to International Relations (IR). 'Nations', 'God', 'Geopolitics' and 'Faith' are all typically deployed in academic discourse and public rhetoric as though their meanings are self-evident, universal and ahistorical. This problem stems in part from the Enlightenment assumption that European secular rationality, classification systems, and science of political economy are (or ambiguously *ought to be*) universal in their application. Arguably this kind of claim to universal truth already existed in both Catholic and Protestant discourses and self-representations, exemplified in the belief that pagan peoples must

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be converted to save their souls and teach them proper governance and how to be civilised. Such a disposition seems to have found its way into the narrative of Euro-American enlightenment and progress.

Colonial and neo-colonial power has always been as much about cognitive and linguistic imposition as military. In the interests of global communication, it might be held that all languages ought to be translatable into a universal language, which just happens to be European. But the 'just happens to be' is itself part of our problem.

Arguably, however, there is also a more general process at work. There is a tendency for abstract categories with a very general application to become attributed with misplaced concreteness, transformed into reifications, things that seem to exist objectively beyond their conventional (and contested) deployment. Imaginaries that are useful to think with become transmuted into common sense reality that it is eccentric or even irresponsible to question. While we need general categories to think with, some are invested with a priority that reflects the dominant interests of powerful institutions and classes. The literate male elites that governed the Roman Catholic Church for centuries have invested specific concepts with huge importance, and these have been policed and violations punished. This theme can presumably be extended widely and globally, because all power formations need to appear legitimate to those with and to those without power. Hegemonic imaginaries in all their varieties are presumably identifiable in situations of actual or potential conflicts of interest. We can describe this tendency as the transformation of imagined orders of power into the self-evidently real, of desired forms of domination into unquestionable legitimacy.

Categories that today sustain our own myths of the modern—such as the distinction between religion (either irrational or merely non-rational 'faith') and the nonreligious secular (rational science and realistic politics)—are policed by a range of agencies, not only the media, politicians and the academics, but also including constitutions and the courts. It is surely dangerous when foreign policy experts, diplomats and military leaders uncritically internalise our myths about what is good for everyone.

The problem with these general categories and their conscious or unconscious representation as neutral and universal goes well beyond International Relations. One can even find the problem in Edward Said's groundbreaking work, *Orientalism*, and the postcolonial and subalternist paradigms that it ably helped to generate. Said and postcolonial theorists hardly deconstruct secular reason in its dichotomous relation to religion, though this step seems perfectly compatible with their position and would represent a legitimate extension of their work.[3]

IR is a crucially important discipline, being concerned with global communications and understandings and having a fairly direct influence on the thinking of powerful agencies in the international arena. In this sense, IR is a potent agency for the reproduction of hegemonic discourse. In Althusser's terms, it is an ideological state apparatus. Yet an IR critical of the kind that will perhaps be welcomed in this book might contribute powerfully to its unravelling.

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To unravel hegemonic liberal discourse requires us to pay critical attention to the disguised ideological functions of some of our most widely deployed categories in their apparent innocence. We can begin in the title with the problematic term 'God' in the expression 'Nations under God'. This word, 'God', is not innocent and cannot provide us with a neutral category for describing or analysing anything. It is an empty signifier that acts as the binary opposite of 'the world', which is also a metaphysical imaginary with no essential content. The rhetorical illusion that this binary generates is that, whereas God is purely imaginary, the world is empirically encountered in our everyday experience. However, we do not encounter 'the world' in our everyday experience. For 'the world' is *everything* in empirical experience, and therefore nothing.

This God-World binary oscillates along the same axis as 'the supernatural' in binary opposition to 'the natural', 'faith' in opposition to 'knowledge', and 'religion' in opposition to non-religious secular reason. One empty binary stands in for all the rest, protects the whole series from critical deconstruction, and holds us in circular reasoning.

In Anglo-American and Europhone Enlightenment discourse more widely, 'God' has historically been derived from Christian theology(ies). Within the history of Christian theology the meaning of 'God' has been contested bitterly

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between different confessional states and has entailed extreme punishment for what the powerful have considered heretical misrepresentation. We cannot know what it means to say that some person or group has belief in God, or belongs to a faith community, unless we are clear about the meaning of the key terms both for us and for them. The authoritative transmission of the true meaning of God understood as monotheistic, Trinitarian and Christological has been the central topic of many of the controversies throughout the history of the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and the various churches founded since the Reformation. The true meaning of God has required persuasive argumentation, creedal and liturgical definition and policing by various authorities, and does not offer a ready-made, neutral descriptive and analytical concept. In fact we could say that there is no true meaning of 'God' outside someone's (or some community's) assertion that there is.

I am not an expert on Islam, but my understanding is that for at least some important Muslim theologians, Trinitarian doctrine is polytheistic and thus an error, a kind of paganism. If this is the case, then Christian monotheistic belief in God (even if there were any one meaning attributable to these terms) would not be the same as what many Muslims understand by Allah.

Restriction of the use of the term God to monotheism or monotheistic systems does not solve the problem but further extends it, requiring an agreed understanding of what does and does not constitute a monotheistic idea—as distinct from a polytheistic, pantheistic, monistic, deistic or henotheistic one. Beliefs that the Catholic and Protestant authorities have deemed to be pantheistic, or those that deny the ontological identity of God the Father and God the Son, have been proscribed as pagan heresies. Given the history of bitter contestations around the term 'God', it is difficult to see how it could ever be considered useful as a neutral descriptive or analytical concept.

## God, Gods and Goddesses

Use of the term 'God' as if it is a neutral descriptive concept generates further problems when one considers the related term 'gods' and 'goddesses' in the plural. Even in Anglophone discourse, it is difficult if not impossible to know quite what these terms can mean. What is a god? So much can be included that the term is rendered vague at best and at worst incoherent. Virtually anything that someone or some group somewhere deems special, sacred or of deep significance in their life or lives can be and has been termed a god. Our liberal secular gods are self-interest, capital, private property and money.[4] Durkheim and many since him have argued that the Individual is the dominant modern 'sacred'. [5] These are all abstractions transformed into objects of faith, the hope of salvation and striving for generations of believers, collective imaginaries transposed into sacred realities and policed by various agencies. The illusions of Euro-American progress and development are other objects of devotion; so is the sacred nation-state and its territory.[6] However, where there is no limit to the content of a concept, and where 'religion' is used to encompass belief in a constitutionally 'secular' state, then the point of making the distinction at all seems to get lost and becomes questionable if not vacuous.

## Natural, Unnatural and Supernatural

One strategy that is evident in much contemporary rhetoric on God or gods has been to fall back on the distinctions between the 'supernatural' and the 'natural'. This move does not solve the problem, because nobody can claim to know definitely what either of these terms means or how to distinguish between them.

To take the term 'nature' or 'natural', one might ask what is *not* natural? There does seem to be a useful distinction to make between the natural and the artificial, for in many contexts it is important to know if there is a conscious human intention behind an occurrence. However, this would not typically be taken to mean that an artificial, consciously produced factor is *unnatural*. For biologists and other scientists (I suppose) everything is natural and can be explained in naturalistic terms. Even those scientists that accord a degree of explanatory autonomy to 'society' would be likely to give the final reduction to nature, understood as evolutionary adaptation for the purposes of survival and reproduction of the genes. But then in this case the term 'nature' and 'natural' appears to encompass everything that can be known.

To some people, homosexuality is an *unnatural* act, but this is a moral judgment and typically depends on a specific

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tradition of value judgments. On the other hand, a biologist might claim that homosexuality is natural and can be given a factual, naturalistic explanation—in terms of genetic inheritance, for example. Many biologists might be committed to the view that not only homosexuality but everything can be given a naturalistic interpretation, at least in principle. But if this is the case, then the terms 'natural' and 'naturalistic' seem to become less useful. If everything can in the final analysis be explained as part of nature, then why would a biologist or physicist need to refer at all to nature or the natural? What more is being tacitly asserted by the propensity to refer to nature?

Another person might answer the same question—what is not natural? —by claiming that some events are *supernatural*. But such a claim itself depends on a specific theory of the supernatural, often conveyed in a theological or philosophical system, and representing a specific and contested viewpoint. The meaning of terms like supernatural and natural, and the supposed relations between them, have been conceived in radically different ways in Thomist-Aristotelian, Deist, and empiricist or positivist systems respectively. In Thomist-Aristotelian thought, the supernatural is the ultimately real, and nature is encompassed at a lower level of creation. In modern secular empiricist and positivist thought, the secular is *essentially* different from the religious, as faith is to knowledge, etc.

Many peoples reportedly make no such distinction. Scholars in religious studies, anthropology, philosophy and the social sciences, in their attempts to formulate a neutral descriptive concept, have been unable to agree on the meaning of supernatural (as with so many other critical terms) and some have consequently played with alternatives such as superhuman. But such a move requires a clear understanding of what 'human' means and how far beyond is 'super'. In ordinary language a nuclear explosion could be described as a force that is superhuman, but we wouldn't typically describe it as beyond nature. If we cannot give a clear answer to the question about the meaning of supernatural, then the meaning of natural is also indeterminate.

When biologists and physicists deny the existence of God, how do they or we know what they are denying? Or what anyone is affirming by claiming such an existence? How to articulate a clear and universal distinction between the natural and supernatural is thus deeply problematic, and attempts to define God or gods in terms of supposed distinctions between natural and supernatural lead to an endless circularity.

## God, Gods and Problems of Translation

The concepts of God, gods and goddesses also involve accompanying problems of translation. Deployment of the term is often assumed without argument to indicate an essential meaning that can be translated into different formulations in non-European languages. Some well-known examples of this are the uses of God or gods/goddesses for Allah in Arabic, Yahweh in Hebrew, Brahman in Sanskrit, deva/devi and devata in Sanskrit, kami in Japanese, and so on.

Any intended or unintended importation of Christian, Trinitarian, monotheistic, incarnational meanings of 'God' into non-European and non-Christian contexts is likely to distort what other people want to say and believe and mean. If we take the Japanese term kami as one example of a non-European term that is frequently translated as god or gods, in different contexts it can refer to mythical persons, living human persons, ancestors, enlightened beings, shamanistic spirits, entities such as trees, waterfalls, mountains and rivers, the sun and the moon, and so on.[7] Much the same can be said about the vast range of what might be called deva and devi in India or South Asia more widely. Only sustained contextual analysis can hope to determine what meaning is being attributed to such multivalent terms in any specific and relevant situation.

It is highly problematic to attribute a belief in the supernatural to people who use such terms as kami or devi. Is *ganga*, the goddess who is also the river Ganges, supernatural or natural? One would need to enter complex debates between Hindu pilgrims and natural scientists (often the same people) about the meaning of a claim that the Ganges is a goddess—or what it would mean to call it part of nature. If we cannot find a clear meaning for supernatural in our own discourses, then the problem of translating the term and its supposed opposite 'natural' into Sanskrit (or Tamil, Chinese, Japanese, etc.) seems even more unlikely.

## Geopolitics of Faith

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The 'Geopolitics of Faith' referenced in the title may trip off the tongue in some circles, but even a cursory examination renders it hard to understand. Are people who are attributed by self-confessing secularists with 'faith' really in a different category from people with faith in secular reason? Is the secular science of economics based on knowledge rather than faith? Or is economics itself a form of faith, even when economists proclaim themselves to be scientists in an empirical field of research? Liberal faith in free markets, which are aspirations and not observable facts, is not essentially different from faith in the providential designs of the Christian triune Godhead. Yes, they are different, but they can both be legitimately described in ordinary language as acts of faith in unobservable postulates.

In much of today's public and academic rhetoric, faith is in binary opposition to knowledge, just as religion is to secular political economy. The people who charge others with having 'faith', or living in a faith community, also may want to tacitly convey that they themselves do not, because moderns don't live by faith but by science. This may not be an intended implication, but it can easily be read as such because it forms part of a discourse with a long history: they have religion but we have science, they are backward whereas we are progressive, they have the medieval caliphate but we have modern nation-states, they are not yet fully rational but we are. This faith-knowledge binary, when challenged or elaborated, is substituted by others such as religion and science, supernatural and natural, God and the real world, myth and fact, blind belief as against empirical observation. These binaries form a self-perpetuating, self-referential, and circular system that ensures the ongoing viability of the rhetorical construct in the face of any possible challenge. Thus, all of these terms are parasitic on each other in one way or another and are protected from exposure as empty postulates.

One of the effects of these binary, either-or formulations (it is either faith or it is knowledge, it is either religion or it is science, it is either their uncomprehending fanaticism or it is our reasonable and measured defence of our own interests) is to create essentialising distinctions. Yet it is hard to see in ordinary language how we could imagine any science without acts of faith being involved, or any belief that does not involve a claim to knowledge.

Arguably, all systems of thought are dependent on categories that are themselves not based on empirical observation. Has anyone actually seen a nation-state? Or a society? Or a self-regulating market? Or a religion? These are all abstract constructs with specific histories of emergence since the Enlightenment. What constitutes knowledge has been deeply contested historically, even among self-identifying scientists, and is the matter of unresolved epistemological debate. To assume that there is a world of faith, or several systems of faith, from which secular science or liberal political economy are excluded is to presume too much.

The term 'geopolitics' attempts (very roughly speaking) to link and analyse conflicts of power to specific geographical spaces and control of specific areas of land, air and sea. Maps are presumably important representations of geopolitical knowledge, but maps are contested, because there is an issue about who draws them and who controls their authoritative interpretation.

In the general formulation 'geopolitics', the term politics takes on a universal and ahistorical meaning such as power struggles or conflicts of interest. It strikes a tone of realism, facing the actual ongoing conditions of scarce resources in rational and pragmatic ways.

However, the public and academic discourse on politics enfolds beneath its appearance of universal neutrality a very different and more historically and ideologically specific nuance. The English term politics is not ahistorical or universal. It was invented as a consistent discourse in the seventeenth century to demarcate a domain of governance or 'political society' essentially distinct from 'religion'. In this myth, religion ought to be kept out of governance because religion (in contradistinction to what was, at that time, the normal and orthodox understanding of religion as encompassing Christian truth) is a private affair of men's hearts and consciences (I use the gendered language deliberately) and has (or ambiguously ought to have) nothing to do with the public arena of policy. In developing his own myth of man in the state of nature and the rational accumulation of private property, Locke introduced an either-or binary that has become an habitual part of our own thinking: it is either rational politics concerned fundamentally with the protection of natural rights—especially the right to private property, and thus in the domain of elected representation; or it is religious faith that is essentially private and divorced from power. Locke's myth had an elective affinity with the interests of powerful white male property owners in North America and found its way into the

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US Constitution.

Even if the reader wishes to question the precise historical origin of the religion–politics binary, what cannot be doubted is that the term politics today includes the highly contestable assumption that it is non-religious secular, which implies that in its 'real nature' (the nature of politics) it is separate and separable from a distinct domain of religion. Religion in turn and in its 'real nature' has nothing to do with power. Religions and faith communities do not, or ought not to have, political agendas. Religion and politics don't mix. Irrational violence results if they become confused. One of the marks of western progress and reasonableness is that we keep religion out of politics, but unfortunately others have not yet become sufficiently intelligent to understand this, and our tutelage must continue until they do.

As with so many of the other categories discussed in this chapter, politics and the state, and their distinction from something called religion, is imaginary, yet it is proclaimed by written constitutions, policed by the courts, the media, by prominent politicians and scientists, and reproduced in the disciplinary structures of the universities. This is the ambiguous content of politics: on the one hand it is a neutral and universally valid term for human conflict and its resolution, or power in general; yet it is also a key category in a historically specific power formation, a dominant discourse of liberal secular civility and rationality. These two faces give the term marvellous resonance and flexibility. All interventions by the US and other western powers that are deemed as well-meaning, pragmatic attempts to reduce violence in various regions and introduce the rational techniques of problem-solving and good governance turn out also to be impositions of alien values and language categories on peoples who are just as intelligent as us, and who have their own resources for dealing with their own problems, if only the self-serving western powers would end our interminable and misread interventions in their affairs.

## **The Internalisation of Anglophone Discourse**

One other complicating factor that ought to be mentioned is that the Anglophone formulations and vocabulary, along with their concealed ambiguities, have been internalised in different ways and to different degrees by the elites of other countries. To communicate to the US government or other US and international agencies requires deployment of English (or French) language categories. This could mean that the elite in question to some extent agrees with the US ideals and demands, or it could mean that they are forced by translation problems to say one thing to the Americans and another to their own and neighbouring people. The Americans and their acolytes then accuse the elite in question of hypocrisy.

A good example of this problem is when a mullah or the Dalai Lama is first categorised as a 'religious' leader and then accused of illegitimately dabbling in 'politics'. Or alternatively he is described as a political leader pretending to be a religious one. This inscribes without any argument the assumption that needs to be questioned. Recently the Dalai Lama has adopted these very categories for self-description (I am a religious leader, not a politician) and has proclaimed the need for Tibet to have a constitution that separates religion from the secular state.[8] This is probably not a cynical move but a bid for survival by a revered leader of Tibetan people in a power game in which he holds little power. When invited to Taiwan to perform Buddhist rites for the dead, the Chinese tried to stop him on the grounds that he is not a 'pure religious leader' but someone who dabbles in politics—a troublemaker. This was all reported in English in the *Japan Times* whose sources were East Asian news agencies[9].

Yet, despite the high stakes for millions of ordinary lives, these terms have little clear meaning in English. Written constitutions such as the US, Indian or Japanese (and many others) provide a right to freedom of religion but also seek to protect the secular state from religion. The problems for the courts in making decisions about whether or not a belief or practice is religious or secular are very great indeed. For example, the US Constitution insists that there must be a distinction, but a review by a constitutional expert of Supreme Court interpretations since 1790 fails to establish any clear and consistent criteria for making it[10].

Is our own seeking for justice in secular courts of law essentially different from the desire for justice under Sharia or any other system of legal representation? My point here concerns the representation of legal systems as either secular or religious. One can argue that secular courts of law are sacred spaces replete with ritual, taboo, solemnity,

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special spatial layout, hierarchy and so on. These are where we go to realise Justice in our lives. Is Justice less of a transcendent value to us than devotion to various 'gods'? Secular courts of law are not essentially different from 'religious' institutions themselves, except in the discursive either-or construction that proclaims that they are.

The challenge would be to try to translate these Anglophone or more widely Europhone terms and the supposedly intelligible distinctions that are intended to be made into Tibetan, Arabic, Urdu, Chinese, Swahili, or whatever. If the distinctions are not fully intelligible in English in the first place, then this seems to be a recipe for global miscommunication.

## Inconclusive Conclusion

This has been a brief exercise in deconstructing some of the common Anglophone categories of everyday public life that appear in this collection's title, attempting to indicate how they conceal (largely unconscious) rhetorical devices that allow abstract and rather empty terms to appear persuasive, objectively real and inevitable. I will finish by anticipating some of the objections to the arguments I have outlined here. We need general categories to think with. What would you put in their place? Why would alternative formulations and terms not bring their own inherent confusions? The whole argument is negative; what positive and constructive suggestions do you have? If there is a little clear content as you claim to such significant concepts as religion, politics, God, and so on, then from where do they derive their rhetorical power? I have made suggestions about this here and in other places, but I am sure that the question will surface again.

## Notes

[1] This is a highly compressed argument, and as such cannot be comprehensive. I hope it might provoke critical thought. The arguments are given a more extensive airing in several publications. A good starting place for anyone who is interested in following them up is my book *Religion and Politics in International Relations: the Modern Myth* (Continuum, 2011). This book also includes references, which are few here for purposes of length. I am at present working on a book provisionally titled *Abolishing Politics and Other Felicities*.

[2] A typical and influential version of this mythical discourse can be found in Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. See my discussion, side by side with more academic texts that reproduce much the same propaganda, in *Religion and Politics in International Relations* (op.cit)

[3] See William D. Hart, *Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture*, CUP, 2000. See also Jil Anidjar, 'Secularism', *Critical Inquiry*, 33, Autumn 2006, pp52-77 for an interesting discussion of the religion-secular distinction in Said's texts.

[4] 'God is dead but has been resurrected as "Capital"'; Jeremy Carrette & Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: the Silent Takeover of Religion* (Routledge, 2005), p1.

[5] Paul Heelas, 1992, 'The Sacralization of the Self and New Age Capitalism', In Nicholas Abercrombie and Alan Warde (eds), *Social Change in Contemporary Britain*. Cambridge: Polity Press (pp. 139-166)

[6] Bellah, Robert N. (1967). 'Civil Religion in America', *Dædalus* 96 (1):1-21; (1991). *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle, (1996) 'Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion', *American Academy of Religion* 64(4), Winter, 1996; available at <http://www.asc.upenn.edu/usr/fcm/jaar.htm>

[7] The many possible deployments of the term *kami* were brought out by D. C. Holton, (1940) 'The meaning of kami', *Monumenta Nipponica* 3:1-27. The complexity of the term is well brought out in Kuroda Toshio [Trans. Fabio Rambelli] (1996). 'The Discourse on the "Land of Kami" (Shinkoku) in "Medieval Japan: National Consciousness and International Awareness', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 23, pp353-385.

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[8] "The Dalai is definitely not a pure religious figure. He is using the cloak of religion to engage in long-term activities to separate China, he is a political exile." Official representative of Chinese Government commenting on President Obama's meeting with the Dalai Lama, reported by Roberta Tampton & Sui-Lee Wee, 'Obama meets with Dalai Lama despite China warnings', *Reuters*, Fri Feb 21, 2014, <<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/02/21/uk-usa-china-tibet-idUKBREA1K1HA20140221>>

See also *Charter of the Tibetans in Exile*, adopted on 14 June 1991, Central Tibetan Administration, <<http://tibet.net/about-cta/constitution/>>

[9] I have discussed this issue more fully in *Religion and Politics in International Relations: The Modern Myth*, Continuum, 2011

[10] See Micah Schwartzman, (2012). 'What if Religion Isn't Special?', Virginia School of Law: Social Science Research Network Electronic Paper Collection. <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1992090> [accessed on 20 August 2014].

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