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## Pecora - Religion and Modernity in Current Debate - JCRT 4.2

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Any attempt to talk briefly about such immense subjects as “religion” and “modernity” is a foolhardy enterprise at best, and I take up this task with many misgivings. But in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001, a subsequent “war” focused mainly on what is now widely perceived to be global networks of religious (that is, primarily Islamic) terrorism, including renewed armed struggle between Palestinians and Israelis the religious elements of which cannot be ignored, it is hard not to go once again where better angels might fear to tread. The recent American invasion of Iraq has made the task of re-thinking the relationship of modernity and religion all the more pressing, since it now appears that a secular Western power with a still vibrant Christian culture the United States will attempt to create *ex nihilo* a new government and civil society in Iraq, which was once the cradle of Islamic civilization. The resurgence of a lively discussion about a “clash of civilizations,” the invocation of “crusades” and *jihads*, and the large body of assumptions about the secular nature of the contemporary West and the religious sensibility of those who oppose it assumptions that appear on both sides of this divide make it almost impossible, I think, for informed people not to wonder once again about the complicated relationship between the so-called “modern world” and religious belief.

In such models, US retaliation in Afghanistan and the larger Western focus on Islam as the key to the nature of a modern Arab consciousness falsely assumes a uniformity of world view one radical Islam where in fact many and diverse Islams exist, some far more rationalized than others (not to mention very small pockets of equally impoverished Christians in the case of Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt, and elsewhere). More to the point, this model argues that in blaming religious militancy for the economic and political shortcomings of the Arab Middle East and its violent reaction against the West, the West mistakes the symptom for the illness. The turn toward so-called fundamentalist, less rationalized forms of religion in Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, and so forth is for the liberal-left mainly an ambiguous consequence of neocolonialism.

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3. The character of American debates about the role of religion in current political conflicts is perhaps our first clue to the difficulties of the topic. Conservatives have tended to attribute the source of much of the conflict to religious fanaticism that is, to a kind of irrational hatred, something like what Nietzsche would have called *ressentiment*, directed toward Western secularism, material wealth, and technology.<sup>1</sup> This hatred is said to be irrational because it seems to be based in religious commitments and values that resist any accommodation to what Max Weber called the rationalization of social life. We can understand Weberian rationalization as a tendency that manifests itself most saliently in capitalist economic activity and its global marketplace and we should recall that Marx already referred to such a global economy in the *Communist Manifesto*<sup>2</sup> that is, a tendency based psychologically on the efficient calculation of means and a willingness to substitute alternative ends as equally valuable pursuits. We then have a whole structure of explanation that juxtaposes anachronistic allegiance to what

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<sup>1</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1969); see especially first essay.

<sup>2</sup>Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 12-13.

Weber called the *Wertrationalität* (or value-oriented rationality) of religious absolutes with the *Zweckrationalität* (or purposive rationality) of modern, capitalist, instrumental reason.<sup>3</sup>

4. To be sure, US (and European) conservatives hardly wish to abandon altogether their commitments to value-oriented thinking, and they tend not to agree with Nietzsche's assessment of Judeo-Christianity as itself a product of *ressentiment*. Like many liberals, they more or less follow Weber in seeing modernity's social optimum as a blend of value-oriented and instrumental reason, in which rationalized forms of religion (in the US case, mostly various sects of Protestantism) become largely inseparable from values embedded in the decidedly worldly benefits of national defense, capitalist accumulation, and vocational professionalism. No modern US President, for example, has been able to refrain from declaring some form of religious affiliation, however desultorily practiced. But a President would be quickly thwarted if religious ideals began to damage economic interests. Even religious fundamentalism in the US is extremely pragmatic and rational where the marketplace is concerned. (We could look, for example, at the extraordinary financial acumen and growing success of the Mormon Church in Utah as a model of dissenting Protestantism that has had little trouble accommodating what are in many ways fundamentalist beliefs with a highly rationalized life-world). In certain ways, this is no more than what Matthew Arnold pointed to when he referred in the mid-nineteenth century to the twin obsessions of England's dissenting bourgeoisie: "the concern for making money, and the concern for saving our souls."<sup>4</sup>
5. Many liberals and many further to the left, by contrast, have tended to see all the talk about religion as largely a distraction from the real, or material, conflicts of our world, as in Edward Said's commentaries on the September 11 attacks in the Egyptian press.

The New York and Washington suicide bombers seem to have been middle-class, educated men, not poor refugees. Instead of getting a wise leadership that stresses education, mass mobilization and patient organization in the service of a cause, the poor and the desperate are often conned into the magical thinking and quick bloody solutions that such appalling models provide, wrapped in lying religious claptrap. This remains true in the Middle East generally, Palestine in particular, but also in the United States, surely the most religious of all countries. It is also a major failure of the class of secular intellectuals not to have redoubled their efforts to provide analysis and models to offset the undoubted sufferings of the large mass of their people, immiserated and impoverished by globalism and an unyielding militarism with scarcely anything to turn to except blind violence and vague promises of future salvation.<sup>5</sup>

6. On the one hand, as Said and others have argued, the mosque is merely a readily available means, and hardly the best one, of organizing resistance to oppressive policies, whether these are initiated by America, by its supposed client state, Israel, or by corrupt ruling dynasties (for example, in Syria, Jordan, and especially Saudi Arabia) that fear truly democratic sentiment and the loss of oil revenues collected largely from Europe and Japan. On the other hand, the left

<sup>3</sup>Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, ed. Talcott Parsons, trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: The Free Press, 1947), p. 115.

<sup>4</sup>Matthew Arnold, *Complete Prose Works*, Vol. 5, ed. R. H. Super (11 Vols.) (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960-1977), p. 99.

<sup>5</sup>Edward Said, "Commentary in *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 20-26 September 2001, No. 552", *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

also argues that, after the Second World War, the United States routinely backed reactionary regimes in a Cold War policy of containing the Soviet Union, and that a number of these regimes were led by religious fundamentalists. In his most recent book, Tariq Ali reminds us that the United States actively supported “the Muslim Brotherhood against Nasser in Egypt; the Sarekat-i-Islam against Sukarno in Indonesia, the Jamaat-e-Islami against Bhutto in Pakistan and, later, Osama bin Laden and friends against the secular-communist Najibullah.”<sup>6</sup> Having cynically manipulated religious belief against the communist “evil empire” during the Cold War, the United States in turn became the oppressive target of the fundamentalism that it had once used for its own benefit. It is a morally elegant conclusion: the chickens have come home to roost, as it were, and September 11 was the result.

7. We thus have an equally rich explanatory structure on the left, in which, as in Marx, religion is an epiphenomenon of oppressive economic conditions, and any political program aimed primarily at reconciling religious differences is doomed to fail.<sup>7</sup> What goes without saying is that the position of the left as I have outlined it here, even when it rejects Western hubris and the inexorability of technological, economic and political modernization, assumes that rational social action is the very antithesis of religious belief and that nations would be much better off without religion altogether. Tariq Ali is especially severe on this point, and it is an issue to which I will return. Like the moderate conservative view, the left’s anti-clericalism implicitly accepts the Nietzschean (and, in modified form, Weberian) idea that radical salvation soteriologies are the product of *ressentiment*. The materialist left simply insists that there are basic economic causes at work behind the fa’ade of movements like Islamic fundamentalism, causes that the more idealist right is reluctant to acknowledge. And contrary to most conservatives, many on the left are also apt to claim that religion of all stripes is at heart a powerfully destructive social force more dangerous than other ideological forms’ though such arguments tend to complicate the left’s confident assertion of religion’s merely epiphenomenal nature. In the *New York Review of Books*, the Israeli liberal Amos Elon rejects the “simplistic” idea that the Palestinian *shahid* (or suicide-bombing martyr) is a “demented Muslim fundamentalist eager to be received into paradise,” insisting instead on the bitterness caused by 35 years of colonization. Citing Ian Buruma, Elon notes that “religious fanaticism” is “political more than cultural.” But he then explains some of the difference between the current intifada and the first one (in 1987) by pointing to a *fatwa* of the leading theological authority in Sunni Islam, Sheik Mohammed Said Tantawi, which declared that the *shahids* are “saintly defenders of their people’s honor.”<sup>8</sup> Elon thus takes a position toward religion not unlike that of Israeli Prime Minister Sharon toward PLO Chairman Arafat, whom the Israeli leader declared “irrelevant” and at the same time the source of all the trouble.
8. It seems obvious to me that both of Elon’s claims are true, and that they are independently variable as well as inextricably linked. Certainly, 35 years of political injustice are for Palestinians like an open wound that refuses to heal. (Actually, it would be 54, if one used the founding of Israel rather than the 1967 Arab-Israeli war as the beginning of “colonization,” but invoking the earlier event would of course be far more problematic for an Israeli citizen.) Still, the response to such injustice would not be expressed in its current forms without the religious feeling, experience and affiliations that structure and preserve it, that is, without the collective consciousness and religious *habitus* that are able to support its active and militant

<sup>6</sup>Tariq Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 275.

<sup>7</sup>See esp. Marx, “On the Jewish Question.” Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

<sup>8</sup>Amos Elon, “No Exit.” *New York Review of Books*, XLIX: 9 (May 23, 2002), p. 15.

character. After all, history is filled with horrible crimes perpetrated by one people against another, yet relatively few of these have enabled sustained, trans-generational resistance. For a multitude of reasons, Islam has been recently quite successful in this regard in the Arab world, more successful in the end than either Marxism or nationalism; Islam has assumed a role similar to that of Catholicism in the struggle for Irish independence and Hinduism (fitfully allied with Islam) in the Indian triumph over the British Raj. Since the American and French Revolutions, the West has become more or less enamored of the idea that successful resistance of this sort tends to assume the form of secular, republican nationalism, often mixed with socialism, though, as Ernest Gellner points out, active nationalism is far more often the exception than the rule.

9. But if nationalism is itself often understood as a phenomenon with its own independent logic, historical as well as anthropological—a position embraced by popular movements of liberation, such as that of Arafat's PLO, by those like Anthony D. Smith who take the long view of national consciousness, and by post-colonial theorists like Frantz Fanon and Said, than by sociologists like Gellner, who emphasize the primacy of economic modernization—then all the more must we admit that religious traditions and imperatives may respond to human needs quite apart from economic immiseration. The intransigent conflict that has ruined so many lives in the Middle East for so long is obviously about economic development, just as surely as it is about oil, land, and national aspirations. But I do not think that it is difficult to understand the degree to which all of these issues are polarized by the central steering mechanism of religious affiliation, which is in many ways the *sine qua non* of the turmoil, from the Balfour declaration to the present. Zionism, whatever else it was, could have no meaning without the widespread and historically long-lived religious persecution around which it developed (as in Herzl's account of it), and the Arab response to the creation of a Jewish state in their midst may have looked very different had most of the Arab world had not been Muslim. (What the response to Israel's founding would have been had its site and environment been overwhelmingly Christian poses an interesting thought experiment, given the centuries of animosity between European Christians and Jews on the one hand, and Christian guilt over the Holocaust on the other.) Relegating the religious end of things to "magical thinking," whatever Said's phrase finally means, does not take us very far if religion is to be given its full, measurable due in the making of human history.
10. I tend to reject the political right's perspective, which indeed glosses over the material poverty and injustice at the roots of terrorist violence, and may also mask a certain kind of racism—after all, if religious commitments are themselves so irrational, one might claim, then those who make them must be at heart irrational as well. And yet the right at least takes religion seriously, if in this case mainly for the purpose of denigrating the violent zealotry of the Other's faith and commending the more circumscribed, rationalized Christianity of the West. On the other hand, while I share the secular left's demystifying critique of "religious fundamentalism," I cannot ignore the fact that the left has on the whole an impoverished understanding of religion (not unlike its earlier understanding of nationalism), which has frequently led to contradictory responses. (Think of Algeria, both in the 1950s and today, of Afghanistan, of India, Pakistan, Indonesia, and so many other former colonies.) I say this not, I hasten to add, because I myself profess a religious faith—I do not—nor because I think religion necessarily has an important role to play in creating a better world. But I would argue that the failure to create analytical space for religious motivations has hobbled leftist or progressive understanding of current events.

11. The conventional opposition between a conservative emphasis on rational versus irrational forms of religious belief and a progressive emphasis on religion as the ideological expression of economic conditions thus leaves us with something of a Hobson's choice, neither alternative of which does a good job of capturing a global reality. Any secular Western intellectual who accepts the idea that human perceptions of the world and human conceptions of truth are, like language itself, irreducible functions of social rather than individual existence cannot ignore the fact that religion has been, and remains, one of the most important institutions of many mature societies, especially when we look beyond the confines of contemporary North-Western Europe. And it has been absolutely central to the historical development of a nominally secular modern Europe as well. As Novalis pointed out in an essay from 1799, there are good reasons to think that Luther's reformation and Luther's Bible were key instruments in the creation of a Europe dominated by nation-states rather than by a united Christian confession and empire. Whether we revert to Edmund Burke on tradition or take our cues from Durkheim on collective consciousness or Wittgenstein on language games, it should be clear that describing religion as "lying . . . claptrap," however invigorating politically, will not serve as a characterization of the broader importance of religion in the constitution of social reality, any more than will the conservative attempt to discriminate neatly between rational and irrational modes of religious belief. Wittgenstein may be particularly useful here. Commenting on Wittgenstein's "Lectures on Religious Belief," Hilary Putnam observes that "Wittgenstein would not have regarded talk of incommensurability as helpful, and would not have regarded talk of certain discourses being 'cognitive' and other discourses being 'noncognitive' as helpful." Rather, notes Putnam, "there are overlapping similarities between one sort of referring and the next, and that is all."<sup>9</sup> In effect, while reference to material causality may seem to belong more securely to a rational or "cognitive" mode of speaking about social action than reference to the motives of religious belief, it may be better to regard these (at times) competing discourses as making sense of the world in different yet overlapping ways rather than as simply and completely incommensurate. One may refer to religious entities and consequences in a way that is quite different from referring to one's material environment; but one need not think that understanding one sort of discourse participating in one sort of language game precludes understanding, or participating in, the other.
12. In practice, I should note, what we often find is that commentators tend to shift back and forth uneasily, not unlike Amos Elon on Islamic fundamentalism, between secular and religious explanations. Despite his rejection of religious influences and his emphasis on socio-economic conditions in addressing the current Palestinian *intifada*, for example, even Said pointedly refused to make economic motives (or nationalist ones, for that matter) the basis of Orientalist ideology, which emerges instead in *Orientalism*, via Foucault's notion of discourse, as something much closer to Durkheim's understanding of religion (including the animus toward other religions) as a function of group solidarity. (Oddly, Said does not address this rather significant theoretical inheritance.) Talal Asad's influential essays on the differing relations between power and religion in Christianity and in Islam (*Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*) openly confront similar complexities. Asad is persuasive about the asymmetries that arise when an increasingly imperial Enlightenment perspective tries to fit, or translate, the historical discourses of Islam into concepts derived from a history of Christian tradition, such as the foundational role of individual belief.

<sup>9</sup>Hilary Putnam, "Wittgenstein on Religious Belief." *On Community*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1991), p. 73; see also Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 53-72.

This implies not only that there really are some core concepts within Islamic tradition being mistranslated by the Christian West, but also that imperial power, especially through the imposition of a nation-state political life-world on those it controls, has subtly altered the *habitus* of Muslims' the concrete socio-religious rituals of their everyday life' from within.

13. At the same time, it is clear that Asad's larger point is that "reasons of power" have always had an important role to play within particular religious traditions, which cannot in fact be separated from the socio-economic life-world in which they are found. But then how should we distinguish between the licit and illicit expressions of power within religious traditions? Is the socio-economic power that weaves its way through a religious tradition fundamentally different depending on its origins, as Asad seems to believe? We should then perhaps begin to speak of very different "secularisms" as well, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and so forth. This poses, I think, an interesting question, and one that perhaps deserves serious consideration. And yet, Asad refers to "Muslim secularism" (already suspended in quotation marks in his text) only once in his book, and defines it simply by the separation of "religion from politics in national life," that is, as a feature of the Christian West's power that has been imposed on Islamic nations, and then taken up by Muslim intellectuals in resistance to that power.<sup>10</sup> But if this is so, then "secularism" itself, at least as Asad is using it, is a specific feature of the Christian West. This too poses an interesting question, and it has some interesting consequences' not the least of which is that it puts Asad very much in agreement, at least on this one point, with Bernard Lewis, who has argued that the whole issue of the separation of church and state, private belief and public duty, is unique to Christianity' "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" are the words of Christ cited from Matthew 22:21' while such separation has been largely unknown in the Muslim world.<sup>11</sup> For Lewis, there is neither Reformation nor Reformation tendencies in Islam. At least where the meaning of secularism is concerned, Asad's defense of Islam against the Christian West's Orientalism oddly agrees with the most often cited representative of that Orientalism.
14. Moreover, whatever we may think of Lewis's argument, or Asad's apparent concurrence with it, we should recognize that it is deeply embedded in Western social theory. Max Weber's focus on the Protestant Reformation' or rationalization' of Roman Catholicism has, despite much criticism, had a long afterlife. One of the most influential elaborations of Weberian religious sociology' Peter Berger's *Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967)' thus claims that the Judeo-Christian tradition carried the seeds of secularism within it from the beginning.<sup>12</sup> In Berger's view, the Hebrew Bible's monotheism, positing a god completely outside the world, "demythologized" the space between god and humanity.<sup>13</sup> Medieval Catholicism, with its miracles, its focus on the mystery of the incarnation, and its neo-magical system of sacraments mediating between God and humankind, for a time re-mythologized the world and allowed a fully transcendent divinity once more to walk on earth. The resulting integration of secular and religious authority' which began with Constantine, produced a Holy Roman Empire dominating Europe, and fueled Crusades and persecutions' is thus presented

<sup>10</sup>Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 229.

<sup>11</sup>Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 96-97.

<sup>12</sup>Peter Berger, *Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1967), pp. 105-25; for a good summary of Berger's contributions, see Karel Dobbelare, "Secularization: A Multi-Dimensional Concept", *Current Sociology*, 29: 2 (Summer, 1981), pp. 22-26.

<sup>13</sup>Lewis, *Sacred Canopy*, p. 117.

as the de facto rejection of the verse from Matthew cited by Lewis. Only with the Reformation did the process of ethical rationalization emerge again, and with it the disenchantment of the world that Weber so trenchantly described.

15. In its origins, as in its Protestant return to those origins, Christianity thus *entailed* secularism, and did not simply surrender to it. "Religious developments, originating in the Biblical tradition, may be seen as causal factors in the formation of the modern secularized world. Once formed, however, this world precisely precludes the continuing efficacy of religion as a formative force. We could contend that here lies the great historical irony in the relation between religion and secularization, an irony that can be graphically put by saying that, historically speaking, Christianity has been its own gravedigger."<sup>14</sup> Directly behind Berger and Weber here stands Nietzsche again, who in the Third Essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* points out that the European ideal of a scientific will to truth is itself the product of Christian asceticism. Ironically, Nietzsche juxtaposes this ascetic ideal to the more truly "free" spirits of the eleventh-century Islamic order of Assassins, who abrogated both faith in religion and in truth itself with the watchword: "Nothing is true, everything is permitted."<sup>15</sup> Secular modernity is thus for Nietzsche (as for Berger) really the last phase of a Judeo-Protestant ascetic ideal: "the awe-inspiring *catastrophe* of two thousand years of training in truthfulness that finally forbids itself the *lie involved in belief in God*."<sup>16</sup> Taking his cue from the Assassins, perhaps, but still situating himself within the Christian tradition, Nietzsche wants to push this training one step further along, so that Christian truthfulness finally begins to question "*the meaning of all will to truth*."<sup>17</sup> Though this clearly liminal and future-oriented gesture has been more significant for negative theology in the twentieth century than for religious sociology, Nietzsche's larger focus on Christianity as "its own gravedigger" has, I think, been formative for the sociologists. By contrast, we in the postmodern humanities have tended to emphasize Nietzsche's liminal probing of the meaning of truth along with the negative theological line of thought that appears in Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida while ignoring the degree to which Nietzsche located his radical questioning within a Judeo-Protestant tradition that he in fact singled out as the basis of modern secularism. In positing "secularism" as itself a Christian concept that cannot be translated without distortion into Islamic society, is Asad not then simply adopting one of the most influential lines of thought in the Christian West? It is not a problem that is easy to solve.
16. We should not downplay the effects of economic and technological modernism in the formation of the modern nation-state, as Gellner and his followers have quite clearly elaborated them. Nor should we ignore the fact that, at least in the period from 1914 to the 1980s, both nationalism and communism came to represent effective substitutions for religious affiliation in many parts of the world. Moreover, as Anthony Smith, Clifford Geertz and others have claimed, national affiliation has its own quite complex pre-history before the rise of capitalist-driven nationalism after the Enlightenment.<sup>18</sup> But it is important to acknowledge that, by any global measure, religious affiliation has not succumbed to a singular narrative of secularization, through which economics, technology, and individualism would dominate, as the nation-state arose. Today, it is quite often the case that religion plays a powerful social role both in determining national aspirations, as in the Balkans, and in resisting the imposition of secular nation-state

<sup>14</sup>*Sacred Canopy*, p. 127.

<sup>15</sup>Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, essay 3, section 24.

<sup>16</sup>*Genealogy*, essay 3, section 27.

<sup>17</sup>*Genealogy*, essay 3, section 27.

<sup>18</sup>Clifford Geertz (ed.), *Old Societies and New States* (New York: Free Press, 1963), pp. 105-19.

goals, as in much of the Islamic world. Indeed, Asad's approach to religious traditions is in fact remarkably similar to Smith's approach to national traditions: both are subject to great transformations over time, but there are after all certain kinds of transformation that would mean that one is no longer playing "the same game" at all.<sup>19</sup>

17. Despite the seeming obviousness of the idea that secularization is an on-going historical process, religious beliefs and institutions continue to play a powerful role in shaping the character, direction and tempo of the process. This means that secularism has been subject to radical differences also within the West' especially between Catholic and Protestant nations, between different kinds of Protestantism and Catholicism, and between old and new traditions.<sup>20</sup> Even if we believe that secularism is inexorable in the final determination, as both Durkheim and Weber argued, we must acknowledge that it does not proceed along intuitive or universal lines. Very coherent, univocal, and state supported religious traditions have devolved into very low degrees of overt affiliation with organized religion or churches, as in France (4%), Italy (5%), West Germany (13%), Spain (15%) and Britain (22%)'though it must be added that churches are still state-supported via taxes in much of Europe, that they can play a significant role in policy debate, and that many people who no longer affiliate with a church still marry and bury within the church (as in much of Scandinavia). At the same time, state-enforced confessional tolerance has led to a condition of almost permanent revivalism in the United States (with almost 60% overt affiliation, far higher when more sporadic ties are considered).<sup>21</sup> Beyond Western Europe and the United States, state-enforced communist secularization has yielded to a "liberating" return to orthodoxy (as in Poland, the Baltic States, the Southern Republics of the USSR, and Afghanistan; one could look as well at the more eccentric, and less successful, Falun Gong movement in China).
18. A recent essay by Nikki Keddie outlines the bases of a global view of secularization, offering an account similar in many ways to that of Asad, yet also quite distinct where the central concept of secularism is concerned. Keddie also challenges one of the main arguments about secularization made by Bernard Lewis: that "infectious new ideas" about the secular, republican nation-state were actively promulgated by the French after the Revolution, and were carried back to the Islamic world by Muslim students attending Western universities in France, Italy, and Britain in increasing numbers.<sup>22</sup> Lewis further claims that, even before the Revolution, the increasingly "ecclesiastical" or hierarchical nature of the modern Islamic religious order was due to the imitation of Christian models, with their clergy and bishops. Keddie's main argument is that, in most of the world beyond Europe, secularization may be more a matter of deliberate state policy'which Keddie calls "secularization from above" 'than (as the secularization thesis since Weber has held) a matter of intellectual change due to increasing social differentiation, bureaucratization, and rationalization at the level of lived experience or (as both Lewis and Asad argue, albeit for different purposes) direct Western influence on intellectuals.
19. In all cases, economic transformation is at stake. In the standard models, secularization occurs first within the social life-world: the increasing division of labor and the rationalization of religious and moral values that accompany (or, in Weber's early model, actually enable)

<sup>19</sup>Asad, p. 18.

<sup>20</sup>See especially David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978).

<sup>21</sup>See report of 1981 Gallup Poll in Barry Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman, *One Nation Under God: Religion in Contemporary American Society* (New York: Harmony Books, 1993), p. 9.

<sup>22</sup>Lewis, *What Went Wrong*, pp. 112-113.

economic modernization, including the disaggregation of institutional spheres, are eventually reflected in (rather than being consequences of) state policy.<sup>23</sup> In Lewis's view, religious rationalization, as well as the secular dyad of nation-state and civil society, are imported by a Western- (or Christian-) educated elite. In Keddie's model, similar transformations in modern Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, and India "had to be heavily promoted by governments, given the weakness of the indigenous capitalist classes and the strength of European economic competition."<sup>24</sup> Reforms in Islamic law were demanded by new nation-states that required a) a larger share of traditional religious taxes for administration, b) nationalized education for purposes of political hegemony, c) a rationalized code of law for trade, and perhaps most important d) a technologically modernized military that could compete with (and ideally defend itself against) those of the West. (Keddie actually puts most emphasis on the military's need for technical modernization.) In many cases, such reforms were not aimed at achieving the separation of church and state found in the United States, but state control over religious institutions, often with the willing support of clerics. State control of religion in the Islamic world may not have produced free-market capitalism on the Western model, but in Keddie's view it was a state-sponsored response to the Western model that often met with far more resistance from entrenched religious-legal institutions than has been evident in the modern Western experience.

20. The interesting twist here, and one that clearly separates Keddie's approach from that of Asad, is her speculation that autocratic state-sponsored "secularization from above," as opposed to secularization via progressive social differentiation and free-thinking intellectuals (whose fate within Islam Tariq Ali laments), may also be more basic to Western contexts than historians have been willing to admit. She suggests for example that Henry VIII's confiscation of monasteries (1534-39) was more significant in the course of English secularization than Locke's political theory (which is singled out by Lewis). As Christopher Hill once observed, "The plunder of the [Catholic] Church by the landed ruling class stimulated the development of capitalism in England" and for centuries, of course, there has been clerically supported state control of the Church of England.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, Keddie suggests that the American and French Revolutions, where republican imperatives toward centralized non-sectarian government predominated among the elite, were more important than the work of Voltaire.<sup>26</sup> This is of course a very complicated issue, and raises all the conventional chicken-and-egg problems about political and social versus intellectual history. Governments and revolutions are also intellectual affairs—a point that Keddie acknowledges only in her final footnote—and leaders respond to philosophical imperatives just as much as to a Machiavellian desire for authority and control.<sup>27</sup> It is also true that Keddie's long view compares very different political phenomena—Henry VIII's actions were part of the consolidation of dynastic rule in England, while the French Revolution was aimed at supplanting dynasty with the new idea of republican nationalism. But in Keddie's defense, one must admit that Napoleon, who may have done more to spread the ideals of the Revolution (and from the top down) than any one else, had

<sup>23</sup>For discussion of such models, see Roy Wallis and Steve Bruce, "Secularization: The Orthodox Model", *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis*, ed. Steve Bruce (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 8-30, and Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>24</sup>Nikki Keddie, "Secularism and the State: Towards Clarity and Global Comparison", *New Left Review*, October-November, 1997, p. 30.

<sup>25</sup>Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution: The English Revolution of the 17th Century*. (New York: Schocken, 1964), p. 39.

<sup>26</sup>Keddie, "Secularism and the State," p. 36.

<sup>27</sup>"Secularism and the State," 40n 28.

little use for the “ideologists” (that is, *philosophes*) around him’Napoleon being the first to use “ideology” in its pejorative sense. And Keddie’s concluding point is certainly worth considering: that there has been a fair amount of traditionalist and fundamentalist resistance, at least in the non-Western world, wherever secularization has been pursued vigorously from above (as in the Pahlavis’ Iran), and less so where secularization has been more modestly promoted. Certainly, the paradoxes of much secularization in mostly Islamic societies seem intimately related to Keddie’s top-down model.

21. The case of Tunisia, where the secular French-trained lawyer Habib Bourguiba led a successful fight against French colonialism in 1956, is a good example. Bourguiba founded a relatively enlightened dictatorship, which, for example, granted to women the rights to vote, serve in government, seek a divorce, and have an abortion. He also radically curtailed the influence of *shar’i’a*. By the 1980s, however, Bourguiba had cracked down hard against the Islamic movement Nahda, which was influenced by militant Islamic success in Iran and funded by Persian Gulf elites. Today, Tunisia is in effect a perfect model of the contradictions of rapid, top-down secularization. The country does more than 70% of its trade with Western Europe, spends more than 50% of its budget on social and developmental programs, and reports (at least officially) that 85% of its people live in homes they own. Tunis is a thriving, cosmopolitan city. In this sense, Tunisia clearly reflects the social and economic rationalization that the secularization thesis implies. And yet, the regime of President Zine el Abidine ben Ali, who came to power in 1987 in a bloodless coup and recently engineered constitutional changes that will allow him to remain President for life, now sits atop what has been described as a “volcano” of dissent, fueled by militant religious sentiment and sympathy with the Palestinians, and a repressive police state that sanctions the imprisonment and torture of dissidents, especially the religiously motivated, but also those who are not.<sup>28</sup>
22. Tunisia’s socio-economic transformation, which by any measure we would have to call progressive, has involved both struggle against and imitation of the West. But what Keddie describes as state-sponsored secularization from above, much of it supported by development spending in education and socialization that we in the West would normally consider salutary in our own nations, now confronts explosive resistance. And democracy, which Ben Ali once actively championed, is disappearing. In effect, the secular regimes of Tunisia and Algeria have had to invoke what the conservative political theorist Carl Schmitt called a “state of exception” — that is, a leader’s temporary suspension of constitutional, nominally democratic law (in Schmitt’s case, that of a dysfunctional Weimar Republic) in order to preserve a “constitutional” order from being subverted by popular forces. In Nazi Germany, the state of exception became a permanent feature. In the case of nations like Tunisia and Algeria, and perhaps at some point Turkey as well, the paradox further involves the entire question of secularization. That is, one finds in the later cases a deliberately *secular* and at least nominally democratic leader adopting dictatorial powers in order to prevent the subversion of that order by religious authority. Secular thought suddenly becomes its own worst enemy. This is a paradox that is all too evident in the evolution of the secular, socialist Baath Party of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Hussein’s was a regime that the US once supported as a secular (and supposedly more rational) hedge against religious fundamentalism (especially Iran’s) and has now destroyed in the name of the worldwide struggle against religious fundamentalism. Any plan for reorganizing the state and civil society of Iraq from the top down once again cannot afford to ignore this history.

<sup>28</sup>See Michael Slackman, “Tunisia’s 2 Faces of Progress”, *Los Angeles Times*, Monday, June 10, 2002, A1.

23. Accompanying such differences in the way secularization is experienced in Christian and Islamic nations is a rather thorny semantic problem. Most Western (and many non-Western) elites now refer to Islam and Christianity in highly asymmetrical ways. The usual parallel or opposition today is between "the Islamic world" and "the West" (no longer "the Christian world," though up until about World War I the religious phrase could still be found). The asymmetry implies something more complex than simply the naïve and monolithic Western view of Islam rightly criticized by the post-colonial academy. As several sociologists of religion note, there may be a big difference between a society in which one consciously chooses one's "church" for specific quasi-instrumental purposes (as Toqueville and Weber had already observed of the status differentials of American Protestant sects) and a society in which one's religion is largely co-terminus with one's ethnic nationality.<sup>29</sup>
24. Khaled Abou el Fadl is a devout Muslim and one of the most interesting voices today arguing that Islam has rationalizing (or reformation) currents within its classical tradition that are quite opposed to the puritanical strains supported by the Saudi elite. He was the Omar and Azmeralda Alfi Distinguished Fellow in Islamic Law at UCLA. There is by contrast no sense in which all of the other law professors around Abou El Fadl would be considered teachers of highly rationalized Christian Law, though one might argue that Western concepts of law were profoundly influenced by Judeo-Christian scripture, the workings of ecclesiastical courts, Reformation notions of individuality, and Christian humanism. Indeed, the periodic furor caused by a conservative American judge who wishes to have the Ten Commandments displayed in his courtroom would suggest that, at least on the political right, the link between law and religion in the West has not been completely forgotten. This is not to discount the classical Greek and Roman rudiments of Western legal traditions, nor their introduction to the West by Arabic scholars. But it is to recall that religious traditions, however disavowed by the liberal state, were an intrinsic, and perhaps guiding, part of the mix. It seems unlikely that Western elites will once again start referring to some entity called "Christendom," and some have suggested that, by the same token, references to something called "the Islamic world" are equally meaningless. And yet the asymmetry here is not simply to be wished away, since differing patterns of secularization are as real as the different religious traditions.
25. One such asymmetry, routinely invoked by sociologists of religion, has to do with whether religion is held to be a question of individual belief, or a question of communal habitus, more popularly addressed as ethnicity. Being a Turk in an overtly secular state like Turkey (as opposed to being an Armenian or Greek) means being Muslim by definition, whether one professes any belief in Islam or not: your presumed religion is automatically inscribed in your passport if you are a Turk. How to interpret the ambiguities in this situation is the problem. Lewis maintains that the primary purpose of the Turkish Republic initiated by Kemal Ataturk was a separation of church and state on the French model: he notes that Turkey is the only Muslim nation that formally adopted secularism, removed Islam from the constitution and abandoned *shar'i'a* as law.<sup>30</sup> Keddie, following and revising the arguments of Niyazi Berkes, insists on the contrary that Kemalist secularism in Turkey meant neither separation of religion and state, nor the abolition of Islamic belief, but rather "the establishment of state control over religion and the religious classes," and hence a rationalization of religious customs and dress by force from above. Though the Turkish model is somewhat unique among nominally Islamic nations, being a Muslim in such a society may be much closer to (though hardly the same

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<sup>29</sup>See especially Martin.

<sup>30</sup>See Lewis, *What Went Wrong*, p. 106.

as) being a Jew in Israel' again, something that one may *be* regardless of one's actual religious beliefs or even one's ethnic-national background' than to being a contemporary Christian in the West, where the vicissitudes of individual choices in belief systems are supposedly more evident. Modern Turkish law is no more indebted to religious sources than Israeli law, and (until very recently) Islamic clerics in Turkey had less political power than Israeli religious leaders.

26. But this distinction between religion as ethnic or communal *habitus* and religion as individual belief' an opposition that has been drawn by anthropologists as opposed to one another as Clifford Geertz and Talal Asad to distinguish East from West, or less rationalized from more rationalized, or primitive from modern' will itself not quite hold.<sup>31</sup> Again, we would be better served by a Wittgensteinian model of overlapping, rather than incommensurate, discourses. As in the example of nominally secular legal systems, constitutionally separated from any church, which nevertheless emerge out of long histories of religious thought, the question of secularization cannot be answered in such straightforward terms. Even France, with its long anti-clerical republican tradition, its very low rate of religious observance, and its recent waves of Muslim immigration from North Africa, could still be considered deeply Christian both in terms of its cultural heritage and in terms of its contemporary understanding of the distinction between church and state. That is, religion even in modern France is also a question of communal practices and physical *habitus*, not merely of belief or its absence, as Muslim schoolgirls wearing headscarves to class have discovered. At the same time, no one could look at the history of those areas where Islam has become an inextricable part of communal life and physical deportment and not also recognize that degrees and modes of belief still matter in highly significant ways. What is crudely called "fundamentalism" is every bit as much about depth of belief as it is about *habitus* or degree of adherence to religious law, and a devastating war has been fought, between Iraq and Iran, where the confessional distinction between Shia and Sunni belief systems was a salient factor. (Indeed, the war itself is incomprehensible unless one takes account of the minority Sunni Baathist regime's fear of its Shia majority population.) To be sure, no one would mistake the way belief and *habitus* intersect in France for the way they intersect in Iran, but then this intersection is different in America than it is in France too, despite their shared Christian heritage, and it is not the same in Iran and Turkey, despite their shared Islamic heritage. There is clearly something more complicated at issue than the putative distinction (as in the model proposed by Asad) between individual belief in Christianity, which is supposedly more adaptable to change and secularization, and communal *habitus* in Islam, where change and hence secularization supposedly hold little value. There are also the differing patterns through which belief and *habitus* co-exist, and through which "religious" and "secular" motives inform one another, and these do not distinguish themselves neatly along confessional lines.
27. The asymmetry in the opposition between something called "the West" and something else called "the Islamic world" is a function of more than Orientalist ideology, or Western manipulation, though both are involved. It reflects different patterns of secularization with complex historical roots, albeit patterns that have been shaped by contact with and struggle against one another. The competing attraction of nation-state affiliations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, along with the need to reduce hostility between such states after 1914 in favor of a "league of nations" or "European Community," already envisioned by Comte

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<sup>31</sup>See Clifford Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 167-86.

and Renan (and for that matter, by Napoleon), has led many contemporary elites to disavow the persistence of primarily Christian modes of both belief and *habitus* in the service of some supererogatory and secular notion of the “West” that can be traced back to the pre-Christian Greeks. Conversely, the prevalence of state-sponsored or political secularization, in which religious institutions have been effectively taken over by the state, may have worked to preserve a fa’ade of national-religious identity, as in Kemalist Turkey or Nasserite Egypt, within which widely varying degrees of secularism could be found. Such top-down secularization may also have invited, as in the case most recently of Iran, Afghanistan, Algeria, the Balkans, Pakistan, India, and Chechnya, attempts at the religious reconstruction of political institutions, including the sort of pan-Islamic empire envisioned by the Taliban, which, as Abou El Fadl and others have observed, seldom have the historical religious authority their champions would like to claim, and which in turn force some leaders to embrace a “state of exception” in the preservation of a secular order.

28. One conclusion might be that we in the West should learn to separate what have been the twin pillars of modernization up to this point: that is, economic rationalization and religious secularization, especially given the heightened awareness of religion’s influence on politics today. Which is to say that the model in which rationalization occurs more or less simultaneously on the level of religious, ethical, and economic systems’an integrated history that Weber, in many ways the father of modern notions of secularization, did not in fact accept’ may be less useful for thinking about modernizing tendencies in the rest of the world, though it is a model shared to a large extent (as I noted at the start) by both the political right and left in the West. Perhaps we need to acknowledge that processes of religious, economic, and social change are more asynchronous’ asymmetrical, yet overlapping’ than the standard model of secularization implies, and that the diversity applies *within* “the West,” and *within* “the Islamic World,” as well as between them.
29. Embracing secularization as if we knew clearly what the word means, and as if it were the rational solution to the world’s ills (as the Left Hegelians Feuerbach, Bauer, and Stirner argued long ago) still leaves us with most of the hard questions unsolved (as Marx replied), if only because the rigorously secular world too often turns out not to be precisely what we want either. The Soviet Union converted its cathedrals into museums, but the enlightened gesture did not prevent the Gulag. People are not necessarily more enlightened politically once they have extirpated religion from society, and this is a hard truth for the irreligious among us, that point where the phrase “disenchantment of the world” attains its full meaning. Indeed, if we follow Durkheim, it may appear that human collectivities simply cannot cohere without something that seems more like a religious than a rational belief. Behind the fa’ade of a secular criticism that imagines mutually exclusive domains of rational discourse and irrational “claptrap” there remains a deeper set of concerns about the ambiguous implications of secularization, the fragile nature of social solidarity, and the continuing difficulties of finding a political perspective that would be both truly Enlightened, that is, radically free of all supernatural enthusiasm, and at the same time open to something other than the private calculation of benefits and losses, of means and ends. The disappearance of religion, however attractive such goal might be when we look at the modern Middle East, may not necessarily provide an answer, which is why, paradoxically, we still find ourselves talking so much about it at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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## Notes

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