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# Religion and Politics: An Introduction

BY TALAL ASAD

THE CONTEMPORARY salience of political-religious movements across the world seems to represent a challenge, in some places even to constitute a threat, to the project of modernity. For as Casanova reminds us in his wide-ranging essay—the first in this special issue—the process of secularization has always been regarded as essential to that project. The limits that the dominant ideology of modern society assigns to religion—and the serious alarm with which moderns view the recent transgressions of those limits—are intrinsic to historical narratives of modernity.

In narrating the history of modern civilization we mark the separation of religion from the state, and from science, as crucial steps in our liberation from bigotry and superstition. In these separations we see more than our emancipation from the arbitrary constraints of religion: we think that religion itself comes to be freed from the contagious corruptions of worldly ambition. Yet there are complicating considerations once we go beyond the outline of this simple story. To begin with, that separation has always involved links between “religion” on the one hand and public knowledge, moral identity, and political processes on the other (varying, of course, from one Western country to another). It is not just that the separation (“secularization”) has been incomplete, but that even in Western liberal societies “modernized religion” and “secular culture” have supported each other in crucial, if often indirect, ways.

It may be argued that this modern culture (including science and the state) is quite different from what it once was, that it

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makes us freer, more enlightened, and more self-reliant than we once were. A chastened and reformed religion which can subscribe to such a culture deserves in turn to be supported. And that may indeed be the case.

But if neither the knowledge and practice we call modern science nor the institutions and devices we see as integral to the modern state are now what they once were, then “religion” too may be said to be different from what it once was, and not merely truer to its original essence and less oppressive of our already-constituted selves. The idea that “religion” is everywhere and at all times *essentially* the same,<sup>1</sup> that it can therefore be the object of a single comprehensive theory, is one of the great creative fictions of the modern world. It has constructed “religion” as an integral part of the modern practice of politics in the post-Enlightenment state.

Significantly, it was in the seventeenth century, in the midst of Christendon’s internal sectarian wars and Europe’s voyages of discovery and conquest overseas, that the earliest systematic attempts were made at producing a universal definition of “religion.”<sup>2</sup> What later came to be called natural religion—defined in terms of beliefs (regarding “transcendental power”), practices (ordered “worship”), emotions (a sense of “the sacred”), and ethics (a code of conduct based on “rewards and punishments after this life”)—was now said to exist in all societies. The idea of scripture (a divinely produced/inspired text) was not necessary to this concept of natural religion partly because Christians had become more familiar with societies

<sup>1</sup> “There may certainly be different historical *confessions*,” wrote Kant, “although these have nothing to do with religion itself but only with changes in the means used to further religion, and are thus the province of historical research. And there may be just as many different religious *books* (the Zend-Avesta, the Vedas, the Koran, etc.). But there can only be *one religion* which is valid for all men and at all times. Thus the different confessions can scarcely be more than the vehicles of religion; these are fortuitous, and may vary with differences in time or place” (“Perpetual Peace,” in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. H. Reiss [New York: Columbia University Press, 1991], p. 114).

<sup>2</sup> I have dealt with this theme in “Anthropological Definitions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz,” in *Man* 18 (1983).

that lacked writing. But a more important reason, perhaps, lay in the shift in attention that occurred in the seventeenth century from God's words to God's works. "Nature" became the real space of divine writing, and eventually the indisputable authority for the truth of all sacred texts written in merely human language (the Old and New Testament).

My point is that what appears to social scientists today to be self-evident, namely, that "religion" is *essentially* a matter of meanings linked to ideas of general order (expressed in rite, sentiment, and doctrine) and that it has universal functions, is in fact a view with a specific (post-Reformation) Christian history.<sup>3</sup> What was once a concrete set of rules, practices, and attitudes authorized by a specific tradition of biblical interpretation came to be abstracted and universalized just as European practices of statecraft and natural philosophy were becoming increasingly routinized, ambitious, and globalized. In this movement we have not merely an increase in "religious toleration," certainly not merely a new "scientific discovery." What we have primarily is the construction of a concept and its associated practices which are part of wider historical changes that constitute the modern landscape of power, knowledge, and morality.

In her lucid essay on eighteenth-century religiosity in Western Europe, Jacob describes how it was made up of a new pattern of sentiments, beliefs, and ceremonial activities, one that was essential to the emergence of liberal "civil society." In that teleological sense the new "religion" was shared by a wide range of opinion, from liberal Protestants through deists to freethinkers. She recounts how, in historically specific ways, "reason" and "civil society" (both embodied in particular forms of subjectivity) came to be *sacralized*. In our received narratives of secularization we do not usually think of this development

<sup>3</sup> Anthropologists have a long record of attempting, unsuccessfully, to produce universal definitions of religion. For a recent scholarly discussion in the same tradition, see S. J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

as a translation of “religious sentiments” into our political life, but rather as a proper reverence for the transcendental values by which civilized life is maintained. Yet the sacralization of forms of subjectivity/social life is indeed involved here. I do not want to suggest, however, that this proves that modern political life and premodern depend equally on symbols of the sacred, that therefore a certain kind of “religion” is still at the center of secular politics—although this point has been made more than once, and again recently by some anthropologists.<sup>4</sup> My argument is different. It is that according to our modern construction “religion” (at any rate in its worldly forms) consists precisely of those beliefs-sentiments-practices which are not essential to our common politics, economy, science, and morality. More strongly put: “religion” is what actually or potentially divides us and may set us intolerantly against one another. It is not the locus of “the sacred” that I want to emphasize here, but the normative process of defining what is integral and excluding what is marginal to the modern state.

Given the history of Europe’s sectarian wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—which is also the history of the gradual emergence of the secular state<sup>5</sup>—it is not surprising

<sup>4</sup> Clifford Geertz has argued as much in “Centers, Kings, and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power.” Thus: “At the political center of any complexly organized society . . . there is both a governing elite and a set of symbolic forms expressing the fact that it is in truth governing. No matter how democratically the members of the elite are chosen . . . or how deeply divided among themselves they may be . . . , they justify their existence and order their actions in terms of a collection of stories, ceremonies, insignia, formalities, and appurtenances that they have either inherited or . . . invented. It is these—crowns and coronations, limousines and conferences—that mark the center as center and give what goes on there its aura of being not merely important but in some odd fashion connected with the way the world is built. The gravity of high politics and the solemnity of high worship spring from liker impulses than might first appear” (*Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* [New York: Basic Books, 1983], p. 124). This is, of course, the classical Durkheimian point of view.

<sup>5</sup> See G. Oestreich, *Neostoicism and the Early Modern State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) for a fascinating study of the concept and practice of “social discipline” as it emerged in continental Europe from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. On the interconnections between doctrinal and political conflict

that moderns should be more sensitive to the dangers of irrational intolerance<sup>6</sup> than to those of *rational destruction*. Yet liberal arguments for religious toleration, it may be recalled, were initially made in order to secure the integrity of the state, not the other way around. Thus according to Locke, the great theorist of religious liberty, Catholics and atheists were not to be tolerated because their beliefs would always be a threat to civil peace; a danger to the authority of the Protestant king in the first case, and to the moral bonds of human society in the second. Careful readers of *A Letter Concerning Toleration* will know that Locke was concerned not with the rights of the autonomous citizen but with the duties of the civil magistrate. The liberal discourse on the rights of the citizen emerged a century later, but even so the sacralization of those rights has been compatible with varieties of legally protected religious intolerance in civil society up to our day.<sup>7</sup>

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in the sixteenth century, J. Lecler, *Toleration and the Reformation*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, 1960) is indispensable.

<sup>6</sup> From the liberal point of view “irrational intolerance” is, of course, a tautology. But I use that phrase to emphasize what has been especially reprehensible about religious intolerance to liberals ever since Locke. For Locke, intolerance directed at coercing religious belief is irrational because what is believed to be the truth can never be coerced. Recently S. Mendus has attempted a defense of Locke on this point in *Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism* (Atlantic Heights, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1989), pp. 22–43. I find her argument, which invokes a distinction between “sincere” and “authentic” belief, ingenious but not compelling.

<sup>7</sup> Because in liberal theory “civil society” is the sphere in which the state’s coercive powers are absent, it does not follow that restriction and intolerance cannot occur there. The following case is instructive in reminding us that private property, private influence, and the judgments of private morality can act intolerantly in civil society: “We would do well to remember that *The Satanic Verses* is not the only Penguin book which has been burnt in recent years. Not many years ago almost the entire print run of a Penguin book was burnt on the grounds that its contents were blasphemous and would be deeply offensive to many Christians in [Britain]. The book in question was Sine’s *Massacre* . . . The Penguin edition of *Massacre* was introduced by Malcolm Muggeridge and published in 1967 at the time that Penguin was under the direction of Tony Godwin. Many booksellers, however, found the book deeply offensive because of its blasphemous content and some conveyed their feelings to Allen Lane, who had by this time almost retired from Penguin Books. His response was swift and effective. One night, soon after the book had been published, he went into Penguin’s Harmondsworth warehouse with four accomplices, filled a trailer with all the remaining copies of the book, drove away and burnt them. The next day the Penguin

However, it is the dangers of rational destruction that deserves some attention here, and in this connection the quotation supplied by Casanova from Luckmann's well-known study of modern religion may be worth reflecting on: "By bestowing a sacred quality upon the increasing subjectivity of human existence [the modern sacred cosmos] supports not only the secularization but also what we called the dehumanization of the social structure."<sup>8</sup> Whether we find Luckmann's thesis persuasive or not (Casanova describes it simply as "pessimistic"), it does accord with the apparently different claim of Baumann that state-organized genocide is part of the Janus face of modernity, in which individual subjectivity has become at once sacred and dispensable. In his sobering book on the Nazi destruction of European Jewry, Bauman writes:

There are two antithetical ways one can approach the explanation of the Holocaust. One can consider the horrors of mass murder as evidence of the fragility of civilization, or one can see them as evidence of its awesome potential. One can argue that, with criminals in control, civilized rules of behaviour may be suspended, and thus the eternal beast always hiding just beneath the skin of the socially drilled being may break free. Alternatively, one can argue that, once armed with the sophisticated technical and conceptual products of modern civilization, men can do things their nature would otherwise prevent them from doing. To put it differently: one can, following the Hobbesian tradition, conclude that the inhuman pre-social state has not yet been fully eradicated, all civilizing efforts not withstanding. Or one can, on the contrary, insist that the civilizing process has succeeded in substituting artificial and flexible patterns of human conduct for natural drives, and hence made possible a scale of inhumanity and destruction which had remained inconceivable as long as natural predispositions guided human action. I propose to opt for the second approach, and substantiate it in the following discussion.<sup>9</sup>

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trade department reported the book 'out of print'" (R. Webster, *A Brief History of Blasphemy* [Southwold, Suffolk: Orwell Press, 1990], p. 26).

<sup>8</sup> T. Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 116.

<sup>9</sup> Z. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 95.

Baumann does not argue that massive inhumanity and destruction are our inescapable modern fate; he merely warns that they are ever-present possibilities against which we must be morally and politically on our guard. It cannot be denied that the great acts of human cruelty and destruction in the twentieth century have been carried out by secular governments, not religious ones—although it should be stressed that this fact does not entail the superior virtue of “religious” states. But if one is persuaded by the kind of argument propounded in Baumann’s book, one can conclude that the paramount danger of our time resides not in the rise of political-religious movements as such but in the organizational and technological powers of the civilized state, and in the increasingly impersonal, opportunistic character of modern war and politics.

The politics of the modern, liberal state is of course closely related to the constitution of “civil society” by which our liberties as citizens are secured. The process through which members of all classes and religions, and of both genders, have become (at least in principle) full and equal citizens is central to the story of struggle by which the secular, liberal state has been formed. But civil society is not only the sphere in which rational, autonomous citizens uphold and exercise their rights. As the site of the capitalist economy and as the arena of modern sociability, civil society is also the matrix within which diverse institutionalized powers are established and personal identities mobilized. In a secular, liberal state that subscribes to the principles of religious toleration, historical religions (including secularized versions of religious traditions) are part of civil society. The political tensions this generates in modern societies are notorious—not only because different classes and institutions often compete unequally over national resources, but because people’s sense of belonging (and therefore of security) may be differently affected by their particular religious formation.<sup>10</sup> For although religious *beliefs* may not be

<sup>10</sup> I have discussed some of these questions at length in “British Identity and the



coerced in a liberal state, some religious *identities* appear to be more at home in a given nation-state than others are. And even if personal beliefs are (as Lockean liberal theory claims) essentially voluntary, social identities are not.

The Indian state is avowedly secular. That is to say, there are no constitutional privileges given to religious institutions or groupings, as they are, say, in neighboring Pakistan. In stark contrast to most other Asian countries, India has also maintained (with one brief interlude under Mrs. Gandhi's emergency) a parliamentary democracy, an independent judiciary, and a diversified press. In every liberal sense of the term, India has a vigorous civil society. Van der Veer's interesting essay describes how, nevertheless, an increasingly powerful political-religious movement known as the Vishva Hindu Parishad is attempting to impart an aggressively Hindu character ("Hindutva") to the Indian nation-state. Is this a case of the intrusion of religion into the domain of the state? According to a recent secular Indian critic, Dipankar Gupta,

Hindutva consciousness is not so much a religious consciousness as it is a nation-state consciousness. In the minds of the majority population (in this case Hindu) the nation-state is being held to ransom by Sikhs (in Punjab) and by Muslims (in Kashmir). For over 10 years now (and for Kashmir it is even longer) the problems in the northern border areas have been primarily understood as problems with religious minorities. The majority community has thus been quite significantly persuaded by the counter secular argument that the Hindus are the only ones upholding India while the other communities, who have been given all kinds of guarantees and protection by the Indian Constitution, are bent on breaking it up.<sup>11</sup>

Gupta deplors this outcome, but believes (as most secularists in India appear to do) that it is to be explained by vested

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Politics of Multiculturalism in the Wake of the Rushdie Affair," *Politics and Society* 18 (1990).

<sup>11</sup> D. Gupta, "Communalism and Fundamentalism: Some Notes on the Nature of Ethnic Politics in India," *Economic and Political Weekly* (Bombay), Annual Number, March 1991, p. 573.

political interests, leaders who formulate communalist ideologies and then manipulate popular feelings to respond to them. Like many secularists in the West, Gupta suggests that “politicized religion” is more manipulative (“conspiratorial” is the word he uses) than secular politics. I find this suggestion less than convincing.

It is true that historically in India (and in the Middle East, for that matter) boundaries between religious communities have been far more fluid, and the identities of members of neighboring communities far more overlapping, than the constructors of religious orthodoxies would have us believe. But there are two observations that need to be made in this connection. First, the attempt to establish fixed boundaries between populations, to reform and standardize their beliefs and practices, to secure their loyalties, and to define their community membership—all of this has been central to the project of the modern nation-state which is essentially “secular” and not “religious.” That this attempt has not everywhere been successful is beside the point. It is the distinctive character of the modern state’s strategic and administrative disciplines that I want to underline. Their scope, intensity, and continuity exceed anything that religious reformers in premodern times could aspire to. (Indeed, the political ambitions of today’s “fundamentalist” movements have themselves been shaped by the presence of these modern disciplines.)

My second point has to do with a particular feature of the modern system of mass elections and machine-party politics. In a secular, democratic state whose citizens are seen, by religious as well as secular-nationalist observers, to be divided into “the majority [religious] community” and “religious minorities,” there will tend to be an elision between the politically representative character of government on the one hand and the state’s national presentation of itself on the other. Assisting this elision will be the dominant nationalist discourse which identifies the history of “the nation” with the history of “the [religious] majority.”

Chatterjee's rich article traces the roots of this elision to nineteenth-century Bengali historiography which, in constructing the story of the Indian "nation," identified it with the vicissitudes of "the Hindus." As in other parts of the world then subject to European hegemony, Indian nationalists learned to read and write history from their imperial masters as a secular narrative that describes the progress of "peoples" and accounts for their subjection to or of one another. Chatterjee analyzes the construction of the nationalist historical scheme which is also in its major outlines a European scheme: first a glorious "classical" Hindu India, then a "medieval" India dominated by the cruel and decadent rule of Muslim invaders, and finally the "modern" epoch beginning with British colonial government. Nationalists recognized that British administration was just, beneficial, and *progressive*, but they did not consider that this rendered it *legitimate*—on the contrary, they claimed that only an independent India would restore government to the true representatives of its people and that it alone could ensure a more comprehensive progress of the nation toward a truly modern condition.<sup>12</sup>

Chatterjee points to the exclusion of Muslims from the essence of the Indian (Hindu) nation in this historical scheme, and argues that this makes nationalist historiography always available to "Hindu extremist politics." He is critical of

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<sup>12</sup> What the Indian nationalists perhaps did not sufficiently appreciate was that the liberal British claim to rule India was based not on any notion of representation of the governed but on a transcendental principle: the ruler's power to create a missing virtue. J. S. Mill expressed this most clearly: "There are conditions of society in which a vigorous despotism is in itself the best mode of government for training the people in what is specifically wanting to render them capable of a higher civilization. There are others, in which the mere fact of despotism has indeed no beneficial effect, the lessons which it teaches having already been only too completely learnt; but in which, *there being no spring of spontaneous improvement in the people themselves, their almost only hope of making any steps in advance depends on the character of a good despot.* Under a native despotism, a good despot is a rare and transitory accident: but when the dominion they are under is that of a more civilized people, that people ought to be able to supply it constantly" (J. S. Mill, "Representative Government" [1861], *Three Essays* [1975], pp. 408–409; emphasis added.)

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secularists in the Nehru tradition who favor a more vigorous response within the domain of state politics, as well as of Gandhian populists who maintain that Indian folk-society is naturally plural and tolerant if only state politics could be got off its back. “None of these answers,” he concludes, “can admit that the Indian nation as a whole can have a claim on the historical legacy of Islam. . . . Islam here is either the history of foreign conquest or a domesticated element of everyday popular life. The classical heritage of Islam remains external to Indian history.”

Chatterjee’s implicit solution to the problem of religious identities in a secular state stands in marked contrast to the positions elaborated recently by the Jews in France, who are the subject of Friedlander’s informative article.

Recent moves to reassert Jewish identity in France have taken several forms, Friedlander tells us, including the development of secular Jewish culture and a return to Orthodox community life and study. The responses here do not propose the enrichment of a common national culture by drawing on the Jewish heritage but rather the creation of cultural autonomy within a multinational state. The problem phrased in this way is perhaps particularly acute for France with its highly centralized administrative and educational systems, and the demands of secular and religious Jews in France may therefore appear to be similar to other calls for political and cultural devolution in that country. But there is an important difference: whereas regional “nationalisms” are grounded in specific geographical areas within the overall territory of the state, the proposed Jewish-nation-in-France is not. However, whatever problems of political representation and resource-sharing this fact may create at the center, there is no formal difficulty in a modern state containing more than one “nation”—and no fatal practical difficulties provided that the constituent “nations” accept a common “nationality” and that the state itself is not identified as the state of one of the “nations” only (as it is in Israel).

In France, with its predominantly Catholic population, the church has been sharply separated from state structures since the Act of 1905—with the exception of Alsace, where (for historical reasons going back to its annexation in 1801) the state pays the salaries of Catholic priests, Protestant ministers, and Jewish rabbis. It does not follow, of course, that “religion” (i.e., religious sentiments) has no influence on French domestic politics, as reactions of both government officials and ordinary citizens to the new Islamic presence in the country show.<sup>13</sup>

For several centuries the Roman Catholic church has had to come to terms with powers of the modern nation-state in each European country. But as a transnational organization it has, of course, its own disciplinary structures and concerns. Della Cava’s fascinating narrative traces the recent conflicts between “liberals” and “conservatives” within that worldwide body. The democratizing tendencies of the former since the Second Vatican Council of the mid-sixties has been met increasingly by authoritarian measures on the part of the latter. Ironically, it is the conservatives who are committed to separating the “properly religious” concerns of the church from the “political.” Thus their strenuous opposition to liberation theology is in effect a rejection of the church’s too-intimate involvement with “the world.” It is because liberation theology confounds religion with politics, they say, that its intellectual content is so thin and its spiritual grasp so feeble.

The influential lay religious movements through which the present hegemony of Vatican conservatives has been furthered are confined almost entirely to Europe (the United States and Peru being the two exceptions). Della Cava argues that this reflects the Vatican’s preoccupation with helping to remake “Christian Europe.” In this regard both its policies and its rhetoric appear to resonate with the efforts of the European

<sup>13</sup> A recent survey that concentrates on the immigrant communities but without paying sufficient attention to the wider political and cultural pressures on them of the host society is G. Kepel, *Les banlieues de l’Islam: Naissance d’une religion en France* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

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Economic Community to construct supraprstate institutions and loyalties—although the Vatican’s implicit claim to be Europe’s “spiritual leader” will not be readily accepted by its member states.<sup>14</sup>

I come finally to Haeri’s intriguing contribution. Haeri maintains that, in spite of the repressive, religious character of the Islamic state, some recent developments in Iran have opened up opportunities for women’s personal lives that had been suppressed in the period of modernization initiated by Reza Shah. A form of temporary marriage (*mut’a*), recognized in Shi’i religious law, is being openly revived as a means of giving young men and women the initiative to enter into liaisons of their own choosing. In the prerevolutionary period, Haeri argues, the enforced unveiling of middle- and upper-class women resulted in heightened sensitivities among them about “respectability,” and this attitude was understandably hostile to *mut’a*, which appeared to border on licensed prostitution. But I would stress, perhaps more than she does, the role of the modern state in all this.

The modern state is also a *modernizing* state, a network of secular powers that assume the task of remolding the material and moral condition of its subjects in accordance with Enlightenment principles. This task has involved the reform and control of laws governing the most intimate relations between individuals, including sex and reproduction. In Christian Europe it led the secular state to divest ecclesiastical institutions of their authority to regulate marriage, etc., and to take it over itself.<sup>15</sup> But even in non-Christian countries which had never had ecclesiastical bodies, the modernizing state has appropriated these functions from society at large. Thus a

<sup>14</sup> But the Catholic dimension may not be a liability either, as Germany’s recent drive to recognize Catholic Croatia and to bring it closer to “Europe” testifies.

<sup>15</sup> In England, “family law” as a distinct body of legal knowledge applicable in the secular courts emerged only late in the nineteenth century, after the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 had deprived ecclesiastical courts of all jurisdiction in matrimonial cases; see E. L. Johnson, *Family Law*, 2nd ed. (London, 1965).

basic problem with *mut'a* under the Westernizing shahs was that the state found it difficult to appropriate.

In other parts of the Middle East the construction of modern states has involved the forcible reconstruction of the "religious law" (the *shari'a*) since about the middle of the nineteenth century. Those parts of the *shari'a* that were now defined as "commercial law" and "criminal law" were dropped, and European-based codes substituted for them. The so-called "law of civil status" was amended and confined to one of two branches of the reorganized state court system.

Legal concepts necessary for modern capitalist enterprise, as well as for liberal practices of punitive justice, were thus put into operation by the state. Even when the reforms in "family law" were achieved through the use of legal devices previously available in the tradition of the *shari'a*, the movement was toward the adoption of categories necessary for reconstructing morality along modern, liberal lines. Thus procedural devices that were used by the courts to discourage "child marriage," for example, didn't merely help to raise the minimum age of marriage; they also served to introduce Western liberal ideas about the proper relation between childhood and sexuality.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the modern world, as in Europe historically, the construction of secularism has meant something more than a simple separation of religion and the state. It has involved the coercive universalization of modern morality, knowledge, law and nation-statehood.

<sup>16</sup> I have dealt with this in some detail in a paper entitled "Conscripts of Western Civilization" submitted in February 1987 for Stanley Diamond's Festschrift, which is not yet published.