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Incorporating Secularism and Related Constructs within the Critical Study of Religion

Christopher R. Cotter

As editor of this special feature, and as a conversation partner in the initial interview with Donovan Schaefer back in 2016, I have given myself the dubious pleasure of having the penultimate word in this round of responses, before Donovan provides some parting thoughts. This is a pleasure inasmuch as I am clearly heavily invested in the debates surrounding the deliberately provocative question – *Is Secularism a World Religion?* – that provided our starting point, I thoroughly enjoyed participating in the original conversation, and have relished assembling a diverse team of respondents to provide commentary from their own disciplinary and empirical perspectives. The pleasure is dubious because almost everything I could think of to say has already been said, either by Schaefer and myself in the interview, or in the resulting responses. Never fear, though...

A Problematic Question

As acknowledged throughout this special feature, the central question itself is problematic for a host of reasons. It requires agreement about what ‘secularism’ is – is this a specific, oppositional force to religion? The differentiation between ‘religious’ parts of society and those in which religion is not an immediate point of reference? Do we mean the *political* secularism(s) intrinsic to many (Western) democracies? Does it involve some sort of normative commitment? Or can it, as Frost suggests above, refer to a more sweeping ‘non-religious’ distancing from a generalized notion of religion? Or some combination of these?

Then, there are additional problems with ‘(World) Religion’. Religion ‘is a modern concept that operates as a distorting anachronism when applied to the study of earlier epochs’ (Goldenberg 2018, 80; cf. Nongbri 2013). It ‘has roots in European colonial ambitions and intellectual history’ (Goldenberg 2018, 80; cf. J. Z. Smith 1998, 275; Cotter and Robertson 2016b) and many models of religion (implicitly or explicitly) justify Christian Europe’s cultural superiority (Martin 2017, 13). By generally prioritizing

belief and doctrine and preserved in texts (Lopez Jr. 1998, 21), the very concept of religion is ‘a citation of Christianity as idealized prototype’ (Goldenberg 2018, 80). Assigning ‘secularism’ to the category of ‘religion’ can therefore amount to perpetuating these issues. Similarly, deciding that it is not religious is also a function of power (Goldenberg 2018, 80) and can be as ‘self-serving as narratives that privilege one “religion” over another’ (Martin 2017, 11). Adding ‘World’ into the mix doesn’t help matters, as the World Religions Paradigm has been thoroughly critiqued for repeating and reinforcing the presumptions of Protestant missionaries, being centred on belief, texts and institutions, privileging the accounts of elites, and de-emphasizing heterogeneity (see Owen 2011; King 1999; Masuzawa 2005; Cotter and Robertson 2016b; Nongbri 2013).

However, precisely because of these problems, asking whether secularism is a World Religion in a classroom setting can have enormous pedagogic value as, again, has already been reflected upon in the texts above. The issue that I wish to focus upon in the remainder of this piece – which has been implicit throughout some of the responses above – is not whether ‘secularism’, or a related gamut of ‘other than religious’ (J. M. Smith and Cragun 2019) or ‘religion-related’ (Quack 2014) constructs, is ‘a World Religion’ or is ‘really religious’, but the manner in which these constructs can be incorporated within the purview of the critical academic study of ‘religion’. In this context, I understand the critical study of religion to be the ‘critical historical deconstruction of “religion” *and related categories*’ (Fitzgerald 2015b, 303–4). Those seeking excellent recent primers on this approach are encouraged to engage with Martin (2017) and Goldenberg (2018). Furthermore, much of what has been written in this special feature would also fall under the critical umbrella.

The Critical Study of Secularism (etc)

Recent decades have seen an enormous growth in studies of ‘non-religion’¹ – conceived substantively as ‘any phenomenon – position, perspective, or practice – that is primarily understood in relation to religion but which is not itself considered to be religious’ (Lee 2015, 32) – as opposed to a residual empty state that is left over when ‘religion’ has been eliminated from the equation. The authors of such studies frequently point to statistics that are taken to demonstrate that ‘nonbelievers in God’ are the world’s fourth largest religious group (Lee 2015, 61; Baker and Smith 2015, 1; Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale 2016, 4–6; Zuckerman 2010, 96). If other ‘World Religions’ are deemed worthy of study (and, thus, incorporation into the World Religions classroom), then surely this group – seemingly represented the world over – must be? It makes sense that those involved in the study of religion might be curious as to what exactly is going on here. However, the notion that there are growing numbers of ‘non-religious’ individuals in the (Western) world is often built upon a residual ‘none’ or ‘no religion’ category constructed by censuses and surveys – typically alongside, as Frost notes, the ‘World Religions’. The phrase ‘the nones’ has ‘no meaning except in relation to multiple-choice grammars’ – there is nothing that makes this a ‘group’ apart from this box-ticking exercise – and therefore, ‘in accommodating and attending to non-affiliation, academics are implicated in the creation not only of a population but of a social group’ (Lee 2015, 132). Furthermore, whilst there is an admirable logic of inclusion in the argument that ‘being “secular” might not only be a matter of being *without* religion but also a matter of being *with* something else’ (2015, 5), there is a danger that this simply repeats and reinforces a discredited World Religions model, homogenizing differences (as the texts above acknowledge) and over-emphasizing seemingly religion-like features (Cotter and Robertson 2016b, 12).

¹ For example, Bullivant (2008), Zuckerman (2010; 2011), Cotter (2015), Catto and Eccles (2013), Chervallil-Contractor et al. (2013), Hassall and Bushfield (2014), Silver et al. (2014), Baker and Smith (2015), P. Beyer (2015), Eccles and Catto (2015), Lee (2015), Mann (2015), Manning (2015), and Zuckerman, Galen and Pasquale (2016), among others.

However, there are several clear reasons why critical scholars of religion can benefit from the study of 'non-religion'. First, although many 'presume that [the term 'religion'] points to pre-social and thus universal sentiments' (McCutcheon 2007, 182) – the notion of *homo religiosus* critiqued by Coleman and Messick above – studying non-religion, atheism, agnosticism, religious indifference and so on can facilitate the testing and problematizing of this perceived or claimed universality of religion, if only suggestively. Second, studying such constructs – which are necessarily 'religion-related' (Quack 2014) in many contexts – allows us to explore relational interactions, identity politics and contestations at different sites: from the US-centric discursive battles between 'New Atheists' and the 'Religious Right', to localized studies of how people construct social identities 'on the ground'. Third, studying non-religion can also contribute to theorizing the concept of 'religion' in relation to the 'secular' and other categories. Studying the under-researched side of this problematic binary can provide a solid basis for its continued questioning and lies at the heart of many contemporary legal issues such as individual (non)religious freedoms, charitable statuses, or separation of church and state.

That being said, through being explicitly relativized to 'religion', substantive studies of non-religion seem doomed to be plagued by similar issues (Jong 2015, 16). According to Timothy Fitzgerald, to 'imagine that either side of this binary – "religion" or "non-religion" – can be addressed as a topic of research is an act of reification succumbing to, and reproducing, a central ideological illusion of Liberalism' (2015a, 263–64). In response to this, one might argue that the study of non-religion is precisely the study of a culturally dominant reification. Indeed, it is Western cultural history itself that reifies the distinctions between religion, non-religion, 'spiritual but not religious' and so on (Lee 2015, 26). However, through being tied to religion, empirical studies of non-religion seem rightly chastised by Fitzgerald, and destined to 'focus on the negation and not the object being negated, although we do not accept the object in the first place' (Engelke 2015, 136).

Productive Ways Forward

One possible way for scholars to sidestep this critique is to be ‘vigilantly specific about the aspect of “nonreligion” that they are interested in’ (Jong 2015, 20) and precise about ‘the instance to which it is applied and the meaning to which it is used’ (Buckley 1987, 6; cited in Quillen 2015, 118). This would be somewhat analogous to Schaefer’s suggestion that we bring the idea of multiple secularisms into the classroom. Others, like Jacqui Frost above, see merit in recent efforts to utilize ‘worldviews’ as a less problematic overarching rubric for the study of religion and non-religion (Taves 2018; Taves, Asprem, and Ihm 2018). However, as I argue elsewhere (Cotter Forthcoming A; Forthcoming B), the focus upon ‘ways of life’ and ‘big questions’ that animates this approach (Taves, Asprem, and Ihm 2018, 207–8) risks obscuring the contingent and socially constructed conflation between religion, non-religion, and the ‘big questions’, and playing into vested interests that wish to make non-/religion all about providing meaning, value, and answers to said big questions. Another approach is to take the deconstructive path advocated above by Eaghll and rise to Fitzgerald’s challenge: ‘Surely the only topic here that makes sense as an object of study is the discourse [on “religion” and “non-religion”] itself?’ (2015a, 264 fn. 22). Perhaps instead of trying to answer the question of whether secularism is a World Religion, we should focus upon the discursive processes by which asking and answering this question makes sense, the contexts in which it makes sense, and so on?

Craig Martin’s chapter on ‘Authenticity’ in *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion* identifies a number of questions that should arguably be asked in place of the temptation to assess ‘what is “authentic” or what is this group’s “essence”’ (2017, 154), and which can be usefully adapted in approaching our central question:

- Who is asking the question, and why might they wish to answer it in a particular way?
- ‘What do they stand to win in this context if their claim is received as persuasive?’
- ‘What could they lose if it is not?’
- What competing perspectives might be in place?

- ‘And who holds the social, political, or legal power to enforce their’ answer?

The way in which this question is answered might affect how certain groups or perspectives associated with ‘secularism’ gain access to charitable status, exceptions from or prescriptions of certain things, and whether topics associated with it are permitted on the curricula of public schools. It can affect chaplaincy provision, healthcare, freedom of expression, rituals associated with dying, whether secularism or (world) religions are deemed worthy of respect or derision, whether secularism is seen as a worldview apart or one among many, and so on. And so too for the whole range of positions that might be considered under the notion of ‘non-religion’. Encouraging students to consider these questions is an excellent way to encourage critical analysis of the key concepts that populate our field of study. Whether we have the time, space, ability or desire to push these sorts of questions in the classroom is, however, a different issue entirely. As to the incorporation of this into the World Religions classroom? Well, the problem there isn’t secularism as such, but the very notion of a World Religions classroom. In *After World Religions* (2016a), David G. Robertson and I gathered together chapters from scholars engaged in varying ‘subversive’, ‘alternative’ and ‘innovative’ pedagogical campaigns against the entrenched World Religions Paradigm. If one cannot, for whatever reason, engage in alternative or innovative approaches to dismantle the organizing rubric – be this World Religions or simply the notion of ‘religion’ – then the subversive incorporation of critically-engaged studies of ‘non-religion’ (see Cotter Forthcoming A) into one’s teaching, or rhetorically asking if secularism is a World Religion, can sow destabilizing seeds of critical thinking that can bear fruit in the most unexpected of places.

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