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Religion and Its Other

Secular and Sacral Concepts
and Practices in Interaction



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Introduction: Reconfiguring Religion and Its Other

Michi Knecht and Jörg Feuchter

»Any discipline that seeks to understand ›religion‹ must also try to understand its other.« (Talal Asad)

Religion is back. At the turn of the new millennium, swan songs of religious decline have given way to the rhetoric of religious returns.¹ Already over the course of the last four decades, theories of secularization have lost much of their former plausibility. Empirical observations as well as analytical arguments are brought to bear evidence against accounts that narrate the story of modernization as a »disenchantment of the world« (Max Weber) and as a progressive separation of politics and religion in an oversimplified manner. From being the model case for a universal trend, parts of Europe have been reallocated to the position of an exception from the rule, their high degree of secularization itself becoming an object of more localized theoretical arguments and more sustained empirical analysis. The course of history can no longer be understood as an inevitable development towards the vanishing of religion. Yet as much as this insight may have become common sense among scholars of the humanities and social sciences concerned with religion, as little do we seem to have begun to grasp its epistemological implications for our world. Because if even secularized European societies can be described as »post-secular«² in a certain sense, as Jürgen Habermas has just pointed out, then »the secular« itself, until recently a virtually unquestioned background category in the studies on religion, can no longer be taken for granted. Rather, it has to become the object of study. Instead of being understood as the absence of religion, as the real world which is left after the

1 See, for instance, David Martin, Grace Davie & Peter Berger (eds.), *The De-Secularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (New York: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999); Martin Riesebrodt, »Fundamentalism and the Resurgence of Religion«, in: *Numen* 47 (2000), pp. 266–287; and more recently, Martin Riesebrodt, *Cultus und Heilversprechen. Eine Theorie der Religionen* (München: Beck, 2007); as well as Martin Tremel & Daniel Weidner, »Zur Aktualität der Religionen. Einleitung«, in: *Nachleben der Religionen. Kulturwissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zur Dialektik der Säkularisierung*, ed. by Martin Tremel & Daniel Weidner (München: Fink, 2007), pp. 7–24.

2 Jürgen Habermas, »Notes on a post-secular society«, in: *signandsight.com*, 18.06.2008, URL: <http://www.signandsight.com/features/1714.html> (retrieved 22.06.2008). First published in German as: »Die Dialektik der Säkularisierung«, in: *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* (2008), 4, pp. 33–46. Habermas refers to »the affluent societies of Europe or countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand«. Cf. also Hans J. Höhn, *Postsäkular. Gesellschaft im Umbruch – Religion im Wandel* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2006).

removal of the world's »enchantment«, it has to be understood as a particular figuration. And of course, the end of simple secularization narratives has also deep effects on our understanding of religion as well as for the dichotomy within which both religion and the secular are constructed.

This is where this volume takes up. It is an attempt to grapple with the epistemological consequences of the post-secular turn. It endeavours to rethink the relationship between religion and different forms and dimensions of the secular through a wide array of empirically grounded case studies from different disciplines. In doing this, its leitmotif is the figure-ground-relationship between religion and its other as it is perceived and configured locally, regionally, nationally or transnationally in historical as well as contemporary contexts. Yet the notion of the »other of religion« is open to more than one possible meaning, and it cannot be fixed independently of specific situations and forms, in which it is embedded. In this volume, »religion's other« refers to a number of constellations along two rather broad, but distinct dimensions. For one, all contributions to this publication take up the »other of religion« as an instance of the secular in its manifold forms. These range from the secular state, positive law, and specific formations of secular selves and embodiments to particular practices of biomedicine, science, and journalism. In addition, the majority of the authors in this volume also address the »other of religion« in the sense of »other religions«. Along this dimension, they trace processes of real or imaginary engagements and transfers amongst and between Protestantism and Catholicism as well as amongst and between Islam, Judaism and Christianity. The contributors outline the boundary-setting and border-crossing strategies of reform movements as actively located within larger, hegemonic congregations or communities of faith and investigate the articulations and appropriations that occur in encounters between locally expressed religions and more widely mobilized and traveling forms.

The two dimensions of »religion's other« – the secular or the non-religious on the one hand, and other religions on the other hand – touch and intermingle. At their interfaces, a set of questions is generated that provide the contributors to this volume with common ground in spite of the fact that their fields of inquiry span eight centuries and three continents. One such set of emerging shared problematizations concerns the possibility to conceptualize religion and the secular without giving priority to the experiences of Western modernities. Whether the presence of more than one form of religion is an explicit aspect of their research agenda or rather an implicit acknowledgement of the coevalness of different religions understood as a »common, active occupation or sharing of

time«³, all contributors try to overcome conceptions of religion and the secular that are exclusively fed by Western histories, narratives and categories. Instead they aspire to more encompassing, sometimes also more discomfiting global perspectives.⁴ A second set of shared commitments is about the hope of invigorating theory and analytical concepts through dense and detailed empirical case studies that describe and portray the complex interactions of religion and its diverse others within a microanalytic perspective. Finally, all contributions focus on the processes through which borders and boundaries between »religion and its others« are defined, maintained, negotiated and eventually stabilized or modified. They thereby contribute to the accumulation of discontinuous, contingent, and always specific histories of diverse constellations of religion and its others and productively challenge notions of religion and the secular liable to rash universalizations.

A further layer of ambiguity or complexity entailed in the notion »religion and its other« has to do with the suggested relationship between its two elements. With regard to the secular as religion's most significant other, the title of this volume points to a figuration that cannot adequately be understood as a simple dualism. Even though the two features are often viewed as antithetical to one another, we suggest they are in fact better thought of as crucially and intricately intertwined.⁵ »Religion and its other« invokes a relation that develops through the transformation of both elements or poles. It is closely associated with ideas of interdependence and interactivity and connotes processes of mirroring (as in the work of Lacan) and of dialectics (as in the writings of Hegel and Marx). At the same time, it not only associates mutual influence or even integration, but also distancing and exclusion. It thus generates questions that address the entangled histories of religion and the secular as imbued with asymmetries and imbalances of power.

All these dimensions and connotations add complexity to the notion of »religion and its other«. It is this very complexity of the image that makes it »good to think with« in the classic phrasing of Claude Levi-Strauss⁶ and that might help

3 See Johannes Fabian, *Time and The Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 31.

4 See Farish A. Noor, »Talal Asad and the Comfort of Discomfort«, in: Khaleej Times Online, 4 April 2007, URL: http://www.khaleejtimes.com/DisplayArticleNew.asp?section=opinion&cxfile=data/opinion/2007/april/opinion_april13.xml (retrieved 15.06.2008).

5 See, with regard to the configuration of modernity and tradition as comparable forms, Bruce M. Knauff, »Critically Modern: An Introduction«, in: Bruce M. Knauff, *Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), pp. 1–54, here p. 25.

6 »Good to think with« has become an almost canonical formulation in social and cultural anthropology. It is used to mark concepts or terms which prove to be particularly useful in re-thinking common sense assumptions vis-à-vis culturally diverse data and materials. The phras-

to redirect research away from binary models towards an analysis of the secular and the religious as co-constitutive. In what follows, we trace some of the critical positions that have contributed towards this development and introduce the case studies of this book in their attempt to rethink religious reform, to rewrite scholarly concepts and genealogies, and to transgress borders and boundaries that have disciplined the study of religion and its other for long.

Researching Religion and Its Other after the End of the Grand Narratives of Secularization

In social theory as well as in historical research, positions that argue for a more nuanced view of secularization and in favor of mid-ranged concepts have gained ground. A whole string of recently published monographs and edited volumes take up the argument that secularization theories have not been straightforwardly falsified, but rather proven to be too monolithic and overly abstract.⁷ In order to refine secularization theory, different strategies are proposed: The American sociologist José Casanova, for example, opts for a subdivision of three aspects, which in more monolithic versions of the secularization thesis are usually lumped together. In his account, the core development of secularization as functional differentiation and as emancipation of the sciences, the state, and the economy from religion is still very much defensible, but has to be separated from a second and third aspect, i.e., the decline of religious authority and the progressive privatization of religion.⁸ These two latter aspects of secularization, according to Casanova, should neither be seen as necessarily intertwined with the first nor be thought of as indispensable for liberal democracies. German-American sociologist of religion Martin Riesebrodt proceeds in a complementary fashion, but with a slightly different analytic vocabulary: To facilitate more adequate de-

ing goes back to Claude Levi-Strauss' use of it in his study of totemism, arguing »[...] that natural species are chosen (as totem, MK) not because they are good to eat but because they are good to think«. Claude Levi-Strauss, *Totemism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), p. 89.

- 7 See for example: Pippa Noris & Ronald Inglehart (eds.), *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Peter van der Veer & Hartmut Lehmann (eds.), *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Manuel Franzmann, Christel Gärtner & Nicole Köck (eds.), *Religiosität in der säkularisierten Welt. Theoretische und empirische Beiträge zur Säkularisierungsdebatte in der Religionssoziologie* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2006); Detlev Pollack, *Säkularisierung – ein moderner Mythos? Studien zum religiösen Wandel in Deutschland* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).
- 8 José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 19–39.