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Review Essay

Rethinking Secularism: P. Harrison, É. Balibar, T. Asad

The Territories of Science and Religion

Peter Harrison. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015. 300pp.

Secularism and Cosmopolitanism: Critical Hypotheses on Religion and Politics

Étienne Balibar. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. 288pp.

Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason

Talal Asad. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. 222pp.

Sotiris Mitralaxis*

I will discuss here three recent books that both directly and indirectly discuss religion and secularism, in different contexts and certainly from different perspectives; one by historian Peter Harrison, one by cultural anthropologist Talal Asad, and one by philosopher Étienne

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Balibar. All three authors have invested a sizable part of their scholarly career in studying religion/secularism, and the books reviewed are revised collections of relatively recent lectures and essays (rather than, for example, texts authored with the explicit purpose of comprising a monograph); this entails that each of these books is, so to speak, the *distillate* of a career in working on the concepts and realities discussed here.

Implicit in any current discussion on “science and religion” are usually three core premises: (a) that there is a (social) phenomenon called “religion,” within which all the different “religions” are to be contemplated; (b) that (natural) science is to be perceived as a wide area of inquiry that is mercilessly objective and utterly devoid of unproven axioms (i.e., devoid of anything resembling “knowledge by revelation”); and (c) that the natural state of affairs entails the illegitimate claim of religion to answer some of the questions situated within science’s domain, with the best case scenario entailing religion’s self-restraint (and thus peaceful co-existence). The thorn behind these discussions is the very fact that “science” and “religion” are rather modern inventions—at least in the way we understand them today. Peter Harrison’s *The Territories of Science and Religion* is not *explicitly* about secularism, yet by researching the historical background of our modern understanding of “religion” and “science,” it is indeed exploring the *preconditions* for doing so. The book is a revised version of the Gifford Lectures Harrison delivered at the University of Edinburgh in February 2011. I must start off by confessing that I consider *The Territories of Science and Religion*, as well as the books by Harrison that reflect the earlier stages of this line of research, exceedingly important and truly ground-breaking. In meticulously researching the evolution of the semantic content of terms such as ‘*religio*’ and ‘*scientia*’, Harrison demonstrates that these are concepts that emerged in early modernity and evolved ever since. This is obviously not to say that ‘*religio*’ and ‘*scientia*’ (or θρησκεία and ἐπιστήμη, respectively) did not exist *as words* prior to early modernity, but that their meaning was substantially different to the one they bear today (more akin to personal *virtues*), and that their perceived antithetical nature is part and parcel with the particular meaning they started to acquire from a historical point in time onwards. To perceive phenomena and realities that predate this particular semantic content—for example, the Christian church—as being circumscribed by that content is to unknowingly indulge in a pernicious anachronism, in which one essentially enters a debate with pre-arranged conclusions. Harrison does not hasten to dictate conclusions but is more invested in laying out the findings of his historical research (“In keeping with the original tone of

the lectures on which this book is based, I have tried simply to tell the story, and have refrained, or at least have attempted to refrain, from intruding more recondite theoretical reflections into the narrative” [xi]), although it is rather unavoidable that the reader grasps the implications of these findings for contemporary debates on religion, science, and secularism.

The author masterfully demonstrates in *Territories* how our modern and contemporary understanding of “science” and “religion,” usually thought of as primordial bodies of knowledge explaining the world, is surprisingly modern, a four-hundred-years affair. Scholars familiar with the study of the human past cannot but agree with this conclusion; in spite of this, this would be startling news to many, if we are to judge by how, in almost the totality of the religion and science debate, these two notions are violently projected to the past as reified substances. The real problem, however, lies in the fact that those two *modern* notions, in stark contrast to the realities they strive to point at, are *by definition antithetical and mutually exclusive*, when examined closely—and Harrison shows when and how exactly this has emerged. In the modern conceptualisation of “religion” and “science,” two *competing* narratives for the explanation of the world around us are offered, one evidence-driven and one mythology-driven. Given that the religious narrative is seen as frozen in time, as it were, while science is further developing every day with newer evidence and proof, these two cannot but clash and collide. The problem is that by accepting to enter into the sphere of meanings offered by the modern notions of “science” and “religion,” one has already inescapably accepted the only logical conclusion that this can lead two. By accepting to employ this *language*, one by definition accepts the *conclusions* that are *inherent in that language*. This review cannot and should not summarize the book itself, particularly given its nature as the detailed telling of a long story in the history of science, religion, and ideas, but I hope the reader will allow me some comments on the context in which this book appears, and thus indirectly on its importance and, I would go as far as to say, potentially explosive nature.

According to the narrative inherent in the very concepts today, these two explanatory “systems”—science and religion—might not have *seemed* that competing at an age when science was not mature or powerful enough to challenge religion (and was being trumped by it), but perhaps a new age has dawned, and so forth. To cite just one example, Ian Barbour’s schema (*Religion and Science*, 1997) of four possible science-religion relations (conflict-independence-dialogue-integration) testifies to this, as it asserts

the mutually exclusive nature of “religion” and “science,” with the latter two options signalling attempts at *accommodating* this mutual exclusivity. Even in the case of the “friendlier” options, the setting is still one of “taming the lion”—in the case of *dialogue*—or of subjugating it—in the case of *integration*. One would expect those insights such as those by Peter Harrison on the subject, demonstrating the problem with the *very terms used* and the fact that, in a sense, “this game is rigged,” would have acted as a game-changer, changing the debate *itself* by inescapably changing its *very frame*. However, it is not difficult to see that this is not the case. Applauded as they are by scholarship, insights such as these have not resulted in a change of this magnitude. They have set off debates that run *parallel* to the “religion and science” one, while the not-always-scholarly arena of the “religion and science” debate goes on with its peaceful life of mutual character assassinations and vigorous argument recycling (and what is vigorous here is the *recycling*, not the arguments). Why is this the case? I believe that this is because our cultural context effectively precludes any capacity to conceptualise science and religion differently on any level other than the purely scholarly one. “Science” and “religion” are not just two concepts. In their modern and current reincarnation, they are *foundational concepts* for the constitution of our globalised Western worldview, the *given* worldview in which we all exist (in which other worldviews are integrated via commodification, effectively annihilating them). Starting with modernity, the popular semantic contents of “science” and “religion” form a sizable part of the very fabric of our shared worldview, of our cultural presuppositions—most explicitly articulated in the Enlightenment juxtaposition of a “grand age of science, or rationality” to a “grand age of religion/superstition.” Trapped within this narrative as we are as a culture, secularism seems the only conceivable future, since the world *progresses*. This renders the current global resurgence of religion utterly incomprehensible—and confines the discussion on *post-secularism* (not in a Habermasian sense, but in the sense of an era *after* secularism) within the walls of academia. The struggle of a liberating science with an obscurantist religion is one of the most important and prevalent foundational myths of modernity, culminating in our current predicament. Even entertaining the possibility of approaching reality with different notional tools is unimaginable, as this presupposes being able to think outside the box of our culture writ large—and it is to be debated whether this is possible at all at a scale grander than that of academia.

Thus, meticulously narrated historical indications such as the ones found in Harrison's *Territories* that the very *premises* of our discussions on religion, science, and secularism are problematic and anachronistic undermine the very frame within which these discussions take place. The possibility that a substantial part of this debate is little more than a Wittgensteinian "language game" (as Talal Asad often remarks in the second book under review here), in which we merely operate within our cultural and historical/anachronistic presuppositions in a predictable manner, should be quite unsettling, given the centrality of this debate in today's academic as well as public sphere.

(The reader would do well to also study John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, together with Harrison's *Territories*. While this would be a very, very different book, both Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* and Harrison's *Territories* make much more sense when read together, perhaps *precisely* due to their different perspectives, aims, and methods.)

One can see this (up until now implicit in Harrison's *Territories*) questioning of basic secular premises from a different (and softer) perspective in Talal Asad's *Secular Translations Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason*. Cultural anthropologist and author of *Formations of the Secular Christianity, Islam, Modernity* Talal Asad offers here an expanded version of his Ruth Benedict lectures to Columbia University's Department of Anthropology in April 2017, revisiting his earlier work on secularism and expanding on it. The main problem that occupies Asad is the (claim to the) "translation" from the religious to the nonreligious (for example, at the level of values)—and its essential untranslatability. The first chapter questions notions according to which liberal secularity is a secular translation of (Judaean) Christian values and challenges Jürgen Habermas' conception of postsecularism. The second chapter examines untranslatability via the "sensible body," particularly on the basis of Muslim traditions and embodied practices concerning the Qur'an, and the third chapter contributes to the question of the emergence of the "self" as a unique, self-governing agent, with a particular focus on the *mask(s)*, and on the "language of numbers." Talal's skepticism is based "on the fact that we think of both 'Christianity' and 'secularity' too rigidly, describing them too confidently, on the basis of an a priori secular history and secular anthropology. The very dispute over whether there is or is not an essential continuity between religion and the secular depends on constructed concepts of both" (147). The purported translatability of Christian values into secular ones is premised on thinking about Christianity, religion at large, and secularism

as natural kinds—and this premise is deeply problematic: “if there is one general point this book has been making, it is that words like ‘modernity’, ‘religion’, ‘politics’, ‘secularism’ and their associated, shifting vocabularies are intertwined with modes of life” (ibid.). While Talal’s book (together with his earlier research) proposes neither a deconstruction of secularism *per se* nor an explicit postsecularism, it is one of a wide array of contributions that put secularism itself under scrutiny rather than self-evidently take it as the basis for a social scientific approach (thus, in many ways, the description of Talal’s project as “an anthropology of secularism”). A common element of both Talal’s and Balibar’s books is that, while they are in no way invested in a project of deconstructing secularism and are even less motivated by the “return of religion,” they are ready to see (facets of) secularism as part of the problem, indeed as potentially *engendering* problems. In Talal’s concluding words, “how, if at all, we can adapt to unpredictable catastrophes in our life—collective as well as individual—is impossible to answer confidently. I find myself, like others today, in a condition more troubling than doubt and less reassuring than faith—especially the faith that the ideals of secular reason and the language in which it is expressed will ultimately resolve all problems and never create new, intractable ones” (161).

Étienne Balibar’s *Secularism and Cosmopolitanism: Critical Hypotheses on Religion and Politics* promises “to explore the tensions lurking at [the troubled nexus of secularism and cosmopolitanism] in order to advance a truly democratic and emancipatory cosmopolitanism, which requires a secularization of secularism itself,” as the publisher notes. This as well is a collection of texts: the first part is the English translation of Balibar’s 2012 *Saeculum: Culture, Religion, Idéologie*; the second part is comprised of essays written in 2005–2006; and the third part, “Statements,” brings together three writings from 2015–17 in response to the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* and later acts of what is usually called radical Islamic terrorism. Balibar notes at about the start of the book that secularism and secularization can also be a source of *problems*, not merely of solutions, particularly in the context of a project of cosmopolitanism; as he writes,

supposing that, under the conditions of contemporary politics, no cosmopolitan project is tenable without secularization (in other words, supposing that the idea of a “religious cosmopolitanism” is untenable *per se*), why is it that holding up a secular or secularized perspective for the construction of the cosmopolis only adds (at least initially) new problems and contradictions to those already entailed by the idea of moving from

citizenship at a national level to transnational citizenship? In other words, why does the idea of a public sphere that is freed from the grip of religion (an idea that seemed straightforward enough even if it did not command unanimous consent) at the level of the polis or nation, become confusing, impracticable, or even self-destructive when we shift our concept of politics to the level of the world or humanity, that is, to a space a priori free of limits and exclusions? (6)

While the book is, of course, full of fascinating insights and philosophical acumen, I am inclined to discern a certain puzzlement, if not bewilderment, in view of the new rules of the game, as it were: i.e., that as the very prophet of the secularization thesis Peter L. Berger argued decades ago, the *desecularization* of the world is well underway, with the exception of, mainly, certain European societies with particularly ominous demographics and, thus, rather dim prospects in the long run. My sense of a certain awkwardness on the part of Balibar in the face of this current and unfolding reality may be unjustly amplified by the comparison of this book to Harrison's and Talal's more lucid theses. To this lucidity, Balibar counterproposes the need to imagine a "*laïcité of the future*" ("we should not only reflect on the *future of laïcité*, but we should also reflect on the [contingent and hypothetical] *laïcité of the future*," [116])—and this is the case in spite of his clear diagnosis of the plethora of "secular religions" (45) or of the use of *laïcité* as [French] national identity politics (162–66). Balibar aims at defining a strategy "through the somewhat utopian notion of the *secularized secularism* (or *desacralized secularism*)"; this notion is proposed "not as a 'solution' or a 'fixed' concept, but as an instrument to criticize existing rules, construct genealogies, and make room for political imagination" (viii)—in any case, however, his thinking operates *within* the frame and on the premises of secularism, however understood. Balibar does discern that "religion" is a historically constructed and problematic notion (and he explicitly takes Talal Asad's work into account in doing so) and that secularism "has contended itself with displacing and amplifying [the theological antitheses intrinsic to the Christian tradition]" rather than having abolished them (31) and is itself religious in a host of ways (e.g., "in what we commonly refer to as the 'return of the religious', I include certain ways of asserting or imposing *laïcité*, as themselves deeply religious forms of reacting to what is perceived as a 're-theologization' of social conflicts or their modalities of self-consciousness," [xxi]), yet he seems to recognize and question certain givens of our modern and contemporary ideology *only up to a certain extent*. This is a reading of

Balibar's *Secularism and Cosmopolitanism* that is premised upon the prior study of Harrison's and Asad's studies; in any case, however, it seems to me that while we find ourselves in a phase where many theoretical givens on—and certain historical expectations from—secularism (and *laïcité* itself) have crumbled, allowing a litany of thinkers to fascinatingly explore cognate theoretical areas in way hitherto unthinkable due to the implicit ideological frame and horizon we all operate in, Balibar may seem today as stopping short from making a true leap to previously unexplored territories, resorting instead to using sharp, yet somewhat old, tools.