BOOK REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

TRANSGLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON A GLOBAL SECULAR AGE

A Secular Age beyond the West: Religion, Law and the State in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa.
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In their introduction to this rich volume, editors Mirjam Künkler and Shylashri Shankar explain the multilayered and complex agenda for the collection. A first goal of A Secular Age beyond the West: Religion, Law and the State in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa is to shed more light on the career of the secular in (post)colonial states and by doing so “transcend dichotomies of West and non-West” (12). As the chapters cover societies with different religious majority patterns, multiple formations of legal arrangements around religion, and numerous political systems ranging from dictatorial-authoritarian to more liberal-democratic settings, the country studies provide rare insights into the diversity of the postcolonial management of religion.

Secondly, by building on Charles Taylor’s threefold notion of secularity, the volume seeks to throw some light on modern religion-state relations (2), while at the same time covering the frequently conflictive and contradictory processes of boundary formation and boundary implementation between the religious and the nonreligious (5). In other words, the contributors to this book set themselves the task to analyze the (temporary) fixations of the religious and the secular in the context of state building and the evolution of modern governmentality during and after the colonial era.

To implement this agenda, the editors and authors have chosen an approach that diverges significantly from Charles Taylor’s A Secular Age. The historical precondition of Taylor’s secular age is an exclusive humanism that evolved within “Latin Christendom” and its later incarnation of “the modern West.” In this light, the evolution of the secular age is the result of a globally unique civilizational grammar that created the possibility of the death of God and its comprehensive ideational, social, and political consequences. For a comparative endeavor, Taylor envisioned a more detailed study of the diverse forms of secularization and secularity “in their different civilizational sites” before we could aspire toward some more general, world-historical conclusions. As I understand Taylor, a move beyond the confines of the modern North-Atlantic seems to be intrinsically tied to an analysis of the alterations in the civilizational textures of colonial and postcolonial societies in the modern era.

A Secular Age beyond the West boils this agenda down to the study of parallel national histories. Although several case studies recognize the colonial era as an important formative period for all

2 Taylor, A Secular Age, 21.
three forms of secularity across Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, the volume does not contain a more in-depth comparison of European empires and their impact on how the modern state regulated religion and facilitated or obstructed secularization. A more thorough, comparative study of the colonial governmentality of religion could facilitate a better understanding of the interconnected character of European religious regulations in Asian and African colonies and how they were negotiated within and among local communities.3

Another important research field this volume indicates is the relevance of transnational dynamics—that is, those historical processes that derived their impact from various forms of connectivity across national, regional, and continental borders. A few country studies include some very relevant side remarks on such transnational entanglements. I argue, though, that if we want to substantiate the assumption of a “secular age beyond the West,” we cannot but devote more attention to transnationality (or inter-imperiality)4 as a constitutive element of such an age. In the following, I build on the book’s illustrative case studies and suggest three strategies for how to move toward a more translocal framing of the secular in the colonial and the postcolonial world.

The first strategy is to integrate the comparative perspective into the country studies rather than leaving them to the volume editors. The architecture of such edited books usually contains a double move from an overarching, per definition translocal research agenda sketched out in the introduction to parallel national histories and back to a more integrated view in the conclusions. An inspiring exception is the chapter by Christophe Jaffrelot, who puts Pakistan’s contemporary history of secularity in the context of South Asia’s colonial legacy and Indian national history after 1947. Through the general integration of comparative perspectives into the analysis of national histories, though, the country specialists could provide some essential preparatory work toward a global history of the secular age particularly after decolonization.

I illustrate this point more in detail with Mirjam Künkler’s illuminating chapter on the bureaucratization of religion and the modernizing conditions of belief in post-independent Indonesia. The processes she describes around the build-up of a ministerial culture designed for the management of religious affairs is a specificity of postcolonial Indonesia that cannot be reduced to colonial inheritance. More importantly, though, it is a manifestation of twentieth-century political and administrative history. Following the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War and the decline of European empires in Asia after 1945, many postimperial states founded ministries or ministry-like departments with a specific competence in religious affairs. The histories of a few of these ministries are comparatively well-researched, such as the Indonesian Kementerian Agama (Ministry of Religion) or Turkey’s Diyanet (Presidency/Directorate of Religious Affairs). For the case of Indonesia, we know from archival evidence that immediately after its foundation in 1949, the Kementerian Agama claimed a central role not only in the administration of Islamic and other religious affairs, but also in educational reform, the management of religious infrastructure, the canonization of Islamic doctrines against other, less orthodox forms of Islamic thought and practice, the control of proselytization, the administration of the wealth of religious foundations, and domestic politics more generally. Especially the ministry’s competencies overlapping with the tasks of the Education Ministry caused several political conflicts over the direction and precise shape of reform in post-independent


4 While transnational perspectives are meanwhile well established in the fields of modern and contemporary world history, inter-imperiality is less so. For an outline of such a framework see Laura Doyle, “Inter-imperiality: Dialectics in a Postcolonial World History,” Interventions 16, no. 2 (2014): 159–96.
Indonesia. In its very existence, though, scholars have interpreted the ministry both as a historically successful strategy to prevent the full institutionalization of an Islamic state⁵ and as a repressive instrument that forced people into predefined religious categories that systematically prohibited any form of religious absenteeism and therefore grossly violated the freedom from religion.⁶

The origins of the public administration of religious affairs in the Turkish Republic also lie in a postimperial order. With the foundation of the Diyanet in the mid-1920s, the political elites around Mustafa Kemal intended to take religion under the direct control of the head of government. At the same time, the intention was to prevent the evolution of a potentially sacred character of such an institution in the eyes of conservative or even reactionary religious circles.⁷ Both motives were clearly power-driven and subjected religious and especially Islamic affairs to the agenda of Turkey’s modernization and social reform.

The history of many other such institutions, such as the ministries of religious affairs in Bangladesh, Brunei, Pakistan, or the Prime Minister’s Department in Malaysia, is either largely under-explored or completely unknown. A comprehensive global history of these ministries also remains to be written. However, some scholars have undertaken first steps in this direction through a comparison of the institutional and political histories built into these ministries. Martin van Bruinessen, for example, finds in his comparison of the Turkish and the Indonesian case that both ministries were an attempt by secular elites to modernize the conservative segments of society, whom they considered backward not only in economic but also in cultural and even civilizational terms.⁸ Furthermore, both ministries approached religion as a national security affair and tried to protect the young state and, by extension, the society, from the potential takeover by conservative or extremist religious groups. And in both cases, the Cold War functioned as an enabling framework that facilitated an authoritarian political culture, within which religion was framed as a continuous security risk to the stability of the established order. These features of two religious affairs ministries display some important continuities from the imperial period in terms of governmentality and the discursive construction of religion. But at the same time, they also manifest new institutional settings and new institutional cultures in the era of postimperial modernization.

To sum up this argument, Künkler’s case study on Indonesia is an element of a much larger global administrative history of religious affairs ministries that evolved in the postimperial era as a cornerstone of national identity and institution building. The continuous canonization of religious customs and doctrines was a central consequence of this development, in which transnational influences and large-scale religious networks played an important role.⁹ In this light, it makes

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⁵ B. J. Boland, The Struggle of Islam in Modern Indonesia (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 105–06.
good sense to understand the evolution of such ministries and their administrative cultures in terms of entanglements between colonial inheritance, national specificities after independence, and global patterns of an administrative culture that evolved since the interwar period.

A second strategy to overcome parallel national histories of the secular age in the postcolonial world is to better integrate transnational connectivity into the writing of national histories of the secular since the end of the Second World War. Most of the contributors to this volume rightfully emphasize that the conceptual and institutional legacy of the colonial era was an important referential framework for the times after independence. But this often-stated relevance of colonialism should not lead to an underappreciation of postcolonial discontinuities and the newness of regional and global circumstances after 1945. Postwar reconstruction, decolonization, and the evolving Cold War in Asia after the Chinese revolution in 1949 triggered a number of specific transnational and international dynamics that had an important impact on national formations of political secularism—that is, the ideas and practices that inform the modern state’s management of religion.

A good starting point for this discussion is Gudrun Krämer’s chapter on the history of secularity in modern Egypt. In her reading, the Egyptian case illustrates that political factors play an important role in the functions and meanings of secularity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although she insists that the “nation-state remains a meaningful unit of analysis,” she also recognizes the influence of ideas, norms, and practices originating from the West and the Gulf region on the manifestations of secularity in Egypt (297). The evolution of tastes, markets, media flows, and private interests from other Islamic societies in the Middle East constituted a transnational sphere that strongly co-determined the relationship between Islamic law, the state, and society in twentieth-century Egypt (311). Although in the more empirical parts of her chapter also Krämer strongly focuses on developments within Egypt, she emphasizes the relevance of translocal dynamics and criticizes Charles Taylor for not considering those more centrally in his analysis of the Western secular age.10

To capture the historical dimensions of a secular age outside the North-Atlantic world after 1945, the Cold War is a largely underappreciated context for political secularism. The growing antagonism between a “global right” that ideologically defended inequality in its various manifestations within and between societies,11 and reform-oriented forces including communist movements, labor and peasant unions, and socialist circles strongly influenced the role religious organizations, values, and practices played in state and society around the world.12 The Tradition, Family, and Property, or TFP, movement, for example, was founded in Brazil in 1960 under the leadership of local conservative Catholics to oppose any kind of reform that potentially threatened the status of the Catholic Church in Brazilian society and that questioned existing social hierarchies, the unequal distribution of private property, and the constitutional monarchy.13 These threats resulted from several transnational developments that challenged the status quo in Latin

10 In my reading, though, Taylor’s civilizational approach accommodates numerous cross-border dynamics and is therefore per definition transnational.
America and on other continents. One of these challenges was the Second Vatican Council and its far-reaching reforms of liturgical practices, the relationship of the Catholic Church with other Christian confessions and non-Christian religions, and its reform-oriented spirit in favor of reconciling the church with the modern era. Another direct offense for the TFP movement was liberation theology, which introduced Marxist approaches to social relations and the economy into Christian thinking and in this way nourished ideas about a radical break with the established social stratifications and economic structures.

The TFP movement did not remain a national Brazilian phenomenon, but evolved into a transnational form of activism to preserve the role of Catholicism in Latin American and North American societies. Its determined anti-leftist and anticommunist attitudes made it an appealing political ally for right-wing politicians in these societies, which, in return, increased the TFP’s political influence in favor of Christian-dominated statehood. In similar ways, transnational conservative women’s networks lobbied for the persistence of the influence of Catholicism in various societies in the Americas to effectively counter “god-less communism.”

In Southeast Asia, during the 1950s and early 1960s anticommunism led to the repositioning of religious networks within various societies and also transformed their political influence. This development did not lead to one coherent pattern throughout the region, but the (at times fierce) controversies around the reform-oriented left transformed local forms of political secularism and the role of religious actors in society more generally. The anticommunist military campaign in Malaysia, for example, launched by the British colonial authorities in the late 1940s under the euphemistic label of an “Emergency” provided a unique opportunity for transnational missionary networks such as the Church Missionary Society to expand its infrastructure and to step up its social relevance among internal migrants and forcefully dislocated communities. To facilitate this anticommunist groundwork, the British authorities diverted from their policy of restraint toward Christian missionaries and supported these endeavors with significant financial and logistic means. The career of these transnational missionary circles, originating from European and US-American societies but increasingly globalizing since the early twentieth century, were important players in the evolution of late-imperial and early postcolonial state secularity. They enhanced transcontinental flows of money, ideas, and missionary strategies such as technical innovations and, in this way, co-determined the role of Christianity in local communities.

In this light, the Cold War provided an opportunity structure for religious networks and secular institutions to advance their interests in cooperation but also against each other. As a consequence, the global bipolar constellation shifted existing religious-secular settlements in many ways.

Another question that seems relevant in this context is in how far we can speak of religious internationalisms that evolved in the new international architecture after the Second World War. By internationalism, historians usually mean the ideas or ideals around an international order that become—at times—manifest in the setup of international institutions. The classic research field

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16 Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin, “Rethinking the History of Internationalism,” in Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History, ed. Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
for the history of internationalisms is the second half of the nineteenth century, when international workers movements, the transnational socialist milieux, and communist circles emerged as important political factors. More recently, though, internationalisms of the first half of the twentieth century and in the decades after 1945 have received more attention. By religious internationalism after 1945 I do not mean an internationalism mainly facilitated by religious organizations themselves. Rather, the question is whether we can observe a codification of how to regulate religion through international law and international organizations such as the United Nations. If that was the case, such codification efforts would need to be considered in the historical analysis of a global secular age after 1945.

My impression is that, in spite of the existing scholarly literature on the regulation of religion and religious freedom through international law after World War II, our historical understanding of how these regulating measures have been “vernacularized” into national versions of political secularism and local religious practices is limited. Selectively, though, there is evidence that the internationally codified right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion was an important contributing factor to what we might call a global secular age after 1945. Comparable to Charles Taylor’s exclusive humanism, which functioned as the decisive context factor for Secularity III—that is, the possibility not to believe—the codification of these freedoms in international law and in numerous human rights instruments within and outside the UN created “the environment for everyone to manifest his or her own religion or belief without State interference or interference by other individuals.”

This statement needs to be qualified in at least two ways. The assumption here is not that the implementation of these freedoms has been successful all around the world. Rather, the argument is that the obvious limitations of these freedoms in numerous national political systems should not lead to a complete neglect of either their normative power or the historical impact these legal codifications had on international and domestic political relations. The consolidation of the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion as a central element of the human rights canon and its integration into human rights institutions supposedly altered the context for claims of these freedoms.

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18 Vernacularization refers to the process by which international norms such as human rights become appropriated and adopted in local contexts. See Peggy Levitt and Sally Merry, “Vernacularization on the Ground: Local Uses of Global Women’s Rights in Peru, China, India and the United States,” Global Networks 9, no. 4 (2009): 441–61, at 446.


In return, these claims selectively altered political secularism and the practical regulation of religion through the state.

Secondly, assuming an impact of the international codification of these religious rights does not mean to bring a universal secularization theory back in again. Rather, a more detailed historical analysis of this impact only makes sense if we assume that secularization processes around the world have been contradictory, unequal, and determined by many different factors among societies in the postcolonial world as well as in the West.

From a larger twentieth century perspective, these developments within the human rights agenda of the United Nations are also closely connected with colonial inheritance. Especially in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, the human rights agenda has frequently been an excuse not to undertake any concrete reforms on the ground and to avoid the establishment of a strong human-rights-based consensus for more intervention in large-scale human rights violations.21 The European empires had no interest in the UN’s interfering in what they considered their internal colonial affairs. But the question in how far the advanced codification of human rights related to religious freedom and the protection of nonreligious beliefs functioned as a context-altering factor for claims of human rights is relevant for the diagnosis of a global secular age after 1945.

A third and final strategy to turn the search for a “secular age beyond the West” into an approach beyond the nation-state concerns the secular-religious settlements that evolved during and after decolonization. In their conclusions, Künkler and Madeley distinguish between three different types of constitutional arrangements: (1) no recognition of religious claims for any form of special treatment, (2) the establishment of a nominally religious state, and (3) a de facto but not specifically constitutional prioritization of certain religious authorities in state affairs (359–61). Christophe Jaffrelot’s Secularity IV, by which he means the instrumental use or better abuse of religion as a form of ideology in order to mobilize political clienteles and achieve nonreligious goals (154, 181), feeds into all three settlements but seems to be prevalent particularly in the second and third type. A relevant question building on these findings is how these different constitutional settlements and various manifestations of Secularity IV not only developed parallel but in relation to each other. More research in this direction could illustrate in how far the different manifestations of political secularism in the twentieth and twenty-first century took shape less on their own terms but through patterns of mutual perception and influence.

A few historical examples from various national contexts might illustrate this point. During the interwar period, debates on political secularism and the modernization of state and society across the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia were inspired by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s agenda in the Turkish Republic.22 Leading anticolonialists, politicians, and the press in Egypt, British India, or Dutch-occupied Indonesia were discussing the Turkish example in its relevance for these societies’ postcolonial futures. Although the available information on Kemal’s policies did not always correspond with reality, the Turkish version of political secularism served as a contested role model for Asian forms of secularism after the end of the colonial era.

It would be exaggerating to argue that the Turkish Republic was a blueprint for anticolonial ideas of republican secularism in India or Indonesia, for the Turkish example was too controversial to simply be imitated. But the local debates on possible settlements between the religious and the secular took account of what the elites saw in Turkey. The interpretation of Kemal’s agenda ranged

22 For more empirical details, see Clemens Six, The Transnationality of the Secular: Travelling Ideas and Shared Practices of Secularism in Decolonizing South and Southeast Asia (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 12–21.
from a torchbearer of enlightenment for the postimperial world to a warning example of a raging modernization ideology that had turned against Turkey’s own cultural-religious identity. In a similar way, “constitutional migration” transferred the meaning of and knowledge about religious freedom between Europe and South Asia.\textsuperscript{23} Lawmakers in Pakistan, for example, borrowed central constitutional provisions around the individual’s right to peaceful religious practice, less from the usually cited sources of British legal traditions or traditional Islamic sources, but more from the Irish and the Indian constitutions and adapted them to their local requirements.\textsuperscript{24}

As many other pieces of research have shown, constitution-making during and after decolonization has rarely ever been an isolated process but an exercise in borrowing and translation.\textsuperscript{25} The point of these examples is that in many postcolonial societies the constitutional settlements between the religious and the secular were shaped by mutual perceptions and comparisons. As a consequence, these patterns of perception were an integral element of the evolving secular age outside the West.

\textit{A Secular Age beyond the West} provides numerous connecting points for a more transnational understanding of the various conflictive and at times contradictory processes through which a global secular age came about. Such a perspective is not a substitute for the kind of country studies this volume accommodates, but it appears as a necessary addition to the debate as it alters the framing of these national histories toward a broader context of translocal entanglements, which, as my argument assumes, co-constituted this secular age.

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\textsuperscript{23} Matthew J. Nelson, “Constitutional Migration and the Meaning of Religious Freedom: From Ireland and India to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan,” \textit{Journal of Asian Studies} 79, no. 1 (2020): 129–54. [Note by the editors: this article is one of the results of a research group later organized by the same group of scholars who edited and contributed to \textit{A Secular Age beyond the West}.]

\textsuperscript{24} The transfer of constitutional provisions between Ireland and Pakistan concerned primarily the references to religious freedom. In the course of Pakistan’s contemporary history and the increasing influence of Muslim (that is, Sunni) majoritarianism, though, the meaning of these provisions changed significantly. The focus on individual rights and the rights of religious minorities was gradually replaced by a stronger emphasis on the rights and sensitivities of Pakistan’s Sunni majority. See Nelson, “Constitutional Migration,” 2. The political and social costs of this development for religious, indigenous, and ethnic minorities were significant and deeply influence Pakistan’s society until today. See Christophe Jaffrelot, \textit{The Pakistan Paradox: Instability and Resilience} (London: Hurst, 2015), 439–528; Shaheen Sardar Ali and Javaid Rehman, \textit{Indigenous Peoples and Ethnic Minorities of Pakistan: Constitutional and Legal Perspectives} (Richmond: Curzon, 2001).