

WHAT COMES AFTER THE CRITIQUE OF SECULARISM?

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PANEL THREE

1:45-3:15: Secularism, Christian Mission and the American Public Sphere

Moderator: Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins

David Hollinger, “Protestant Foreign Missions and the Vindication of Secularization Theory”

“After the critique of secularism” we could profit from a breaking down of the question into several parts, attending especially to the difference between 1) defining secularism as a cultural outlook and 2) explaining its appeal, so defined, in various, particular historical contexts. With regard to the process of “secularization,” it would be well to distinguish between the various cultural formations that “the secular” replaces, and then to provide an explanation of why this or that specific cultural formation yields space to what is agreed to call “secular.” In keeping with this analytic frame, I find it promising to test, in the historically Christian North Atlantic West and its global extensions, the following proposition: *The more one knows about the world, the less inclined one is to ascribe to supernatural authority whatever value one finds in the teachings and social function of Protestant and Catholic churches, and the less inclined one is to invoke supernatural authority as a warrant for whatever specific worldly conduct one advocates.* As the wording of this proposition implies, one might well discover widespread instances among professing Christians of “secular” outlooks, prompting, I would hope, a sense of the religious-secular dichotomy as more of a spectrum than a boundary between clearly defined entities. My current work is consistent with all of the foregoing, and is now focused on the ways in which the experience of 20th century American Protestant missionaries among indigenous peoples propelled de-provincializing movements within the communities that sent the missionaries abroad. The foreign missionary project was designed to change foreign peoples, which in some respects it did; but that project changed the “sending” communities, too, and often in directions that I believe are best called secular. Missionaries, in this view, have often been, historically, agents of secularization.

Anna Su, “What is a Church?” Secularism and the Expanding Boundaries of Religion”

The current literature on secularism is awash with critique. Secularism, until recently, has been primarily understood as a political doctrine of state neutrality towards religion. And yet it has become increasingly subjected to charges that it not as emancipatory as commonly assumed. These charges take two main forms: (1) the *managerial critique* which posits that secularism is far more regulatory than commonly assumed, and (2) the *neutrality critique* which is that it is

deemed to be simply a continuation of Christianity by another name. One of its most influential critics, the anthropologist Saba Mahmood, for instance, equates secularism with the state's power to define and regulate religious life – a sphere that by secularism's own terms should have been private and depoliticized. This paper explores the particular implications of the managerial critique of secularism on the contemporary controversies involving what I call quasi-religious institutions, that is, religiously-motivated entities that participate in the public sphere through the provision of public goods and services. I include in this definition religious schools, religiously-motivated for-profit businesses, and religiously-affiliated hospitals. In doing so, the paper bridges the theoretical conversations surrounding secularism and the current legal debates around these institutions and argues for a partial re-enchantment of the public square as there is no justifiable reason for not allowing these quasi-religious institutions to take part in the marketplace.

Vincent Lloyd, “Principled Post-Secularism: Left Right Convergences”

This paper will explore the way critiques of secularism emerged largely independently from the political left and the political right, in the US. I am interested in what constructive political engagement in a pluralistic context looks like once secularism is demystified and discarded. Critics of secularism from the right have been responding to these questions for longer, and in more detail, than (largely academic) critics on the left, and so offer lessons for leftist critics.

While the most visible critics on the right (the “religious right,” “fundamentalists,” etc.) often ignore the complexities of the current pluralistic context, a small group of critics on the right – I will take Richard John Neuhaus, R. R. Reno, and Charles Chaput as exemplary – embrace a strident critique of secularism but also offer a principled, constructive political program ostensibly accessible to all. On the surface, and in a “culture wars” framework, these figures seem closely aligned with US Republican Party politics – on issues such as abortion, sexuality, militarism, and economic liberalism. Yet on other issues, particularly racial justice, right wing critics of secularism have long espoused “left”-sounding views. Moreover, the embrace of Trump by principled post-secularists on the right serves as a useful reminder of the distance between advocates of this position and the Republican Party establishment.

I propose to examine how the principled critique of secularism from the right results in an unexpected set of political positions. What does this say about the implications of leftist critiques of secularism as such critiques begin to migrate from the academy into broader public, political discourse? On the one hand, leftist critics of secularism often hold up (and neo-Orientalize?) “exotic” responses to secularism – for example, in Egypt. On the other hand, there is resistance to actually endorsing such responses – a healthy distance is usually maintained. This tension seems likely to result in political disorientation (as Michel Houellebecq dramatizes in *Submission*). What is necessary, on both left and right, is a principled critique – but what would this look like?

THIRD PANEL BIOGRAPHIES

David Hollinger is Preston Hotchkis Professor of History Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley. His books include *After Cloven Tongues of Fire*; *Postethnic America*; *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture*; and *Cosmopolitanism and Solidarity*. He is an elected Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a former President of the Organization of American Historians.

Anna Su is an assistant professor at the University of Toronto Faculty of Law. She is the author of *Exporting Freedom: Religious Liberty and American Power* (Harvard University Press, 2016).

Vincent Lloyd is Associate Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at Villanova University. He co-edits the journal *Political Theology* and edits the American Academy of Religion's book series, *Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion*, published by Oxford University Press. Lloyd's books include *Black Natural Law* (Oxford, 2016), *Is Charisma Moral?* (Columbia, in press), and the co-edited *Race and Secularism in America* (Columbia, 2016). He is currently finishing a manuscript on divine and human fatherhood in African American culture.
