

Romanticism/Secularization/Secularism

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Abstract

The romantic period is often considered a time of secularization. However, recent critiques of the secularization thesis, as well as recent scholarly accounts of romanticism, have questioned this assumption. At the same time, a number of scholars have begun to analyze secularism itself. Secularism, some have suggested, actually ‘invents’ the concept of religion during the period of European colonialism. It is therefore not possible to investigate the question of ‘romanticism and religion’ as if ‘religion’ was a definite thing. However, the relationship between secularism and romanticism remains an important research topic. One question of particular interest is how literature came to be understood during the romantic period, and the degree to which literary reading is associated with secularism.

Introduction

For some time, the romantic period (roughly 1780–1830) has been coordinated with the narrative of secularization. According to M. H. Abrams, whose 1971 book *Natural Supernaturalism* made this case most compellingly, romanticism was ‘the secularization of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking’ (12). What Abrams meant was not that religion was disappearing during the early nineteenth century but that it was being transformed. ‘The process’, he continued, ‘has not been the deletion and replacement of religious ideas but rather the assimilation and reinterpretation of religious ideas, as constitutive elements in a world view founded on secular premises’ (13). Certainly the romantic writers, or at least some of them, thought something very like this *was* happening. Writing during the period of revolutionary turmoil in France during the early 1790s, Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) thought that he and his fellow freethinkers in Great Britain were ‘laying gunpowder, grain by grain, under the old building of error and superstition, which a single spark may hereafter inflame so as to produce an instantaneous explosion’ (18:544). ‘The old building of error and superstition’ is both the Church and the Government, and Priestley wants to take them both down. The great Whig statesman Edmund Burke (1729–97) took Priestley at his word, and, in his famous counter-revolutionary work *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, defended both the British monarchy and the British church as the basis of civil society.

Direct revolution was one thing, but even as the political situation calmed down in the early years of the nineteenth century, writers such as Percy Shelley and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were convinced that they were living through a time of momentous change that centrally included a spiritual and religious upheaval. In Shelley's 1816 poem *Mont Blanc*, the mountain itself is addressed as something that can 'repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe' (lines 80–1), a radical gesture that recalls Priestley's fantasy of blowing up church and state together. For his part, the younger Coleridge, still under the influence of Priestley, would have welcomed such sentiments; the older and more conservative Coleridge defended a (reformed) national church built around the intellectual classes whom Coleridge called 'the clerisy'. As he wrote in *On the Constitution of the Church and State* (1830),

[t]he Clerisy of the nation, or national church, in its primary acceptation and original intention comprehended . . . all the so called liberal arts and sciences, the possession and application of which constitute the civilization of a country, as well as the Theological. (585)

Just as for Priestley and for Burke, the stakes for Coleridge are very high, nothing less than 'civilization' itself. In a variety of ways and political inflections, then, romantic-era writers felt compelled to destroy, rebuild, or re-imagine the religious identity of the age.

Something, indeed, was changing during the romantic era, but *what* was changing is less clear. As it turned out, religion was not withering away. Indeed, during the period from 1800–1850, religious participation in England actually rose.¹ Perhaps Abrams was wrong, and the romantic age is not an age of secularization. Or, perhaps, we have to define secularization more precisely.

Definitions of Secularization

The 'secularization thesis' states that religion declines as societies modernize. The characteristics of modernization are widely agreed upon, though different thinkers have emphasized different aspects: Max Weber emphasized rationalization, Karl Marx emphasized industrialization, and Émile Durkheim emphasized social differentiation. All these founders of modern social science agreed, however, that religion and modernization were inversely related. By positing a necessary link between modernization and secularization, the secularization thesis defines religion as a relic of the past, and explains continuing religious practice by reference to an incomplete or unaccomplished modernization. Religion is conceptualized as something that humankind must be liberated from, or as something that 'holds back' such things as progress and science. Yet much empirical evidence actually points the other way: many of the most rapidly modernizing societies – i.e., those across the 'global south' – are among the world's

most religious societies.² In the United States, meanwhile, modernization seems to be closely correlated with religious vibrancy.³ Typically, data of this kind has been accounted for by saying the Western European modernity provides the template for modernization; other parts of the world will eventually, it is held, converge on the European model. It increasingly seems to be the case, however, that Western Europe is not the model but the exception. If Western Europe is indeed a largely secularized society, this may be because of the specifics of its own history, not because it provides a universal template.⁴ In some cases, perhaps, modernization is *good* for religion. But if this is the case, then secularization must either be uncoupled from modernization or redefined as something other than religious decline.

In his book *Public Religions in the Modern World*, José Casanova distinguishes among three definitions of secularization: secularization as religious decline, secularization as privatization, and secularization as differentiation. Of these, Casanova concludes, only secularization as differentiation is a defensible hypothesis. By 'differentiation' Casanova means the fact that autonomous secular institutions now handle functions that were formerly under the domain of the church. Economy, law, and medicine are all obvious examples. Casanova insists, however, that differentiation does not necessarily entail decline or privatization. Indeed, he concludes on the basis of empirical evidence that religion worldwide is not in decline, and that we are witnessing a widespread rejection of the privatization component. For him, the Iranian revolution of 1979 is a watershed moment. Etymologically, one of the meanings of secularization referred to the transfer of individuals and property from the church to the mundane world. The focus of secularization so understood is on a changed relationship *within* the world, rather than on a changed relationship between this world and the next. This has immediate ramifications for a concept such as Abrams's 'natural supernaturalism', which aims to describe precisely a changed relationship between the natural and supernatural worlds. It is clear that Abrams was thinking of secularization primarily along Weberian lines, presumably because Weber's emphasis on rationalization provides an easy link to an interpretation of romanticism as a response to enlightenment reason. Following Weber, then, Abrams's notion of 'natural supernaturalism' (derived appropriately enough from Thomas Carlyle, the great nineteenth-century opponent of rationalizations) implicitly defines religion as a set of ideas and presumes that modernization entails the privatization and/or loss of those ideas. Thinking of secularization as differentiation, by contrast, would mean that in principle one has nothing to say about personal belief; differentiation is concerned simply with describing how religion adapts itself to the accelerating emancipation of secular institutions and norms.⁶ We can imagine, therefore, a highly differentiated society that nevertheless experiences high levels of religious participation.

What of the ‘privatization’ of religious belief? The demand that religious expressions and subjectivities be limited to the private sphere can take several forms. In one narrative, privatization is the natural result of differentiation: there is simply less and less in our public life that needs to be described in religious language. Another version of privatization, however, involves the deliberate application of state power, for example in the command that church and state be separate, and that religion not ‘invade’ the public sphere. This is a policy known in France as *laïcité*. As Olivier Roy points out, *laïcité* developed ‘against the backdrop of a political conflict between the state and the Catholic Church that resulted in a law regulating very strictly the presence of religion in the public sphere’ (xii). It was to *laïcité* that the French appealed when they banned conspicuous religious symbols from the public schools in 2004 (a law widely interpreted as aimed specifically at Muslims). Roy argues that one source of present-day French confusion about religious minorities is that *laïcité* in effect treats Islam as the new Catholicism.

Though they are sometimes lumped together as ‘secularization’, *laïcité* and religious decline need to be kept analytically distinct. Sometimes they go together, as in France (at least as regards Christianity). The United States, however, is an example of a country that has not experienced significant religious decline, and yet where *laïcité* is the official policy. Great Britain has never had a policy of *laïcité*, and yet its levels of religious activity are fairly low. In the romantic period, some of the British reactions to the strong anti-clericalism of the French Revolution can be understood as reactions to *laïcité*, or more generally to the Revolutionary effort to disarticulate Church and State. This is certainly in the background of the Priestley, Burke, and Coleridge examples cited at the beginning of this essay.

In countries such as France, *laïcité* as state policy is also embedded in an *ideology* of *laïcité* that insists on religion’s privatization (Roy xii). If Casanova is correct that ‘we are witnessing the “deprivatization” of religion in the modern world’ (5), then we could account for many of the complications involving religious minorities in contemporary Europe as rejections of *laïcité*. This suggests that questions of state power are never far from the center of discussions about the fate of religion. While the term ‘secularization’ tries hard to achieve an aura of social-scientific neutrality – aiming to describe an empirical reality rather than promote a specific ideal – it may in fact be the case that neutrality is not an option. States are not by and large neutral entities. They have interests too. This is a point to which I shall return below.

Contesting Romantic Secularization

What can these terminological clarifications tell us about romantic writing? Within the last decade or so, we have seen two distinct modes of contesting

the secularization thesis within romantic studies. The first argues that familiar interpretations of canonical writers got things wrong, and that they were really more religious than it might have seemed to an earlier generation of critics. In *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789–1824* (1997), Robert M. Ryan sets out to contest Abrams's 'natural supernaturalism' thesis. Ryan treats primarily the traditional romantic canon (plus Mary Shelley), arguing that we think of the romantic writers as continuing the tradition of the Protestant Reformation: 'I will examine the literature of the Romantic period as a conscious attempt by a group of writers to influence the religious transformation that was taking place in their society', he writes (7). Similarly, William Ulmer, in *The Christian Wordsworth, 1798–1805* (2001) aims to 'examine the poetry in light of Wordsworth's consciously held convictions as they evolved from 1798 to 1805' (7).

This approach, though offered as a correction to Abrams's association of romanticism with secularization, is in fact further confirmation of it, since it treats religion as a set of private 'ideas' that enter the public sphere indirectly, via literature. This was, in a nutshell, Abrams's point: secularization is about the transformation of religion, and sometimes that transformation entails a preservation – though on new terms, or against new background conditions. The Reformation itself, after all, is often understood as a primary agent of secularization. Thus, where Ryan and Ulmer see 'religion', Abrams sees secularization. But the bare fact that 'religion' survives is not, in itself, evidence against secularization. We have to ask how the very term 'religion' is being defined – something that Ulmer and Ryan do not do. A different way to register doubts about the secularization thesis and its relationship to romanticism would be to say that canonical romanticism of the sort that Abrams appeals to may indeed be secularized in some way, but that this hardly accounts for the diversity of writing during the romantic era, nor for the religious diversity of the period. As a result, one might look to non- or extra-canonical writers and materials, and thereby contest secularization by, as it were, changing the subject. This has proven to be a fruitful approach, in part because it aligns with the generally historicist tenor of the field as a whole, with its increased emphasis on historical context and its concomitant focus on writers traditionally marginalized by a focus on the traditional canonical poets.

Much of the best work in this historicist vein has moved between nonand newly canonical material and the traditional canon, thereby troubling that very boundary. Martin Priestman's *Romantic Atheism: Poetry and Freethought, 1780–1830* (1999), gives us Wordsworth, Blake, and Percy Shelley in the context of Godwin, Priestley, and the French *philosophes*. Nicholas Roe's *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (1997) takes a canonical poet and inserts him back into the dissenting religious and political milieu that his hyper-canoncity has made it all too easy to forget. And Daniel E. White, in *Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent* (2006), narrates what

he calls a 'Dissenting genealogy of romanticism', placing such canonical figures as Wordsworth and Coleridge into the context of dissenting circles surrounding the Barbauld and Godwin families. 'The sphere is which early Romantic writers imagined and produced new combinations of language and articulated new and often untenable political selves', White writes, 'was almost always religious' (2).

Thanks to these and other scholars, we can no longer speak loosely of 'romanticism and religion'. Instead, we have many romanticisms, some secularized, some religious, and some in between. Concomitantly, this approach shifts the emphasis away from religious *ideas* (where Abrams had placed it) and onto religious practices. Individual writers, according to this approach, don't interact with such abstractions as 'religious ideas'; rather, they are embedded in networks of practice and behavior – networks that are always, during this uncertain time, politically inflected.

Some limitations to this approach, however, are also apparent. For one thing, it is striking that religion is here imagined chiefly in terms of radical or progressive ideology, as if in continuing reaction to a familiar idea of religion as false consciousness. Although these studies aim to expand our sense of what 'religion' is, then, they tend to do so only along one axis. Secondly, if Ulmer and Ryan are perhaps too tied to authorial intention, so that they conceptualize religion as a set of ideas that influenced particular writings, this second group tends to eschew questions of intention altogether, preferring instead to flesh out such things as a writer's 'circle', her 'context' or her 'milieu'. Ironically enough, the category of 'religion' itself in these studies is often taken to be self-evident. But it is precisely this category that needs to be examined. What, exactly, is being named here? Is there even such a thing as religion?

The Invention of 'Religion'

It seems logical to assume that the word 'religion' points to some *thing* in the world. We commonly take religion to be a stable object – a 'natural kind', as cognitive scientists would say. Yet consensus is growing that 'religion' is not in fact a natural kind, but rather that it is a historically constructed, or invented, object. The evidence comes from several quarters. A number of cognitive scientists have argued that religion is not in fact selected for by evolution but is rather a 'by-product' of other evolutionary pressures.⁷ More immediately relevant to literary study, historians like Peter Harrison and Jonathan Sheehan have demonstrated that 'religion' as we understand it today is a historically malleable category, forged in the early modern period to answer particular historical and conceptual needs. As for religious studies, a number of scholars have demonstrated that the discipline, which depends centrally upon such concepts as 'world religion', has constructed 'religion' as a transhistorical, universal category available for study and analysis.⁸

Peter Harrison traces the emergence of a modern understanding of religion to the various crises of authority within Western Christianity during the early modern period. Harrison notes first that in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation, it became increasingly important for believers to grasp precisely what it was they were professing to believe. Moreover, the content of that belief was a particular kind of knowledge, a packet of information leading to salvation: 'the traditional view had been that in the process of revelation God reveals himself. Now God reveals saving knowledge' (25). Second, Harrison shows that understanding the content of 'religion' as a set of propositional truths, and 'belief' as assent to those truths, made it possible to handle the fact of religious pluralism in a new way. Alternatives could now be understood as different religions, in the plural, to be ranged against the 'true religion' (that is, Christianity). Thus 'religion' was placed on an equal footing with the natural sciences, and 'comparative religion' became for the first time conceivable. There are many details to fill in here, but perhaps I have said enough to indicate the main points. There is substantial scholarly agreement that: (1) 'religion' is not a natural kind; (2) It was invented to answer particular needs at a particular historical moment; (3) This history centers on a crisis of authority in Western Christianity; and (4) Inventing 'religion' also makes it possible to invent 'religions', in the plural, in order to name those activities and postures that characterized Europe's Others.

Secularism

Just as we often speak of 'religion' as a generic category, so we often speak of 'secularism' as the opposite of 'religion'. But if religion is not in fact a natural kind, what of secularism? Is it too invented, and can we narrate its history? To ask these questions is to invoke what is at present an extraordinarily wide-ranging, interdisciplinary conversation.

In an influential essay entitled 'Modes of Secularism' (1998), Charles Taylor suggests that the seventeenth-century wars of religion, culminating in the peace of Westphalia in 1648, are the 'origin of modern Western secularism' (32). By establishing the modern system of European nation states, the Peace of the Westphalia recast religious dispute as a matter of internal state politics rather than of inter-state conflict. The secular, which in an earlier era had largely been conceptualized temporally – as the mundane time that would come to an end with Christ's second coming, and as the time presided over by secular institutions – was now conceptualized spatially. Once there are secular spaces, it becomes possible to draw conceptual boundaries around them, and to conceive of religion as something that might violate those boundaries.

Taylor goes on to clarify two distinct historical modes of modern secularism. The first, derived from Locke, Leibniz, and the deist tradition, seeks to identify 'common ground' among the world's religions. (Note

that this development goes hand-in-hand with the invention of the category of 'religion' described above.) The second mode, associated with Grotius, develops an idea of secularism as an independent political ethic abstracted from religious beliefs. Taylor astutely points out that much of the confusion surrounding religion in the public sphere today has its origin in these different conceptions of the secular. In the first, secularism has its origins in religion; it seeks a lowest common denominator that can bring subjects into agreement, and the state's role is to be evenhanded among a variety of religions. In the second, secularism has its origins in a non-religious theory of the human; it seeks to secure a space free from religion, and conceives of the state's role as the active policing of religion (Taylor 35).

Finally, Taylor notes that because both models were developed to manage disputes among disagreeing Christians, neither can readily handle the variety of metaphysical orientations on offer in the contemporary world. As a result, Taylor proposes a third mode of secularism, this one modeled on John Rawls' notion of an 'overlapping consensus'. An overlapping consensus model of secularism acknowledges the fact that all people have a substantive conception of the good, but it lifts the requirement that those conceptions be the same, or even compatible. 'It is essential to the overlapping consensus', writes Taylor, 'that it be generally understood that there is more than one set of valid reasons for signing on to it' (49). Thus, X might support a functionally secular state because she is an atheist and believes that government should not be in the religion business, while Y might support a functionally secular state because he doesn't want the state interfering in his religious life. Meanwhile, Z doesn't care much about religion one way or the other but as a transgender activist is committed to human diversity, and sees in a secular state the best chance to protect and promote that diversity. And so on. Such a re-conceptualization is necessary, according to Taylor, because modernity has brought with it a new 'social imaginary'. We no longer live in a hierarchical, heavily mediated society; rather, we imagine ourselves as having 'direct access' to power in the context of a homogenous secular time shared by all. This shared secularity is where any theory of secularism must begin.

In his 2003 book *Formations of the Secular*, Talal Asad offers an important criticism of Taylor's overlapping consensus model. Asad is doubtful that modern democracies are in fact 'direct access' societies. While access may not be mediated by explicit hierarchies, he notes, it is nevertheless mediated by all manner of other things: pressure groups, mass media, elite leaders and administrators, and so on.⁹ These forms of mediation are certainly different from those that obtained during the era of Latin Christendom, but Asad argues that we mis-describe that difference if we see it as simply a shift from a religious to a non-religious imaginary. Rather, the post-Westphalian secular state has in a variety of ways taken over functions formerly intrinsic to religious authority.

Now, there is widespread agreement that Christianity (particularly Protestantism) in some way ‘causes’ secularism. Asad’s point, however, is that we should not interpret secularism as progress. The secular state authorizes certain subjectivities and disallows others, legislates practice and bodily posture, and pursues its own interests with regard to those citizens it identifies as ‘religious’. Influenced by Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘governmentality’, Asad calls attention to statecraft as the science of managing a population in which power is always operational but often invisible because it works locally, in those places where individual bodies and practices – wearing a headscarf, eating *halal* meat – intersect with institutions. When it comes to secularism, then, the key term for Asad is neither ‘consent’ nor ‘reason’ (as found in liberal political theory) but rather power – particularly power as enacted and mediated within the modern nation state. If we bring these two together, colonial and post-colonial history immediately becomes relevant to the discussion. Just as ‘religion’ was invented partly in response Europe’s others, so too was secularism invented, legitimized, and naturalized through an encounter with its other – an ‘other’ most recently figured as the Islamic fundamentalist. We can establish four general points of agreement among those who aim at a minimum to flush secularism from its hiding place of impartiality and neutrality:

1. Secularization needs to be carefully defined and cannot be understood as simply a subtraction story, as if the modern secular self was always there, waiting to be liberated from superstition. This premise is often linked to broader claims about ‘multiple’ or ‘alternative’ modernities.¹⁰
2. Secularism is not a neutral governance structure but has its own interests. It authorizes certain kinds of subjects and marginalizes others. It is coercive (but frequently disguises this under the name of ‘tolerance’). So to analyze secularism we need also to analyze power.
3. ‘The Religious’ is not the opposite of ‘The Secular’. Rather, secularism is complexly intertwined with a particular religion (Christianity) and as part of that complex relationship *produces*, at a certain historical moment, the distinction between the religious and the secular. As a result, religion appears as marked, set against the neutral or unmarked background of the secular.
4. Secularism is a product of a particular historical process in the West. It does not travel very well, and it is unlikely that it can be plunked down somewhere else. Turkey and India are frequently cited examples of the difficulties of this process.¹¹ Asad makes the point somewhat more polemically when he argues that state secularism guarantees peace at home ‘by shifting the violence of religious wars into the violence of national and colonial wars’ (7). However one chooses to trace the connections, it seems clear that the question of secularism is simultaneously a Western question and a global one.

To be sure, there are important disagreements even among those who agree upon these basic premises.¹² Take, for example, the relationship between secularism and Western Christendom. In *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor offers an immensely detailed and rich account of this relationship; Taylor's argument is that Christianity in effect created secularism over roughly that past 500 years. Yet he offers his account without much attention to the other cultures and other 'religions' that were increasingly pressing in upon Europe's consciousness during this same historical period. And elsewhere in his work he remains at least cautiously optimistic that the western model of secularism, problematic as it may be, is the best hope for other regions of the world. At the other extreme, Gil Anidjar has recently taken the same premise – namely that Christianity created secularism – to argue that secularism is therefore the new name for a centuries-long western persecution of Islam, now understood as the archetypal 'religion': 'Secularism is part of a discourse of power and of institutions that are bent on making us . . . know or recognize religion . . . for what it is not: Christianity, secularized' (62). There are a range of possible positions between the poles laid out by Taylor and Anidjar.¹³

Despite their manifest differences, it bears repeating that Taylor and Anidjar *share* the same basic (and critical) premises regarding secularism. There are many others, of course, who wish to defend secularism – and the liberal tradition with which it is importantly linked. Thus Jürgen Habermas, though he has moved recently toward a fuller engagement with the continuing salience of religion in the West, continues to insist that religious adherents 'translate' their values into language that is recognizable to secular actors. Within romantic studies, Mark Canuel's groundbreaking *Religion, Toleration, and British Writing* (2002) is virtually alone in recognizing the institutional dimensions of secularism, and thus deftly sidestepping matters of belief and intention that have hampered most writing on the topic. Canuel's position on romanticism's discourse of toleration, and his faith in institutional mechanisms to solve or at least manage religious dispute, puts him in the broadly Habermasian camp.

Literature and Secular Criticism

It is frequently pointed out that during the romantic era the emerging concept of 'literature' comes to bear increasing weight. An important part of this claim is that literature is self-constituting and self-grounding. As Friedrich Schlegel put it in his famous *Athenäum Fragment* 116 (1798), '[t]he romantic genre is the only one that is more than a genre and that typifies poetic production; for, in a certain sense, all poesy is or should be romantic' (321). Percy Shelley, for his part, writes in the 'Defense of Poetry' (1821) that '[poetry] is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; . . . at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought' (531). Central to such claims for literature's autotelic status is

the idea that literature is *sort of* but not *exactly* like religion – that it accesses the kind of power generally associated with religion, but without committing itself to a particular metaphysic, legitimating itself rather than relying upon some transcendental source. Literature (for by ‘poetry’ both Schlegel and Shelley mean not merely verse but literary activity more generally) is potent but protean, and this opens it to new experiential possibilities in a way that organized religion has foreclosed upon. As Schlegel writes, ‘[n]o theory can exhaust romantic poesy, and only a divinatory critique might dare attempt to characterize its ideal. It alone is infinite, just as it alone is free’ (321). Or as Shelley puts it, poetry is ‘as it were the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own; but its footsteps are like those of a wind over a sea’ (532).

As noted, these are familiar romantic-era sentiments – versions of them could be found in Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Schiller, and Schleiermacher, among others. Recent attention to secularism means that we can now understand these sentiments not simply as ‘displacements’ of religion, however, but as importantly bound up with the discursive power of secularism itself. Consider, for example, Saba Mahmood’s analysis of a United States Government program called ‘Muslim World Outreach’. Established by the National Security Council and funded to the tune of \$1.3 billion, the program aims to identify and support moderate and reform-minded Islamic leaders, to help them ‘reform Islam from within’. Mahmood shows that a symbolic or literary hermeneutics is central to the Government’s imagination of what such a reformed Islam would look like. Against the figure of the Scriptural literalist, Muslim World Outreach seeks to support those who believe that the Quran ‘should be read as a system of signs and symbols, whose meaning is to be deciphered in a manner not dissimilar to how we read literature or poetry’ (339–40). Mahmood’s essay identifies an apparent paradox, namely that the hostility of progressive secular intellectuals toward ‘orthodox’ religiosity is often ‘conjoined with a certain commitment to the poetic resources of the Judeo-Christian tradition’ (346). Her analysis, however, suggests that this is not a paradox at all, for it is precisely affection for the ‘poetic resources of the Judeo-Christian tradition’ that marks programs like Muslim World Outreach *as* secular. Such secularism, again, is to be found in the history through which a set of interpretive practices, deriving initially from the Christian tradition, has over time become the common-sense background against which ‘religion’, here understood as Islam, can be evaluated. Such secularism is not neutral but is caught up in a particular history – the history of Protestant hermeneutics in the West – and necessarily is therefore also caught up in current international geopolitics, statecraft, and the continuing attempt to manage the so-called ‘War on Terror’.

Mahmood’s unsparing critique of the intellectual foundations of World Muslim Outreach is also, then, a critique of a conception of literature crucially inflected by romanticism. For it is only during the romantic era

that the 'poetic resources of the Judeo-Christian tradition' come to be recognized as such – that is, as honorable expressions of a universal human striving that can now at last be stripped of its associations with a particular tradition and made available to all inquiring spirits.

By contrast, Edward Said's notion of 'secular criticism' is unapologetic in its defense of both secularism and literature.¹⁴ In his essay of the same name, Said describes the experience of modernity as the loss of 'filiation' with a natal home or place (a loss exemplified in the images of sterility scattered across modernist texts). In consequence, people search for a way to reconstitute the authority of such filiation through the creation of a new community, a process Said calls 'affiliation' (16). This process can be, and often is, conservative and consolidating – Said cites Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot in this regard. But even progressive forms of affiliation (Marxist 'class consciousness', for instance) are always in danger of becoming dogmatic. The role of the 'secular critic', Said argues, is to trouble the ease with which filiation can be transformed into affiliation. Said's metaphors here, as throughout much of his work, contrast 'the quasi-religious authority of being comfortably at home' (16) with the consciousness of exile and homelessness that is for him the mark of the critic. Because he is not at home, the critic is able to take the measure of modernity and its loss of filiation: 'because of that perspective, which introduces circumstance and distinction where there had only been conformity and belonging, there is distance, or what we might also call criticism' writes Said (15).

There is some disagreement among Said's admirers about what the term 'secular criticism' means.¹⁵ Perhaps more relevant than Said's own intentions, however, is the question of how the concept of secular criticism negotiates the relationship between secularism and the literary. Said makes it clear that by 'criticism' he means more than simply 'literary criticism'. Yet it is also evident that he is modeling habits of critical attention upon the forms of attentiveness solicited by literary writing. 'Obviously I'm not suggesting that everybody has to become a literary critic', he notes in an interview. '[T]hat's a silly idea. But one does have to give a certain attention to the rather dense fabric of secular life' (Sprinker 233; qtd. in Mufti, 'Auerbach' 110). With Said, then, we see at least an elective affinity between secularism, criticism and literary 'attention'. The importance of literature to Said's image of criticism has been further reinforced by the fact that many of those currently writing under Said's influence are located in departments of literature, rather than in political science or anthropology.

In sum: in Said and in those inspired by him, we find a defense of secular criticism that while by no means reducible to literary language is nevertheless dialectically engaged with it; for critics like Mahmood, by contrast, a critique of secularism is mounted in part upon an analysis of 'literature' and the kind of 'attention' generally associated with it. To

date, these two perspectives on the possibility of secular criticism have engaged each other only glancingly.¹⁶ As a result, the extent and shape of their disagreement is not entirely clear, and we are left with a series of questions. How much of the disagreement is the result of different disciplinary locations? How much is it a reflection of broader disagreements within postcolonial theory? Are there alternatives to the intellectual heroism of secular criticism? At the same time, how are we to understand critical agency if it does not originate in something like Said's ideal of secular critical distance? Are there forms of literary reading that escape normative secularity? At stake in these questions is how we understand criticism itself.

Conclusion: Romanticism and Secularism

The increasingly rich and varied conversation about secularism clearly takes in much that is not central to romantic studies. However, scholars of the period can draw several lessons from it. First, if religion is an invented category, then it cannot be treated as a natural kind. There is not some *thing* called 'religion' that can simply be brought to bear on literary study. Second, 'religion' cannot be studied apart from the secular, understood as the discourse that continues to frame, shape, and produce 'religion' as the marked category against which secularism can be posed a neutral background. Third, as romantic criticism continues to engage with questions of empire, the matter of secularism's relationship to colonialism, and particularly the production of 'religion' in and around the colonial contact zone, demands further study.

Finally, as Shelley's 'Defense of Poetry' among other texts indicates, the history of the secular passes importantly through the romantic period itself. For it is romanticism that is largely responsible for transforming Christian hermeneutics into 'secular appreciation' for the poetic resources of a tradition. Poetry (in the expansive definition Shelley gives to it) in this period constitutes itself as *the* privileged place from which to speak about matters of religion.¹⁷ More than anyone else, the great romantic-era thinkers, from Herder to Schleiermacher to Coleridge, inaugurated, systematized, and institutionalized this decisive shift toward appreciating the Bible's figurative, symbolic, and metaphorical resources. In so doing, they developed not only a new method for reading the Bible but also a new method for reading what was increasingly coming to be called 'literature'. Understood this way, coming to terms with secularism will mean coming to terms with romanticism – and vice versa.

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Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ See Brown esp. 42–7.

² See Berger; Jenkins.

³ For a ‘marketplace’ analysis of the religious vitality of the United States, see Finke and Stark. For a critique of Finke and Stark and defense of the secularization thesis, see Bruce. In general, American sociologists seem more willing to jettison the secularization thesis than their European counterparts.

⁴ See Davie. A number of writers have concluded, from this and similar evidence, that we must think not of a single modernity but instead of ‘multiple modernities’. See Eisenstadt and Goankar. It should also be pointed out the ‘Western Europe’ itself is not a homogenous entity: secularization has played out very differently in France and Spain (historically Catholic) and in Great Britain and Holland (historically Protestant).

⁵ For Carlyle’s critique of ‘Mechanical Philosophy’, see ‘Signs of the Times;’ for the phrase ‘natural supernaturalism’, see *Sartor Resartus*.

⁶ For more discussion, see Jager, *Book of God* 26–30.

⁷ See Boyer; Atran.

⁸ See Fitzgerald; McCutcheon; Masuzawa.

⁹ Asad 4. Asad also makes an important distinction between *secularism* and *the secular*. The first is a political doctrine that arose in Europe and America at a specific time and that, as we have seen here, presupposes among other things a new concept of ‘religion’. The second is what Asad calls an ‘epistemic category’ (1) that is ‘conceptually prior’ (16) to the political doctrine of *secularism*. The secular is an ad hoc assemblage of ‘concepts, practices, and sensibilities’ (16). Such a formation, Asad argues, can only be accessed through genealogical critique.

¹⁰ See note 4. Charles Taylor’s recent book *A Secular Age* follows out this argument in great detail and subtlety.

¹¹ See Bhargava, ed. *Secularism and Its Critics*; Golë.

¹² See for example Asad’s criticism of Casanova in *Formations of the Secular* 182–3, and Casanova’s reply in ‘Secularization Revisited’.

¹³ See for example Connolly. Asad’s position also falls somewhere between Taylor’s and Anidjar’s.

¹⁴ The term ‘secular criticism’ occurs often in Said’s published work. The essay ‘Secular Criticism’ forms the introductory chapter to *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983).

¹⁵ For variations, see Robbins; Pecora; Mufti, ‘Critical Secularism’.

¹⁶ Though see Anidjar for an attempt to read Said through Asad’s optics.

¹⁷ For an account of this process in Wordsworth that appeals to Casanova’s discussion of differentiation, see Jager, *Book of God* 158–187; for an attempt to retrieve a critical sensibility from this romantic process, see Jager, ‘After the Secular’.

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