

“Decolonizing Theology Amidst Secular Ruins”
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Abstract

This presentation links decolonial thought to discussions of secularization and the post-secular, asking what decolonial perspectives contribute to conversations about God-talk, atheism, and the remains of a public sphere for debate over such matters. I first provide a schematization and periodization of anti-, post- and decolonial movements as a framework for understanding the discourse and its relation to forces of modernity. I then relate it to one central such force, secularization, and explore decoloniality’s disruption of typical construals of secularization or its demise. My hypothesis is that decolonial perspectives offer rich resources for reframing typical dichotomies (e.g. religious/secular) and for institutions and practices that sustain space for vigorous debate over these issues.

In his essay, “Two Theories of Modernity,” Charles Taylor seeks to correct what he terms the dominant “acultural” reading of modernity with a cultural reading.¹ The former speaks of a presumed set of universal human tendencies toward rationalization that manifest and develop variously in diverse locales. The latter acknowledges the context-specific practices in Western culture that contributed to the rise of the phenomenon called modernity and with it certain characterizations of rationality and universality. Thus, the former attends to culture and context as an afterthought, as the stable core of universal, modern humanity manifests itself with some modulation according to the spaces of its deployment. The latter brings cultural and contextual concerns into a reading of modernity itself. Taylor emphasizes the need to locate the emergence of the modern in a constellation of values, institutions, and practices in late medieval Europe before speaking of its manifestations elsewhere. In short, modernity must be culturally located and evaluated.

Yet Taylor’s assessment, at least in this essay, leaves out attention to *submerged* cultural practices and identities that attend the birth of the modern. The opposition, I want to suggest, should be read not so much as one between cultural and acultural constructions of modernity, as between dominant and subjugated stories of the modern. Rather than argue merely for a contextual corrective to abstract notions of modernity, it

¹ Charles Taylor, “Two Theories of Modernity,” in *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

is necessary to highlight the fractures and disjunctures *within* modernity itself, even when socially and culturally grounded. While one fulcrum of change and development at the center of modernity was indeed late medieval Europe, retrieving this cultural context alone misses Europe's mutual imbrication with others construed as peripheral or external to this geospatial imaginary. Discourses of alternative modernities highlight the varying stories told within this genealogy.² Critical in such discussion are the awareness and mapping of the power locations, the political economies, of the various storytellers involved.

Neglecting this, Taylor's essay also seems to imply that the emergence of modernities in colonial contexts unravels according to spontaneous local logic and practice, rather than as the result of dissemination through the colonial encounter. Swinging perhaps too far to the pole of acknowledging local cultural diversity, it neglects crucial power dynamics and questions of domination and exploitation so central to modernity's development, particularly in the colonies. The presence of various modernities in colonial spaces betrays the reality that, as Enrique Dussel is careful to maintain, the logic of the dominated is always already constitutive of the European identity being exported.³ We cannot think Europe without thinking the underside, those constructed as the counterpoint to the Eurocentric self being forged. The modernities emerging in the colonies form a complex part of and supplement to European manifestations. Thus, a thoroughgoing, culturally situated analysis of modernity would need to include the colonial encounter, such that both European and colonial modernities are coordinated and related.

One key facet of emerging modernity are the interlaced ideas of the secular, secularity, and secularization, notions that, as Tomoko Masuzawa has made clear, arise with the colonial encounter and in tandem with the category of religion.⁴ Both religion and the secular require each other as differential categories. As theorists of the secular highlight, the secular sphere was in part *theologically* constructed by and on behalf of

² Thus, for instance, Dipesh Chakrabarty sets forth the two histories of capitalism, one that attends to the mechanisms of labor, value, and production in capitalist processes and one that limns the detritus, the excluded yet vital elements of living labor and non-capitalist exchange deemed external to the system. Indeed, it is this category of living labor that, for Enrique Dussel, forms the epistemic counterpoint to the totalizing narrative of capital and, with it, modernity. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); Enrique Dussel, *Towards an Unknown Marx: A Commentary on the Manuscripts of 1861-63*, trans. Yolanda Angulo (London: Routledge, 2001).

³ Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of "the Other" and the Myth of Modernity*, trans. Michael Barber (New York: Continuum, 1995).

⁴ Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

religio-cultural others during European ascendancy.⁵ To be sure, the secular was used in part to monitor and police difference, especially as the category of religion was marshaled to enumerate the other both in Europe and in colonized territories. Yet it also existed as a space for the employment of concepts such as tolerance, value-neutrality, and the provisional suspension of judgment in matters of diverging opinion and analysis. Institutional structures and legal discourse came alongside the theological basis in order to enforce, by means of the state's problematic monopoly on violence, a tenuous peace that allowed the other to exist. Amidst the contemporary celebration of our "post-secular" era with its supposed "resurgence" of religion, I argue that pause is called for to consider the vital role played by the secular. A decolonial vantage point, I suggest, one that breaks with and speaks back to European modernity and its categories of knowledge, might offer resources for reconfiguring and preserving this fragile sphere.

In this paper, I first dwell briefly on the notion of the secular that is here being explored and retrieved. I then turn to decolonial thought as an aid in assessing the interpenetration of categories of religion, secularity, and modernity. I distinguish it from approaches known as anticolonial and postcolonial. I return to the question of the secular and consider it from the decolonial vantage point. I pay particular attention to secularization's links to the inception of capitalism, particular around primitive accumulation, colonial resource extraction, and the formation of indebted subjects. Formations of the secular map onto critical, material networks linking Europe and the colonies, and invoke central processes such as the mobilization of race, privatization of land, and profanation of poverty. Given that the secular and religious are tied to Europe's relation with the colonial world, decolonial reflection on the secular is as much tied to the futures and fates of religion and secularity as is continental thought. I gesture toward a notion of the secular as a theoretically—and theologically—legitimated space to allow for and protect difference and disagreement. Theologies and religious reflection interested in a nuanced defense of the secular might consider decolonial perspectives for alternatives to how secularity is predominantly displayed and deployed, linked as it has been to Eurocentric conceptions of modernity.

The precarious secular

The history of the secular is as vexed as stories of its "origins," and mine is in no way a simplistic celebration and retrieval of this concept. But present discourses on the post-secular and on religious resurgence reveal problematic tendencies. I am concerned about

⁵ See, e.g., Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

persistent fundamentalisms and neo-orthodoxies. Each set of discourses in its own way exploits the turn to difference and particularity in postmodernity to reassert a master narrative. Violence against the secular order is articulated through political decisions invoking religious messianism and manifest destiny. Militaristically, it appears in contemporary wars of religion, articulated along national and economic lines, whether in military occupations or terrorist insurgencies. Rhetorically, it appears in decrying the secular as a heresy, either as the spawn of an error in ontology or as a realm given over to Satan, for instance.⁶ Such approaches elide with discourse about the post-secular to celebrate the triumph of religion and enthusiastically offer their post-mortem assessments on the secular. Paradoxically, much current talk of religious resurgence simply fits the story modernity told itself about itself. Taking modernity's claim of linear and progressive secularization at face value, such perspectives celebrate its apparent failure without interrogating the functions of the narrative or its mythological stature.

As José Casanova has claimed, however, one of secularization's main characteristics involves the institutional differentiation of spheres.⁷ This need not go hand-in-hand with the decrease in or suppression of religion. Indeed, history belies this notion, and Casanova notes the persistence of religion alongside and often because of the secular differentiation of spheres. The question is thus not why religion persists or why secularization develops unevenly. The interesting question is the "why" of the story of the secular itself. Why did modernity need to tell itself this tale, simultaneously fashioning and repressing the religious other, yet always maintaining its specter on the horizon? Such religion (as a category and as its loosely mapped and mercurial phenomena) remains present, and the commotion around its "resurgence" may be more about the return of the repressed in modernity's consciousness than about any new "empirical" developments in global religiosity. Indeed, it is the institutional differentiation of spheres, which Casanova highlights, that appears as the constructive and productive edge of the secular.

My interest is in preserving the important contribution of a secular space as one socio-politically and discursively constituted to *protect difference*. One can trace the

⁶ Radical Orthodoxy, of course, regards the secular as a form of heresy, a perverse ontology, and prime source of conceptual and social malaise in modernity. See, e.g., John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford; Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2006). For Satanic imagery, I have in mind the "Great Satan" metaphor used by Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei, among others, to depict the U.S. and "Western values" more broadly. While not leveled only at secularism, this is part of the assemblage often condemned. American evangelicals also invoke such Satanic imagery when condemning aspects of "secular culture" at home or abroad.

⁷ José Casanova, "Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective," *Hedgehog Review* 8, no. 1-2 (2006).

secular emerging as a way for religious others in Europe to seek space to pursue their own patterns of life free from more openly violent modes of initially ecclesial and subsequently state intervention. Notions of the secular were furthermore marshaled in the academy to create a space that allowed a pragmatic and provisional peace for the sake of inquiry. Put bluntly, heresy could be explored without fear of the flame and stake. The hope in both cases is to bracket out reprisals from power due to difference and disagreement.

Admittedly, we find ourselves in delicate territory, for genealogies of the secular highlight that part of its own ideological success involves its being posited as a response to wars of religion. The secular is touted as an advance, as a rational response to violent, religious irrationality. Such tales miss the violence of the imposition of the secular itself.⁸ They also neglect the ways state structures employ it to police difference. Indeed, the enforcement of the secular is directly bound up with the colonial project and pacification of culturally and politically, and hence religiously, threatening others. Yet, we cannot escape this problematic tension, and to my mind this is no reason to reject constructive contributions of the secular. Decolonial redeployments of the secular may thus aim to mobilize its ostensible *protection* of difference while acknowledging, reckoning with, and resisting its operations in *policing* such difference.

In seeking to redress the modes of violence needed to preserve and police the secular, a violence whose necessity must be vigorously contested, one step may be to rekindle robust theological justifications for such a sphere. Religious paradigms might construe the secular as part of their own gift to global humanity. This gifting can be incorporated into the stories religions tell themselves about themselves. If defenses of the secular can be marshalled from various religious imaginaries, immanent measures may emerge to protect such spaces. Arguably, the state's role as violent gatekeeper for the secular might then be mitigated. In other words, as religious and non-religious humanistic traditions draw on their resources to formulate justifications for a secular sphere, support for the secular is not left to the state alone. The secular need not be constructed in opposition to religious self-understandings, and such rapprochement may liberate the fragile secular from the administrative governance of state structures.

Thus, I am arguing for a particularistic conception of the secular, recognizing that this category is not monolithic. I am advocating a self-conscious construction of the secular on theological and sociopolitical grounds, for the sake of peace and meaningful engagement. Such terms may be based on "ideas of the good" inherent to the religious or non-religious value systems from which one theorizes. Rather than a stripping away

⁸ See, e.g., William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

of the religious to reveal some mythical secular core, diverse religious and non-religious perspectives contribute to a third space, between independent, religious particularism and statist, secular universalism. Here condemnations and reprisals from power connected with notions of transcendent good are bracketed out. We find a pragmatic embrace of immanence and contingency.

Given the genealogy of the secular as emerging in tandem with the concept of religion and used in part to coordinate European identity vis-à-vis colonial otherness, I turn now to discourses of decoloniality as one resource for reconceptualizing the secular. Decolonial difference acknowledges the multiplicitous and problematic nature of a space constructed both to make room for difference and yet also to monitor it. Such a vantage point at once recognizes itself as the colonial underside to such a realm and yet seeks to move beyond the opposition. It is free to appropriate what is productive and life affirming in such discourses, while contributing silenced voices to shore up and reconfigure such a secular space. Before exploring such contributions, I lay out what I mean by decoloniality and situate it in relation to two other discourses that may be more familiar.

A tenuous typology of decoloniality

Decolonial thought is associated with the work of scholars like Anibal Quijano and Walter Dignolo, developed in conversation with the project of Enrique Dussel.⁹ It locates itself simultaneous within and without the story of modernity. Rhetorically, it recognizes the colonial element present in developments in the modern, and at the same time seeks to move beyond binaries to allow the telling of other stories. It is not simply an antagonistic response to modernity and colonialism, nor is it simply a problematization of the contradictions within Eurocentric thought. Rather, it brings a variety of local and indigenous voices to the table to contribute to a rich and diverse picture of what we call the story (and, hence, stories) of modernity, and with it by implication religion and the secular.

What follows is a tenuous typology marking out the variants in theoretical response to colonialism, in order to help further situate decolonial thought. This typology is here proffered with all the caveats and qualifications necessary for such an attempt. It is to be considered a loose classification with a host of exceptions and possible alternative configurations. The power moves typically latent in classification systems must also be acknowledged outright. This heuristic should not be reified. This

⁹ See, for instance, Walter Dignolo, "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 1 (2002); "Delinking," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2007); Enrique Dussel, *Posmodernidad y Transmodernidad: diálogos con la filosofía de Gianni Vattimo* (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana Plantel Golfo Centro, 1999).

typology is a provisional and general grouping of the ways discourses on coloniality have developed, distinguishing between anticolonial, postcolonial, and decolonial approaches.

Anticolonial thought characterizes the liberation movements associated with forging a national consciousness and independent state apparatus after colonialism. Anticolonial thought is often categorized as modernist, seeking to realize the promise of Enlightenment emancipation and self-determination, but this time among the repressed nations. Anticolonial thought takes Enlightenment on its terms, not uncritically, but dialectically, in antagonism to the discourse of the oppressor. As such it seeks to overcome the contradiction of colonial violence with “legitimate” revolutionary violence. Anticolonial thought is most often associated with Marxian analysis and essentialist constructions of racial identity, motivating social liberation movements as extensions of the march of history. The local, indigenous vanguard become the bearers of the promise of emancipation, translating it into enculturated narratives of ethnic, religious, and national parlance. Frantz Fanon may be the figure most often associated with this approach.¹⁰ One can add to this Nasser, Césaire, Guevara and a variety of theorists and political leaders associated with the non-aligned countries, which came to be constituted as the Third World.¹¹ Anticolonial thought privileges the *when*: the when of liberation, the when of self-determination, the when of social justice. It temporalizes and historicizes.

Postcolonial thought is often seen as a contextualized extension of the poststructuralist and deconstructive turns in European discourse. Although it is unfairly characterized as merely mimetic of such European discourse, it does emerge in critical conversation with the likes of Foucault and Derrida, for instance. Postcolonial thought questions anticolonialism’s commitment to a modern narrative of linear development and liberation. If anticolonialism is primarily concerned about the *when*, we might say that postcolonial thought privileges the *who*. It seeks to trouble notions of subjectivity, of static ontologies and enclosed selves, and hence incorporates discussion of hybridity and fluid, dynamic notions of identity. A hybrid, interstitial space and identity is not a blending or mixing, but a restless movement of liminality. Postcolonial thought takes anticolonialism’s colonizer/colonized binary and disrupts it by positing a unitary colonial subject, a mutual indwelling of both aspects. Thinkers like Bhabha and Spivak are often located in this approach.¹² Both anticolonialism and postcolonialism inherit the

¹⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

¹¹ This history is explored in Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, W.W. Norton, 2007).

¹² Edward Said, a monumental figure in such literature, straddles a divide between anti- and postcolonial perspectives, advocating clear political intervention along more typically Marxian

ongoing debates between Marxian and poststructuralist theorists about the limits and liabilities of each side's approach, particularly when it comes to political practicability.

If anticolonialism is marked by the *when*, and postcolonialism by the *who*, decolonial thought asks the *where*. It asks about the where in terms of a geopolitics of knowledge, both globally and in its construction within the academy. Decolonial thought situates knowledge production in its various locales and seeks to let local voices, histories, and paradigms speak back to and transform the master narrative of modernity set forth with European ascendancy. Thus, while postcolonial thought has laid bare some of the fractures within the monolithic story of modernity, decolonial thought adds to this the multiple other stories of modernity seen from a variety of vantage points. Mignolo, for instance, invites us to reconsider the world around 1500 as a polycentric world of multiple regional empires and alliances. Europe had not yet sought to eclipse all in writing its history as world history. It had not yet reclaimed Greco-Roman thought as its own. It had not yet committed genocides and inserted itself problematically into every area of the globe. Mignolo invites us to shift perspectives and paradigms into one of pluriversalism.¹³ What are the other histories and paradigms that might have developed independently, and how are they transformed and shaped in interaction with the colonial expansion of Europe's provincial narrative?

Decolonial thought not only asks the where but also seeks to reconfigure the when and who of the former approaches. Like postcolonial thought, it questions anticolonialism's reliance on a modernist narrative of linear, progressive emancipation. It accepts the disruption by poststructuralist discourse of such temporalities. Yet it challenges the move to derive this disruption from poststructuralism as a European discourse. It seeks to speak new modes of the when based on alternative modes of time and temporalities outside of Europe.¹⁴ It also challenges the postcolonial who. While the anticolonialists sought realization of the self through emancipation and attainment of the European universal ideal, postcolonial thought addressed the hybridity, fracturing, and erasure of the self. Alternatively, decolonial thought looks to ideas of life and flourishing from local stories, traditions, and trajectories, outside what it sees as the Eurocentric purview of these former conversations. What local resources are available for the performative and discursive construction of the self and selves in distinction from imposed identities or even those bound up with the colonizer?

lines while at times invoking Foucauldian analysis that many take to undermine such projects. Rather than problematic for Said, this example merely reiterates the challenges of classification attempts such as the present one.

¹³ Mignolo, "Delinking."

¹⁴ See, for instance, the importance of the "where" of time in the introduction, "Time on the Move," in Achille Mbembé, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

One example of this approach, drawn from Black studies, is the positing of Europe as periphery, as Cedric Robinson has done.¹⁵ For much of world history and the height of what even Europe calls the classical age, Europe was a backwater, a hinterland, an insignificant outpost. African, Arabian, and Asian civilizations constituted the real; Europe was the negation. Europe was rejected by Greco-Roman thought as barbarian. It was not until centuries later, with the invasion of the New World and onset of colonization, that Europe began to constitute itself self-consciously, doing so in part by a revisionist retrieval of Greco-Roman thought, now construed as its own heritage. Robinson's approach has a productively destabilizing effect, opening up refigurations of history and knowledge. What might it do to think Europe as negation, to think eurocentrism in a minor key?

Decolonial thought also asks about the epistemic construction of knowledge in the academy, the ways such approaches largely depend upon a fixed set of categories of Western science. This approach seeks a reconfiguration of the very edifices of disciplinary distinctions and academic divisions of labor. It is not merely about expanding and diversifying existing structures, but about allowing them to be transformed. Mignolo compares his approach to Samir Amin's notion of delinking from global networks. Mignolo sees Amin's approach as limited to economic interconnectivities, and what Mignolo wants to suggest is the possibility for new networks of epistemological connectivity. "The de-colonial shift," Mignolo writes, "is a project of de-linking while postcolonial criticism and theory is a project of scholarly transformation within the academy."¹⁶ In plain terms, decolonial thought seeks to have its own conversations outside the hegemony of a Eurocentric academy, and to appropriate such discourses and speak back on its own terms, if and when it wills. Decolonial thought is perhaps a later iteration in terms of theoretical reflection on the condition of coloniality and its epistemic registers. But the claim of Mignolo and others is that this type of thinking, a thinking *otherwise* than coloniality, in response to, rejection and dismissal of, and deliberate alternative to Eurocentric modernity, has been going on throughout the project of the modern. Decolonial thinking is not a new mode of thinking, but instead a new way of framing the discussion.

Originary occlusions: primitive accumulation and secularization

Before turning to decolonial resources to rethink the secular, it is important to highlight secularization's imbrications with the primitive accumulation necessary at capitalism's

¹⁵ Cedric Robinson, *An Anthropology of Marxism* (London and New York: Ashgate, 2001), 33. See also Lewis Gordon, *Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁶ Mignolo, "Delinking," 452.

inception, as well as its implications in the expropriated and exploited labor needed for colonial extraction and capital production. This highlights secularization's links to economic transformations during colonial modernity, ones that remain central to the project of global capitalism as a form of late stage colonialism. By theorizing the site and mechanisms of primitive accumulation in relation to secularization, we see glimpses of the complex interweaving of the religious/secular assemblage with important material-economic transformations on the ground, as well as with developments in discourse around race, space, and economy.

We do well to recall that secularization, at least in its early modern deployments in Europe, had as its focal point the institutional and material transfer of ecclesial property into state hands. Hans Blumenberg cautions that we should not let such early material designations overdetermine the metaphorical application of secularization nor wed us to "substantialist" assumptions that speak of a loss or transfer of theological content into profane spheres.¹⁷ Nevertheless, such a historical marker is important for linking discourse about the emerging secular differentiation of spheres to material appropriation and matters of economy, as well as agonistic struggles between ecclesial and state power. This anchor prevents discussions of secularization from simply being about apparent changes in theological key, told as mere intellectual history (whether as decline or progress), and calls attention to the links between such ideational developments and changes in economic and political-institutional relations.

In Frank Ruda's telling phrase: "Luther profanes poverty."¹⁸ Reformation upheaval included redefinitions about the nature of poverty, taking as one key site of critique the medieval distinction between sacred and involuntary poverty. As Ruda elaborates:

The reformation ousts poverty from its holy throne and destroys in this way the privilege of a class that imagines itself to be the sole possessor of truth. Luther thereby shatters the medieval economy of salvation that had become dilapidated and that had previously been able to assign a seemingly fixed place to poverty. Before Luther, voluntary rejection of property and refusal of worldly possessions is integrated into an economy of salvation by the fact that the beggar is "promised spiritual support" in return.¹⁹

¹⁷ Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).

¹⁸ Frank Ruda, *Hegel's Rabble: An Investigation into Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (London: Continuum, 2011), 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*; citing Bronislaw Geremek, *Poverty: A History* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 47.

Clergy and mendicant orders relying on alms for support were thrust out into the newly profaned space of the public sphere, where work would eventually come to be the sole determinant of access to money-capital. Thus, in thinking secularization as the transfer of land and property from church to state, we must likewise think it as the transfer of vulnerable and precarious bodies from spiritual to material economies. Even as serfs and peasants are excluded from land through enclosures, and only permitted back to work now as “free” wage laborers, so are orders of the religious poor shifted to the ranks of the proletariat or to the “rabble” and precariat, those excluded even from the labor economy. Part of the formation of dependent labor is thus bound up with narratives that undo ideals of sacred poverty, the place of almsgiving, and transcendent vocation.

Furthermore, Jordy Rosenberg’s illuminating study of discourses on “enthusiasm” in 17th and 18th century England examines how a narrative of secularization functioned specifically to occlude the mechanisms of early capitalist accumulation.²⁰ Rosenberg explores the migration of sentiments about enthusiasm as it “was reconceived as a principle of social comportment, in some cases as key to the peaceful functioning of civil society.”²¹ What we find are critiques of religious fanaticism and enthusiasm marshaled to serve the emerging market system and its relations of production and exchange.

For instance, Rosenberg tracks the metaphor of bondage in and escape from Egypt as used in England in the service of land privatization, as the commons was gradually enclosed. Ideals extolling England as a space of free exchange, unencumbered by ecclesial control, allegorize escape from Egypt and the despoliation of the Egyptians to serve a narrative of secularizing progress. Secularization was a way to shore up the state as savior from religious tyranny (as a form of institutional enthusiasm). Such liberation and salvation brought with it land enclosures, the erosion of Poor Laws, and the emergence of police forces to protect private estates. As Rosenberg claims:

This secularization narrative posits a distinction between a dangerously religious past and a rational, ideal present. But the point to take from this is not so much that the early eighteenth century was invested in secularization in and of and for itself. Rather, because this narrative is organized around the figure of accumulation at the level of the state, what it does is simultaneously allegorize

²⁰ Jordana Rosenberg, *Critical Enthusiasm: Capital Accumulation and the Transformation of Religious Passion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). See also “Accumulate! Accumulate! That Is Moses and the Prophets!”: Secularism, Historicism, and the Critique of Enthusiasm,” *The Eighteenth Century* 51, no. 4 (2010).

²¹ Rosenberg, *Critical Enthusiasm*, 10.

and occlude the contemporary accumulative conditions of British development as an attribute of a distant and violently religious past.²²

Thus, the critique of religious enthusiasm served to allegorize and periodize history around the problem of primitive accumulation. Rather than being identified with the mechanisms of extraction of surplus labor under capitalism, such accumulation was relegated to a mythic past whose determinants included religious tyranny. Such despotic rule, like the pharaohs of old, extracted wealth from an oppressed populace toiling under superstitious beliefs.

As Rosenberg summarizes Marx's critique of such a narrative, "In the mythic past produced by the political economists, religious terror and theocratic tyranny—rather than the transformation of the countryside, the inauguration of the imperial nation-state, the creation of the plantation system, and the birth of commercial capitalism—produced the initial accumulations of profit."²³ The temporalization of modernity, and, in particular, of modern economy made use of the fanatic and enthusiast tropes to construct a chaotic religious past against which secular capitalism asserted itself as savior.

Rosenberg also notes that the transfer of church property into the hands of princely estates in England served to deliver ecclesial land tenants into the hands of the new, private landlords. An entire class of indentured labor was made available, removed from direct access to its land, and now dependent upon the landowning class. Citing Blumenberg with approval, Rosenberg claims that secularization in this sense had less to do with any "decline" or transmutation of theological into worldly values, and more so the creation of free and alienated capitalist labor.²⁴

Secularization discourses were mobilized in capitalist spatializations as well. Policing the religious fanatic is seen not only internally, in Europe's own nation-state formation and land privatization, but externally as well. Here, confrontation with colonial and non-European others plays into Europe's self-fashioning and the geopolitics of early capital, the plantation system, and resource extraction. The figure of the fanatic—and the religious fanatic in particular—aided in colonial projects of racial and ethnic demarcation and control. Cool-headed rationality, serving bureaucratic administrations, was the vaunted subjective posture against which the "natives" were

²² *Ibid.*, 58, italics in orig.

²³ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 104-05.

contrasted. Europe's civilizing project—both internally and externally—invoked the figure of the undisciplined fanatic, the savage in the wilderness, as its counterpoint.²⁵

Such deployment is thus bound up with what Nancy Fraser has highlighted as the expropriation of labor in the colonies that must be read together with the exploited labor of the newly formed European proletariat.²⁶ Models of primitive accumulation and capitalist inception and ongoing function must hold both together, for expropriated and enslaved labor was central to, and not merely an extension of, the emergence of capitalism. This reveals one of many material links between coloniality and European formation.

Attending to the hidden economies of secularization thus complicates understandings of the term. Here we see it deployed as an ideological narrative that obfuscates political and economic transformations taking place in Europe at the time. Tales of religious decline, enlightenment, or liberation of reason may coincide with new modes of labor extraction and the concentration of wealth and resources into an elite minority class. Secularization thus ties together the category of religion, exploited peasant labor and enclosures, and colonial extraction. We need to think (at least) these three trends together in relation to stories of modernity. Thus, questions about the status of belief or models of God in light of secularization, for instance, pertain as well to the status of global relations around capital flows, labor, land, and racialized subjects.

Decoloniality and the secular: contributions and interventions

In light of the mutual implication of secularization with colonial appropriation, how might we relate the foregoing typology and discussion of decoloniality to refigurations of the secular? At the outset, I note Mignolo's caveat that it would be problematic to

take secularization as *the* sacred truth and impose, by military force if necessary, the secular on societies who do *not necessarily have a problem* with giving a priority to the sacred or with weaving together the sacred and secular... Once we bring geo- and body politics into the realm of knowledge and understanding, we realize that secular modernity has its own politics, which do not necessarily coincide with the needs, visions, and desires of everyone on the planet, and that

²⁵ Achille Mbembé captures the connotation of the native as the passionate and fanatical other requiring rational control: "The native was also recognizable by his/her *exuberance*, ability to enjoy the present to the full, grace of movement, *insatiable* pride, intrigue, and *playfulness*... *Not knowing how to write, she/he registered nothing*... The native was a *great child* crushed by long atavism, was *incapable of autonomous thought* and could make no distinction between vice and virtue." See Mbembé, *On the Postcolony*, 33, emphasis added.

²⁶ Nancy Fraser, "Expropriation and Exploitation in Racialized Capitalism: A Reply to Michael Dawson," *Critical Historical Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 163-78.

new projects (ethical, political, epistemic) are emerging in which secular modernity is being transcended by multiple projects of epistemic decolonization...²⁷

Thus, the relationship to the secular manifest in European society will be different in colonial settings. The decolonial *where* resituates talk of secularity in a different setting. In retrieving and reconfiguring the anticolonial *when*, we must recall first that secularism was not uniformly embraced in the post/colony as a mode of liberation as it was in Europe. As Vijay Prashad outlines in his people's history of *The Darker Nations*, as liberation movements worked to forge national consciousness and independence, religion could well be invoked as one support among others for the purposes of identity demarcation, solidarity, and hope.²⁸

Reconfiguring the postcolonial *who*, we can first consider discussion of secular identity, the emergence of what Taylor has called the "buffered self" in place of the porous self. Yet in the colonial situation, just as religion might be positively marshaled in the interests of forging national consciousness, rejections of European secularity contribute to forging ideas of the self. For instance, in his review of Taylor's *A Secular Age* for the *Journal of AAR*, Chakrabarty reflects on the problems mapping Taylor's typology onto the colonial plane.²⁹ He speaks of the death of the buffered self in postcolonial India, the ways the easy correspondence between growth in secular agency and democratic social process in Taylor's work breaks down in the Indian context. Chakrabarty stops short of suggesting the possibility of the simple failure of Taylor's notion of the self in the colonial situation, but it must be considered and alternatives retrieved. Thus, the decolonial *where* asks the where of secularity, the various ways outside of Europe's orbit that secularity is or might be constructed.

One practical route forward may be through comparative secularisms, which allows us to reorient, expand and redefine our understandings, in particular, of the institutional practices related to this sphere. Note that the same cautions apply here as in comparative religions. As scholars have troubled the supposed univocity of the concept of religion, we must disrupt a singular notion of the secular. Are we importing a specifically Western, Protestant notion of secularity? Do we assume it as a fixed, already constituted social object for analysis? Or is it constructed by our analysis?

With this in mind, however, the project may be useful. As Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini write:

²⁷ Mignolo, "Delinking," 488.

²⁸ Prashad, *Darker Nations*.

²⁹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Modern and the Secular in the West: An Outsider's View," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77, no. 2 (2009).

One of the major insights of the project of the comparative study of secularism(s) has been to challenge the holistic nature of the secularization narrative in which any secularism represents development along a single path. By differentiating the secularization narrative itself, historical sociologists have shown that secularism need not always be read as the telos of development. The comparative study of secularism has thus intervened not only in the linear narrative of secularization, but also in its accompanying narratives: development, modernization, evolutionary inevitability. By interrupting secularism's just-so story, the comparative study of secularism challenges the view that either nations had moved through the process of modernization or they had not, they were either developed or undeveloped, modern or antimodern.³⁰

In addition to more synchronic analysis, comparative historical approaches may provide fruitful alternatives to consider. One example is that of the so-called Islamic Golden age from the 9th-14th centuries. Under the Abbasid Caliphate the Islamic empire enjoyed a period of stability and a cultural milieu supporting scientific discourse and inquiry, interfaith cooperation and interchange, economic advance, etc. The earliest forms of academic peer review occur in this period, as did the earliest universities. Economics saw advances such as double-entry bookkeeping, which would propel the growth of banking in Italy and the inception of capitalism centuries later. It is well known that the retrieval and preservation of Greek thought in this period provided Europe with resources for philosophy and theology. We need to consider how the practices and institutions of this form of cosmopolitanism impacted emerging European concepts of secularity. How might arguments, resources, and structures from this period be retrieved and incorporated to rehabilitate modes of secular space today?

Another decolonial approach, rather than observing how secularity is deployed differently on the ground, would be to rethink various conceptual foundations to the secular. Temporality is one starting point, considering the etymological roots of European concepts of the secular as a temporal suspension, a moment of "worldly" time, the *saeculum*. Secularization imports with it a notion of linear history progressing toward a specific horizon, undergirded as it may be with a repressed or evacuated Christian redemption narrative.³¹ The secular as it is widely conceived and championed in modernity stems in part from confident grounding in an ultimate realization through

³⁰ Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, "Introduction: World Secularisms at the Millennium," *Social Text* 64 18, no. 3 (Fall 2000).

³¹ Such was, at least, the view of Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

eschaton and *parousia*, however reconfigured. What might the temporal ontologies of certain African philosophical systems, such as those of the Akan, do to alter the concept? Here, authentic Being and the Real are in the past, as founding moments, and successive iterations diminish in significance as they increase in distance from that past.³² The future is nonexistent, literally nonbeing, but comes into partial being in the continuous present through our actions. What foundations for a space bracketing out power reprisals and conceptual violence might be marshaled from such perspective? How might indigenous Christian theological perspectives, incorporating such notions of alternative African temporalities into Christian thought, offer a different reading of the need for and nature of the secular?³³ While such a temporal scheme risks positing the present and future as decline, and hence potentially and problematically reinforces narratives of lament over secularization,

Examples and possibilities are as diverse and plentiful as non-European cultures. A decolonial vantage point of breaking with and speaking back to modes of European modernity and its narrowly defined secular sphere provides one model for constructive engagement. My hope is that religious and non-religious actors will continue to see the viability and importance of something like the secular sphere and work to preserve it. Indeed it might be that the one key point of interfaith dialogue and cooperation will emerge around preserving a secular sphere, a contingent and “value-neutral” space, recognizing that it exists for value-laden, often radically non-neutral, and possibly theological reasons. Such reasons have as ends certain goods like peaceful coexistence, flourishing of life, and unfettered inquiry in the service of the good. Such inquiry would be regulated by the logic internal to the structures and spaces of that inquiry itself, rather than by external dictates or powers. The post-secularity currently being lauded need not entail a jettisoning or dismissal of the secular. Rather, a critical part of its mandate might include a more rigorously theorized and theologized—and, hence, legitimated—secular sphere.

³² See, e.g., V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). I pose this challenge to Milbank in light of his own post-secular triumphalism in Devin Singh, “Provincializing Christendom: Reviewing John Milbank’s *Beyond Secular Order*,” *Syndicate: A New Forum For Theology* 2, no. 6 (2015).

³³ See, e.g., Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986).