

MICHAEL ALLAN

# Reading Secularism: Religion, Literature, Aesthetics

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE considers the place of religion and secularism in the field of literary study. The authors draw from anthropology, history, philosophy, and law, and all share in a common effort to take the category of religion seriously—not necessarily as a term with a fixed descriptive meaning, but as a category that nonetheless has implications for what we do when we read. The six essays trace the interactions of religion, literature, and secularism at distinct historical moments—ranging from early modern Spain to the nineteenth-century United States and interwar Germany and Palestine. They also chart how literature inflects the sensibilities, behaviors, and attitudes of readers. Spanning regions, languages, and methods, the issue bridges questions about reading secularism with critical reflections on the disciplines undergirding its textual traditions.

In different ways, each of the essays refuses to divide religion and secularism, and instead examines the relational dynamic linking the two terms. The resulting analysis echoes recent scholarship in the critical social sciences—such as Talal Asad’s *Formations of the Secular* and Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*—that points to religion and secularism not as opposites, but as interrelated and mutually determining categories. Not only is secularism the condition by which a concept like religion becomes imaginable, but secular states necessarily define religion in order to demarcate its place within the social order. Winnifred Sullivan’s *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* illuminates this entangled relationship in a legal context, and Jonathan Sheehan’s work demonstrates how even Enlightenment discourse fixates on religion in a way that throws the secularization thesis into question. Such studies help to demonstrate that engaging religion and secularism is less a matter of purifying one concept of the other than of entwining the analytical challenges implicit

---

A special thank you is due to Lisa Freinkel and the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Oregon for the support of this special issue. I am also grateful for the editorial insights and assistance provided by George Rowe and Lynne Rossi at the journal *Comparative Literature*. Finally, my gratitude extends to Georges Khalil at the Forum for Transregional Studies in Berlin, as well as Hicham Bouzid, Bina Gogineni, Saba Mahmood, Sunayani Bhattacharya, and Baran Germen for the conversations that helped to shape the introduction.

*Comparative Literature* 65:3

DOI 10.1215/00104124-2325086 © 2013 by University of Oregon

in the two terms. In the end, reading secularism means confronting dominant presumptions about the liberal state and its claims to mediate between religious differences, as well as analyzing the practices, disciplines, and behaviors informing secular attachments.

Discussions of religion and aesthetics have a known genealogy within literary criticism: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's and Jean-Luc Nancy's reflections on Romanticism, aesthetics, and the sublime; Edward Said's notion of secular criticism; Carl Schmitt's and Walter Benjamin's comments on political theology; or various studies of mysticism, magic, and disenchantment (see During and Viswanathan, "Secularism"). And the last few years have seen a wealth of scholarship on these topics: Aamir Mufti's special issues of *boundary 2*, an issue of *New German Critique* on political theology (Lebovic), Jordan Alexander Stein and Justine Murison's special issue of *Early American Literature*, the dossier on secularism in *Public Culture*, Michael Kaufmann's essay and its responses in *New Literary History*, and Victoria Kahn's special issue ("Early Modern Secularism") of *Representations*, among them. In books ranging from Colin Jager's *The Book of God* and John Lardas Modern's *Secularism in Antebellum America* to Sheldon Pollock's *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* and Gauri Viswanthan's *Outside the Fold* we encounter discussions of religion by no means limited to theology and the social sciences. As a category that complicates assumptions about modernity, religion permeates philosophy, aesthetics, philology, and anthropology and traverses those disciplines, regions, languages, and traditions that constitute the basis of comparative literature.

The six essays here extend these discussions to focus specifically on how religion and secularism impact reading, literature, and aesthetics. How does attention to the category of religion impact what we do when we read? What sorts of inquiry does it make possible? I gesture here to three possible directions and then follow with the trajectories charted in the essays.

### *Literary Theology?*

To what extent are reflections on textuality indebted to traditions within scriptural hermeneutics? Scholarship in Qu'ranic exegesis as well as discussions of allegorical versus literal readings of the Bible surely influence how the practice of literary reading has come to be understood. Echoes of these debates can be found here in essays by Saba Mahmood, Tomoko Masuzawa, Jordan Alexander Stein, and Allison Schachter, all of whom point to the difficulty of separating literary from religious reading practices—or purifying humanism of preexisting theological debates. If in the field of politics Carl Schmitt suggests that all political concepts are inherently theological, then might the same be true for literary ones? To what extent do literary concepts reverberate with those scriptural traditions through which textuality has come to be theorized?

### *Secularism and the Grounds of Comparison*

How do religion and secularism inform the practice of comparison? How is the comparative method practiced within the field of comparative literature similar to or different from the methods of comparative grammar, comparative anatomy, or comparative religion? From what position does one compare? Is there something

inherently secular in the activity of comparison—and, more specifically, in our presumption that we can mediate between different literary traditions? Beyond the history of the discipline and its indebtedness to broader discussions of the human sciences in the nineteenth century, there are also contemporary implications to these concerns. If nation and language are the primary framework for comparison, then how might a greater attention to a category like religion encourage us to imagine world literature otherwise? What would discussions of the global humanities look like, for example, if the struggles in Iran, Algeria, Chechnya, and Bosnia provided the groundwork for our thinking rather than the secular, national narratives of the 1960s? How, in other words, does rethinking geopolitics with religion in mind challenge the presumptions and attachments that inform much of what is studied in the name of global literary scholarship?

### *Embodiment, Affect, and Mediation*

What is the relation between political and aesthetic mediation? How do discussions of embodiment and affect impact the convergence of religion, secularism, and literature? When in *Formations of the Secular* Asad asks what an anthropology of secularism might look like, he responds by entwining politics, affect, and embodiment in reflections that have as much to do with literature and aesthetics as they do with anthropology. He notes the distinction between the secular as an epistemological category and secularism as a political doctrine, and suggests that secularism “presupposes new concepts of ‘religion,’ ‘ethics,’ and ‘politics,’ and new imperatives associated with them” (2; see, also, Casanova). And unlike many earlier scholars—from Max Weber and Carl Schmitt to Karl Löwith and Hans Blumenberg (see, also, Pecora)—Asad weighs his social, political, and philosophical claims against a backdrop that includes not only Western Europe, but also interactions among religious traditions in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. His comparative analysis of the modern liberal state situates secularism as “an enactment by which a political medium (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self” (5). But Asad goes even further and positions mediation outside a strictly political understanding. When he writes in a simple declarative statement that “transcendent mediation is secularism,” he exposes the deep resonance between mediation and secularism, on the one hand, and ethics and aesthetics, on the other (5). Asad also places secularism squarely within forms of life, attitudes to the body, and structures of the senses, all of which he sees as integral to his understanding of anthropology as the comparative study of embedded concepts (17).

Part of what makes Asad’s work so unique is that, even as he focuses on the modern state and its imaginaries, he consistently invokes secularism not only as a matter of governance, but also as the cultivation of sensibilities, behaviors, and attitudes. And it is here that he turns to literature. The second section of his introduction, for example, considers how the Bible comes to be read as literature and later addresses Romantic poetry, the place of authorship, and the role of aesthetics with reference to figures ranging from William Blake and Adonis to Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man. By embedding political, aesthetic, and theological questions in his analysis of the secular, Asad effectively pushes the problem of mediation beyond mimetic relationships and frames the disciplines through which readings

emerge. His analysis focuses, then, not so much on what a text says, but on how it comes to mean within a specific interpretative tradition—with literary reading being but one possibility. He thus challenges literary scholars to consider how literature comes to matter and the traditions foreclosed with its ascendance. Weighing scripture and literature against a history of reading, attending to the contours and limits of a public sphere, Asad's anthropology of secularism transforms how we might think of our scholarly practice. If transcendent mediation is secularism, as Asad tells us, then being attentive to mediation—both its practices and histories—is at the forefront of a history of secularism.

Extending the implications of Asad's concerns with mediation, a number of scholars question the dynamics of a secular public sphere and the purview of the reading practices it cultivates. In sites ranging from Quebec to Turkey to France, secularism has been nearly inseparable from assumptions about the place of reading in public schools, whether it means the displacement of scripture by literature or the literary reading of scripture. Thus, for example, Niklaus Largier returns in a recent article to Martin Luther in order to trouble the conventional narrative of mass literacy and the emergence of reading publics. Against those who understand Luther's translation of scripture into the vernacular as an act freeing readers, Largier points to the ways in which Luther "establishes and justifies the secular order as a social and pedagogical institution that is meant to control the ways in which the Bible can be read" (41). Seen in this light, secularism not only transforms print culture, but also transforms methods of reading and the institutions that teach how to make sense of texts. By locating the disciplines central to the emergence of a reading public, Largier counters a view that links the modern public to free thinking and points to Luther's efforts to police carefully the act of reading. The implications of these claims are echoed in Charles Hirschkind's work on cassette sermons in Egypt and Michael Warner's work on print culture in American literary history.

The essays collected in this special issue highlight the complexity and rich implications of the interdisciplinary scholarship on religion and secularism, especially as it intersects with reading. In the first two articles, Saba Mahmood and Seth Kimmel consider the historical convergence of Islam and Christianity to address the limits of humanism, in Mahmood's essay, and law, in Kimmel's. Mahmood queries the assumptions of a humanist reading practice in the controversy over the historical fiction of Egyptian novelist Youssef Zeidan. Mahmood demonstrates how Zeidan's novel *Azazeel* engages the Nestorian and Asturian positions regarding the humanity or divinity of Christ, and she follows the debates in which the Muslim author responds to his Christian critics. Zeidan's humanism and his claims for literature and history put him at odds with the Coptic Christian religious authorities in Egypt. Mahmood's attention to the contours of the debate reveals the competing frames within which *Azazeel* comes to be read. In doing so, she not only questions the place of humanism, but also forges methods for analyzing literature through its readers. In her view, secularism functions as a philosophy of history, a semiotic ideology, and a particular manner of conceiving the representational debates within historical fiction. Her analysis demonstrates the

salience of theological debates within early Christianity for the reading of Zeidan's contemporary novel.

This line of argument takes a turn in Seth Kimmel's engagement with legal traditions in early modern Spain. After duly noting the tendency for scholars to take the Protestant Reformation and the Northern European Enlightenment as points of departure for the story of secularization, he considers how early modern Spain at the time of the Inquisition complicates this well-established account. Kimmel examines a petition by Nuñez Muley and the writings of Valencia in order to investigate various approaches to the practice of religious dissimulation (*taqiyya*). Within this practice, denying one's faith or committing an act of blasphemy was religiously permissible for those facing political persecution. At the time of the Inquisition, there was a concerted effort to secularize the crime of heresy in order to make it punishable in court. Against this backdrop, Kimmel notes how a Muslim in early modern Spain, understood as an atheist, was therefore technically outside the jurisdiction of ecclesiastical courts. He suggests that the ensuing legal debates in early modern Spain anticipate the sort of distinctions between religious and cultural practice, behavior versus belief, that have become so integral to recent scholarship on secularism (see, for example, Sullivan). Weaving together the work of scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt, Talal Asad, and Michel Foucault with court records from the Inquisition, Kimmel's essay points to the importance of the location from which the story of secularization is told, as well as the methods, assumptions, and attitudes that inflect its narration.

Whereas Mahmood and Kimmel relate secularism to the intersection of religious traditions, the second pair of essays turns to American literary history and debates within Christianity. Tomoko Masuzawa investigates a court case in Ellsworth, Maine, where Catholic children were expelled from school for refusing to read aloud the King James Version of the Bible. The children's parents filed suit, claiming that public schools ought not discriminate against students "on account of color or sect." In response, the chief defense counsel for the School Committee, Richard H. Dana Jr., argued that the Bible was not being taught as doctrine, but as a literary or cultural document. Masuzawa contextualizes the trial within discussions of violence between Protestants and immigrant Catholic communities, and her essay addresses, in no small measure, a curious reversal: whereas the plaintiffs bring suit against the Protestant majority School Committee for practices deemed discriminatory, the defense frames the plaintiffs as beholden to a sectarian entity threatening the nature of a public institution. What emerges from Masuzawa's analysis is a set of insights into the relationship among the Bible, moral education, literary reading, and the rhetoric of sectarianism. She thus places literature and the reading methods it presumably requires squarely within debates about the role of religion in the state.

In a related gesture, Jordan Alexander Stein investigates an emergent emphasis on form in literary and aesthetic analysis in nineteenth-century America. Whereas Masuzawa deals with legal, theological, and cultural questions, Stein considers the link between aesthetic formalism and the secularization of knowledge, a link he traces in the institutional emergence of literature as a profession. Recounting the debates among public intellectuals regarding the proper methods for the study of literary texts, Stein pairs the secular aesthetic of Walt Whitman and

Thomas Wentworth Higginson with the formalist reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson offered in Matthew Arnold's Boston lecture. He then weighs these discussions against Barrett Wendell's *A Literary History of America*, which gives a formalist account of American literary history, and William Dean Howells's fusion of theme and form in his reflections on national literary history. Weaving these various strands together, Stein's essay ultimately points to the entrenched secularism of aesthetic formalism in American literature, something he reads adeptly through the theological and institutional registers in the emergent discipline.

The last two essays of the issue confront the convergence of Orientalism and Zionism in relation to problems of political theology. In her analysis of Leah Goldberg's modernist novel *Avedot*, Allison Schacter entwines secularism and Orientalism, showing how Goldberg's work frames the problem of reading. In the complex interplay between Goldberg and her narrator Kron, Schacter explores the rhetorical registers of the novel, noting Kron's turn to thirteenth-century medieval poets as inspiration and Goldberg's implicit consideration of her own reading public. The novel stages the intimate address of a Hebrew poet to his readers, the interception of the poem by Nazi sympathizers, and in turn its publication in a German Orientalist journal as evidence of anti-Christian Jewish sentiments. Drawing upon the work of Gil Anidjar and Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, Schacter makes her analysis of this literary work the grounds for thinking about the place of gender within debates about modern Hebrew, secular nationalism, and the limits of a reading public. Her essay thus links the novel, with all of its registers, to the indeterminacy of the religious and secular divide. In doing so, she reads modern Hebrew as a self-Orientalizing gesture that blurs the theological and political dimensions of the modern state.

In the final essay, Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin's reading of Walter Benjamin alongside Gershom Scholem offers a subtle re-theologizing of the political vocabulary employed by these two writers. The essay resists putting theology at the service of a Jewish state and ultimately claims a place for exile. Raz-Krakotzkin begins by reading Benjamin's messianism through the work of Scholem and then goes on to demonstrate that, even though Scholem embraced Zionism, he did so by understanding Zionism not as the realization of a concrete land so much as a framework for bi-nationalism. In fact, Raz-Krakotzkin argues that the split between the Zionist secular vision of a Jewish nation-state and a utopian apocalyptic Zionism underscores a fundamental instability in the modern state of Israel. His essay ends with a poem by the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. In a gesture that weds literature, theology, and politics, Raz-Krakotzkin reads Darwish's allusions to al-Andalus as a figure for thinking exile, bi-nationalism, and the entangled traditions of Palestine.

The two most recent reports of the American Comparative Literature Association, Charles Bernheimer's *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* and Haun Saussy's *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, address some of the terms—culture and identity, on the one hand, and nation and language, on the other—that have constituted the primary axes along which scholars ranging from J.W. von Goethe and Hugo Metzl to Rabindranath Tagore and Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett have compared literary traditions. The categories of religion and secu-

larism suggest alternate formations of community, tradition, and semiotic ideology. Within these alternate formations, a framework that typically assumed the cultural determination of textual phenomenon is replaced by an emphasis on communities of interpretation, histories of reading, and the ways in which textual traditions come to be lived. Indeed, this special issue might well have been entitled *Comparative Literature in a Secular Age*, thus echoing both Bernheimer's and Saussy's reports as well as Charles Taylor's concerns with the broader transformations implicit in the social imaginary of a secular polity.

The essays collected here query how religion and secularism define, delimit, and transform the concept of literature and our practice as comparatists. And if the essays contain both direct and oblique references to the work of Hans Blumenberg, Edward Said, and Max Weber, they remain first and foremost considerations of formations of religion embedded in specific cases. Each essay explores hermeneutic struggles across literary, historical, and textual traditions, and does so by considering the limits of secular reading practices. Religion and secularism are not treated thematically, nor is religion demarcated as merely one method among others in a marketplace of possibilities. Instead, the essays highlight the challenge implicit in reading religion across literary history—and the potentials of such methods for the future of literary study.

*University of Oregon*

### Works Cited

- Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003. Print.
- Casanova, José. "The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms." *Rethinking Religion*. Ed. Craig Calhoun et al. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011. 54–74. Print.
- During, Simon. *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002. Print.
- Hirschkind, Charles. *The Ethical Soundscape*. New York: Columbia UP, 2006. Print.
- Jager, Colin. *The Book of God*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2007. Print.
- Kahn, Victoria, ed. *Early Modern Secularism*. Spec. issue of *Representations* 105 (2009): 1–169. Print.
- Kaufmann, Michael. "The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies." *New Literary History* 37.4 (2007): 607–28. Print.
- Lacoue-Labarthe, Phillipe, and Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Literary Absolute*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1988. Print.
- Largier, Niklaus. "Mysticism, Modernity and the Invention of Aesthetic Experience." *Representations* 105 (2009): 37–60. Print.
- Lebovic, Nitzan, ed. *Political Theology*. Spec. issue of *New German Critique* 35.3 (2008): 1–64. Print.
- Modern, John Lardas. *Secularism in Antebellum America*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011. Print.
- Mufti, Aamir, ed. *Critical Secularism*. Spec. issue of *boundary 2* 31.2 (2004): 11–281; *Antimonies of the Postsecular*. Spec. issue of *boundary 2* 40.1 (2013): 1–267. Print.
- Pecora, Vincent. *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, Modernity*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006. Print.
- Pollock, Sheldon. *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2006. Print.
- Sheehan, Jonathan. "Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization." *American Historical Review* 108.3 (2003): 1061–80. Print.

- Stein, Jordan Alexander, and Justine Murison, eds. *Methods for the Study of Religion in Early American Literature*. Spec. issue of *Early American Literature* 45.1 (2010): 1–210. Print.
- Sullivan, Winnifred Fallers. *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005. Print.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007. Print.
- Taylor, Charles, Colin Jäger, and Saba Mahmood. “Secularism: Genealogies and Politics.” *Public Culture* 18.2 (2006): 281–347. Print.
- Warner, Michael. “The Evangelical Public Sphere.” Lectures delivered at the University of Pennsylvania, March 23–26, 2009. Web. <<http://repository.upenn.edu/rosenbach/2/>>.
- . “Is Liberalism a Religion?” *Religion: Beyond a Concept*. Ed. Hent deVries. New York: Fordham UP, 2008. 610–17. Print.
- . *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books, 2005. Print.
- Viswanathan, Gauri. *Outside the Fold*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998. Print.
- . “Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy.” *PMLA* 123 (2008): 466–76. Print.