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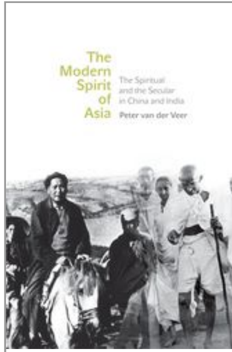

The Modern Spirit of Asia: The Spiritual and the Secular in China and India
Peter van der Veer

Print publication date: 2013
Print ISBN-13: 9780691128146
Published to Princeton Scholarship Online: October 2017
DOI: 10.23943/princeton/9780691128146.001.0001

“Smash Temples, Build Schools”: Comparing Secularism in India and China

Peter van der Veer

DOI:10.23943/princeton/9780691128146.003.0006

[−] Abstract and Keywords

This chapter discusses secularism as a political project with its own utopian elements. Secularism refers to the growing importance of scientific knowledge that is not constrained by religious authority. Religion is sometimes taken to be an obstacle for scientific progress and secularism demands its removal for the benefit of societal development that is guided by scientific discovery and technological innovation. Secularization was seen by sociologists as an intrinsic and inescapable part of the modernization of Western society, with the assumption that this was something all societies had to go through. An alternative to post-Weberian arguments in sociology about religion and secularity is offered by theories that emphasize individual, rational choice in religious markets.

Keywords: secularism, secularization, scientific knowledge, religious authority, technological innovation, sociology, religion, Western society

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Subscriber: Virginia Tech; date: 20 May 2019

The concept of secularism is not less elusive than that of religion, or spirituality, or magic, with which it forms a syntagmatic chain. Often it is unclear what is meant by “the secular.” At one level the term refers to the separation of state and church. This makes sense only in the West, where one has the Christian church. Even in the West, however, this separation takes different shapes in the United States, in Britain, in France, in Holland. In Asia religions are not organized in churches, and that simple fact already creates confusion about what is meant by “the secular.” At another level it refers to the marginalization of religion in society. Again, this seems to be occurring in some societies in Europe, but certainly not in the United States. There is therefore also not a clear causal connection between level 1 and level 2. Finally, there is a third level, which is that of the growing irrelevance of religion as a source of knowledge. This refers to the growing importance of scientific knowledge that is not constrained by religious authority. Religion is sometimes taken to be an obstacle for scientific progress and secularism demands its removal for the benefit of societal development that is guided by scientific discovery and technological innovation.

Much sociological attention and imagination has gone into first the development of the secularization thesis and more recently in its dismantling. Secularization was seen by sociologists as an intrinsic and inescapable part of the modernization of Western society, with the assumption that this was something all societies had to go through.[1] Jose Casanova has been at the forefront of the dismantling of this thesis with his important book *Public Religions*.[2] He has argued that the three propositions of the secularization thesis—namely, the decline of religious beliefs, the **(p.141)** privatization of religion, and the differentiation of secular spheres and their emancipation from religion—should be looked at separately in a comparative analysis. Most of the research on secularization is focused on an opposition of Western Europe and the United States. Casanova argues that comparative historical analysis allows one to get away from the dominant stereotypes about the United States and Europe and to open a space for further sociological inquiry into multiple patterns of fusion and differentiation of the religious and the secular across societies and religions. This means moving away from teleological understandings of modernization. Or perhaps better, it means a questioning of that telos by recognizing its multiplicity and its contradictions. Casanova’s intervention can be understood as building on the Weberian project of comparative and historical sociology, but going beyond it by avoiding the examination of civilizations and focusing instead on nation-states. He shows that religions can play a major role in mass mobilization around political issues in modern polities that have a legal separation of state and church. The political significance of religion is enduring in large parts of Europe, Latin America, and certainly also in the United States. In India one finds a secular separation of religion and state, but at the same time politics is full of religion. In China one finds a communist regime that is bent on removing religion from the political arena, but is now faced with revival of religion at all levels of society. Post-Weberian comparative sociology approaches the vast array of secularisms from a historical study of the trajectories of nation-states.

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An alternative to post-Weberian arguments in sociology about religion and secularity is offered by theories that emphasize individual, rational choice in religious markets.[3] Market theories of religion have developed in the United States, because of the dominance of market ideology in that country. Moreover, they seem to fit the historical development of secularism in the United States. The United States has erected "a wall of separation" between state and church, according to which arrangement the state is secularized, but is required to uphold religious freedom. **(p.142)** Historically, especially proselytizing Protestant groups have thrived in the United States, and they have set an example that is followed by other denominations. Their competition is made possible by the noninterference of the state and what is sometimes called the "free marketplace of ideas." European modernization theorists have often mentioned the United States as an exception to the rule of secularization, while American market theorists have argued that Europe was the exception to the rule, since established religions (state religions) in Europe monopolized the religious economy and took market incentives away. However, both Poland and Ireland are Catholic monopolies and at the same time are hardly secularized. One can learn from the debate between these sociologists that one should not strive for universal models but develop meaningful comparative analysis.

Besides the fact that market theories of religion run into some empirical problems in societies outside the United States—for instance, in Europe—they have some further theoretical difficulties. Market theories assume that individuals make a certain kind of "rational choice" and that they have stable preferences. This allows for description and prediction. The problem, obviously, is how to demarcate rational and irrational choices. This demarcation problem is discussed in detail by an influential Swiss sociologist of religion, Jürgen Stolz.[4] He argues that also choices that are seen by the majority in a society as irrational can still be considered rational, if people have good reasons to believe in their choice given the information that they have.[5] However, one may object that if we equate rationality with understandability, we effectively replace the actor's rationality with the sociologist's rationality, which reconstructs the "good reasons" that people may have for their beliefs. Moreover, what if people just perform certain religious acts without putting any emphasis on believing, or do not in general give the concept of belief central importance in their religious activities?[6] The problem sociologists who follow the economic model of "rational choice" run into is that their definition of rationality is too one-dimensional to be useful **(p.143)** for the interpretation of much social behavior. When they realize this and try to expand the definition of rationality the concept loses its value for prediction. These problems are not new. In the 1970s they were hotly debated by Peter Winch, Steven Lukes, Martin Hollis, Ernest Gellner, and others. This debate was largely based on Evans-Pritchard's ethnographic work. In his classical study of witchcraft and magic among the Azande Evans-Pritchard showed that seemingly irrational magic, as a set of concepts, practices, and techniques, has to be understood within a wider range of moral understandings.[7]

Stolz wants to reintroduce a Weberian concept of value rationality, but, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the problem with that is precisely that it makes a distinction between religious morality (value rationality that can be found in world religions) on the one hand and irrational magic on the other. This is in Weber's case (and in that of modernization theory) connected with an evolutionary view of the disenchantment of the world. It is these assumptions that have become part of ideologies of modernizing elites and have important social consequences that need to be critically analyzed by sociologists rather than being taken as the guiding models for studying religion.

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The market cannot be understood purely in terms of rational choice. Our current understanding of actors in financial markets complicates rationality and places more emphasis on greed, on herd behavior, and on the interaction between actors and electronically embedded models.[8] If this is already the case for financial markets, a central aspect of the economy, it might be more useful to closely examine the specific understandings of rationality and desire and personhood that are produced in religious movements rather than assume that we know already what the individual as a rational human being is. Moreover, there are other aspects of the market that may be helpful in our analysis of religion, such as advertising in various media, the creation of social imaginaries (to use Charles Taylor’s term), and fantasies that lead to particular consumption patterns, branding, and lifestyle, which are neglected by the market theorists. In principle **(p.144)** attempts to connect different spheres of social life, such as the market and religious affiliation, are to be applauded, but to reduce the richness of social life to a narrow definition of rational behavior is not necessary.

The rejection of market theories of religion that depend on universalistic assumptions of rational choice brings us to a cultural approach of secularism. The comparison between secularism in India and China depends on the following steps. The first is that the project of European modernity should be understood as part of what I have called “interactional history.”[9] That is to say that the project of modernity with all its revolutionary ideas of nation, equality, citizenship, democracy, and rights is developed not only in Atlantic interactions between the United States and Europe but also in interactions with Asian and African societies that are coming within the orbit of imperial expansion. Instead of the oft-assumed *universalism* of the Enlightenment one needs to look at the *universalization* of ideas that emerge from a history of interactions. Enlightened notions of rationality and progress are not simply invented in Europe and accepted elsewhere, but are both produced and universally spread in the expansion of European power. This entails a close attention to the pathways of imperial universalization. Examining secularism in India and China uncovers some of the peculiarities of this universalization by showing how it is inserted in different historical trajectories in these societies.

The second is that with all the attention to secularization as a historical *process*, there is not enough attention to secularism as historical *project*. Casanova has in his recent writings rightly drawn attention to the importance in Europe of secularism as an ideological critique of religion, carried out by a number of social movements.[10] Secularism as an ideology offers a teleology of religious decline and can function as a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is important to examine the role of intellectuals in furthering this understanding of history, but also their relation to sources of power: state apparatuses (prominently the law) and social movements. Secularism *frames* religion. As Talal Asad observes, **(p.145)** “the space that religion may properly occupy in society has to be continually redefined in society by the law because the reproduction of social life within and beyond the nation-state continually affects the discursive clarity of that space.”[11] Secularism is a forceful ideology when carried by political movements that capture both the imagination and the means to mobilize social energies. It is important to attend to the utopian and indeed religious elements in secularist projects in order to understand why many of these movements seem to tap into traditional and modern sources of witchcraft, millenarianism, and charisma. Much of this is omitted from discussions of secularization, but the cases of India and China show us how essential this is for understanding the dynamics of religion and the secular.

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It is imperialism that brings Indians and Chinese to interpret their traditions in terms of the category of “religion” and its opposition to “the secular.” While there are multiple histories involved here, it is the imperial context that produces a remarkably similar trajectory that essentializes Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Daoism, and even Confucianism into comparable entities, subjects of the new, secular discipline of comparative religion or science of religion that attempts to emancipate itself from Christian theology. One also has to look carefully at ways in which European notions of science and its opposite, of progress and backwardness, capture the imagination of Indian and Chinese intellectuals and how this relates to the creation of the modern state. In the following I will first deal with secularism in China and then with secularism in India in order to show what kind of problems secularist projects attempt to address and what kind of violence their interventions entail.

Secularism in China

“Smash temples, build schools” (*huimiao*, *banxue*, 毁庙办学) is a particularly telling slogan that was used in a campaign against temple cults and religious specialists during reforms in late Ching at the end of the nineteenth century.[12] According to the reformists, **(p.146)** led by Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and supported by the emperor, China had to modernize quickly and this had to be done by promoting education and by getting rid of religious superstition. These two elements belonged together, since education should train people in modern, rational thought, while superstition and magical thought should be discouraged. Education is central to the development of the modern nation-state. It demands that its subjects be disciplined and educated in a national curriculum. That curriculum contains the basic elements of modern science, required for educating an adequate workforce, but also basic elements of national culture, such as language and history. Religion can be regarded as part of national culture, but in secularist states students are taught to reject that part of culture, see it as a historical aberration, and become atheist.

Education is also central to religion. To be able to send, receive, and interpret the religious message one needs to be educated. Despite the Deist claim that religion is natural, it is in fact culturally acquired.[13] One could perhaps compare learning a religion with learning a language, and indeed ritual communication has often been studied as a form of language. Many religions have ritual manuals about what to do when and for what purpose, and this practical knowledge may be more important than the content of what people believe, or their “inner states,” although some religions, especially Protestantism, do put a lot of emphasis on interiority. The education in sacred truth, in sacred rituals, in correct behavior is an indispensable element of religions. If we think of the ways in which we are socialized to understand symbols (religious and nonreligious) and their relation to practice, it is clear that we have to study not only religions but also how religious symbols become authoritative in relation to other representations and discourses.[14] For example, if one becomes a Buddhist in a secular state Buddhist symbols are discursively constructed and understood in relation to the dominant discourse of secularism.

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Outside the family, the temple and the monastery are throughout history sites of education. In Europe it is relatively recent **(p.147)** that they have been rivaled or overtaken by state-sponsored schools. It was only in the late nineteenth century that the old universities of Oxford and Cambridge were loosening their ties with the state church. Still, many of the arrangements in these universities (and elsewhere in Europe) recall the religious nature of higher learning. In China Buddhist and Daoist temples and monasteries were also sites of learning, but primarily for religious education. It is state Confucianism that is central to the state curriculum. The state required officials to be educated in interpretations of the classical canon that were tied up with an imperial ritual system and a Confucian cosmology. The centralization of the examination system has been one of the major features of the development of the bureaucracy in China and looked at with admiration from outside of China. Nevertheless, it does not seem to be correct to see this as an entirely secular system, since it partly promoted what one could call a Confucian mind-set, a kind of moral and political theory, as well as a ritual complex that legitimated the sacred nature of the imperial system, but it was located outside temples and monasteries.[15] Kang Youwei, who started the campaign for the destruction of temples and the building of schools, wanted to have the worship of Confucius as part of the school program.[16] What had to be destroyed then was not religion as such, but sites of popular religion, and what had to be promoted was Confucian secularism.

Before the communist victory in 1949 a number of campaigns, first in late imperial China and afterward in the republic, destroyed or “secularized” (in the medieval European sense of being taken out of the church and integrated in the world), according to one estimate, half a million existing temples.[17] What the communists did after 1949 was, to a very great extent, a continuation of these campaigns. The nationalists in Taiwan with their Confucian nationalism did not develop a fundamentally different policy toward religion than the communists (except for their support of Christianity), but continued Confucian secularism. Until the late 1960s the Taiwanese nationalists kept religious activities under a very tight control. All these campaigns **(p.148)** against religion should have produced a secular China, but the contrary is true. In Taiwan religious activities are to be witnessed everywhere, and with the loosening of the tight controls over religion in the People’s Republic of China we see religious activity also flourishing everywhere. This paradox can be understood by closely examining the nature of these secularist campaigns.

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Secularism as an ideology and as a practice in China is in the first place an anti-clericalism. Anti-clericalism has deep roots in Chinese history, but at the end of the nineteenth century it gained the attention both of the popular media and of intellectuals who grappled with modern, Western ideas. Intellectuals, like Liang Qichao (1873–1929) and Zhang Binglin (1869–1936) and Chen Yinke (1890–1969) separated Buddhism and Daoism from their clerical roots and made them into national moralities that could serve the modernization of China. Buddhist leaders such as Taixu (1890–1947) and Daoist modernists like Chen Yingning (1890–1969) made great efforts to bring their religions under the rubric of secular nationalism. The popular press was also not opposed to religion as such, but to Buddhist and Daoist clerics who were described not only as ignorant buffoons, but also as criminals, drunkards, gluttons, and, foremost, as sexually debauched. Temples and monasteries were described in the emergent press in the late Qing period as dungeons for sexual debauchery, places of great pornographic potentiality. Clerics were portrayed in stories as visiting houses of pleasure. The main theme here was in fact that monastic celibacy and techniques of self-improvement were a *disguise* for a lawless, unbridled sexuality.[18] This theme of sexual scandal was certainly crucial in the emergence of the popular press in the nineteenth century everywhere, but the Chinese focus on clerics recalls especially the pornography that was printed in the Netherlands but distributed in revolutionary circles in France in the decades before the French Revolution. Here we see a genealogy of *laïcité* in the underbelly of the Enlightenment that connects religion with sexuality in ways that are never made explicit, but **(p.149)** that are also behind the social energy in anti-Islamic gestures today in France.[19]

Clerics in China were also seen as inherently violent, since their ascetic disciplines and martial arts that inflict violence on their own bodies can be turned against others for criminal of rebellious purposes. This theme obviously gained prominence because of the failed Boxer rebellion in the late nineteenth century. Clerics were able to organize secret societies that threatened the state monopoly of violence. They combined fighting techniques with magic that made the believers think they were invincible and thus extremely dangerous. The failure of the Boxer rebellion, however, showed Chinese intellectuals that there was no future in using magical means to defeat the imperial powers. Again, the theme of *delusion* and *disguise* is combined with the notion that the illiterate masses are led into meaningless and ultimately fruitless violence by cunning clerics.

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Besides a form of anticlericalism Chinese secularism is a form of scientism and rationalism. From a nineteenth-century enlightened and evolutionary perspective it pitches scientific rationality against magical superstition. Secularism is thus a battle against the misconceptions of natural processes that keeps the illiterate masses in the dark and in the clutches of feudal rulers and clerics. The term for superstition (*mixin*, 迷信) comes from Japanese, as do many other terms that are employed in the discourse of modernity, like indeed the term “religion” (*zongjiao*, 宗教) itself. In using these neologisms it makes a distinction between religion that contributes to the morality of the state and superstition that is detrimental to modern progress. These views are shared by intellectuals of all persuasions, including the nationalists and the communists, but also by many reformist religious thinkers. This is both a discursive and an institutional shift as an aspect of the transition from the ancien régime of the Qing empire to the modern republic. The traditional system of three teachings (*sanjiao*), Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist, in which Confucian state ritual defined the framework for the other two, was **(p.150)** transformed in the republic by the notion that there were five acceptable world religions: Buddhism, Daoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam. Confucianism was kept outside this arrangement, because it was considered to be both national instead of global and in essence secular rather than religious. Confucian intellectuals did try to turn it into a secular civil religion, but this met with little success outside the nationalist elite. The religions that are officially recognized as religions today are being organized along the model of Christianity in nation-wide associations that are ultimately controlled by the state. What remains outside of this arrangement is what is often called popular belief (*minjian xinyang*, 民间信仰)—namely, all those cults that are in fact closely connected to Buddhist and Daoist ideas and practices but are not part of these associations. Moreover, many of the Buddhist and Daoist local cults are hard to transform into nation-wide associations. Especially Daoism had been deeply intertwined with local cults. The opposition between officially approved associational religion and local forms of superstition gives authorities a great space for controlling and repressing all kinds of religious expressions.

Anti-clericalism and scientism together were deeply connected to Western, enlightened ideas about progress, in which magic had to be replaced by scientific rationality and by moral religion as basis of national identity. Major currents of Western thought, like social Darwinism, neo-Kantianism, and Marxism, were absorbed in China. Not only prescriptive thought about society came to stand in the light of rationality, but also descriptive social science, such as sociology and anthropology. The social sciences lost their ability to describe the effects of these ideologies on society since they could not distance themselves from them. Space for critical social thought became extremely limited when communism came to power. Intellectuals played an important role in the secularist projects of nationalizing and rationalizing religion and, crucially, they were part and parcel of large-scale state interventions to produce a modern, national identity. While Buddhism and Daoism were to some extent sources for the creation **(p.151)** of national religion, Confucianism was itself being considered as already both national and rational. The attempts to transform Confucian traditions into a civil, national religion were extremely interesting as a form of social engineering, but ultimately failed, largely because Confucian teachings could encompass Daoist and Buddhist teachings but not the social energy that local Daoist and Buddhist cults could mobilize.

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Secularism in China is, to a large extent, the sordid history of state persecution of clerics and destruction of temples both before and during communist rule. Under communism the anti-superstition and anti-clerical campaigns were combined with anti-feudalism campaigns. The 1950s not only saw the brutal elimination of millenarian movements like Yiguandao (一贯道), but also the destruction of feudalism and thus the redistribution of temple land and temple property —secularization in its original sense.[20] Mao, as a good Marxist, predicted the decline of religion as part of the creation of a socialist China in the following words: “The gods were erected by peasants. When the right time comes, the peasants themselves will throw away these gods with their own hands.”[21] But, as a matter of fact, Mao and the party did everything to destroy the gods, but the peasants did everything to rescue them.

One of the great puzzles of China today is not that it proves the secularization thesis wrong, because that thesis is proven wrong almost everywhere, but that despite a century of secularist attacks religion has not been destroyed. In fact we see everywhere in China a more open engagement with the gods. This raises a number of issues. First, if we accept the theoretical premise that the secular and the religious are produced simultaneously what has happened to the religious under secularist attack? What is the nature of Chinese religion today? Has it been hiding and does it now come out of the closet and what does that mean? Second, how can we explain that secularism has not been able to fulfill its world-historical task? Third, what may be the future of secularism in China under the current conditions of religious expansion?

(p.152) First, then, what is the nature of Chinese religion and secularity today? On the one hand we find a general acceptance in China of the idea that religion is not important to the Chinese, that the Chinese have always been rational and secular, and with modernization even more so. This view is prevalent not only among intellectuals, but is also more generally held. And on the other hand, there is a widespread interest in religious practices, in visiting shrines especially during tourist trips, in religious forms of healing. Both in cities and in the countryside communities are rebuilding their temples and have started awkward negotiations with the authorities to perform their ceremonies again. Religious activity seems to be embedded in a fully secular life, in which job insecurities, health, and desire for success and profit create a demand for divine support. With the decline of the iron rice bowl of the state this demand has only increased. The same intellectuals who deny the importance of religion pray for their family’s welfare wherever they can. The chain of memory, to use Hervieu-Leger’s term, however, seems to have been broken and needs to be patched up.[22] Often people who engage in religious activities are not very knowledgeable about them, but in China this lack of knowledge is taken to an extreme. This is enhanced by the fact that the clergy has been largely exterminated or so much brought under control of the party that they have lost their liturgical bearings. This situation in itself gives a lot of space for new religious movements in which lay people play an important role, but also cobble them together from various elements like the many *qi gong* movements.

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Second, how do we explain the failure of a century of systematic destruction of Chinese religious life? One answer lies in the millenarian nature of Maoism itself. The party absorbed quite a lot of the social energy that is available in religious movements. Yiguandao was a huge movement with millions of followers, at the moment of the communist takeover, but it was destroyed quickly after the killing and torturing of its leadership without inciting huge rebellions. One of the reasons was that the communists, like the Yiguandao, also promised paradise on earth **(p.153)** and seemed to have a better go at it. Mass mobilization (*qunzhong yundong*, 群众运动) for the transformation of self and society has a central place both in Chinese religion and in Maoism. Studying and especially reciting Mao’s writings again recall religious chanting. The finding and expelling of class enemies and traitors follow quite precisely the trappings of Chinese witchcraft beliefs and exorcism, even in the giving of black hoods as symbols of evil to the accused.[23] The practice of public confession likewise continues religious practice.

Third, what is the future of secularism in China? As I already indicated secularity is well established in China in daily life as well as in people’s self-understanding. Secularism as repression of religion is also widely tolerated if a movement, like the Falun Gong, appears to threaten the social and political order. It is much less tolerated when local authorities try to intervene with local manifestations of popular religion. In fact, in many cases today the authorities are pleased with religious activities that draw outside money.[24] Secularism is also certainly still the frame in which clerics have to operate. The Buddhist and Daoist associations are largely controlled by the state.

Recently, the sociologist Fenggang Yang has attempted to apply market theory to the study of Chinese religions. However, he admits that there is no “free market” with free choices, since in the Chinese case religion is heavily regulated. He argues that this results in a division of the market into a red market that comprises all officially permitted religious organizations, believers, and religious activities; a black market that comprises all officially banned religious organizations, and so on; and a gray market that comprises all religious and spiritual organizations, practitioners, and activities with ambiguous legal status. In the gray market one finds illegal practices of legally existing religious groups and religious and spiritual practices that manifest in culture instead of religion.[25] He further advances the proposition that “increased religious regulation will lead not to reduction of religion per se, but to a triple religious market.” Much of this is reminiscent of the long-standing sociological discussion **(p. 154)** of the “informal sector or informal economy.” Sociologists working on so-called developing economies are at least since the 1970s aware that official statistics about economic performance do not take large sectors of the economy into account. The scholarship on this inspires a dynamic understanding of the relation between the state and the market. The state is not monolithic, and state actors often work at different levels and in contradictory ways. David Palmer has shown, for instance, how much *qi gong* activities were not repressed, but were actually supported by the party at various levels.[26] The same is true for Chinese medicine. After the liberalization of the economy local, regional, and national authorities work in different ways in their relations to religious activity.[27] Labor sociologists have pointed out how interconnected the formal and the informal are and speak of processes of formalization and informalization.[28] A general point made in these studies is how unreliable statistics are in assessing economic activity. This is a fortiori true for the religious market, and this raises doubts about the usefulness of American sociological models that are so heavily dependent on statistics for the Chinese situation.

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More, in general, however, one needs to reflect on the conceptual difficulties in distinguishing different sectors of social life through the use of categories like state, market, and religion. We are already aware that the category of religion has a complex genealogy in Western history and has been applied to China (and elsewhere) not to empirically describe but to conceptually produce a particular social field. Sociologists of religion may learn from their colleagues working on Chinese entrepreneurship and small businesses after liberalization who repeatedly caution for sharp demarcations of the boundaries of the state and the (free) market. Yang’s structural distinction of red, black, and gray markets does not pay attention to the processes of (in) formalization that are part of the dynamic of a range of actors including state actors.

Yang also insists on the importance of reviving Confucianism as a moral resource. He suggests that “at this critical moment of **(p.155)** historical development of Confucianism, we must think over carefully which direction it should take in order to avoid going onto the wrong path and to provide security to the people and make the country prosperous.”[29] The right path is, according to Yang, to make it into a civil religion, like American civil religion, as described by Robert Bellah.[30] Moreover, those who want to promote Confucianism should stress “the notion of the transcendental Tian and to affirm the inclusive spirit in the history of China.” Finally, instead of seeing Christianity as an antagonistic rival, Yang argues that one should see it as an important resource from which one can learn, since Christianity is also a resource for national morality.

Confucian tradition has it that intellectuals and academics in China are close to the state. Also those academics who work outside China but would like to have some influence in China try to find ways to network with government advisors and state projects. Since China does not have an open public sphere it is difficult to play a role in informing a reading public. While in the past intellectuals worked within Marxist ideology, today there is a burgeoning effort by intellectuals inside and outside China to promote Confucianism as an alternative to stagnant Marxist ideology. The so-called Boston Confucianists, inspired by the Harvard–Beijing University philosopher Tu Wei-ming, also try to promote Confucianism on the Chinese market, both in and outside Mainland China. For instance, the political philosopher Daniel Bell, who teaches at Tsinghua University in Beijing, relates ideas developed in the context of communitarianism to Confucian traditions and sees some positive social morality coming out of these traditions for contemporary Chinese society.[31]

Since Confucianism is often seen as a form of secularism one needs to ask the question, what is Confucianism today? Let us examine briefly the widespread idea that China is a Confucian society.[32] In the context of an assumed worldwide religious revival we seem witness to what many observers call “the revival of Confucianism.” President Hu Jintao and other Chinese leaders **(p.156)** have reevaluated the Confucian tradition. After a long period in which the Communist Party attacked Confucianism as part of feudal society, which came to a head in the Cultural Revolution, it now claims that harmony is the central value of Confucian teachings and that it is something to be cherished. Worrying about growing economic disparities amid rapid economic growth, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) focuses on Confucian harmony as a form of societal consensus and solidarity. For the first time in 66 years the party organized a lavish worship ceremony at Tianjin’s Confucius Temple in November 2004. In the town of Qufu, the birthplace of Confucius, the official ceremony of commemorating his birthday has since 2004 become an important public ritual, broadcast live on state television. The Ministry of Education is encouraging numerous courses in Confucian culture by establishing Confucius Institutes all over the world following the model of the Goethe Institute or the British Council.[33]

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But what is being revived and whether it is secular or religious remains very unclear. Political attempts to make Confucianism the secular morality of Chinese civilization today are historically similar to debates at the end of the Qing Empire to make Confucianism a national religion (*guojiao*). Both state officials and major intellectuals were involved in this project, but it is precisely the intellectualism and distance from popular belief that has prevented making Confucianism into something akin to Japanese state Shintoism before World War II. The attempts to transform Confucian traditions into a civil, national religion were interesting as a form of social engineering, but ultimately failed, largely because Confucian teachings could encompass Daoist and Buddhist teachings but not the social energy that local Daoist and Buddhist cults could mobilize. Although Confucianism can provide a legitimating ideology for state authoritarianism that enforces social harmony—as one sees, for example, in Singapore—its proponents face great difficulties in making it into a national religion.

The current position of the Communist Party toward Confucianism is quite a departure from its long-term secularist project. **(p.157)** To be accused of being a Confucian was to be branded a reactionary feudalist and very dangerous in the early 1970s, and this was used against various leaders, including Lin Biao, Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping.[34] But Confucianism with its civilizational morality has always been close to state reason. As such, it is much more palatable for communists than Buddhism and Daoism, to say nothing of the wide-ranging category of popular religion. The liberalization of China from 1978 onward has also brought a liberalization of the religious field. It is very hard to assess the direction of developments today, since a century of persecution has severed the chains of oral and ritual transmission in many parts of the country and destroyed the lives and livelihood of clergy and therefore much of the infrastructure of religion. Building this up requires economic support that is mainly coming from tourism, since many of the shrines are in places of touristic interest. The rebuilding of religious infrastructure is thus related to new forms of consumption and will be closely dependent on them. In that sense the market is, obviously, an important aspect of religious change in China. At the same time, an analysis of the nature of the nation-state and the support of the intellectual class for its promotion of national identity continues to be of primary importance when one tries to determine how secularism frames religion in China today.

Secularism in India

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Secularism in India has a number of elements in common with Chinese secularism, but the nature of caste hierarchy and of interethnic and intercommunal relations alters the meaning of these elements decidedly. In Hinduism Brahmans are the most important clerics, but anti-clericalism has deep roots in Brahmanical thought itself. Priests who perform a religious service to the community and are paid for that in gifts are looked down upon by Brahmans who devote themselves to studying the Vedas. This strand of anti-clericalism fueled many of the reforms of the large temples in South India in the twentieth century, in which powerful middle-class laymen who had had an English **(p.158)** education came to see their priests as ignorant and to demand that they be reeducated to learn proper Sanskrit and ritual performances.[35] The Brahman caste as a whole had come under attack in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the rise of explicitly secularist movements, especially in South and West India. Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890) began a movement in Maharashtra against the alleged exploitation of low castes by Brahmans.[36] E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker (1879–1973), also known as Periyar, founded a social respect movement in Tamil Nadu that became the basis of an anti-Brahman Tamil nationalism. He connected his anti-clericalism with a theatrical atheism that was expressed in publicly burning sacred books, such as the Sanskrit Ramayana. The sources of this anti-clericalism that evolved in the case of Periyar into atheism were twofold: Christian missionaries had for a long time vilified Brahman priests for their rapacity and ignorance while trying to convert especially tribals and low castes to Christianity and away from Hindu culture, to which they were already marginal.[37] This rhetoric was taken over by the anti-Brahman movements, which were seeking a non-Brahman following. It was combined with racial and linguistic theories, developed by among others Max Müller, which distinguished the Aryan invaders from the indigenous low castes. Brahmans were then shown to be racially different from the Dravidian population of South India and were portrayed as exploiters of the indigenous peoples. Indian anti-clericalism is different from Chinese anti-clericalism because of the connection between the Brahman caste and Hinduism. It was the Brahman caste that came under attack, and Brahman priests were taken to be the symbols of that caste. Religious activities in Brahman temples that excluded other groups were no longer accepted as part of traditional hierarchy, but seen as forms of oppression. But both in China and in India the main issue was the introduction of modern egalitarianism in a hierarchical society and thus the connection between feudalism and religion.

Scientism and rationalism in India are as much an element of secularism as in China. However, already in the nineteenth century **(p.159)** Indian intellectuals did not emphasize the opposition between science and religion, but instead emphasized the scientific nature of indigenous traditions. Secularist attacks on traditional religion were rare, although attempts to purify religion from so-called superstition and to show the scientific foundations of religion were taken up by reformers in a number of protonationalist and nationalist movements. Rational religion, as a major current in these reform movements, offered a home to intellectuals who wanted to reflect on developments in science from Hindu traditions. A good example is J. C. Bose (1853–1937), a renowned physicist and plant physiologist, whose work on electrical waves and on plant consciousness was animated by attempts to understand the unity of nature from the perspective of the Hindu philosophical school of Advaita Vedanta, in which Bengali intellectuals had been trained.[38] The social network formed by such scientists and Hindu reformers like Swami Vivekananda shows how the development of scientific and religious thought was interwoven. Philosophers like Henri Bergson and Aurobindo embraced Bose’s vitalistic science eagerly. While Chinese intellectuals also found rationality and science in some religious traditions, especially in the field of medicine, there is a much stronger sense than in India that progress can be made only by separating science from magic and by destroying magic.

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While secularism as a political project in India is of limited importance, secularity of the state is central. The colonial state was professedly neutral toward religious divisions in society. The British in India were deeply concerned with projecting an image of transcendent neutrality in order to be able to rule. At least partially they were successful in doing this, since Indians today often see *dharma-nirapeksata*, the indigenous term indicating the neutrality of the state as a distinctive character of Indian civilization rather than a colonial invention. Sometimes, for example by Gandhi, this neutrality is more positively interpreted as *dharmasamabhava*, the equal flourishing of religion under the state’s neutrality. After the Mutiny of 1857 the British were afraid to be seen interfering with the religious activities and sensibilities of **(p.160)** their Indian subjects. This implied that the state had to hide its modernizing and secularizing interventions in society under a cloak of neutrality because it derived its legitimacy not from India but from a democratic process in Britain. This neutrality, however, is interpreted by Indian nationalists as forms of divide-and-rule, especially in the area of Hindu-Muslim relations. The state is thus condemned as pseudo-secular, an argument that is later revived by Hindu nationalists against the postcolonial government. The postcolonial state derives its legitimacy from democratic elections in India and is thus even less able than its predecessor, the colonial state, to cover up its interventions in society and religion, such as the Temple Entry Acts (opening Brahman temples for untouchables) and the abolition of untouchability, as neutral.

Since the colonial state is secular in the sense of being neutral toward religion, this gives wide scope to connecting religion with anti-colonial nationalism. Religion is relatively free from state control and thus an arena from which the state can be attacked. Anti-colonial nationalism in India draws deeply from religious sources, both ideological and organizationally. One can distinguish between a moderate, pluralist vision of the Indian nation and a radical vision that wants to promote a singular religion as the core of national identity. The pluralist vision is the ideological foundation of India as a secular state. It is opposed to the radical vision of Muslims separatists who founded Pakistan as a “homeland for Muslims” as well as from the radical vision of Hindu nationalists who continue to fight for a Hindu India. The moderate vision has been always part of the secular ideology of the Congress Party, a party that ruled India for the larger part of postindependence history.[39]

The Congress Party found itself confronted with two major problems. First, Hindu-Muslim antagonism was a major threat to the creation of an Indian nation. This problem became more and more crucial in the struggle for independence, and secularism was conceived as the answer to it. Second, Indian society was marked by one of the most pervasive systems of inequality **(p. 161)** in the world, and which was religiously sanctioned by Hindu traditions. Again, secularism was conceived as an answer to this. While state interventions were recognized as crucial to the transformation of Indian society into a modern nation, Congress leaders agreed that large-scale violence should be avoided. A major argument in developing Indian secularism was made by Gandhi when he made a plea for nonviolence and tolerance. However, except for a brief period, Gandhi was not officially a member of Congress leadership, but a moral exemplar outside of party politics. Gandhi’s moral example could be an element in producing secular tolerance, but such an example is not enough for the daily business of regulating social life. After independence the modern state could not refrain from intervening in society.[40]

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Critics of Congress secularism today, such as T. N. Madan and Ashis Nandy, have understood the rise of communalism in India as a backlash against a long-term campaign of an interventionist state to impose secularism on a fundamentally religious society.[41] While their emphasis on state power is correct, their criticism of Nehru’s secularism is fundamentally mistaken. Nehru’s position was that the state should not attempt to make India a mono-cultural society in which the minorities would feel alienated. Pragmatically Congress adopted the role of neutral arbiter of religious difference, just as colonial administrators had done. Separate civil codes for Hindus and Muslims that had developed in the colonial period were continued in secular India. Potential sources of violent conflict, such as the disputed site of Babar’s Mosque in Ayodhya, had to be controlled and managed, rather than fundamentally solved. In fact it is this policy to which Hindu Nationalist parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP; Indian People’s Party) today objects. It does not claim that an anti-religious secularism has dominated Indian society, but that it has been a pseudo-secularism that has given religious minorities special benefits in order to get their votes. So it does not argue that secularists had launched an attack on the religious traditions of Indian society, but that it had left minority traditions **(p.162)** intact for electoral reasons. The BJP claims to be secular, but it has launched campaigns to destroy mosques that had been built on Hindu sites and rebuilt Hindu temples, claiming that the only traditions that had to be dealt with by the secular state were those of the minorities. Nehru’s cautious but sometimes ambivalent policies toward multiculturalism and the ways they came to be challenged in the 1970s and 1990s show the importance of the state.[42]

The limitations of a secular Congress that tries to avoid violence in its interventions in society are clear from the failure to get rid of untouchability and caste hierarchies. Ambedkar, one of the great untouchable leaders of Congress and architect of India’s secular constitution, came to the conclusion that the secular, liberal state could not solve the problems of untouchability that were deeply embedded in codes of honor and respect. While early in his career he demonstrated his stance against Hinduism by burning Hindu law books in public, at the end of his life he decided to convert to Buddhism in order to escape from the Hindu caste system.[43] In a very original manner he came to grips with the dualism of redistribution (class) and recognition (caste). His conversion shows that religious conversion can address these issues sometimes better than conversion to secular ideologies like socialism or liberalism.

Chinese Atheism and Indian Secularism

While sociologists have attempted (with little success) to apply American market theories to the study of Chinese religion and secularism, this has not been tried in the Indian case. The fact that Indian society has not been secularized cannot be explained by market incentives. While in India religion is ubiquitous and not declining, anti-religious secularism is rare. Although there is antagonistic competition between religious communities (Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, and Christians primarily), this is not about “market share” in a religious market. Different from the United States the secular state and communal legal arrangements make **(p.163)** religion not a matter of rational choice in a free market, but a matter of socialization. Conversion to another religion in India is highly problematic and proselytization strictly circumscribed. The sensitivity of conversion is the effect of a colonial history of Christian missionization, but has been extended to Muslim conversion.[44]

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Secularisms in India and China are products of the imperial encounter. Certainly, there are precolonial traditions of anti-clericalism and anti-superstition in India and China. These do not disappear, but they are transformed into secularisms by the imperial encounter. In China the state has always been suspicious of popular religious movements that might threaten state control, but it has also constantly pacified and incorporated local cults within state-sanctioned practices by giving imperial titles to local gods.[45] Popular religious movements could exhibit millenarian features, especially in response to famines or upheavals in society. A recent example is the Taiping movement in the mid-nineteenth century, which was a major challenge to the Qing and could be suppressed only with great effort. Chinese secularism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a continuation of the long history of state attempts to control popular religion, but only becomes secularism by the new focus on progress, development, and rationality. The difference is that the modern state does not wait to respond to challenges by popular movements, but intends to proactively remove superstition from society and control the morality of recognized religions.

The secularist destruction of the infrastructure of religion in China during the 1950s and 1960s, especially the taking away of landed property from temples and monasteries and the disbanding of clergy, has had long-term effects on the reproduction of religious life that are only now being studied. In many parts of China temples and shrines are being rebuilt, but it is unclear how religious traditions are being studied and developed. Much of the communist efforts in the field of religion today go into the control of unregulated Christian house churches. Some ideologues feel that Buddhism and Daoism, as Chinese religion, **(p.164)** should be promoted as a bulwark against especially evangelical Protestantism.[46] At the central level of national policy Confucianism is being promoted as a civil religion that supports social harmony in the face of growing social and economic inequality. As long as there is no grassroots support for such a project it is unclear how Confucianism can fulfill the role of civil religion, and the history of these attempts shows the likelihood of its failure.

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Secularism as a political project to remove religion from society or to marginalize it can hardly be found in India. The anti-Brahman movements are not against religion per se, although there have been some atheists in the leadership. These movements are against the cultural hegemony of Brahmans in Indian society. While the communist movement has been strong in parts of India, especially Bengal and Kerala, it has never had the power to attack religious institutions. Anti-religious secularism in India is marginal, but secularity of the state is central and supported by a form of secularism that wants to support inter-religious tolerance. In India the colonial state had to perform secular neutrality toward religion for fear of widespread rebellion. Certainly, one could argue that secularity always implies neutrality, as in the separation of state and church. However, colonial neutrality is different to the extent that the colonial state places itself outside the political process in the colony, while being legitimated by the political process in the metropolis. Indian secularity is a colonial secularity in the first place. It avoids an outright attack on the beliefs and customs of the natives, while masking its fundamental interventions in society by cloaking them in neutrality and by seeking scriptural legitimation in the classical traditions of India. In doing so, the colonial authorities received the support from native elite intellectuals who were vigorously debating the scriptural authorization of local practices. The postcolonial state inherits the institutionalized forms of secular neutrality from the colonial state (for example, in the judiciary), but had to derive its legitimacy from the political process **(p.165)** in Indian society. India’s diversity in terms of caste and religious community (primarily the new political categories of Hindu and Muslim) produced a certain kind of neutrality of the postcolonial state that is constantly suspected of favoritism for one group or the other and is thus under scrutiny of opposing groups. Charles Taylor addresses this diversity by referring to Rawls’s famous concept of “overlapping consensus” and by emphasizing the importance of secularism for democracy in internally diverse societies.[47] However, historically, it is the political process that led to independent India’s democracy that has pitted religious communities against each other. Secularity in postcolonial India cannot simply be understood as “overlapping consensus,” but rather as a variety of responses to this political process of religious mobilization for political gains. One of those responses is a specifically Indian form of secularism that is a movement not to destroy religion but to promote toleration.

In China reformers within the Qing dynasty and later in the republic do not have to perform neutrality toward religion while introducing Western notions and calling upon the state to enforce them in society. The fact that Chinese reformers can call for the destruction of temples and that this is actually carried out is almost unimaginable in India. An exception is the so-called Babri Masjid, a mosque built by the Mughal emperor Babar in the sixteenth century in Ayodhya in North India, which was destroyed by a Hindu nationalist movement in 1992 because it had allegedly been built on the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama. This destruction led to widespread fighting between Hindus and Muslims and a great loss of life. It was not a secularist attack on religion, but a communalist attack on Muslims that could happen only because of deliberate inaction of a state that was more and more under electoral pressure from Hindu nationalists. It has been the single most important political event in Indian politics since the 1980s, which shows how much this iconoclasm differs from the wholesale assault on religion in China.[48]

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(p.166) While the call for open access to temples for untouchables in the so-called Temple Entry Agitation in the 1920s and 1930s did create political unrest and was of importance in challenging caste hierarchy, it was access to religion rather than destruction of it that was the issue. In India religion becomes the basis of resistance to the colonial state, and it has to be reformed and modernized in order to make it part of the morality of the modern nation-state. The Indian discussion then is primarily about reforming Indian traditions, not about destroying them. In fact Indian nationalists want to defend their religious traditions, since they suspect that the Christian British want to destroy them. The Indian reformers who wanted to destroy Brahmanism as a form of oppression were certainly important but they did not play a central role in the nationalist movement. In fact their political position derives precisely from their social marginality as untouchables, as in the case of Ambedkar, or from their regional marginality, as in the case of the Tamil leader Periyar. They may burn sacred texts but certainly not temples.

Secularisms are emancipatory projects and as such can be violent. The transition to modernity is obviously violent—it does violence to traditional arrangements and therefore the relation of secularism to violence is crucial. The secularist mobilization of social energies in China is very violent, discursively and practically. Ironically, the Maoist secular utopia was strikingly millenarian and thus reintroduced the traditional elements that it wanted to eradicate, but in another configuration. In India the secularist utopia, as is clearest in Gandhi’s campaigns, is almost the opposite. The democratization that the nationalist movement demanded not only asked for the removal of colonial rule, but also created a growing political antagonism between Hindus and Muslims. Nonviolence was the center of Gandhi’s attempts to create a secular India. It was not only the emancipation from the colonial oppressor that had to be nonviolent, but even more the emancipation from inequality and communal opposition that had to be nonviolent.

(p.167) The Chinese and Indian cases show us that secularism is not simply anti-religious in these societies, although there are anti-religious elements in it, but that it attempts to transform religions into moral sources of citizenship and national belonging. The masses have to be reeducated to realize their emancipatory potential, and religions can be used as state apparatuses to perform this reeducation. One does not have to smash temples to build schools; one can also use temples to educate the people, as was traditionally the case in most societies. Secularity frames religions that are nationalized and modernized. While religion is an important element in the production of national imaginaries, it can never be entirely contained by the secularist frame. It may produce linkages outside the nation-state, as world religions do; it may produce alternative visions of the moral state and thus become dangerous for secularist control, as in millenarian movements, such as the Falun Gong, that have emerged in China after the demise of Maoism. Precisely because secularism is a project and not a process it is bound to be incomplete and to produce contradictions, such as religious utopianism in movements that aim at the destruction of religion.

Notes:

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(12.) Vincent Goossaert, “The Beginning of the End for Chinese Religion?” *Journal of Asian Studies* 65, no. 2 (May 2006): 307–336.

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