Religionization and Secularity[1]

Markus Dreßler

This entry discusses four concepts: religionization, religio-secularization, religio-secularism, and religion-making. They are proposed as heuristic devices for the analysis of the processes through which social structures, practices, and discourses come to be understood as 'religious' or 'religion.' Since all of these concepts relate to the demarcation of boundaries between religious and non-religious domains, they are devices for analyzing the formation and maintenance of secularities.

This entry is based on the premise that processes of religionization and practices of religion-making have been intertwined with processes of secularization and politics of secularism. If we take a constructivist approach to religion, we must consider how to position secularity, conceived in terms of conceptual distinctions and structural differentiations,[2] within this dynamic. It is suggested that, at least for the modern context, secularity can be regarded as a product of processes of religio-secularization and practices of religion-making. As with the Multiple Secularities approach, the constructivist approach to religion advanced here is interested in the historical conditions under which certain assemblages of knowledge and structures were and continue to be related to religion and secularity.

Religionization is intertwined with secularization and secularism

Secularity as a product of religio-secularization and religion-making

---

1   This text is a condensed version of Markus Dreßler, "Modes of Religionization: A Constructivist Approach to Secularity." Working Paper Series of the HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities" 7, Leipzig, February 2019. https://www.multiplesecularities.de/media/wps7_dressler_religionization.pdf.

2   As developed in the *Multiple Secularities: Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities* research project. See Christoph Kleine and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, "Research Programme of the HCAS 'Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities.'" Working Paper Series of the HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities" 1, Leipzig, March 2016. http://ul.qucosa.de/api/qucosa%3A16727/attachment/ATT-0/.

1

Religionization and Multiple Secularities

Religionization: homogenization and reification of religion

Religionization is proposed as a heuristic term that highlights practices through which religion is homogenized and reified. The term emphasizes the processes through which certain assemblages of knowledge, expressed in discourses and practices, are densified and become recognizable as 'religion.'

Religionization is the subject of a growing body of academic literature – though not all scholars employ the term. The work of Talal Asad, which investigated the discourses and practices through which 'religion' was first bounded and reified in the modern West, still is a major reference point in this debate. In *Genealogies of Religion* and *Formations of the Secular* he developed a genealogical perspective on the formation 'religion' and its modern binary other, the 'secular.'[3] He aspired "to problematize 'the religious' and 'the secular' as clear-cut categories but also to search for the conditions in which *they were* clear-cut and were sustained as such." "I wanted to ask," he explains, "'what are the conditions in which these dichotomies, these binaries, *do* seem to make sense?'"[4]

Pioneering studies by Talal Asad

One can draw a parallel between Asad's consideration of the conditions in which the religion-secular binary appears to make sense and the "reference problems" for secularity, which Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Marian Burchardt formulated in their initial framing of the Multiple Secularities research project.[5] Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt define "multiple secularities" as "the forms of distinction between the religious and other social domains (which are thereby marked as non-religious) that are institutionalized and in part legitimized through guiding ideas."[6] "Reference problems" are specific historical situations and societal circumstances that prompt secularity in terms of a cognitive separation between two spheres, as well as a cultural commitment ('guiding ideas') to maintaining this distinction.

---

3   Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

4   Talal Asad in David Scott, "Appendix: The trouble of thinking. An interview with Talal Asad," in *Powers of the secular modern: Talal Asad and his interlocutors*, ed. David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 298.

5   Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Marian Burchardt, „Multiple secularities: Toward a cultural sociology of secular modernities," *Comparative Sociology* 11, no. 6 (2012): 881.

6   Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, "Multiple secularities," 886–87.

2

Leipzig University – HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities", 2019
www.multiple-secularities.de/publications/companion

Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt suggest four ideal-typical reference problems for secularity:

> (1) the problem of individual freedom vis-à-vis dominant social units [...]; (2) the problem of religious heterogeneity and the resulting potential or actual conflictuality; (3) the problem of social or national integration and development; and (4) the problem of the independent development of institutional domains.[7]

In the modern period, the problem of the legitimation of government, compounded by the centralizing state's increasing powers, and the negotiation of the place and role of religion that this legitimation engenders, may be seen as a further reference problem for secularity. It highlights the question of the political in the modern condition, which may "be regarded as the vantage point through which this antagonism/binary [of religion and the secular] is constantly reinforced."[8] Furthermore, it points to the mutually constitutive impact of religion (defined vis-a-vis the political) and secularity (constituting itself vis-a-vis religion), and, more broadly, to the processes through which the religious/secular and similar binaries (such as religion/culture) are evidenced as means of describing, making sense of, and thus ordering the human experience as well as social formations in the modern world.

Comparable to these reference problems, Asad's concern with the conditions under which binary distinctions "do seem to make sense" indicates the importance of taking context into consideration when analyzing how 'religion' is being evidenced in the modern period. However, in contrast to the Multiple Secularities project, which conceives of conceptual distinctions as responses to specific social structures and reference problems, Asadian critique inquires primarily into the epistemic forces through which the evidence of the secular – taken for granted by the Multiple Secularities perspective – is established. Irrespective of this principal difference, a social constructivist position that recognizes the social reality of conceptual distinctions and structural differentiations with regard to religion, while at the same time being interested in how this reality is being established,

Reference problems for secularity

Additional reference problem: legitimacy of government

Religion/secular binary: modern instrument of world ordering

Asadian critique focuses on the epistemic

Social constructivism enables dialogue between Multiple Secularities and genealogy

---

7 Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, "Multiple secularities," 887.
8 Markus Dressler, "Beyond religio-secularism: Toward a political critique," *The Immanent Frame*. February 25, 2014. https://tif.ssrc.org/2014/02/25/beyond-religio-secularism-toward-a-political-critique/.

3

thus acknowledging its contingency, provides an opening for a dialogue between the Multiple Secularities perspective and Asadian genealogy.

Religio-Secularization and Religio-Secularism

Resonating both with the genealogical method and with the Multiple Secularities focus on conceptual distinctions, as well as structural and institutional differentiations related to such distinctions, religionization in the modern context may be conceived in a constructivist manner as "the signification of certain spaces, practices, narratives, and languages as religious (as opposed to things marked as secular)."[9] Recognizing that religionization understood in this manner is inherently related to processes of secularization and politics of secularism, the term religio-secularization seems appropriate to capture and emphasize this interrelation.

Accordingly, the term 'religio-secularism' is proposed to denote the knowledge regime that legitimizes processes of religio-secularization and strives for the normalization of such processes. For the modern period, we can

> use the notion of "religio-secularism" to put emphasis on the manner in which the concepts of religion and the secular have been intertwined, forming a semantic continuum constituted by the oppositional way in which they are pointing to each other without being able to be defined independently from one another. It also points to how secularism and religionism are corresponding worldviews and practices.[10]

One side effect of the described dynamic of religio-secularism is that, to the extent that we (contemporary students of religion) are often confined to a positionality, which is based on a modern and Western knowledge formation,

> it has become almost impossible for us to rethink religion in nonpolitical ways. What I mean by "nonpolitical," simply, is an intellectual space that makes it possible to conceive of religion in a manner that

Religio-secularization: interrelationship of religionization and secularization

Religion-secularism: knowledge regime legitimizing religio-secularization

---

9 Markus Dressler, "Religio-secular metamorphoses: The re-making of Turkish Alevism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 2 (2008): 281.

10 Dressler, "Beyond religio-secularism;" see also Yolande Jansen, "Beyond comparing secularisms. A critique of religio-secularism," in *Oxford Handbook of Secularism*, ed. Phil Zuckerman and John R. Shook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

4

does not necessarily implicate the political directly as a point of reference against which the domain of religion is demarcated.[11]

Religion-Making

From a social constructivist perspective, we can understand 'religion,' 'the secular,' and their respective derivatives as social realities that are not given, but the product of continuous negotiation and objectification. This implies that we need to focus on agency in processes of religio-secularization and the specific locations in which religion and the secular are produced, bounded, and distinguished against the background of particular contexts.[12]

Religion-making: focus on agency in religio-secularization

The term religion-making aims to shed light on the multiple layers of agency in religionization processes. A distinction between three major dimensions of religion-making – from above, from below, and from a pretended outside – has been proposed for that purpose.[13] These dimensions reflect different ensembles of actors with different interests, and different positions of power, all of which are involved in politics of religionization and may form powerful symbioses.[14]

'Religion-making from above' can be defined as "a strategy from a position of power, where religion becomes an instrument of governmentality, a means to legitimize certain politics and positions of power."[15] The notion refers to

Religion-making from above: religion as tool of governmentality

> authoritative discourses and practices that define and confine things (symbols, languages, practices) as "religious" and "secular" through the disciplining means of the modern state and its institutions (such as law-making, the judiciary, state bureaucracies, state media, and the public education system).[16]

---

11 Dressler, "Beyond religio-secularism."

12 Peter Beyer, "Conceptions of religion: On distinguishing scientific, theological, and 'official' meanings," *Social Compass* 50, no. 2 (2003); Markus Dressler, "The social construction of reality (1966) revisited: Epistemology and theorizing in the study of religion, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 31, no. 2 (2019).

13 Arvind-Pal S. Mandair and Markus Dressler, "Introduction: Modernity, religion-making, and the postsecular," in *Secularism and religion-making*, ed. Markus Dressler and Arvind-Pal S. Mandair (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 21–22.

14 The chapters in Markus Dressler and Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, eds., *Secularism and religion-making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) offer empirically rich and theoretically engaged perspectives on various modes of religion-making and how they interrelate.

15 Mandair and Dressler, "Introduction," 21.

16 Mandair and Dressler, "Introduction," 21–22.

5

Leipzig University – HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities", 2019
www.multiple-secularities.de/publications/companion

What needs to be added is a reference to international institutions with legal and political authority, which are also important agents of religion-making.[17] Trevor Stack has further argued that "religious-secular distinctions have been crucial to the way in which modern governments have rationalised their governance and marked out their sovereignty."[18] The double perspective articulated by Stack is important: distinctions between the religious and the secular are employed as a mode of governance, and as a way of legitimizing claims to political sovereignty.[19] Connecting religion-making politics to secularity, understood as a product of politics of distinction, Stark's assertion is very much in line with the notion of religion-making from above. It also connects the top-down mode of religion-making with the reference problem of the legitimation of government discussed above.

Religion-making from below: religion for the sake of empowerment

'Religion-making from below' can be defined as

> politics where particular social groups in a subordinate position draw on a religionist discourse to re-establish their identities as legitimate social formations distinguishable from other social formations through tropes of religious difference and/or claims for certain rights.[20]

It is important to understand that discourses can only establish their dominance through subordination of other discourses. Whether in appropriating or in subverting terms, religion-making from below therefore needs to be analyzed in relation to religion-making from above. The language of religion employed by particular groups for their particular purposes is an expression of particular stakes and interests, responding to particular contexts, traditions, and the struggle over their interpretation. The notion of religion-making from below aims to acknowledge and underline that those who are in a subordinate position, such as groups that draw on the language of religion as a means to improve their particular social positions, may have considerable agency in religionization politics. Investigating the potentials and constraints of this agency should be one of the aims

---

17   Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Beyond religious freedom: The new global politics of religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

18   Trevor Stack, "Introduction," in *Religion as a category of governance and sovereignty*, ed. Trevor Stack, Naomi R. Goldenberg and Timothy Fitzgerald (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 1.

19   Stack, "Introduction," 3.

20   Mandair and Dressler, "Introduction," 21.

6

of the inquiry into the processes of the making of religion as well as the secular.

Scholarly work within the religio-secular field needs to reflect on its own position and "the siding effects of academic work."[21] Such work can easily become a tool for the vindication of particular political positions, both with regard to the justification and normalization of notions of 'orthodoxy,' as well as with regard to narratives of victimization. This brings us to 'religion-making from a pretended outside,' identified as "scholarly discourses on religion that provide legitimacy to the first two processes [of religion-making, from above and from below,] by systematizing and thus normalizing the religious/secular binary."[22] That the role of the academic study of religion is more complex than naïve imaginations of it as an impartial surveyor of given religious phenomena might suggest, and that it has itself often been implicated in the discursive reification of religion was commented on very early on by Wilfred Cantwell Smith.[23] Subsequent critical initiates of the discipline, such as Jonathan Z. Smith, author of the famous phrase "religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study"[24], inspired students of the following generation to focus in more detail on the role of scholars in the construction of religion.[25] The 'religion-making from a pretended outside' perspective is also indebted to Edward Said and subsequent post-colonial critics of academia's involvement in colonial politics of religionization.[26] It is important to consider how scholarly religion-making is interrelated with the other discussed modes of religion-making, in particular with religion-making from above. Tomoko Masuzawa's *The Invention of World Religions*[27] is an

Religion-making from a pretended outside: the role of scholars in religionization

---

21 Bjørn Ola Tafjord, "Scales, translations, and siding effects. Uses of 'indígena' and 'religión' in Talamanca and beyond," in *Religious categories and the construction of the indigenous*, ed. Christopher Hartney and Daniel J. Tower (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 168.

22 Mandair and Dressler, "Introduction," 21.

23 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The meaning and end of religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

24 Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, religions, religious," in *Critical terms for religious studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

25 For example Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing religion: The discourse on sui generis religion and the politics of nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

26 See also Beyer, "Conceptions of religion."

27 Tomoko Masuzawa, *The invention of world religions: Or, how European universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

7

Leipzig University – HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities", 2019
www.multiple-secularities.de/publications/companion

example of such a dual perspective, as are the contributions of other authors in the post-colonial tradition.[28]

Arena of religion-making: cultural encounters

It might be useful to reflect on cultural encounters, and the translations and negotiations of new and old concepts and practices that they engender as an additional arena of religion-making. Studies on intercultural exchanges from early modern imperialism, and the concomitantly expanding missionary project, through to the age of colonialism have contributed greatly to our understanding of the dynamic character through which modern notions of religion and, consecutively, secularities have emerged globally.[29] Reflection on the increasing entanglements of knowledge with regard to religion and secularities since the early modern period adds a historical dimension that can serve as a corrective to a too narrowly modern framework for religionization. Notions of encounter, translation, and entanglement also challenge overly static conceptualizations of the particular locations from which religion-making is undertaken such as those defined in the three agency-centered modes of religion-making discussed above.

The notion of religion-making has been meant as a heuristic device for inquiry into the continuing construction of concepts of religion, the secular, and their derivatives, as well as the social formations related to these concepts. The distinction between modes of religion-making aims to render visible the complexities and interrelations between various interests and corresponding knowledge arrangements behind religionization processes and the historical constellations that they respond to.

Conclusion

It has been argued that in the modern context processes of religionization are intrinsically related to processes of secularization and that their mutual affirmation, corroborated by secularist politics, is reflected in the formation of secularities: conceptual distinctions and

---

28 Such as David Chidester, *Savage systems: Colonialism and comparative religion in southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

29 Thomas F. Banchoff and José Casanova, eds., *The Jesuits and globalization: Historical legacies and contemporary challenges* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2016).

structural differentiations, through which both religion and the secular become recognizable and which therefore both reflect and contribute to a religio-secular episteme.

From the perspective of the Multiple Secularities project, the notions of religionization and religion-making highlight the historical and dynamic character of the formation of secularities against the background of changing discourses about religion, often triggered by specific reference problems. Informed mainly by social constructivism and post-colonial approaches, the notions of religionization and religion-making are meant to offer complementary angles on the epistemological, social, historical, and political factors that shape and influence (1) discursive distinctions between the religious and its various others/outsides, (2) structural differentiations between religious and non-religious domains, and (3) the relationship between discursive, material, and structural dimensions in the formation of such distinctions and differentiations.

Religionization and religion-making: historicizing secularities

9

Leipzig University – HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities", 2019
www.multiple-secularities.de/publications/companion

Quoted and Further Reading

Asad, Talal. *Genealogies of religion: Discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

Asad, Talal. *Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam, modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

Banchoff, Thomas F., and José Casanova, eds. *The Jesuits and globalization: Historical legacies and contemporary challenges.* Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2016.

Beyer, Peter. "Conceptions of religion: On distinguishing scientific, theological, and 'official' meanings." *Social Compass* 50, no. 2 (2003): 141–60.

Chidester, David. *Savage systems: Colonialism and comparative religion in southern Africa*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996.

Dressler, Markus. "Religio-secular metamorphoses: The re-making of Turkish Alevism." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 2 (2008): 280–311.

Dressler, Markus. "Beyond religio-secularism: Toward a political critique." *The Immanent Frame*. February 25, 2014. https://tif.ssrc.org/2014/02/25/beyond-religio-secularism-toward-a-political-critique/.

Dressler, Markus. "The social construction of reality (1966) revisited: Epistemology and theorizing in the study of religion." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 31, no. 2 (2019): 120–51.

Dreßler, Markus. "Modes of Religionization: A Constructivist Approach to Secularity." Working Paper Series of the HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities" 7, Leipzig, February 2019. https://www.multiplesecularities.de/media/wps7_dressler_religionization.pdf.

Dressler, Markus, and Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, eds. *Secularism and religion-making*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Hurd, Elizabeth Shakman. *Beyond religious freedom: The new global politics of religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

Jansen, Yolande. "Beyond comparing secularisms. A critique of religio-secularism." In *Oxford Handbook of Secularism*. Edited by Phil Zuckerman and John R. Shook*, 369–89. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Kleine, Christoph, and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr. "Research Programme of the HCAS 'Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities.'" Working Paper Series of the HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities" 1, Leipzig, March 2016. http://ul.qucosa.de/api/qucosa%3A16727/attachment/ATT-0/

Mandair, Arvind-Pal S., and Markus Dressler. "Introduction: Modernity, religion-making, and the postsecular." In *Secularism and religion-making.* Edited by Markus Dressler and Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, 3–36. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Masuzawa, Tomoko. *The invention of world religions: Or, how European universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

McCutcheon, Russell T. *Manufacturing religion: The discourse on sui generis religion and the politics of nostalgia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Scott, David. "Appendix: The trouble of thinking. An interview with Talal Asad." In *Powers of the secular modern: Talal Asad and his interlocutors*. Edited by David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, 245–303. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006.

10

Leipzig University – HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities", 2019
www.multiple-secularities.de/publications/companion

Smith, Jonathan Z. "Religion, religions, religious." In *Critical terms for religious studies*. Edited by Mark C. Taylor, 269–84. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *The meaning and end of religion*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.

Stack, Trevor. "Introduction." In *Religion as a category of governance and sovereignty*. Edited by Trevor Stack, Naomi R. Goldenberg and Timothy Fitzgerald, 1–20. Leiden: Brill, 2015.

Tafjord, Bjørn Ola. "Scales, translations, and siding effects. Uses of 'indígena' and 'religión' in Talamanca and beyond." In *Religious categories and the construction of the indigenous*. Edited by Christopher Hartney and Daniel J. Tower, 138–77. Leiden: Brill, 2017.

Wohlrab-Sahr, Monika, and Marian Burchardt. „Multiple secularities: Toward a cultural sociology of secular modernities." *Comparative Sociology* 11, no. 6 (2012): 875–909.

This text is part of the *Companion to the Study of Secularity*. The intent of the *Companion* is to give scholars interested in the concept of Multiple Secularities, who are not themselves specialists in particular (historical) regions, an insight into different regions in which formations of secularity can be observed, as well as into the key concepts and notions with respect to the study of secularity.

It is published by the Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities". For as long as the HCAS continues to exist, the *Companion* will be published and further expanded on the HCAS' website. Towards the end of Multiple Secularities project, all entries will be systematised and edited in order to transform the *Companion* into a completed Open Access publication.

11

Leipzig University – HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities", 2019
www.multiple-secularities.de/publications/companion