BRILL

Historicizing Secularity

A Proposal for Comparative Research from a Global Perspective

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Abstract

Drawing upon the critique of secularization theory, especially its lack of historical depth, this article outlines a research agenda that focuses on a specific – but fundamental – aspect of secularization: it aims at the historicization of conceptual distinctions and institutional differentiations between the religious and the secular. The authors employ the heuristic concept of 'secularity' to refer to these demarcations, and argue that secularization studies should give due consideration to their historical predecessors in various world regions. This seems important against the background of enduring criticisms, which consider such distinctions and differentiations either as an exclusively Western achievement or as a colonial imposition on non-Western regions. Taking into account the development of different historical paths, the authors highlight the transcultural, but in its concrete shape nevertheless culturally specific emergence of distinctions and differentiations related to religion, and propose secularity as a tertium comparationis for comparative research in this field. The authors introduce two different religious and societal settings in the medieval period – Japanese Buddhism and Islam in the Middle East – in order to illustrate the divergent ideational and structural backgrounds to the development of relations between the religious and the secular.

1   Exposition of the Problem*

This article outlines an interdisciplinary research agenda that responds to the critical debate on secularization and secularism in the social sciences and the humanities, especially when it comes to comparative research beyond the Western hemisphere.[1]

Secularization theory has been criticized for its undue generalization of European modernization experiences and their link to secularization processes, a lack of historical depth, and the use of the secular-religious binary as an analytical tool for research. While we acknowledge secularization theory's serious shortcomings, we argue that there is a fundamental aspect of the theory that can serve as a tertium comparationis in historical-sociological research on religion and its relation to its environment. That aspect is the differentiation between religious and non-religious spheres of activity and domains of power. In the following, we outline a research agenda that aims at the historicization of conceptual distinctions and institutional differentiations between the religious and the secular. We employ the heuristic concept of 'secularity' to refer to these demarcations and endeavor to historicize the secular-religious binary beyond its linguistic representation in modern contexts. With reference to two different religious and societal settings in the medieval period – Japanese Buddhism[2] and Islam in the Middle East – we argue that forms of distinction and differentiation existed from early on, which, under certain conditions, could later be related to the secular-religious binary by social actors. We thus explicitly disagree with scholarly positions that question the suitability of the secular-religious binary for both contexts. Our intention here is not to provide a regional comparison or historical explanation in a strict sense but instead to illustrate our argument, which we hope will contribute to opening up the possibility of comparative research on religion beyond the limits of the Western hemisphere.

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1   For the research program, see: www.multiple-secularities.de. Our research is based upon an
     earlier attempt to analyze the multiplicity of secularities in different world regions that was
     published in this journal (Wohlrab-Sahr/Burchardt 2012). Since then, in an interdisciplinary
     research group, we have moved towards the historicization of secularity.
        We are aware of the simplification inherent to talking of 'the West' and the 'non-West'.
     Neither is an empirical unit, and, on both sides of the fictional border, we find heterogeneous
     and changeable conditions. We use the dichotomy for pragmatic reasons in the absence of
     sufficiently succinct and yet appropriate terms, but also because it reflects the current state
     of the discussion.

2   For the Japanese case see also our discussion in Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr 2021.

2 Criticisms of Secularization Theories and Their Consequences

From the outset, sociological secularization theories have not only gained wide support, but also faced a number of serious objections. One objection was that the theories confused the historical modification of the form of religion with the decline of religiosity (Luckmann 1980; Knoblauch 2007; Heelas, Woodhead 2005). There was also objection to the projection of the European modernization-cum-secularization experience onto other contexts (Finke, Stark 1988; Iannaccone 1991; Warner 1993). Both of these objections questioned the automatic connection between secularization and modernization, and thus conceptualized secularization mainly as religious decline, geographically confined to the so-called Western world, and more precisely, to Western Europe. Europe and the US became the antipodes within this regional focus.

Several historical sociologists responded to these objections by trying to account for the various paths that secularization had taken in different regions (Martin 1978, 2005, 2007; Bruce 1999). In their attempt to explain the decline or vitality of religious practice and belonging, most scholars dealt with the more recent past, mostly the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the respective configurations of church-state relations.[3]

Philip Gorski (2000) criticized the general lack of historicization in the secularization debate as well as in research based on the religious economies model. He argued that in these approaches the depiction of the pre-modern period was starkly simplified, broad time periods were omitted, and variations in religious development were neglected.

Of the three different connotations of 'secularization' specified by José Casanova (1994) – religious decline, functional differentiation and the privatization of religion – most of the aforementioned authors dealt with religious decline. While there was much criticism of the assumed connection between modernization and religious decline in the population, functional differentiation between religion and other societal spheres, like politics, law, education or the economy, was apparently accepted as a general indicator of both secularization and modernization.[4]

In the meantime, this consensus has come into question. Criticisms came from three different sides – (mostly) American critics of secularization theories,

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3 An exception was Franz Höllinger (1996), who looked at the time of early Christian missionary activities, arguing that the long-term secularization process was influenced by whether folk religiosity had been integrated or suppressed by the missionaries.

4 Even one of the most ardent critics of secularization theories, Rodney Stark (1999: 252), only attacked assumptions of religious decline in the course of modernization, but left functional differentiation untouched.

(mostly) European secularization theorists, and postcolonial thinkers –, all of whom stressed the specificity of the European experience.

Among American sociologists, a critique emerged that focused on the relationship between secularization and power. Christian Smith (2003) argued against the notion of secularization or functional differentiation as allegedly autonomous processes in the course of modernization, and instead highlighted the power struggle between Protestant and secular elites as the driving force behind the secularization of the public sphere in the United States. Smith's interpretation of this process as a contingent development that depended on the strength of competing actors once again called the link between modernization and secularization into question.

Some European secularization theorists explicitly confirmed the connection between modernization and functional differentiation, yet underlined the specificity of the Western development, based on the historical conflict between the king and the pope, which culminated in the Investiture Controversy. Pollack (2016), with reference to Berman (1983), assumes that the genesis of the modern world ultimately (and unintentionally) was pushed forward by the supremacy claims of the Catholic Church, which at that time had already developed as a powerful and independent institution with strong borders against the outside world. Based on this history, functional differentiation in 'the West' gains its specific radicalism (ibid. 2016, 20–21).

José Casanova, in his global comparative perspective on secularization, made a similar argument when pointing to the difference between the US and Europe (Casanova 2006: 12). For the United States, this does not imply that secularity was absent, but, quite the contrary: It implies that this nation "has always been the paradigmatic form of a modern, secular, differentiated society" (ibid.), lacking, however, the collision between religion and the differentiated secular spheres that had been so prevalent in Europe. Casanova considers this argument even more valid for China and the Confucian civilizational area (ibid.).

Over the last few decades, a fundamental critique of all assumptions about the potential universality of the differentiation of a social sub-domain 'religion' and the concomitant formation of a secular sphere, has established itself within the study of religions. Influential voices have been claiming that there were no semantic equivalents at all to the concept of 'religion' outside Europe before the adoption of the Western concept (Kippenberg and Stuckrad 2003, 41–42). Such ideas are by no means new, however. By 1962 W.C. Smith had already proposed the renunciation of the term 'religion' as an analytical tool for studying non-European cultures, especially Islam (Smith 1991 [1962], 50). In the last two or three decades, R.T. McCutcheon (McCutcheon 1998, 56) and

T. Fitzgerald (Fitzgerald 1997) elaborated on the critique of the cross-cultural application of the concept of religion. A radical position has been taken recently by sociologist Horii Mitsutoshi, who – with reference to Japan – stated "that there was no 'religion' in pre-modern Japan. Therefore, there was no 'secularity' in pre-modern Japan, either" (Horii 2018).[5] The same claim has been made with regard to Islamic thought (Ahmed 2015: 176–245; cf. Abbasi 2020; Bowering 2012: viii). Thus, critique of the cross-cultural application of the term 'religion' has been extended to the concepts of 'secularity' and 'the secular' as analytical tools for the comparison of cultures.

A similar argument – again with Islam as the prime example – was promulgated by anthropologist Talal Asad (2003). He argued that not only the secularization process was an outcome of European history, but also the notion of a secular-religious divide as such emerged against that background. A whole school of scholars developed[6] in this line of argument, stressing that secularization as well as the secular-religious divide were brought to non-Western societies by colonial and imperial powers, including their sciences and humanities. Secularity – from this perspective – was not a fact to be analyzed with 'neutral' tools, but an episteme that carried with it the power relations of Western colonialism. Consequently, only the analysis of genealogies of the religious-secular divide after its transfer to other cultural contexts remained as a legitimate research approach.

Even though many of the classical secularization theorists in the field of sociology did not pay much attention to this fundamental attack from outside the sociological field, it found wide acceptance among those who engaged in interdisciplinary contexts and dealt with cultural comparisons. Often, this was accompanied by critical views on Western experiences of modernity and secularization as such, especially by authors who dealt with Muslim-majority nations (Esposito/Tamimi 2000), or with India (Nandy 1998). Secularization and secularity seemed not only inadequate as concepts and research questions to analyze developments in the history of the non-West, but at the same time undesirable as societal developments. The critiques of concrete – and often authoritarian – 'secularist' regimes, of secularism as a political doctrine, and of secularization and secularity as perspectives of social scientific research, tend to become intermingled.

A consequence of these critiques was, however, that the history of what was later called 'religion' or 'the secular' in non-Western regions seemed to begin literally with the advent of missionaries and colonialists. The question

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5   See also Hardacre 1989, 63.
6   For a critical reconstruction of the 'Asadian' school see Enayat (2017).

of whether similar differentiations and distinctions already existed before the encounter with 'the West' has hardly ever been asked – regardless of whether such similarities might be interpreted as an indication of a potential universal development or at least as a fertile ground for the implantation of Western differentiation models (cf. Akasoy 2015, 150; Abbasi 2020, 3).

The outcome of all these criticisms was two-edged at best. On the one hand, they demonstrated that theory must be historicized and contextualized to avoid falling into speculative philosophy of history. They also stress, correctly, that processes depend on specific historical circumstances as well as on agency, that power relations must be taken into account, and that attempts at generalization as well as the applicability of theoretical concepts and methodological approaches have to be critically assessed.

On the other hand, these criticisms had a serious impact on social scientific research in the field of religion in general, especially where it dealt with non-Western contexts, and where it aimed at global comparisons. They tended to delegitimize the use of categories like 'religion' and 'secularity' for comparative research, since they were suspected of bearing the burden of Western power; and they tended to delegitimize the analysis of broader processes inasmuch as they were suspicious of presupposing anonymous driving forces. As they tied secularization – as a process and a concept – closely, if not to say exclusively, to European history, they insinuated that other parts of the world had nothing comparable to European notions of religious-secular differentiations, or at least that their basic differentiations did not develop in a similar direction. The impression was given that the history, not only of the terms, but also of differentiation as such, came to the non-West 'by boat,' without having something to connect with in these non-Western regions. Ultimately, these contributions – in spite of their diversity – produced the same kind of problems that Gorski had addressed with regard to classical secularization theories: Whereas they had tended to juxtapose a religious past with a secular present, the present critics tend to juxtapose a reified secular West – with compartmentalized concepts of religion and the secular – with a pre-modern 'non-West' void of similar distinctions and differentiations.

3   Breaking the Deadlock: Historicizing Distinctions and Differentiations

What is missing in this debate and what we are endeavoring to achieve here is an attempt to not only historicize a discourse, but to historicize the secular-religious binary beyond its present linguistic representation. This means looking for relevant differentiations avant la lettre, for the emergence of

corresponding conceptual distinctions in non-Western societies, and for the paths that developed therefrom. The following questions should be addressed: Were there any pre-modern conceptual distinctions and/or institutional differentiations upon which the modern religious-secular distinction could build? Were there emic concepts that distinguished between different spheres of action or authority that indicate such institutional differentiation? And if so, of what kind were these distinctions? Finally, did they shape the paths that developed after the encounter with the modern West? If so, in what way did they shape these paths? If not, why did they not eventually give rise to secular paths of development themselves? This approach aims at adding an element to the identification and explanation of processes of functional differentiation outside the West. The assumption is that the availability of such conceptual distinctions and institutional differentiations before the encounter with the West had an influence on how the secular-religious divide was appropriated later on, or remained an important resource for later legitimizations of alternative paths.

There are, of course, scholars on whose works we can build in our attempt to historicize the secular-religious binary beyond its present linguistic representation. Below, we have pointed to just a few examples: Ira Lapidus (1975; 1996) was one of the few scholars who quite early on interpreted Islamic history from the perspective of differentiation mainly between politics and religion, and in doing so argued against the distinctiveness and alleged unity of Islam. In relation to pre-modern India, political scientist Rajeev Bhargava talks about "critical junctures" in Indian history (Bhargava 2010, 160) that opened up "conceptual spaces" (ibid., 160, 165), and generated "conceptual resources that provide the cultural preconditions for the development of modern secularism in India" (ibid., 2010, 170). Christoph Kleine (2013), Aike Rots and Mark Teeuwen (2017) made a similar attempt for Japan.

While the theoretical debate in recent years has largely been dominated by skepticism about comparative investigations of pre-modern societies, historians and regional experts have lately taken the floor to question the incommensurability postulate on an empirical and theoretical basis.

Scholars of sociology and anthropology of religion have identified various distinctions, by which religion is differentiated from its environment: 'sacred/holy versus profane' (Durkheim 2008 [1915]), 'immanent versus transcendent' (Luhmann 2013 [2002]), or 'religious versus secular'. In the debate on the axial age thesis, a historical sequence between the three types of distinctions has been assumed (Casanova 2012: 454; 2019: 5; Schulze 2010).

To relate 'religion' to some kind of basic distinction does not presuppose that religious institutions have nothing to do with mundane or 'secular' affairs. They deal with money, healthcare, administration, and many other things.

They would, however, become invisible as religious institutions, if they did not, at least symbolically, indicate their difference from a bank, a hospital, or an ordinary enterprise. The above-mentioned distinctions indicate these specificities.

The postcolonial critique, taken seriously, would imply that research on religion and the secular would only be possible if related to Western contexts, whereas in the non-West it was power relations alone that could be the object of research – always insinuating that nothing similar to the religious-secular divide could have been present there before the advent of Western powers.

What we suggest here, is to not ignore power relations in the context of secularization processes, in which the notions of a secular state, secular education and law, and of religious freedom, have been transported to other continents. Mark Chaves (1994) has convincingly argued that functional differentiation is genuinely about shifts in power. The direction of this shift, however, is not as clear as a modern view might indicate. Whereas in modern configurations, we mostly find certain societal fields drawing boundaries against religion, in the pre-modern era, we find examples of differentiations starting from religion (see Pollack 2016, 17; Luhmann 1989, 260). In various 'medieval' societies, we observe the drawing of boundaries between a political and a religious sphere by religious actors who, in drawing these boundaries, evidently intended to safeguard the autonomy of religion in the first place.

To summarize, the task to complete is the historicization of conceptual distinctions and institutional differentiations in the non-West that have demarcated a field (compared to what we today call 'religion'), distinct from, however not unrelated to, other spheres of activity or experience, and to identify the related power struggles. As we will show in the following, examples of such early conceptual distinctions and institutional differentiations exist and should be taken into consideration for the analysis of later paths of development. We do not claim to deliver a causal analysis at this point, but rather intend to open up a research field that widens the scope of analysis beyond what we consider a deadlock in the debate on secularization and secularity.

4   Distinctions and Differentiations outside the West

In his work on 'multiple modernities,' Shmuel Eisenstadt suggests a conflation of universal developments (i.e. the encounter with European modernity) and culture-specific developments (specific ways of perceiving and responding to that encounter). The combination of universal developments and culture-specific reactions to these developments eventually resulted in "a multiplicity

of cultural programs and cultural patterns of modernity" (Eisenstadt 2002, 27). We follow his line of thought by starting from the multiplicity of secular-religious demarcations (i.e. secularities) in global modernity and seeking their potential predecessors in the premodern period. We employ the term "secularity" to refer to "interrelated epistemic and social structures in which given social configurations are conceptually cast into a binary taxonomy in terms of classifying things as either religious or nonreligious by relevant actors" (Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr 2020, 6; cf. Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012, 881). We want to explore both common features and the diversity of historical paths and cultural patterns, which lead to these culture-specific forms of secularity. In this article, we begin with the medieval period to provide a genealogy of various types of secularity in global modernity. This research interest does not deny the influence of Western knowledge and structures of governance on non-Western societies since colonial times. However, relevant actors in non-Western societies were not merely passive recipients of Western impositions. Even if the acceptance of secularist principles was demanded by Western powers, the way in which these principles were appropriated, was nevertheless guided by specific interests; it was selective, creative, and strategic. Moreover, the 'agency' of the relevant actors proceeded within the boundaries of existing epistemic and social structures, in the sense of "mutually sustaining cultural schemas and sets of resources that empower and constrain social action and tend to be reproduced by that action" (Sewell Jr. 1992, 27).

4.1 The Case of Japan: Medieval Antecedents of Secularity in Japanese Buddhism

4.1.1 The Scholarly Debate

Seen from the outside, Japan appears to be a prime example of unproblematic secularity. Constitutionally, the laicity of the modern Japanese state seems unambiguous and undisputed. The Japanese constitution guarantees the positive and negative freedom of religion, and it prohibits the granting of privileges to religious organizations or the financial support of religious institutions by the state, as well as the engagement of the state in religious education or other religious activities.

Although debates about visits of government representatives to the Yasukuni shrine (Pye 2003) and attempts to amend the constitution are occasionally discussed among Western scholars and in the Western media, the former is almost exclusively observed with a view to diplomatic repercussions and commemoration culture. As a matter of fact, however, the demarcation between the religious and the secular plays a decisive role in both of these problem areas. Is the worship of the war dead at the Yasukuni shrine a religious ritual

or a secular commemoration (Mullins 2021)? The same question arises with regard to local festivities involving representatives of government authorities and their public funding (van Winkle 2012). In this respect, the governing party LDP aims to change the constitution dictated by the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP) after Japan's surrender in August 1945 and enacted in 1947, to classify such rites as non-religious customs or social events.

It is important to remember that the arguments of those who wish to amend the constitution accordingly refer to nineteenth and early twentieth-century epistemes, which in turn refer to ideas and institutional arrangements that can be traced back to the eighth century. We are therefore dealing here with epistemic structures of an extreme 'longue durée' (Kleine 2019).

In spite of some specificities of Japanese secularity, Western debates and regulations have played a considerable role in shaping the modern-day relationship between the religious and secular spheres, in particular the relationship between the state and religious institutions – partly but not exclusively through the imposed constitution.

In the field of sociology, and religious studies in particular, some peculiarities are striking with regard to the topics of secularization, secularism and secularity. The topic was picked up relatively late in Japan, "has not evoked a very enthusiastic response (...) and has not led to an in-depth debate of the theoretical issues involved" (Swyngedouw 1979, 70). This can partly be explained by the fact that since the 1970s, an "increasing awareness of the problems involved in the cross-cultural application of Western-derived concepts and theories" can be felt (ibid, 76), which on the one hand is strengthened and ennobled by post-colonial approaches in Western discourses and at the same time corresponds to a trend towards nationalistic, culturalist and 'identitarian' theories about the uniqueness of the Japanese (*nihonjin ron* 日本人論).

On the other hand, a cautious approach to theories about secularization, secularism and secularity has become noticeable. As a result, a strong polarization is looming between a radical incommensurabilism (Horii 2016, 2018) and a moderate critique of the unconsidered transfer of Western concepts to non-Western contexts (Fujiwara 2016, 101).

Among Western scholars, Japan occasionally became a test case for the tenability or formulation of the secularization thesis. Some researchers use Japan as an illustration that modernity and religiosity are by no means mutually exclusive (Casanova 1994, 26–27; Stark 1999). It is argued, for instance, that Japan experienced a "Rush Hour of the Gods" (McFarland 1967) right at the height of its breath-taking process of modernization. Experts on Japan, however, have largely rejected the daring thesis of the inversely proportional

relationship between modernization and secularization in Japan. In a direct response to Rodney Stark (1999), Ian Reader unmistakably states that "far from being vibrant, religion, whether organized, institutional, or related to popular and folk practices, is in decline" (Reader 2012, 7).

While Reader is primarily concerned with religious decline as one component of secularization, others have lately focused on institutional differentiation. In this context, the question of the appropriateness of the use of Western concepts in the description and analysis of differentiated social sub-areas in pre-modern non-Western societies naturally plays a decisive role. That is to say that while the applicability of secularization theory as a grand narrative of social change in Japan was challenged early on by Japanese scholars, the cross-cultural applicability of central concepts such as 'religion' or 'secular' as a whole has also been questioned with increasing intensity in the West since the 1990s (e.g. Fitzgerald 1997).

The general skepticism about the application of differentiation-theoretical approaches in combination with the popularity of genealogical and conceptual-historical research, has led in recent years to a number of studies dealing with the adaptation and processing of Western concepts such as religion and secularism (Josephson 2012; Krämer 2013, 2015). In most cases, however, such studies focus more on the direct influence of Western ideas on Japan than on the impact of emic epistemes on the appropriation of these ideas.

4.1.2 Conceptual Distinctions in Early Medieval Japan: Competitions and Comparisons

In a series of articles, Christoph Kleine (2003, 2013, 2018 etc.), has sought to show that already by around the year 800, systems of cognitive and normative orientation, which today are usually regarded as 'religions,' were assigned to a shared category (*kyō* 教 ≈ teaching system; *dō* 道 ≈ paths of cultivation; *hō* 法 ≈ normative system, etc.) and compared with each other in terms of their (partial) functional equivalence. Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Brahmanism and, from the 16th century onwards, also Shintō and Christianity were regularly perceived as representatives of the same social field and thus as competitors.

While comparisons between Buddhism, Daoism, Brahmanism and Shintō were rather theoretical and largely limited to two interrelated functional aspects – (1) as means of coping with contingency for both the individual and society and (2) as means for the stabilization of society and rule through the domestication of the masses – the arrival of Christian missionaries in 1549 brought genuine institutional competition for Buddhism into play. For the first time, Buddhist priests had to deal with a very similarly organized, monastic,

hierarchical, dogmatic, otherworldly-oriented redemptive system of beliefs and practices, which as a socio-cultural formation represented a perfect functional equivalent. This functional equivalence, which found expression, for example, in conversions and re-conversions, was taken for granted by both the European and Japanese sides. While in the 16th century, the term 'religion' finally prevailed as a comparative concept to designate competing systems of belief and practice in Europe, not least in cultural comparison with Japan, the Japanese used terms such as *shūshi* 宗旨, *monto* 門徒, etc., as approximate semantic equivalents. Until far into the twentieth century, *shūshi* in particular was used synonymously with *shūkyō* 宗教, i.e. with the old Buddhist term, which in recent publications is often held to be a de facto neologism (Krämer 2010, 6), introduced for the sole purpose of translating the European word 'religion' in a diplomatic context. In view of the historical data, the assertion that in pre-modern Japan there was no awareness of a distinct social field, which we today call 'religion,' is hardly convincing.

Indisputably, the social differentiation of religion is an indispensable prerequisite for any kind of secularity. Secularity in the strict sense, however, presupposes that under certain conditions and for specific purposes 'the religious' is juxtaposed with 'the secular.' In this context, Kleine (2018) has tried to show that Buddhist thinkers had already developed and propagated a binary epistemic structure by the early Middle Ages, which strikingly resembles Christian ideas such as the 'two swords theory' or the 'two kingdoms doctrine.' Predominantly in the context of power-political discourses, it has been argued that the welfare of the nation, the stability of society and the prosperity of the state rest on two interdependent normative orders: the nomosphere of the ruler (*ōbō* 王法) responsible for mundane (*seken* 世間) affairs and the nomosphere of the Buddha (*buppō* 仏法) responsible for supra-mundane (*shusseken* 出世間) affairs. The paradigm of the "interdependence of the nomosphere of the ruler and the nomosphere of the Buddha" (*ōbō buppō sō'i* 王法仏法相依) (cf. Kikuchi 1996; Kuroda 1983, 1996b; Satō 1985) was widely accepted and discussed well into the Meiji period (1868–1912).

Against this background, it is not surprising that in the course of the appropriation of Western classification systems and knowledge orders in the late nineteenth century, including the establishment of the term *shūkyō* as a semantic equivalent to religion and as a legal category, the classification of Buddhism and the functionally equivalent Christianity under this category was largely undisputed – both had already been classified as *shūshi, monto*, etc. since the late 16th century. The matter was more complicated in relation to Shintō, which the architects of modern Japan wanted to impose as an indigenous state

ideology and compulsory state cult. In order not to violate the constitutional principle of religious freedom enforced by the Western powers, they invented "a new religion" (Chamberlain 1912) called "Shrine Shintō" (*jinja shintō* 神社神道) or "State Shintō" (*kokka shintō* 国家神道) and defined it as "non-religious" (*hi-shūkyō* 非宗教) (Imaizumi 1926; cf. Isomae 2007; Shimazono 2005).

4.1.3   Institutional Differentiation: The Role of Monastic Organizations
A question still to be clarified is why in Japan – as in premodern Tibet (Ruegg 1995; Roesler 2013), Mongolia (Kollmar-Paulenz 2013) and Bhutan (Schwerk 2019) in a similar way – but not in imperial China, the paradigm of the dual rule of a mundane and a supramundane nomosphere prevailed as an effective epistemic structure with considerable durability. Our preliminary hypothesis is that the implementation of such a politically relevant idea presupposes specific socio-structural prerequisites. In Japan, Buddhist monasteries had advanced to become an autonomous power bloc (a *kenmon* 権門 in the wording of Kuroda; cf. Adolphson 2000) since the ninth century as a result of spatial detachment from mundane power, massive land donations and the increasing privatization of land ownership, gains in economic and military power, etc. Kuroda (1996a, 1975) refers to this power bloc as "temple aristocracy" (*jike* 寺家) competing with the "court aristocracy" (*kuge* 公家) and the "military aristocracy" (*buke* 武家). The monastic estates enjoyed extensive legal autonomy, and the clergy had sufficient power to assert their interests against state institutions, even militarily if necessary. On the basis of this institutional autonomy, it was logical and relatively easy to underpin the state of affairs ideologically and thus legitimize it in the long term. This happened with increasing intensity from the 12th century onwards, i.e. during a period in which political power structures had become unstable, which made it easier for the "temple aristocracy" to assert claims to power and autonomy vis-à-vis the "court aristocracy" and the "military aristocracy".

In contrast, the pre-modern Chinese state, on the basis of Confucian conceptions of legitimate domination, such as the meritocratic principle of the "heavenly mandate" (*tianming* 天命), neither institutionally nor ideologically permitted the autonomy of religious institutions. The emperor was regarded as an absolute sovereign to whom every segment of society was unconditionally subordinated. The idea of an interdependence between the nomosphere of the ruler and the nomosphere of the Buddha would have been completely unacceptable and would probably have been considered treason. It can therefore be assumed that the differences in the shaping of modern secularity in the People's Republic of China and in Japan – despite all religious and cultural

similarities – have their roots partly in highly persistent epistemic and social structures, which can be only cursorily hinted at here. It becomes apparent here how social and epistemic structures, institutional differentiations and conceptual distinctions are related to each other.

The configuration in medieval Japan was somewhat similar to that in Europe with the competition between papacy and empire, and we suspect that it was these specific institutional and political configurations that promoted the development of binary ordering schemes in both Europe and Japan, which ultimately formed the basis in Europe for the implementation of secularity as an important organizational principle of the modern state. Where others have argued that it was the institutional strength, autonomy and power of the Catholic Church that – in counter-reaction to it – triggered uniquely European differentiation processes (Berman 1983; Pollack 2016), in Japan we find a configuration similar in some respects yet dissimilar in others.

As to the dissimilarities, epistemes adopted from China, which prescribe the absolute sovereignty of the ruler and subordination of all other institutions and regulatory powers, remained subliminally effective. Never was the Buddhist side claiming to have the last word in political matters. Moreover, in comparison to the Roman Catholic Church, the Buddhist order was highly fragmented and the individual monasteries frequently stood in fierce competition with each other – a fact that makes Taira criticize Kuroda's notion of the "temple aristocracy" as one single power bloc (Taira 1996). There was no central authority that could have confronted the Tennō as the Pope challenged the Emperor in the Holy Roman Empire. With the military suppression of the Buddhist domains, which in the 16th century had opposed the unification of the empire fragmented by a civil war lasting many decades, the Buddhist order finally lost its political and military autonomy. It was placed under the strict control of the Tokugawa regime, and the temples were instrumentalized as registration offices, primarily for the purpose of eradicating Christianity. Nevertheless, Buddhist institutions continued to be regarded as representatives of a distinct area of social activity. Due to the Tokugawa regime's (1603–1868) far-reaching claims to sovereignty, however, state intervention in religious affairs was considered legitimate, but not religious intervention in state affairs. As a further factor in the development of a distinctive concept of secularity in modern Japan, the heterogeneity of the Japanese religious landscape should be mentioned here. The separation of Buddhism (now defined as religion) from Shintō (now defined as an emperor cult, mythical legitimation of imperial rule and ethnic identity marker) and Confucianism (now the basis of public morals, state and social ethics) created a very peculiar religious-political configuration.

Durable social and epistemic structures in the sense of the institutional differentiation of Buddhist monasteries and the conceptual distinction between religious and political nomospheres or spheres of social activity – including the associated purposes, methods, competences and legitimations – were undoubtedly conducive to the relatively unproblematic appropriation of Western concepts of a secular state. This endogenous propensity to embrace the development of secularity has been increasingly taken into account in recent research. As a result, more and more studies have appeared that question postmodern incommensurabilism and look at pre-modern approaches to secularity or even secularism. Already in 1979 Swyngedouw had stated that in "basic layers of Japanese religiosity, there can be discovered elements of secularization avant la lettre" (Swyngedouw 1979, 82). More recently, Mark Teeuwen (Rots and Teeuwen 2017; Teeuwen 2013) and Kiri Paramore (Paramore 2017) have made important contributions to the topic.

These studies do not aim to negate regional and cultural peculiarities and divergences – on the contrary. In order to describe and analyze differences, however, a comparative perspective is needed that draws on concepts such as 'secularity' or 'religion'.

4.2   *The Case of Medieval Islam*
4.2.1   The Scholarly Debate
Unlike Japan and Japanese Buddhism, to relate Islam or regions under the cultural influence of Islam, to secularity and secularization seems problematic from the outset.[7] Given the global influence of political Islam and the political realities in many countries with a Muslim majority, the public in the West have come to regard Islam and secularity as incompatible. This view is also held in key strands of Islamic studies, which underline the relationship between religion and political power, as well as emphasizing the fundamental distinctness of Islam as a cultural unit. Antony Black, for example, has stressed that Islam since the time of the Prophet "comprises a distinct and self-contained cultural unit…. a coherent, ongoing tradition, separate from the West and with a logic of its own" (Black 2011: 1). As such, there is skepticism regarding whether forms of power and forms of separation of power in the Islamic-Arab context can be compared to those in the European-Christian context.[8] This assumption of a principle distinctness is even stronger in the debate on secularism and

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7   Dietrich Jung (2011) develops a genealogy of the holistic image of Islam in both popular and academic discussions in the West as well as in the Islamic world.

8   For a similar argument with regard to monarchical forms of rule in transcultural comparison, see Höfert/Drews 2010.

secularity. In his introduction to the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, the editor clearly states:

> The foundations of Islam neither allow for distinctions between spiritual and temporal, ecclesiastical and civil, or religious and secular categories, nor envisaged the same duality accepted in Western political thought as standard, such as God and Caesar, church and state, clergy and laity. (…) In contrast to the West, the respective realms of religion and state are intimately intertwined in Islam
>
> BOWERING 2012: viii

There has long been contestation with regard to the question of what 'Islam' is, how it relates to the concept of 'religion' (see Gardet 2012), and – consequently – if it is and has been historically distinguishable from something non-religious or even 'secular' (see Dressler, Salvatore, Wohlrab-Sahr 2019). If we oversimplify somewhat, we might identify two positions in this debate: One argues that the religion-secular distinction is alien to Islam, since Islam encompasses all spheres of life; the other stresses that distinctions and differentiations related to religion have existed from early on in pre-modern Islam (Lapidus 1975; 1992; 1996; Abbasi 2020; 2021). Even the *Princeton Encyclopedia* – in spite of the fundamental claim made in the introduction – collects impressive examples of de facto differentiations to which we will return later.

At present, the first position is able to align scholars from different academic and political backgrounds. Here, we find arguments referring to the specific character of Islam alongside historical arguments, as well as political positions related to the present.

Some scholars maintain that Islam does not fit the category of 'religion,' with which a 'secular' sphere could be juxtaposed, and thus is considered to "conceptually frustrate the secular/religious binary" (Ahmad 2015: 116). They argue that Islam must instead be perceived as a "way of life" (Esposito 2000, 10–11) that systematically includes mundane practices and domains, especially in politics and law. This perspective finds support already in the works of William Cantwell Smith (1962), for whom Islam was too broad to be grasped by the category of 'religion'.

The historical argument, as Humeira Iqtidar shows, has become a common trope:

> As many have already argued, the secularization that happened in Europe was not needed in most parts of the world because no exact equivalent of

> the Roman Catholic Church's hierarchical, structured, and institutional-
> ized control existed beyond Europe.
>
>> IQTIDAR 2017, 3

Talal Asad and others have given this argument an epistemic twist by claiming that the conceptual divide between the religious and the secular cannot be used as a neutral instrument of research (especially on Islam) due to this very history (Asad 2003, 1–17).

Some scholars embed this argumentation in a political position that explicitly neglects the need for secularism (as a separation of religion and state) in the regions under the cultural influence of Islam (Tamimi 2000, 28). This has been articulated since the turn of the twentieth century by Muslim reformers with the formula *islam din wa dawla* ("Islam is religion and state"), which must be read as a political slogan, often used to delegitimate the political position that advocates the separation of religion and state as beholden to colonial interests. Within Islamic discourse, this expression was used more generally to characterize the interconnectedness of religious obligation and political rule (cf. Schulze 2015, 498–501). The concept continues to be influential and is often projected backwards to prove the difference between Islam and other systems of ideas and practices for which the term 'religion' is commonly used.

However, even if one concedes that Islam is broader than the predominant modern concept of 'religion'[9] after the comprehensive process of "religionization" (Dreßler 2019), one might nevertheless consider whether there is a domain within Islam that could serve as a more accurate equivalent to 'religion.' This leads some to focus on *din*, a term usually translated as 'religion,' or on *shari'a* as designating divine normativity which humans address via *fiqh*.

In this line of argument, some scholars have pointed to distinctions between *shari'a* and other realms of normativity, like *shari'a* and *siyasa* (March 2015; Künkler 2012), and – related to that – the *adab* and the *hadith* tradition as two sources of normativity (Salvatore 2019).

Sherman Jackson (2017) has recently attempted to discern the secular from within Islam, arguing that there is an 'Islamic secular', constituted by the juridical debate on the domain of *shari'a*. He conceives of that which lies beyond this domain, though still within the Islamic tradition, as the realm of the Islamic secular. Jackson's 'Islamic secular' is thus seen as an intrinsic part of Islam, namely that part that is not governed in any specific way by *shari'a*. From this perspective, the decisive differentiation operates within Islam

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9   The same could be argued for Christianity as well.

(ibid., 11). Precursors of this position can be found in the early twentieth-century discourses of Turkish nationalists, such as Ziya Gökalp (Dreßler 2015), or Islamic reformers like Rafiq al-'Azm (Zemmin 2019) and Ali Abd al-Raziq. Gudrun Krämer (2021: 74) has recently addressed similar attempts in the pre-modern literature as the delineation of "neutral spaces."

Florian Zemmin (2019), in his work on the contributions of Rafiq al-'Azm in the Egyptian journal Al-Manar (around 1900), shows that conceptions of a secular political order in its own right existed in the Muslim reform debate as well (Dreßler, Salvatore and Wohlrab-Sahr 2019). Al-'Azm criticized the "fatal mixing of religion with politics," which he attributed "to the simplicity of the Bedouin Arabs who had first received Islam" (ibid: 82), and in which he saw a root cause of "Muslim weakness" in comparison to Europe. By differentiating between the order of society and the order of the state, he argued for the separation of religion and the state as a remedy for overcoming "Muslim weakness" (ibid: 81) vis-à-vis European nations and "'pagan' Japan" (ibid.), while claiming religion to be necessary for society as well as for human beings.

It needs to be mentioned, that for Al-'Azm, in spite of his emphasis on the separation of religion and politics, the term *islam* refers to both the religious and the secular sphere. His argumentation, however, supports "the mutual dependency and autonomy of religion and politics" (ibid: 91), not their fusion – quite similar to the paradigm of the "interdependence of the nomospheres of the Buddha and the ruler" in Japan.

These contributions show that the relationship between Islam and the secular is a complicated one, and that considerable attempts at legitimization are needed on the part of those who argue for the compatibility of Islam and secularity.

What follows is certainly not a thorough textual analysis of distinctions and differentiations in the Islamic medieval tradition. It is, however, an attempt to come up with a comparative sociological interpretation based on works by scholars of Islam. This will certainly not do justice to the subtleties of Orientalist expertise, but it tries to open up an avenue for the comparison of developments in different religious traditions.

4.2.2   Conceptual Distinctions in Pre-modern Islam

Rushain Abbasi (2020) has recently criticized what he calls the "current orthodoxy" in Islamic studies for "basing their conclusions about the Islamic past on theoretical critiques of European modernity instead of the indigenous sources themselves" (ibid: 187).[10] He insists that even if pre-modern Muslims

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10   For a key critique of politicization in the study of Islam, see Enayat 2017, and Hughes 2015.

"may not have shared the modern European concepts of the religious and the secular," this does not imply "that they did not articulate and develop an analogous categorization of their own" (ibid: 3–4). This is very much in line with our approach of looking for functional equivalents of conceptual distinctions rather than for exact semantic equivalents of European terms.

It must be noted that the history of Islam is one of encounter and competition with older religious communities. Consequently, in the Qu'ran, as well as in early Islamic writings, the term *din* has been used for Islam, Christianity and Judaism. It has also been used to distinguish the 'religion of truth' (*din al-haqq*) from 'corrupted religion' (*al-din al-mubaddal*) (Gardet 2012), and has thus occasionally been used in a comparative way.

Beyond that, the term *din* was employed for distinguishing mundane from supra-mundane matters.[11] In this regard a common binary between *din* and *dunya* has developed. L. Gardet speaks of *din* and *dunya* as "undoubted opposites" (Gardet 2012: 295).

In an in-depth analysis, referring to Muslim theologians from the 10th to the 14th centuries, Abbasi examines the *din-dunya* (*dini-dunyawi*) binary in medieval Islamic thought, which – he argues – refers to clearly distinct, but not mutually opposing aspects of reality (ibid: 192).

Often, this binary is used by pre-modern Muslim scholars in their interpretation of the blessings and benefits of various things:

> ... *din* was often associated with divine law, worship, reward, virtue, and was seen in relation to the next life and God. This was viewed in relation to the realm outside religion, the *dunyawi*, which had to do with the perceptual, the bodily, the mental, the outward, and all the things of human life (like food and sex) that are not, in their primary function, considered to be religious.
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> ABBASI 2020, 98

In medieval writings, the distinction was also used to delineate the scope of Prophetic authority. This delineation, Abbasi argues, served the purpose of affirming the prophet's infallibility in matters of religion, whereas worldly activities, like agriculture and other matters of livelihood were to be left to experts in the relevant fields.

In debates about the relationship between the holy book and sciences like medicine or mathematics, a distinction is made between *dini* knowledge and

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11   Further opposites were *al-dunya* and *al-akhira*, referring to this world and the afterworld. For a more elaborate discussion, see Krämer (2021).

dunyawi expertise.[12] This realm of 'secular' sciences explicitly includes the science of governance (*al-siyasat*), which derives from administrative rulings concerned with worldly affairs (ibid.). Similar distinctions can be observed in these early writings between the administration of *din* and the administration of *dunya*, the latter being primarily concerned with human flourishing in this world (ibid: 218). This also allows for drawing on pre-Islamic sources, as the tools for building up civilization are *dunyawi* and therefore universal (ibid, 221).

In a similar vein, Armando Salvatore (2019) argues that soon after the start of the Islamic civilization, two major, often mutually reflexive, discursive traditions emerged: the courtly tradition of *adab*, and the prophetic tradition of *hadith*. According to Salvatore, the *adab* tradition inspired a 'soft' and malleable type of secularity with corresponding grids of distinction. *Adab* is closely related to *siyasa*, or governance, frequently rendered as 'public policy' or just 'politics' (see also March 2015).

These scholarly contributions suggest different realms that, in the medieval Islamic tradition, are distinguished from *din*, which can be called the 'religious sphere': everyday matters and mundane forms of expertise, forms of power, and, finally, ethics of civility. In several theological writings, these realms are clearly distinguished from 'religious' matters and entail reflections upon the limits of the Prophet's authority. This suggests the institutional contexts in which such distinctions are formulated.

Different sources also indicate a division of power between politics and religion. As a relevant source for this division and for the emergence of the concept of sovereign rule, the role of the pre-modern literature of mirrors for princes has been stressed (Leder 2015: 95).

Neguin Yavari (2014; 2019) has even suggested that the twinning of religion and politics, "at the instigation of religion and in its favour" (Yavari 2014, 87), should be considered as an idea "that runs through centuries of history" (ibid, 151) in the Islamic as well as in the Christian context. She even explores whether this might be considered "a universal political concept" (ibid, 89) – an interpretation that seems to be supported by the above-mentioned configurations in Japan, Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan, etc.

Yavari (ibid, 83) implicitly points to the connection between conceptual distinction and institutional differentiation when she interprets the relationship between different political institutions as reflected in the 'mirrors for princes' literature as an "incipient secularism": "The vizier, the sage, is distanced

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12   However, this distinction was not upheld by all Muslims of that period: there was a spectrum "which ranged from a rigid separationism to virtual non-differentiation" (ibid: 192).

from the king ... The giver of advice and the heeder of advice need to be divided" (ibid.).

These remarks are not meant to claim that religious and worldly spheres of power were clearly separated in the Islamic context. Rather, what we mostly find are ideas of the mutual balancing and civilizing of religion and politics, for which the relative independence of both was needed, and it was the demarcation of "neutral space" (see Krämer 2021) rather than clear separations that indicated distinctions below the level of strong autonomy claims.

4.2.3   Differentiations: Institutional Contexts

What are the institutional contexts of such distinctions? A process that is of relevance for the structural differentiation between politics and religion, is, first of all, the formation of the *ulama* as a class of specialists in textual sources of the tradition and "authoritative guardians of the evolving religious tradition" (Zaman 2012, 575) between the 8th and 9th century (Lapidus 1975), i.e. a differentiation of religious expertise. Zaman also points at the differentiation between the *ulama* and the ruling elites, which not only led to mutual observation and dependence, but – under certain conditions – also to conflicts.

The emergence of the *ulama* has produced theological expertise for which internal consistency and plausibility, as well as the securing of the prophet as the religious authority seem to have played an important role. That the prophet's authority does not stretch 'to issues of agriculture,' and that it is via the restriction of his authority that his infallibility in religious matters can be maintained (Abbasi 2020: 199–202), can be seen as indicative of the differentiation of a religious field that establishes and maintains its own autonomy. In that process, the religious field defines its relations with the outside (or in our terminology, secular) world, that is, with pre-Islamic sources of civility, everyday practice and knowledge, other types of expertise, and the emergence of a political sphere with its own rules. Unlike Christianity, it is not the Church, and unlike Japanese Buddhism, it is not the monasteries that maintain their boundaries with the mundane sphere. Instead, it is Islamic scholarship that defines the reach and boundaries of *din* or *shari'a*, that is, of religious knowledge and religious law.

This obviously went along with the gradual differentiation of other types of expertise (alongside everyday knowledge). Abbasi, for instance, commenting on the work of Ghazali, highlights the 'two sciences' tradition, in which there is "a clear differentiation being made between the religious sciences, which are theological and ethical in orientation and the secular sciences, which are presumably everything else one can learn" (Abbasi 2020: 208). The latter

include arithmetic, medicine, astronomy, and engineering. These differentiations were, however, not linked with strong autonomy claims and respective theorizations.

Mirjam Künkler provides another example of the differentiation between religion and the state, when she points to the bifurcation of the legal system into *shari'a* and *mazalim* courts in early Abbasid times, which, as she argues, solidified separate realms inasmuch as it "implicitly acknowledged a source of law outside of the Qur'an and the sunna, and stipulated a limited application of religious law" (Künkler 2012: 547).

The institutional differentiation between politics and religion is also expressed in the juxtaposition of sultan and caliph (Tor 2013, 533; Leder 2015), for whose institutionalization the reign of the saljuqs played an important role, and which was preceded and accompanied by "concepts of a divinely ordained duality of spiritual and worldly powers" (Leder 2015: 97). This created a need for legitimization and reflection upon the relationship between the two spheres of power. This division of power that prevailed from the eleventh to the mid-thirteenth century is reflected in the 'mirrors for princes' literature.

5   Distinctions and Differentiations: Basic Features and Mechanisms

We have argued for historicizing 'secularity' by looking for pre-colonial forms of conceptual distinction and institutional differentiation between (what was later called) 'religion' and other spheres of social activity. For that purpose, we have discussed the cases of pre-modern Japanese Buddhism and medieval Islam in the Middle East as examples for such endeavors.

The analysis focused on three related issues:

a) On the conceptual level: the identification of certain activities and groups under the label 'religion' (*kyō, dō, hō, shūshi, monto* or *din*). We can see this in situations of life-world comparisons and competition between different ideological groups, indicated, for example, by cases of conversion between these groups, by comparisons between competing socio-cultural formations and normative systems, or by the juxtaposition of 'good' and 'bad' *kyō* or *din*. The argument is that a notion of a unity of certain phenomena existed in pre-modern Japanese Buddhism as well as in pre-modern Islam. We would interpret this as the conceptual distinction of a social field that would later become religion.

b) The development of oppositional pairs (*ōbō – buppō*; *din – dunya*) in which two spheres of power were juxtaposed and put in relation to each

other. In the cases discussed, these were the nomosphere of the emperor and the nomosphere of the Buddha (in Japan) or the realm of political and of religious authority, of temporal and religious knowledge as well as of religious and non-religious jurisdiction (in medieval Islam). This semantic distinction of a supra-mundane from a mundane nomosphere, we would argue, supported the development of a distinct sphere of activity, first of all next to the political (and parts of the juridical) sphere, but also in comparison with other types of knowledge. We interpret this as the development of a conceptual binary that supported institutional autonomy.

c)   What we see in the Buddhist case, is the attempt of monastic organizations to secure their institutional autonomy from the state. We interpret this as a process of institutional differentiation of a social sphere later to be defined as 'religion'.

In the case of medieval Islam, it is the differentiation of the *ulama* as an independent locus of authority, which defined the reach of *shar'ia* and the borders to the outside world. It certainly does not develop the institutional strength and autonomy of the Catholic Church, but it nevertheless has effects on the establishment of politics and religion as distinct, however closely related, spheres.

Religious institutions (monasteries, *ulama*) are obviously important actors that promote differentiation due to certain interests.

Considering the problem of data in historical research, it is not always easy to tell which step came first: whether the semantic distinction preceded the institutional differentiation or vice versa. Referring to Max Weber, one might conclude, that it is the interplay between ideas and interests (Weber 1978: 252), between conceptual distinctions and institutional autonomy that leads to the juxtaposition of religious and political spheres. Our argument is that this can be interpreted as a resource for secularity, on which later secular-religious distinctions could build.

That this is not a unilinear story can also be seen in the comparison of the histories of Middle Eastern Islam and Japanese Buddhism. Different modes of confrontation with Western modernity and the varieties of colonial/quasi-colonial domination come into play as important influencing factors. However, even if the reality of differentiations in the present is different in the contexts of Japan, the Middle East, and Europe, it seems important to recognize that there have been commonalities in terms of religion-related distinctions and differentiations that must be taken into account in order to avoid simply projecting the present onto the past. The story we tell differs depending on

whether we assume that Islam prevented the religious-secular demarcation from developing, or we acknowledge commonalities in the past, and then ask why history nevertheless developed differently.

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