Marion Eggert and Lucian Hölscher, eds.


The genealogies and meanings of the terms ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’ (plus related terms such as secularism, secularity and secularization) have been a matter of plentiful debate and analysis in recent times. Historically it has been widely assumed that they became global terms of meaning and reference as Western colonial influences spread, especially from the 19th century, while the notion of secularization as a modern phenomenon associated with the decline or restriction of religion in the public sphere has been a matter of significant debate.

Yet such terminologies and their associations conceal multiple nuances and problems. As the editors and contributors to this volume show, secularization (and its concomitants secularism, secularity and the secular) cannot be seen as a singular coherent entity or process. Nor are they simply products of a global spread from the ‘West to the rest’—an underlying assumption that permeates so many examinations of secularities and associated terminologies, including those of Charles Taylor and of Talal Asad who are both appropriately critiqued for such fallacies in different chapters. Heiner Roetz’s fine chapter on foreign influences on emergent European secularism, for example, provides ample evidence demonstrating how European thinkers involved in forming notions of secularity drew on Asian, notably Chinese, concepts, and in so doing wonderfully labels Taylor’s *A Secular Age* “a formidable document of North American parochialism” (p. 9). Later Hans-Martin Krämer shows that notions of the secular and of intellectual traditions associated with it were being formulated prior to Japan’s encounters with modern European thought and powers in the mid-19th century and that the concept of the ‘ secular’ has deep roots in Japan going back many centuries. As such he shows that the Japanese were able to formulate their own intellectual thoughts and traditions, thus providing a firm rejoinder to Asad’s rather narrow view that modernity and its concomitants—such as discourses on religion and the secular—are wholly tied to a Euro-American project.

The essays cover much ground across Europe and Asia, with some exceptions (India unfortunately is not discussed despite its constitutional emphasis on secularism). The editors in their Introduction note that while secularization has become contested as a term and concept in recent times, it remains widely perceived as a concept and process specifically emanating from and associated with Western culture – a view they see as problematic. The volume emphasises...
this point by showing how concepts of the religious and the secular have been formulated in numerous cultural and linguistic contexts to the extent that one should not talk about secularization in a singular context but in terms of diversified secularization (p. 7) dependent on differing linguistic, political, social, cultural and religious conditions.

The chapters provide case studies mainly from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to tease out such points. Roetz, as mentioned earlier, demonstrates the fallacy of thinking that secularizing ideas did not occur for the first time in history in modern Europe; they had appeared elsewhere in ways that actually influenced the formation of such ideas in Europe. Examining secularity in German contexts, Lucian Hölscher makes the point that the terms religion and the secular are relational terms that have evolved in changing semantic contexts, and Sylvie LeGrand shows that the French concept of laïcité is far more complex than just anti-clericalism. Together they provide some background to European cultural traditions. Volkhard Krech's chapter examines statistical data on church affiliations in Germany to draw out some of the problems associated with trying to assess secularization in statistical terms; it also indicates (although clearly Krech did not intend this) how scholars can still be hooked into linking secularization with institutional affiliations.

Subsequent chapters examine how concepts of secularity have played out in a variety of cultural arenas beyond the Christian and Western religious and linguistic spheres. Yochi Fischer looks at the complex relationship of (and the artificial and problematic distinctions between) the religious and the secular in Israel, in which secular and religious Jews are locked in struggles for hegemony and in which the secular nation is in effect grounded in religious foundations, with religious laws (e.g. on the Sabbath) influencing much of public life. Chapters by Anat Lapidot-Firilla (Turkey) and Nahid Mozaffari (Iran) show that in both countries the term and concept of the ‘secular’ did not exist as such until the modern era and required loanword borrowings to express the idea. Both chapters, however, reject the notion that this was simply a Western concept imposed on a non-western country and both show how the discourses on developing a public sphere not reliant on religious themes and authority were developed within each country, using its cultural and intellectual traditions. Lapidot-Firilla’s study shows how Turkey’s transition from Ottoman rule heavily influenced by Islamic customs to a secular state was not founded in a secular anti-religion agenda so much as in a process of removing Arabic influences in order to assert a more potent Turkish cultural nationalism. Mozaffari examines Iran’s Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11 to show how a particularly Iranian form of secularism developed in which religion was not set aside but utilised as a means of enhancing social justice.