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Secularisation, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship

Each of these terms, ‘secularisation’, ‘religion’ and ‘multicultural citizenship’, would require a separate and more systematic elaboration than the one I can offer in a single lecture. My aim in this chapter is simply to explore some interrelations between contemporary debates about secularisation, religion, and multicultural citizenship by adopting a global comparative perspective which may help to illuminate critically the European debates.

1. Secularisation

Rather than viewing secularisation as a general universal process of human and societal development culminating in secular modernity, one should begin with the recognition that the very term secularisation derives from a unique Western Christian theological category, that of the *saeculum*, which has no equivalent term not only in other world religions, but even in Eastern Christianity. Originally, the Latin world *saeculum*, as in *per saecula saeculorum* only meant an indefinite period of time, but eventually it became one of the terms of a dyad, religious/secular, which served to structure the entire spatial and temporal reality of medieval Christendom into a binary system of classification separating two worlds, the religious-spiritual-sacred world of salvation and the secular-temporal-profane world. Thus, the distinction between the ‘religious’ or regular clergy, who withdrew from the world into the monasteries to lead a life of Christian perfection, and the ‘secular’ clergy who lived in the world along with the laity.

In this respect, to secularise means to “make worldly”, to convert religious persons or things into secular ones, as when a religious person abandons the monastic rule to live in the world, or when monastic property is secularised. This is the original Christian theological meaning of the term secularisation that may serve, however, as the basic metaphor of the historical process of Western secularisation. This historical process needs to be understood as a particular reaction to the structuring dualism of Medieval Christendom, as an attempt to bridge, eliminate or transcend the dualism between the religious and the secular world. Even in the West, however, this process of secularisation follows two different dynamics.

One is the dynamic of internal Christian secularisation which aims to spiritualise the temporal and to bring the religious life of perfection out of the monasteries into the secular world. It tends to transcend the dualism by blurring

the boundaries between the religious and the secular, by making the religious secular and the secular religious through mutual reciprocal infusion. This path was initiated by the various medieval movements of Christian reform of the *saeculum*, was radicalised by the Protestant Reformation and has attained its paradigmatic expression in the Anglo-Saxon Calvinist cultural area, particularly in the United States.

The other different, indeed almost opposite dynamic of secularisation takes the form of laicisation. It aims to emancipate all secular spheres from clerical-ecclesiastical control and in this respect it is marked by a laic-clerical antagonism. Unlike in the Protestant path, however, here the boundaries between the religious and the secular are rigidly maintained, but those boundaries are pushed into the margins, aiming to contain, privatise and marginalise everything religious, while excluding it from any visible presence in the secular public sphere, now defined as the realm of *laïcité*, freed from religion. This is the paradigmatic French-Latin-Catholic path of secularisation, but it will find diverse manifestations throughout continental Europe.

With many variations these are the two main dynamics of secularisation which culminate in our secular age. In different ways both paths lead to an overcoming of the medieval Christian dualism through a positive affirmation and revaluation of the *saeculum*, that is, of the secular age and the secular world, imbuing the immanent secular world with a quasi-transcendent meaning as the place for human flourishing. In this broad sense of the term ‘secular’, we are all secular and all modern societies are secular and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, one could almost say *per saecula saeculorum*.

There is a second, narrower meaning of the term secular, that of self-sufficient and exclusive secularity, when people are simply ‘irreligious’, that is, devoid of religion and closed to any form of transcendence beyond the purely secular immanent frame. Here, secular is not anymore one of the units of a dyadic pair, but is constituted as a self-enclosed reality. To a certain extent, this constitutes one possible end-result of the process of secularisation, of the attempt to overcome the dualism between religious and secular, by freeing oneself of the religious component.

In his recent work, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor has reconstructed the process through which the phenomenological experience of what he calls “the immanent frame” becomes constituted as an interlocking constellation of the modern differentiated cosmic, social and moral orders. All three orders, the cosmic, the social, and the moral are understood as purely immanent secular orders, devoid of transcendence, and thus functioning *etsi Deus non daretur*, “as if God would not exist”. It is this phenomenological experience that, according to Taylor, constitutes our age paradigmatically as a secular one, irrespective of the extent to which people living in this age may still hold religious or theistic beliefs.

The question is whether the phenomenological experience of living within such an immanent frame is such that people within it will also tend to func-
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Taylor’s phenomenological account of the secular “conditions” of belief is meant to explain the change from a Christian society around 1500CE in which belief in God was unchallenged and unproblematic, indeed ‘naïve’ and taken for granted, to a post-Christian society today in which belief in God not only is no longer axiomatic but is becoming increasingly problematic, so that even those who adopt an ‘engaged’ standpoint as believers tend to experience reflexively their own belief as an option among many others, one moreover requiring an explicit justification. Secularity, being without religion, by contrast tends to become increasingly the default option, which can be naively experienced as natural and, thus, no longer in need of justification.

This naturalisation of ‘unbelief’ or ‘non-religion’ as the normal human condition in modern societies corresponds to the assumptions of the dominant theories of secularisation, which have postulated a progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices with increasing modernisation, so that the more modern a society the more secular, i.e. the less ‘religious’ it is supposed to become. That the decline of religious beliefs and practices is a relatively recent meaning of the term secularisation is indicated by the fact that it does not yet appear in the dictionary of most modern European languages.

The fact that there are some modern non-European societies, such as the United States or South Korea, that are fully secular in the sense that they function within the same immanent frame and yet their populations are also at the same time conspicuously religious, or the fact that the modernisation of so many non-Western societies is accompanied by processes of religious revival, should put into question the premise that the decline of religious beliefs and practices is a quasi-natural consequence of processes of modernisation. If modernisation per se does not necessarily produce the progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices, then we need a better explanation for the radical and widespread secularity one finds among the population of Western European societies.

Secularisation, in this second meaning of the term secular, that of being “devoid of religion”, does not happen automatically as a result of processes of modernisation, but it needs to be mediated phenomenologically by some other particular historical experience.

Self-sufficient secularity, that is, the absence of religion, has a better chance of becoming the normal taken-for-granted position if it is experienced not as an unreflexively naïve condition, as just a fact, but actually as the meaningful result of a quasi-natural process of development. As Taylor has pointed out, modern unbelief is not simply a condition of absence of belief, nor merely indifference. It is a historical condition that requires the perfect tense, “a condition of ‘having overcome’ the irrationality of belief”\(^2\). Intrinsic to this phenomenological experience is a modern “stadial consciousness”, inherited from the Enlightenment, which understands this anthropocentric change in the conditions of belief as a process of maturation and growth, as a “coming of age” and as progressive.

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emancipation. For Taylor, this stadial phenomenological experience serves in turn to ground the phenomenological experience of exclusive humanism as the positive self-sufficient and self-limiting affirmation of human flourishing and as the critical rejection of transcendence beyond human flourishing as self-denial and self-defeating.

In this respect, the historical self-understanding of secularism has the function of confirming the superiority of our present modern secular outlook over other supposedly earlier and therefore more primitive religious forms of understanding. To be secular means to be modern, and therefore by implication to be religious means to be somehow not yet fully modern. This is the ratchet effect of a modern historical stadial consciousness, which turns the very idea of going back to a surpassed condition into an unthinkable intellectual regression.

The function of secularism as a philosophy of history, and thus as ideology, is to turn the particular Western Christian historical process of secularisation into a universal teleological process of human development from belief to unbelief, from primitive irrational or metaphysical religion to modern rational post-metaphysical secular consciousness. Even when the particular role of internal Christian developments in the general process of secularisation is acknowledged, it is in order to stress the universal significance of the uniqueness of Christianity as, in Marcel Gauchet’s expressive formulation, “the religion to exit from religion”.

I would like to propose that this secularist stadial consciousness is a crucial factor in the widespread secularisation that has accompanied the modernisation of Western European societies. Europeans tend to experience their own secularisation, that is, the widespread decline of religious beliefs and practices in their midst as a natural consequence of their modernisation. To be secular is not experienced as an existential choice which modern individuals or modern societies make, but rather as a natural outcome of becoming modern. In this respect, the theory of secularisation mediated through this historical stadial consciousness tends to function as a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is, in my view, the presence or absence of this secularist historical stadial consciousness that explains when and where processes of modernisation are accompanied by radical secularisation. In places where such secularist historical stadial consciousness is absent or less dominant, as in the United States or in most non-Western post-colonial societies, processes of modernisation are unlikely to be accompanied by processes of religious decline. On the contrary, they may be accompanied by processes of religious revival.

In our global age it has become increasingly evident that European secular developments are not a universal norm for the rest of the world and that, as the rest of the world modernises, its people are not becoming more secular like us, but are becoming more religious, or actually they are becoming simultaneous-

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ly both more secular and more religious, which of course only muddles and confuses our binary categories. Indeed, one must admit that the whole world is becoming simultaneously both more ‘religious’ and more ‘secular’ since the Western Christian binary classification system of religious versus secular reality has been adopted globally. Indeed, the categories of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ have recently become globalised for the first time in all non-Western cultures.

2. Religion

Whereas the social sciences, and particularly my own discipline, i.e. the sociology of religion, still function with a relatively unreflexive general category of religion, within the newer discipline of “religious studies” (which in German would be called Religionswissenschaft) the very category of ‘religion’ has undergone numerous challenges as well as all kinds of critical deconstructions. There has been much debate in the last two decades concerning the competing genealogies of the ‘modern’ category of religion and its complex relation to various phenomena like the pluralisation of Christian confessions and denominations in early modernity, the Western colonial expansion and the encounter with the religious ‘other’, the Enlightenment critique of religion and the triumph of ‘secular reason’, the hegemony of the secular state and the disciplinary institutionalisation of the scientific study of religion, as well as the Western ‘invention of the world religions’ and the classificatory taxonomies of religion which have now become globalised.

But, paradoxically, scholars of religion are questioning the validity of the category of ‘religion’ at the very same moment when the discursive reality of religion is more widespread than ever and has become, for the first time, global. I am not claiming that people today everywhere are either more or less religious than they may have been in the past. Here I am bracketing out altogether the question which has dominated most theories of secularisation, namely whether religious beliefs and practices are declining or growing as a general modern trend throughout the world. I am only claiming that ‘religion’ as a discursive reality, indeed as an abstract category and as a system of classification of reality, used by modern individuals as well as by modern societies across the world, by religious as well as by secular authorities, has become an undisputable global social fact.

It is obvious that, when people around the world use the same category of religion, they actually mean very different things. The actual concrete meaning of whatever people denominate as ‘religion’ can only be elucidated in the context of their particular discursive practices. But the very fact that the same category of religion is being used globally across cultures and civilisations testifies to the global expansion of the modern secular/religious system of classification of reality which first emerged in the modern Christian West.
Moreover, while the religious/secular system of classification of reality may have become globalised, what remains hotly disputed and debated almost everywhere in the world today is how, where, and by whom the proper boundaries between the religious and the secular ought to be drawn. There are in this respect multiple competing secularisms, as there are multiple and diverse forms of religious fundamentalist resistance to those secularisms. For example, American, French, Turkish, Indian and Chinese secularism – to name only some paradigmatic and distinctive modes of drawing the boundaries between the religious and the secular – represent not only very different patterns of separation of the secular state and religion, but very different models of state regulation and management of religion and of religious pluralism in society.

Similarly, despite ‘family resemblances’ observed among the diverse religious fundamentalisms, one should resist the temptation to view them all as diverse manifestations of a single process of religious fundamentalist reaction against a single general global process of progressive secularisation. Each of the so-called religious fundamentalist movements – American Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, etc., each of which is moreover internally plural and diverse – are particular responses to particular ways of drawing the boundaries between the religious and the secular. Moreover, those responses are not only reactive, but also proactive attempts to seize the opportunity offered by processes of globalisation to redraw the boundaries. Above all, always and everywhere the religious and the secular are mutually constituted through socio-political struggles and cultural politics. Not surprisingly, one also finds diverse resistances to attempts to impose the European, or any other particular pattern of secularisation as a universal, teleological model everywhere.

It is no longer the United States alone which appears to be an exception to the European rule of secularisation, but the rest of the world appears to be equally exceptional to the point in which we are now talking of the European exception. But we should be cautious with the new discourse of European exceptionalism, because when it comes to ‘religion’ and its antonym ‘the secular’, there is no global rule. We must humbly recognise that many of our received categories, derived from our Christian-secular European developments, fail us when we try to understand developments in the rest of the world, in that they, rather than facilitating understanding, actually lead to fundamental misunderstanding. Neither the category of religious fundamentalism, as if we were witnessing a single global anti-modern reaction to secular modernity, nor the term proposed by Peter Berger “the de-secularisation of the world” (Entsäkularisierung der Welt), as if we were witnessing simply a reversal of a previous process of secularisation, nor even the expression “return of religion” or “religious revival”, as if we were simply witnessing the return of the old traditional religions, none of these categories are very helpful in trying to understand contemporary religious developments around the world. We first need a ‘de-secularisation’ of our consciousness and of our secularist and modernist categories before we can
develop better concepts to understand the novelty and the modernity of these developments.

The very category of secularisation becomes deeply problematic once it is conceptualised in a Euro-centric way as a universal process of progressive human societal development from ‘belief’ to ‘unbelief’ and from traditional ‘religion’ to modern ‘secularity’ and once it is transferred to other world religions and other civilisational areas with very different dynamics of structuration of the relations and tensions between religion and world, or between cosmological transcendence and worldly immanence. Moreover, in the same way as Western secular modernity is fundamentally and inevitably post-Christian, the emerging multiple modernities in the different post-axial civilisational areas are likely to be post-Hindu, or post-Confucian, or post-Muslim, i.e. they will also be particular and contingent refashionings and transformations of existing civilisational patterns and social imaginaries mixed with modern secular ones.

We need to recognise the particular historical character of European developments, not only in relation to non-Western cultures, but even more importantly in relation to other Western non-European developments, such as those in the United States.

The drastic decline in church attendance across Europe since the 1950s constitutes the strongest evidence for the defenders of the traditional theory of secularisation. When compared with the very different evidence of continuing vitality in congregational, associational religion in the United States across all denominations – Protestant and Catholic, Jewish and Muslim, and now Hindu and Buddhist – it is obvious that this is the fundamental difference between American and European religiosity. Secularisation in Europe takes primarily the form of ‘unchurching’ (*Entkirchlichung*), which should be understood as a form of liberation from the type of territorialised confessional religiosity which was the legacy of the Westphalian system. European Christianity, for all kinds of reasons, never made the full historical transition from territorial national churches based on the territorial parish (*Pfarrgemeinde*) to competing denominations of civil society based on voluntary religious associations, a modern form of religious community.

The analytical distinction between “church” and “denomination” is the key to any comparative analysis of religious developments and patterns of secularisation in Europe and the United States. Following Max Weber’s definition, sociologically, a “church” is an ecclesiastical institution which claims the monopoly of the means of salvation over a territory. The territorialisation of religion and the corresponding confessionalisation of state, nation and peoples are the fundamental facts and formative principles of the Westphalian system of sovereign territorial states which emerged in early modern Europe out of the so-called wars of religion. The principle *cuius regio eius religio* is the general formative principle of such a system, a principle moreover which was already well established before the wars of religion and even before the Protestant Reformation, as shown by the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain by
the Catholic monarchs in order to establish a territorial Catholic state ruling over a homogeneously religious Catholic society. What the Peace of Westphalia represented was the generalisation of this dual model of confessionalisation of states, nations and peoples and territorialisation of ecclesiastical religion among the emerging European territorial states. Every early modern European state (with the exception of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), was defined confessionally as Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Calvinist, or Orthodox. In this respect, religious homogenisation and in many instances ethno-religious cleansing are found at the very origin of the modern European state. This is the fundamental factor of early modern European history which will determine the various patterns of European secularisation. Comparatively speaking, European secularisation can be best understood as a process of successive de-confessionalisations of states, nations and peoples, which has been phenomenologically experienced as a process of liberation from confessional identities. This is what determines the historically unique character of European secularisation, which is now increasingly being recognised as a form of ‘European exceptionalism’ rather than as a general model of modernisation that is likely to be replicated elsewhere. In fact, the European pattern of secularisation can hardly be replicated in other contexts in which there was no previous historical pattern of confessionalisation of states, nations and peoples requiring their secularisation, that is, their de-confessionalisation.

3. Multicultural Citizenship

It should be obvious that this interrelation between confessionalisation, de-confessionalisation and European secularisation is also intrinsically related with issues of multicultural citizenship. In fact, without taking into account this longue durée European pattern of confessionalisation and de-confessionalisation, it is not possible to understand the difficulties which every continental European state has – irrespective of whether they have maintained formal establishment or are constitutionally secular – and the difficulties which every European society has – the most secular as well as the most religious ones – in accommodating religious diversity, and particularly in incorporating immigrant religions. This is one of the fundamental differences between Europe and the United States, which never underwent a process of confessionalisation and developed a radically different model of religious denominationalism.

Paraphrasing Karl Marx in “On the Jewish Question” one could say that if America can be characterised simultaneously as the model of “perfect disestablishment” and the “land of religiosity par excellence”, European societies offer by contrast the inverse combination of different forms of “imperfect disestab-

“establishment” and “lands of secularity par excellence”. The United States never had to undergo a formal process of separation of church and state, since it never had either a confessional state or an established state church, from which the state had to separate itself. Unlike most Europeans, Americans also did not need to undergo a process of de-confessionalisation from any national ecclesiastical institution, since even the established colonial churches – Congregational, Presbyterian and Anglican – remained minoritarian institutions and the majority of the population remained unchurched. The American state was born as a modern secular state, without having to undergo any process of de-confessionalisation. The dual constitutional formula of no establishment of religion at the state level and free exercise of religion in society guaranteed the development of denominationalism as a system of free and open religious pluralism in society.

American denominationalism is a system of mutual recognition of de-territorialised voluntary religious institutions and associations within civil society without any state regulation or interference other than through the courts when there are legal conflicts within or among religious organisations. The American state not only has no office of regulation or registration of religious associations, but does not even have the right to register or survey the religious denomination of its individual citizens.

It should be obvious that the different American model of religious denominationalism within a pluralistic civil society and the European model of confessional national churches with limited pluralism have important consequences for the constitution of civil society on both sides of the Atlantic, but also for the development of inclusionary, more egalitarian and solidaristic welfare states in Europe and the weak development of a welfare state in the USA. As the polemical debates around the attempts of the Obama administration to reform the American health system clearly indicate, the very discursive legitimation of what is a taken for granted principle in most European nation states, namely the principle of public national health system which guarantees a minimum egalitarian access of health care for all its citizens, is immediately suspect as an etatist, socialist un-American project and susceptible to the most irrational debates. One can certainly find close elective affinities between the anti-etatist model of state-civil society relations and the model of free exercise of religion protected from any kind of state regulation or control.

American religious pluralism and the multicultural model of society are historically related to the continuous waves of immigration from all over the world. Indeed, there is compelling historical evidence that immigrants to America throughout history, throughout the 19th century as well as in the late 20th century, become increasingly more religious, not less, as they settle in the new country. In fact, most immigrant groups – Protestants and Catholics, Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists – today as in the past claim to be more con-

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sciously and reflexively religious in the United States than they were in their old countries before immigration. In this respect, American religiosity is not a traditional survival from traditional societies which is bound to disappear with increasing modernisation, but is actually an immigrant response to the conditions of denominational religious pluralism in American society.

The conditions in Europe in this respect are significantly different. European societies, after many centuries of religious homogeneity, are becoming again, in some cases for the first time, religiously pluralistic. This novel phenomenon is related, on the one hand, to processes of increasing religious individuation linked to ongoing de-confessionalisation and, on the other, and more importantly to increasing immigration. The new religious pluralism presents a challenge not only to the traditional model of the homogeneous nation-state, but even more so to the equally homogeneous conceptions of modern secular societies and to secularist conceptions of liberal democracy and the public sphere.

It is important to recognise that the Westphalian principle, *cuius regio eius religio*, and the principle of a homogeneous national society that it entails, were not significantly altered either by the critical transition from royal to national or popular sovereignty after the French Revolution, or by the expansion and consolidation of democracy in Western European societies after World War II. Neither the limited secularisation of the European state nor the more drastic secularisation of European societies altered the dynamics of religious and cultural homogeneity. Secularisation, to be sure, brought the de-confessionalisation of individuals and peoples, as well as increasing individualisation, liberalisation, and moral pluralism. But it did not create the conditions for new forms of religious or cultural pluralism.

In the past, ‘the Jewish question’ served as the catalyst of all the unresolved tensions in conceptions of civic as well as ethnic nationalism in Europe. Today ‘the Muslim question’ serves as a similar catalyst in all the debates concerning competing conceptions of liberal secular democracy and multicultural citizenship. The difficulty which most European societies have with the integration of Muslim immigrants could be viewed not so much, or at least not only, as a sign that ‘Islam’ might be ‘the problem’, but rather as an indication of the still unresolved problems which the model of the European nation-state has – whether it is formally secular or not – in regulating deep religious pluralism. One should question the problematic notion that the European secular state is de facto a religiously neutral state and therefore already contains within itself the proper solution to the management of religious pluralism in society. In order to be more neutral the state will need to become not only post-Christian, but also post-secularist.

The same could be said about ‘secularist’ conceptions of the liberal public sphere.

In this context I would like to introduce a distinction between secularism as statecraft principle and secularism as ideology. By secularism as statecraft principle, I understand simply some principle of separation between religious
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and political authority, either for the sake of the neutrality of the state vis-à-vis each and all religions, or for the sake of protecting the freedom of conscience of each individual, or for the sake of facilitating the equal access of all citizens, religious as well as non-religious, to democratic participation. Such a statecraft doctrine neither presupposes nor needs to entail any substantive ‘theory’, positive or negative, of ‘religion’. Indeed the moment the state holds a particular view of ‘religion’ one enters the realm of ideology.

Secularism becomes an ideology the moment it entails a theory of what ‘religion’ is or does. It is this assumption that ‘religion’, in the abstract, is a thing that has an essence or that produces certain particular and predictable effects, which is the defining characteristic of modern secularism. It is the essentialising of ‘the religious’, based on problematic assumptions of what ‘religion’ is or does, which is in my view the fundamental problem of secularism as ideology. One can distinguish two basic types of secularist ideologies. The first type is secularist theories of religion grounded in some progressive stadial philosophies of history which relegates religion to a superseded stage. The second type is secularist political theories which presuppose that religion is either an irrational force or a non-rational form of discourse which should be banished from the democratic public sphere. They can be called respectively ‘philosophico-historical’ and ‘political’ secularisms.

At the phenomenological level of everyday life philosophico-historical secularist prejudices are manifested in the assumption that to be secular means to leave religion behind, to emancipate oneself from religion, thus overcoming the non-rational forms of being, thinking and feeling associated with religion. It also means growing up, becoming mature, becoming autonomous, thinking and acting on one’s own. It is precisely this assumption that secular people think and act on their own and are rational autonomous free agents, while religious people somehow are unfree, heteronomous, non-rational agents, which constitutes the foundational premise of secularist ideology.

On its part, political secularism falls easily into secularist ideology the moment ‘the political’ arrogates for itself an absolute, sovereign, quasi-sacred, quasi-transcendent character or when ‘the secular’ arrogates for itself the mantle of rationality and universality, while claiming that ‘religion’ is essentially non-rational, particularistic, and intolerant (or illiberal) and as such dangerous and a threat to democratic politics once it enters the public sphere. It is the essentialising of ‘the religious’, but also of ‘the secular’ or ‘the political’, based on problematic assumptions of what ‘religion’ is or does, which is in my view the fundamental problem of secularism as ideology.

Overcoming, or at least being reflexively aware of such secular prejudices would seem to be a necessary condition for any viable conception of multicultural citizenship. We need to be more reflexively aware of the complex historical process of Western Christian secularisation and its relation to allegedly general processes of modernisation, as well as to the processes of modern state formation and modern nationalism. We must avoid the false dichotomies built
into our binary categories, either religious or secular, either traditional or modern. Above all, we must be more critically reflexive of the stadial consciousness built into our “secular self-interpretation of modernity.” Becoming post-secular does not mean necessarily becoming religious again, but questioning our stadial consciousness as well as our Euro-centric conceptions of secular modernity.