Check for updates

# Secular

SEBASTIAN LECOURT
University of Houston, Texas, United States

WHEN talking about the secular in literary studies, there are really two terms to conjure with. The first is secular*ism*, a normative doctrine or creed that aims to establish a set of values independent of religion or any other nonpublic commitment. Think of John Rawls's "overlapping consensus," or the utilitarian attempt to define the good in terms of clear material benefits. Secular*ization*, meanwhile, names a thesis about the decline of religion in history. That process may be seen in intellectual-historical terms as the eclipse of a mythic or metaphysical worldview by the combined forces of science, democracy, and capitalist materialism. Or it can be narrated as a sociological story of differentiation whereby religion is shrunken to one institutional domain alongside politics, economics, aesthetics, and so on.[1]

Both terms have a special relationship to Victorian studies. "Secularism" was actually coined by a Victorian, George Jacob Holyoake, who sought to develop a nonmetaphysical political philosophy that could unite Owenite socialists, Comtean positivists, and left-wing Christians around a program of political reform. So he borrowed an old Latin theological term—*saeculum*, meaning mundane rather than sacred time—and used it to refer to the project of improving human happiness without reference to ultimate ends.[2] "We do not say every man ought to give an *exclusive* attention to this world," he explained, "but, as our *knowledge* is confined to this life, and testimony, conjecture, and probability are all that can be set forth with respect to another life, we think we are justified in giving the *precedence* to the duties of this state."[3]

"Secularization," for its part, represents one of the most familiar historical narratives for describing what happened to British literature and culture over the long nineteenth century. In that story, a variety of political and cultural forces weakened the unifying power of religion during Victoria's reign. Bourgeois Dissenters, whose social and economic capital

**Sebastian Lecourt** is an associate professor in the Department of English at the University of Houston. His research focuses on Victorian literature and questions of secularization, colonialism, and comparativism. He is the author of *Cultivating Belief: Victorian Anthropology, Liberal Aesthetics, and the Secular Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2018). He is currently working on a book entitled *The Genres of Comparative Religion, 1783–1927.*

*Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 51, No. 3, pp. 501–504.
© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press.
doi:10.1017/S106015032300030X

were on the rise, led successful campaigns to enfranchise religious minorities and dismantle the confessional state. Industrialization drew more workers to cities like Manchester, where they often fell outside the purview of the Anglican parish system. Advances in geology and theories of evolution shook intellectuals' confidence in the historicity of the Bible.[4] This account of a Victorian crisis of faith was very important to Victorian studies in the 1950s and '60s because it allowed critics to portray Carlyle, Arnold, and Eliot, not as repressive prudes, but as intellectuals boldly confronting the dilemmas of (post–World War II) modernity: Where can people find spiritual meaning in an age of materialism? What new stories can we tell when the old mythologies have been discredited?[5] Importantly, though, it was a narrative with a strong Victorian pedigree. Nineteenth-century social scientists such as Herbert Spencer and E. B. Tylor were often working within an Enlightenment stadial-history paradigm according to which human history inevitably progressed from ages of superstition to one of reason. In *Primitive Culture* (1871), Tylor argued that as the human mind masters its environment it advances from animism, which projects consciousness onto material objects, to polytheism, monotheism, and finally abstract philosophical thought.[6]

The telling thing about these Victorian secularization stories is that they are often strongly Protestant in flavor. What they describe is not the disappearance of religion but instead religion's liberation from priestly control and its enshrinement in the individual conscience. This brings us to a key insight of the post-9/11 scholarship on secularism: the fact that what we call a secular society is not really one without religion, but rather one that circumscribes religion in a way typically based upon the Protestant valorization of personal, inward commitment.[7] The anthropologist Saba Mahmood, for instance, has shown how the U.S. project of spreading secular, democratic values in Iraq effectively entailed teaching Sunnis and Shi'ites a Protestant sensibility that affirmed their own beliefs as private and therefore capable of respecting others'.[8] Such work conjoins the normative and historical senses of secular (*-ism* and *-ization*) by suggesting how creating a religiously neutral world often depends on enforcing a specific sense of what religion is in the first place.

It is in this sense that the secular remains an important concept for Victorian studies as it makes its transimperial turn: it asks us to think through the particularism of universal concepts. The emergence of secular values out of Protestant individualism epitomizes how universalistic projects often remain rooted in more parochial moral and political conceptions. It thus also forces us to ask to what extent such concepts can

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106015032300030X Published online by Cambridge University Press

take on new meanings as they globalize. We could say, with Gil Anidjar, that secularism is merely nineteenth-century Protestant imperialism in disguise.[9] But that is to commit a kind of genetic fallacy by assuming that ideas remain irrevocably tied to their origins. In fact, recent work on secularism in the British Empire reveals the tremendous unpredictability that ensued when Britain tried to build a world out of its own avowedly nonuniversalist concepts. J. Barton Scott, for example, has shown how the Enlightenment anticlerical trope of the "priestly despot" became central to both imperialist rhetoric in British India and to nascent Indian nationalism.[10] While imperial policy theorists such as James Mill argued that Indians were not capable of self-rule because they remained servile to Brahmin priests, Indian reformers from Keshub Chunder Sen to Mahatma Gandhi drew on Hindu ascetic traditions to demonstrate how Indians might internalize priestly mastery and thus become self-governing. Winter Jade Werner, meanwhile, traces how Victorian evangelical missionaries developed a cosmopolitan language of universal brotherhood in order to compete with more secular kinds of cosmopolitanism. Enlightenment secularism and missionary evangelism, in Werner's account, represent competing attempts to imagine a universalist ethos for an age of imperial expansion.[11] Like Scott, Werner shows how the secular and the religious depend on each other, and how both really epitomize a bigger problem—that of building global things out of local materials.

## Notes

1. For overviews of secularism, secularization, and related terms, see Philip Gorski and Ateş Altınordu, "After Secularization?" *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (2008): 55–85; and Vincent Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 1–66.
2. On secularism and Holyoake, see Edward Royle, *Victorian Infidels: The Origins of the British Secularist Movement, 1791–1866* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974).
3. "Secularism: Its Sphere and Service," *The Reasoner* 14.3 (Jan. 19, 1853), 33 (emphasis original).
4. For a familiar synthesis of these stories, see Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106015032300030X Published online by Cambridge University Press

5. Key studies in this vein include Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830–70* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957); J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963); and A. O. J. Cockshut, *The Unbelievers* (New York: NYU Press, 1966).
6. See E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (London: John Murray, 1871), 2:373.
7. The germinal study here remains Talal Asad's *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).
8. Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation," *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006): 323–47.
9. See Gil Anidjar, "Secularism," *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2006): 56–62.
10. J. Barton Scott, *Spiritual Despots: Modern Hinduism and the Genealogies of Self-Rule* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
11. Winter Jade Werner, *Missionary Cosmopolitanism in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2021).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106015032300030X Published online by Cambridge University Press