

## **The ‘Unseen Order’**

**Iain Chambers**

El Jadida. It is the hour that milk is delivered. The hour that I love the most in my city, peopled still only for an instance by those who have to rise early: street cleaners, fisherman, donut vendors, the devout, vegetable sellers, the custodians of the public ovens. One after another they wish me a ‘luminous day’ while I wander the streets and alleys. Come with me into the old Portuguese town where the past has been restored in the smallest detail. In this space, the size of a public square, where, flanking each other, is a mosque, a church and a synagogue. What is this Islamism? This word does not appear in our dictionaries. I learnt of its existence in the Western media.

Driss Chraïbi

All of history is testimony to the present.

Antonio Gramsci

Christianity invented the distinction between religious and secular, and thus it made religion. It made religion the problem – rather than itself.

Gil Anidjar

Power always seeks a language of legitimation. This language is neither invented *ex novo* nor simply borrowed. It is assembled, elaborated and practiced wherever possible and via whatever means. The making of such a language, that is the articulation of power to name, hence direct and define, necessarily draws upon available sense. In order to convince and convey, even when there is the desire to promote a radical announcement, language cannot stray too far from an already established semantics. It can only shift, extend and push the existing *langue*; that is why language is essentially about hegemony. The struggle for sense – both for meaning and direction – requires language. And if language is not invented but rather

constructed and configured, then existing semantics – social, cultural, political, historical, religious, and so on – coalesce and combine in its making. Or rather, they take form and flight there, in the very stuff and texture of the *parole*. It is also here, in its performative exercise and consensual recognition, that power is transformed from mere force to a disseminating pedagogy and the potential counter-site of possible replies. Here language itself can split apart. As Saba Mahmood has argued, there always exists the possibility of the undoing of a Saussurian linguistics and the presumed arbitrary nature of the sign, itself dependent on the strict epistemological distinction of subject and object and the rationalized conception of the former.<sup>1</sup> For language is not simply the tool of the sovereign subject; it is also a reality that permits subjects to appear and act in the world. Language not only binds us to the world, but also folds us into a sense of place and belonging. Its rhythm and cadences speak of us and through us, and therefore its significance can never be fully arbitrary nor solely susceptible to conscious allocation.

#### Religion, secularism and power

Among the lexicons that have seemingly returned to invest the powers of the contemporary world is that of religion. Once assumed to have been superseded by modern, secular society, we discover that religion has become the name of a struggle for authority *within* modernity. We find this is as true in Washington as in Cairo, and in cultural configurations correlated by Christianity as well as in those proposed by Islam, Judaism and Hinduism. Religion, as a modality of modern power, directly and indirectly seeks to provide the narrative authority able to domesticate the world and command the horizon of contemporary sense. More than a question of faith, it is a bio-political category and practice whose rites and rights suggest more than the institutional force of consecrated texts, theological debate and their custody in religious authorities; even more than the creation of communities of believers and the attraction of the sacred. At this point there emerges, as Foucault would have suggested, a discursive power that penetrates the textures of our lives and fuels the regulatory accounting of life, death and the universe.

The seeming return and revival of religion in the contemporary world takes up residence in a modernity that since Max Weber has presumed secularism to be the

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<sup>1</sup> Mahmood, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide”.

measure of its progress.<sup>2</sup> This has subsequently been extended through considerations of the public sphere as a distinct Occidental phenomena developed in a series of debates developed around Jurgen Habermas's noted contribution to the question. Still, if we pay attention to the practices of everyday life we are forced to acknowledge that is ultimately impossible to sustain any sharp distinction between the religious and secular spheres. In place of clear oppositions, or the chronological registration of religious belief being overcome and replaced by the disenchanting rationality of modern life, we discover that each is in fact deeply imbricated in each others' path. Further, the argument made for secular advancement as a measure of being modern, ultimately betrays not only an unwillingness to engage with the historical and sociological evidence on the ground, but also presumes the Occidental privilege to establish periodization. Such considerations invite us to reconsider the 'universal' claims made on the behalf of Western secularism in the name of the presumed critical neutrality of disinterested thought. Once again, it is to acknowledge the location of such thinking in a precise historical and cultural formation whose certitudes are exposed in a planetary frame that consistently exceeds its claims. It is to query claims of objectivity and insist on a historical realism where empirical evidence is collated in the search for critical honesty.<sup>3</sup>

I would suggest that this perspective might lead to two critical considerations. Firstly, that the modern, that is Occidental, invention of the category of religion, like that of race and ethnicity, clearly form part of the apparatuses of power that have been carried over from the colonial world into the postcolonial present. Here to claim the secular as part of a particular cultural formation and precise set of historical processes associated with the West (which clearly does not cover all the variants of modernity) is perhaps less to 'abolish' religion and rather to register the changed ground and conditions in which it occurs. For if Europe invented 'religion' as a constitutive category against which to measure the 'progress' of its modernity (apparently dividing the State from religious affairs, public affairs from private faith), it simultaneously reinforced the production of Judaism and Islam as subordinate versions of alterity. Secondly, arguments about the centrality of a scientific rationality

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<sup>2</sup> As Bryan S. Turner points out, Weber's arguments on religion and the secularism of an ascetic rational work ethic were actually more complex than usually assumed, and did not fit into a coherent whole. Turner, "Islam, Capitalism and the Weber Theses".

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent discussion of these terms, see Gregor McLennan, *Marxism & the Methodologies of History*.

that sustains the secular outlook often seem to hold too far at bay questions of ruptures and paradigm shifts. I personally do not consider that secular modernity, secured in the scientific method and associated instrumental rationality, to be merely an Occidental ‘miracle’ as Ernst Gellner once put it.<sup>4</sup> As opposed to ‘blocks’ of time, I think it perhaps more significant to think in terms of diverse configurations that permit certain analytical languages and their truth claims to appear. This leads to an argument about the historical and cultural valency of faith in the ‘scientific analytical method’, as well as its limits as a language and set of practices that are also mutable and historically contingent (not relative, but mutable so as to produce shifting temporal constellations of sense and analytical knowledge). In the end, the question of method is also about taking nothing for sacred, including the analytical method. It is to insist on the historical framing of cognitive science. So, to exercise secular thought has necessarily to acknowledge the worldly, let us say historical, limits that authorizes its voice, its power and the impossibility of pretending methodological neutrality.

At the same time, we cannot readily presume secularism to be a hegemonic modality of thought or power. It is actually rather difficult to identify any Western society that is fully secular. The United States represents only a fairly extreme instance of the persistent presence of religion in the public and private life of Occidental culture, not to speak of the debates over divorce, abortion, gay rights, assisted suicide, the family and appeals to sentiments saturated in religious dogma. While operating in a diverse fashion, it would frankly be difficult to sustain that a strong sense of religiosity – in costume, custom and civil rites – does not exist in Italy, where I live (and that is leaving aside the persistent presence of the Vatican in the cultural and political life of the country). In a diverse manner, going to an English school that began the day with prayers and hymns, it would be hypocritical to deny my Christian upbringing whatever my personal beliefs. So, perhaps the point about the secular is to understand it in terms of a critical practice that recognizes its cultural provenance and historical limits. Occidental secularism, in other words, is deeply entwined in historical formations in which religion has by no means been laid to rest or overcome. Secularism as a concept and practice is itself the product of such dualisms as church and state, the City of God and the City of Man, and of the struggle for power between them. It is this formation that distinguish Christianity and the West

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<sup>4</sup> McLennan, “Is secularism history?”.

from all other societies and religions. As Joan Scott has pointed out, the historical study of secularization is ‘not the study of a universal process, but of a process distinctively embedded in the history of western Christian societies.’<sup>5</sup> The political debate at this point is then less about the seeming triumph of Occidental secularism and rather about critically appropriating its aspirations in a world that cannot easily be bent to its will. The break through to the secular, to full rationality, is never fully achieved. This has significant consequences in the cultural tissues and political textures of everyday life. Reason, even with the sharpest edge, is unable to simply cut the slippery and amorphous body of the social world, reduce it to a transparent logic.

With this we can begin to understand that the critique of secularism – its premises and pretenses – is not necessarily pursued in order to defend a religious order of knowledge. It emerges rather from a critique of the European Enlightenment, Kantian anthropology, Hegelian historicism and the reach of a particular rationalizing order that claims to render the world transparent to its reason. It is in that knot that rationality, Christianity, colonialism and Occidental power is tied, and against which other reasonings are articulated. If God is dead then so, too, are univocal claims of a specific rationality as the unique truth. This is to propose a rather different and altogether more open argument than one restricted to contrasting the ambiguities of Western secularism with a series of alternatives secured in religious identification. The latter perspective, subtly criticized by Sadia Abbas in *At Freedom’s Limit. Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament*, certainly invests the noted arguments of Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood and Gil Anidjar when they contest secularism as being inherently imperial and implicit in the capitalist order of the world and the abstract coercions of consensual liberalism.<sup>6</sup>

Secularism, as a self-conscious break with tradition, clearly does not commence from zero. Rather it assembles elements from the culture at hand to piece together a critical disposition seeking to comprehend and appropriate the world. In other words, it is a labour of translation seeking a methodology. It is the latter process that brings us into the vicinity of understanding the workings of secular critique in a manner diverse from a proclaimed critical distance and a modality of thinking seemingly untouched by altogether more messy transformations, breaks and connections. In

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<sup>5</sup> Scott, “More on Laïcité in Historical Context”.

<sup>6</sup> Abbas, *At Freedom’s Limit. Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament*.

other words, if I continue to support the idea of the secular I also need to register its limits and location. If the drive for secular thinking moves within a planetary condition where universality cannot be unilaterally guaranteed, I have also to learn to temper the temptation of a desired universalism with the recognition that this is not the real state of affairs in contemporary history and culture, both at home and abroad. This opens up an important distinction between identifying Christianity as a cultural formation with Occidental modernity and the altogether more restricted intellectual power of secularism as a critical practice. While the former association can certainly be considered hegemonic, this is certainly not the case for the latter.

So, if the argument that Occidental secularism is simply the off-spring of Christianity does not hold, neither, I would argue, is the suggestion that secularism can be separated from a history in which religion was, and is, central. Each is imbricated in the global formation we might call modernity. The appearance, or re-appearance, of the terms of religion and secularism today are symptoms that draw upon the deep tensions and unconscious relations that manufacture the present. The dream of rationality, and of a thoroughly secularized understanding of the world discovers its inevitable limits in the rougher composition of cultural and historical complexities in which it has to make its way. Similarly, the ‘thick’ description of the practices of piety performed by a group of contemporary Muslim women in Cairo can be acknowledged as a form of agency while we at the same time register the limits of an anthropological claim on a world that does not merely move according to that local narrative of truth.<sup>7</sup> All of this means that it becomes impossible to sustain that religion simply stands in for the ‘rest’ against the West as a counter-hegemonic set of oppositional practices. Simultaneously, the historical and cultural provenance and limits of secular criticism comes to be acknowledged (both in the Occident and elsewhere), precisely in order to hone its capabilities in a world that is far from willing to accept its promise of perpetual transit and critical transformation. Few desire to live in a tradition and identity that has constantly to be negotiated and renegotiated in the unfinished and inconclusive processes of the world becoming world.

The ‘natural sacredness’ of reality which sustains the poetical piety pursued in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film, *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (1964), as in all of his

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<sup>7</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*.

cinema, promotes a humble mission to endow the world with social justice: an act of faith that is simultaneously a critique of religious authority and the institutional powers of the Catholic Church for their betrayal of the teachings of Christ.<sup>8</sup> A similar perspective was promoted in those very same years by the Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino in his ethnographic work among the peasantry of Southern Italy.<sup>9</sup> There is a subversive idea here. Language, as it were, is turned against itself to reveal a further possibility. If religion exercised the symbolic power essential for the production and reproduction of hegemony and insuring the status quo, it also provided the immediate syntax, creolized by local custom and tradition, for a popularly practiced, often heterodox, sense and its particular understandings of the sacred.

Such an unsystematic, fragmented language can potentially provoke that critical self-awareness which Antonio Gramsci nominated 'good sense'. From rural Catholicism in Southern Italy to Rastafarianism in the Caribbean and Islam in the Algerian *qasba*, such mixtures of conservatism and local knowledge are also sites of power. In a similar fashion, in a significant essay titled 'Said, Religion, and Secular Criticism', Gauri Viswanathan examines Edward Said's attempt to elaborate a secular criticism while attentive to the heterogeneous complexities of Islam as a reasoning, dissenting tradition, opposed to the stereotypical understanding of a homogeneous consensus. What emerges at this point is perhaps less the chronological argument that modern secularism succeeds religion, but rather that dissenting traditions are already deeply embedded and disseminated within the heterodox historical making of religion itself. This, as Viswanathan notes, raises questions about secularism's presumed autonomy 'as a postreligious development'.<sup>10</sup>

### Friends, foes and faith

The daily deployment of the lexical index of us and them, notoriously elaborated in the Schmittian distinction between friend and foe, has more recently been concentrated in the violent insistence of Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of*

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<sup>8</sup> Here is Gilles Deleuze describing Pasolini's cinema: '[W]hat characterises Pasolini's cinema is a poetic consciousness, which is not strictly aestheticist or technician, but rather mystical or 'sacred.' This allows Pasolini to bring the perception-image, or the neurosis of his characters, on to a level of vulgarity and bestiality in the lowest subject-matter, while reflecting them in a pure, poetic consciousness, animated by the mythical or sacralising element'. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image*, 77.

<sup>9</sup> De Martino, *La terra del rimorso. Contributi a una storia religiosa del Sud*.

<sup>10</sup> Viswanathan, "Said, Religion, and Secular Criticism", 171.

*Civilizations*. Accompanied by rising xenophobia and the unfolding lexicon of anti-immigration legislation, we today increasingly register the brutality of the political, juridical and cultural schemata that seeks to reduce the world into neat, easily identifiable sides and oppositions. The problem, as we have already noted, is that there does not exist a unique and homogeneous West or East; just as there is no such *thing* as Islam, or Christianity. Many decades ago the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in his *Islam Observed*, underlined, in their respective crossing by local currents and conditions, the complex communality in difference of Islam in then contemporary Morocco and Indonesia. In the westernization of the world, the tendency, on the contrary, is towards a generalized standardization of the imaginary determined by the economy of the image. At this point, the power of the media provides the immediate measure of truth.

The media seems to surrender to every temptation of reducing reality and condensing it into a symbol, thrusting the whole issue into discursive disrepair . . . In cinematographic language this fixed spatial determination is simply called ‘a shot’, suggesting that the real is no longer represented but targeted. In the staccato of television news shots, this particular shot becomes the symbol that encapsulates the meaning of the entire drama. It is evident that complex social relations are not negotiated in this frantic manner.<sup>11</sup>

To insist on Islam as a thing, invariably condensed in the figure of armed terrorists and veiled women – that is, an image to be confronted, contested and eventually converted to our way of life – is precisely, as both Edward Said and Gil Anidjar have argued, to reveal the centrality of religious discourse to the West. As a category for a distinct sense of understanding – like ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ – ‘religion’ is very much an invention of Occidental modernity and its planetary pedagogy.<sup>12</sup> Rey Chow has frequently pointed out that the separation of the world into distinct histories and cultures, via area, religious and geo-political studies, is a form of intellectual and historical management that holds on to the promise of disciplinary certitude.<sup>13</sup> It leads to an enormous exercise, along the lines of divide and rule, in cultural and political power. This is to avoid the crushing verdict delivered more than seventy years ago from a Fascist prison by Antonio Gramsci:

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<sup>11</sup> Biemann, “Agadez Chronicle. Post-colonial Politics of Space and Mobility in the Sahara.”, 45.

<sup>12</sup> Anidjar, *Semites. Race, Religion, Literature*, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work*.

The question of religion is to be intended not in terms of a confessional faith but rather in the secular terms of the unity of belief between a vision of the world and rules of conduct; but why call this unity of belief 'religion' rather than 'ideology', or more simply 'politics'?<sup>14</sup>

With this we arrive at the disquieting conclusion that Christianity is in fact the name, acknowledged or not, of Occidental modernity and... colonialism. As Fanon put it in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

The Church in the colonies is a white man's Church, a foreigners' Church. It does not call the colonized to the ways of God, but to the ways of the white man, to the ways of the master, the ways of the oppressor. And as we know, in this story many are called but few are chosen.<sup>15</sup>

Many, of course would contest this view and point to the appropriation of Christianity by black Africans and African Americans as a counter-site of cultural contestation and survival in colonial settler societies. Elsewhere, however, it helps us to appreciate better the resistance, refusal and resentment induced by Christianity, together with its secular counter-image, when its Occidental cultural composition and historical planetary power is viewed and lived precisely as a colonial imposition. Western secularism, too, is sustained by a disposition of belief: in the teleological redemption of time as 'progress', in the calling to redeem the planet in a unique image and impose a European derived humanism on the cosmos. As Gramsci sharply reminds us, the relationship between religion, the state and political formations in the West is indissoluble, and invariably renders critical secularism subordinate. 'The principal elements of common sense are provided by religion and therefore the relationship between common sense and religion is much more intimate than that between common sense and the philosophical systems of the intellectuals.'<sup>16</sup>

In the immediacy of inherited beliefs, popular sayings, superstitions, everyday practices and local custom, that is, in common-sensical understandings deposited in the textures of everyday life, the subaltern both recognizes herself while finding there the ambivalent resources of her language. For that language can both confirm and modify, both sustain and subvert, the status quo. Historical forces, social crises and

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<sup>14</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, 1378.

<sup>15</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, 1396–97.

individual assessment can interrupt the continuum of common sense, exposing its constructed and contradictory nature. So, we need to ask ourselves, where do these popular beliefs come from? How do they acquire coherence? As we have seen, Gramsci attributes to religion the principal sources of common sense. Those whose conceptions of the world are largely inscribed in the parameters of an everyday consensus, for whom a critical education is socially and economically excluded, inevitably tended to reproduce meanings that sustained a narrative endorsed by theological finality. Here the Catholic Church reveals its mastery of the syncretic: combining religious dogma and peasant, stretching back to pagan, community rites in a potent synthesis in the multiple souths of the planet. It is precisely on these grounds, as Gramsci argued, that intellectual dissent and critical philosophies are invariably resisted. The potential disruption of the everyday world is considered the work of an external and negative language that seeks to limit the freedom of popular thought and belief, and render it subordinate and marginal. This, of course, is a profoundly political problem. How is the slippery coherence of common sense, secured in sedimented understandings of the religiosity of the universe, to be transformed? This delivers us into a deeper quandary. Simply to consider the weight of the religious underwriting of contemporary politics, in particular in modern Occidental society, is to register the disturbing heart of the question.

For the secular West is clearly also sustained by the ‘unseen order’ (William James) of religious belief.<sup>17</sup> In historical terms this argument would rarely be contested; just think of the centrality of Christianity in its Protestant variants to the making of British colonialism and modernity, so meticulously traced by historians Catherine Hall and Carolyn Steedman.<sup>18</sup> Yet, to insist on the contemporary impact of this formation is usually to encounter an uncomfortable silence. Surely in our modernity, religion is now elsewhere, back there and elsewhere: the property and problem of someone else? As Leila Ahmed pointed out, in their centuries-long struggle for greater freedom and rights, no one ever suggested that Occidental women should abandon Christianity, yet it is precisely this option – the abandonment of Islam in order to embrace modernity – that the West today requires of Muslim women.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 53.

<sup>18</sup> Hall, *Civilizing Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830–1867*; Carolyn Steedman, *Master and Slave: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age*.

<sup>19</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, 244.

This, of course, is also to assume that Islam and modernity are separate entities, and not profoundly entwined and multiplied in both European and planetary formations. That one can be a modern Muslim woman clearly undoes any singular definition of modernity, its politics, practices and possibilities.

Religion lived as an unseen Occidental order today increasingly reveals itself; for example, in the moment that Turkish membership of the European Union is considered. In the end, the objections to Turkey come down to religion and the fear of Islam: kebab counters are acceptable, but the idea of pinnacled mosques punctuating the skyline of European cities is another matter. The fact is that a superficial secularism, spawned by the Occidental category of religion, can become a proposition whereby inequalities and hierarchies of racial, ethnic and gender discrimination are sustained on a global scale. For it is a 'discourse of power that legitimates itself and presents itself as secular as if indifferent to religion yet producing religion as a (generic) problem'.<sup>20</sup> This brings us to confront the racializing pedagogy of reason and religion: between those who know and those cast out in ignorance, excluded and rendered inferior in their religious bigotry and fundamentalism.<sup>21</sup> And then religion, as a bulwark against the atheism of communism, has formally been an integral part of the post-1945 political landscape in Europe, clearly registered in the near hegemony of the Christian Democrat parties in Germany and Italy for decades. To consider politicized Islam, for example, in a modern Turkey that has historically been gripped in the military enforcement of secularism, is seemingly to consider an alien reality rather than part of a clearly differentiated but shared modernity. Finally, prizing open the intricate interrelationship between Occidental secular society and religion also opens up another path towards unpacking the unexamined faith that democracy and capitalism somehow coexist in harmony, sustained by the laws of the market and the theology of individual freedom. What if, behind the mask of Christian morality, they are on the contrary actually deeply antagonistic?

### Blinded by icons

Of course, one might initially object that many of these observations, in this case

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<sup>20</sup> Anidjar, *Semites, Race, Religion, Literature*, 51.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

largely inspired by Antonio Gramsci's observations in the Italy of the 1930s, have been overtaken by events. In the West, the simple, rural peasantry and unruly working class no longer exist as distinct cultural blocs in any obvious position of cultural subalternity. Today, the ignorant, rural pastor who repeats platitudes to his illiterate flock is sometimes replaced by the independent, urban priest who provides a focus in the struggle against crime and corruption, occasionally paying for their sermons with their lives. As organic figures of the local community, these priests provide a cultural, political and moral direction in the absence of political leadership from the state and official cultural agencies. If secular, intellectual culture continues to remain 'external' to the sense of street life and its moral economy, and the rhetoric of the ecclesiastic regime remains largely unaltered, conditions have nevertheless changed. The worldly languages of the mass media and metropolitan culture have truncated the ancient alliances of popular superstition, clerical obscurantism, and the public authority of the Church. At the same time, however, the legislative power registered in the ubiquitous lexicons of Christianity and the television screen actually betray far deeper currents. They illustrate how the Church has adapted in a molecular manner to the media of contemporary culture, and demonstrate how Occidental culture is itself thoroughly Christianized. The news shot, the image and the icon, just like the television screen and the figure of the Madonna, are deeply embedded in each other's agendas.

If to see is to believe, and the image is considered to be 'factual' testimony to the event, then the Occidental vision sustained in Christian iconography – the whole history of Western art from the late classical period through to the Baroque and beyond – has hardly been displaced or disrupted by so-called secular modernity. On the contrary, faith in the immediate visualization of truth – from the expression of the Virgin Mary to the subsequent plunge through TV reality shows and the digital framing of the aerial bombardment of the not-yet-modern world – is firmly unshaken.<sup>22</sup> Edward Said suggestively noted that this ubiquitous realism reaffirms Europe's historical trajectory; a realism that is sustained in a precise conceptual unity:

[T]he Church and the Holy Roman Empire guarantee the integrity of the core European literatures. At a still deeper level, it is from the Christian Incarnation that Western realistic literature as we know it emerges. This tenaciously advanced thesis explained Dante's supreme importance to Auerbach, Curtius,

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<sup>22</sup> Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work*.

Vossler, and Spitzer.<sup>23</sup>

Today, while the aura of the unique artwork fades into the multiplying flux of the copy, the aura of a seemingly tangible and immediate reality, even if mediated and manipulated (after all, it is an image, an inscription, a cultural construction, a pixel configuration), remains undisturbed. 'Nature', the 'human' and 'faith' are immediately present and simultaneously removed from critical concern: they simply are. As Gramsci once suggested, only a polemical relationship to such an inheritance and hegemony is possible. Only a critical undoing and overcoming of common sense can lead to a 'new philosophy: this explains the necessity of a polemic with traditional philosophies in the exposition of the philosophy of praxis.'<sup>24</sup>

What clearly emerges from this discussion is the primacy that Gramsci gives to the generative role of culture in the critical understanding of the political powers of a historical formation. Power is exercised; that is, it is not merely applied as a direct force, but is practiced, performed, and extended in the immediacy of everyday perceptions and languages. Power does not simply subject. It seeks to convince and hence, as Judith Butler has argued, is both a subjecting and subjective force. The centrality and originality of Gramsci's thought lies precisely here in the key idea that cultural hegemony has to be achieved prior to the realization of political power. This evokes a pedagogical undertaking that seeks in education (understood in the widest sense of the term) the means able to challenge the status quo, leading to knowledge that is not an object to be attained and possessed as information, but rather a disposition that sustains a critical appropriation in constant engagement. It is not by chance that the increasing configuration of education in terms of market criteria, privatization and religious belonging, signal, in the most blatant manner, this ongoing struggle for hegemony within the heartlands of Occidental schooling.

Perhaps the central, if largely unnamed, force of cultural consensus and conservation in the West is that represented by religion; that is, by Christianity. The continuing silence of intellectuals in the face of the religious elaboration of Occidental hegemony, both at home (education, public morality, family values) and abroad (colonialism, imperialism, globalization, liberalism and their combination in civilizing missions and 'humanitarian' military interventions) suggests Christianity's

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<sup>23</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 45.

<sup>24</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, 1397.

implicit organicity to that formation. This very silence betrays a structural complicity. Religion, like the school and the family, are among those apparatuses that Louis Althusser incisively referred to as ideological state apparatuses. ISAs interpellate our individual and collective formation to the degree that we (mis)recognize ourselves within them.<sup>25</sup> Christian values are taken for granted, rendered common-sensical, by both by those in power and by those subordinate and potentially in opposition.

Perhaps such values require an altogether more Nietzschean and Foucauldian style of critical revaluation: the Church and its violent custody of ontological truth and belief, has played a formidable role in the formation of modern society and its global reach and imposition; certainly as significant as that played by the prison, the clinic, and the invention of sexuality, not to speak of its centrality to the practices and institutions of colonialism and imperialism, Perhaps, secularism is another one of those inventions? This suggests that something more is required than an intellectual critique of Occidental religiosity – whether by classically influenced and pagan-tinged Renaissance humanists, or skeptical Enlightenment thinkers. It suggests the need for an altogether more radical exposition of the archive or genealogy of religion in the West. In the end, it comes down to a sharp revaluation of the Occidental archive; that is, the critical exposure, undoing and reworking of the powers of a precise historical and cultural formation. Here, and recalling the discussion of Pasolini's cinema, is Antonio Gramsci once again:

It seems to me that the problem is much simpler than it is made to appear by those who implicitly consider ‘Christianity’ as being inherent to modern civilization, or lack the courage to raise the question of the relations between Christianity and modern civilization. . . . the people of the Orient perceive the hostility which is invisible in our countries because Christianity has adapted itself molecularly and has become Jesuitism, that is, a great social hypocrisy.<sup>26</sup>

### The colonization of democracy

Today we are caught in the asymmetrical relationship between the internal principles of liberal citizenship and a militant differentiation and exclusion. This can be considered as the postcolonial fall-out of the logic of spatial domination

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<sup>25</sup> Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)”.

<sup>26</sup> Gramsci, op. cit. 333.

that has historically accompanied the construction of liberalism as the hegemonic *modus operandi* of colonialism and Western modernity.

Sandro Mezzadra

While there is much talk these days of the relationship between democracy and Islam, or of the question of Muslim women and secular freedom, we are completely unaccustomed to posing those questions to Christianity. No one would presume to talk of women in metropolitan Europe as Christian women, or ask of Christianity to account for itself in terms of democracy and gender equality, although in both historical and contemporary terms this is clearly a pertinent question.<sup>27</sup> It is simply as though Christianity, democracy and modernity are all one. If religion, as Durkheim argued, is a symbolic system in which society becomes collectively conscious of itself, then so-called secular Europe and North America is historically and culturally soaked in Christian values and beliefs. It reveals, as Talad Asad insists, that religion is a complex cultural system in which power is decisive for its affirmation.<sup>28</sup>

At this point, it might be significant to accept the idea that Europe is fundamentally Christian in its formation. After all, that is how Europe itself institutionally presents itself. From this critical starting point it becomes possible to think the limits of Europe and its religious infrastructure in a critical space that neither has authorized. To seek to change the languages of comprehension is to disrupt an existing consensus and accompanying order. In an altogether more fluid scenario, a historical bloc cannot appeal to an autonomy unsullied by the forces and currents that precede and exceed its attempts to grasp and transform the world, but neither can it simply be construed as an abstract counter-power located in the anonymous multitude that sustains First World desires for radical change. To seek in the external what is most profoundly internal – the imperious faith in material and metaphysical progress that sustains, however critically, the liberal and Occidental appropriation of the planet and its economic, political, cultural and religious syntax – is to avoid the big chill that accompanies the discomfort of a profound critical interruption. Displacing the logic of its language, disseminating an interrogative cut in what Derrida called ‘globalatinization’, and thereby insisting that not all roads lead to Rome, promotes the

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<sup>27</sup> Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*.

undoing and dispersal of such white mythologies.<sup>29</sup> As I understand it, this would be a truly secular criticism.

As we are well aware, liberal democracy is full of promises of freedom and equality that it is incapable of delivering; for it seeks, as Étienne Balibar points out, not equality but equivalence in the liberal world market. This ultimately explains why the liberal consensus makes so few demands in terms of democratic participation. Politics is increasingly mediated through the channels (and concentrated powers) of mass communications that call upon citizen-spectators to verify the truth of the image and then mandate a government that expects them to remain faithful. The very nature of this state of affairs, in which the interests of the First World are deeply intertwined with the direction of the global economy, is far from consonant with the 'egalitarian and participatory aspirations of democracy'.<sup>30</sup>

Liberalism as the motor of such a development is hardly in the position to transcend this problem except in a vacuous rhetoric where terms like freedom stand in for the defense of the status quo and the existing distribution of riches, resources, and power. Crisis and contingency are continually disciplined by this premise, and democracy is increasingly denuded of all critical import, reduced to the disembodied language of tolerance and pluralism. The question on whose terms participation is permitted brings us back to Gramsci's considerations on the margins of history and the exclusion of subaltern and popular forces from its definition. In modern Europe the vicious state repression of sporadic and spontaneous peasant revolts seeking rural reform, invariably nurtured with a sense of justice drawn from popular religious sentiments, betrays precisely the power relations secreted in a institutional secularism forcibly insisting on the separation of religion and the state.

Gramsci himself draws on the case of Davide Lazzaretti, leader of a peasant revolt in the Monte Amiata region of southern Tuscany, and the priests and peasants involved around the same period in the mountains of Benevento and Matese, north of Naples. This potent, popular mixture represented a challenge to both lay and religious authority. Under a left-wing national government, the revolt was squashed and Lazzaretti summarily executed by a firing squad in 1878. A radical religiosity crossed with republican sentiments – on the red flag of Lazzaretti's movement was written

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<sup>29</sup> Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*; Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*.

<sup>30</sup> Balibar, "Debating with Alain Badiou on Universalism"

‘The Republic and the kingdom of God’ – dramatically exposed institutional power to the limits of its hypocritical rhetoric: just whose rights and religion were being defended here?<sup>31</sup> An existing order is privileged over the potential instability of participation in the practices of egalitarianism. Meaningful involvement in political power is blocked precisely in the instance that power itself grows in increasingly undemocratic and unaccountable concentration. As the cultural, historical and political product of Occidental modernity, liberalism is simultaneously Christian and yet in conflict with the full reaches of democracy when it comes to be voiced in the languages of a republicanism and radical religious sentiments seeking a justice yet to come.

When structural and institutional questions of power are reduced to debates over policy decisions and moralistic intent, then questions of justice and freedom — for whom, where, when and how? — are diverted into appeals to an abstract humanity by which the whole world is colonized and its heterogeneous challenges sequestered and subsequently silenced. This logic can take many forms and degrees of sophistication, but in the end it is reduced to the bluntness of ‘You’re either with us — the West and its ‘democracy’, ‘progress’, ‘civilization’ (and implicitly its Christianity) — or against us’. Just as in the hierarchical order of racialized colors where whiteness goes unannounced, so in the sphere of religion the hegemonic formation does not need to be nominated. Non-Christians can only be considered trespassers in (Occidental) modernity, for they are structurally excluded. We are all expected to respect the economical, juridical, and cultural laws of such a perspective, and those of us in difficulty are expected to work harder in order to enter the frame, certainly not to question, disrupt, or re-articulate its premises. In this sense, liberalism with its religious formation and premises has fully colonized democracy, reducing it to a smiling mask and public masque, and its language to an infinite and ineffectual ventriloquism.

### The violence of secularism

The liberal violence to which I refer (as opposed to the violence of illiberal regimes) is translucent. It is the violence of universalizing reason itself.

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<sup>31</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, 2279–83.

Tied deeply into the largely unrecognized nexus between religion, secularism and liberal political power is the question of tradition. This is not to suggest the seemingly obvious idea of tradition as the source of religious rites, customs and beliefs that survive and live on in the complex currents of modernity, but rather to insist that in the narratives of continuity, in the faith in the uniqueness of Occidental progress, in the narration of the nation as the privileged locus of identity practices and history, a metaphysics of belief, formed and disciplined by Christianity, remains unchallenged. Here, of course, we are conversing with Friedrich Nietzsche and his acerbic critique of the ‘slave mentality’ of modernity, but we are also joined by Gramsci and his insistence on the political function of Christianity in the manufacture of the fragments that are held together in the glue of common sense and a world outlook whose secular affirmation is inextricably bound to centuries of religious incubation. As an uncanny insistence, taken, transformed and translated into a secular vision, the continuing dissemination of a transcendental authority – from baptism to the cemetery – is undeniably still firmly in place. As an integrating force, as a form of social cement and cultural cohesion, the atemporal values of Christianity seemingly legitimate a tradition (transformed, rendered modern) that is ours.

In a Durkheimian sense, this may well be its social function. However, we also need to insist on the more uncomfortable perspective that as a disseminated form of power, as the molecularization of a spiritual order, Christianity continues to provide and legitimate the order of the West. To argue that people still draw on Christianity in order to domesticate and make sense of the world may well be true, but it may also be the case that such a need blocks other horizons of sense, obscures other, less provincial and more beneficial, structures of belief. In this sense, Christianity becomes the touchstone of the West: rendered most explicit in the public political rhetoric of the United States. If, these days, public leaders increasingly argue that Christianity should be formally acknowledged in the founding discourse and the identity touchstone of Europe and the Occident (thereby excising the creolizing prospects of the pagan Greeks and Romans, along with the European claims of Judaism and Islam), then Western modernity loses its exceptional secular state. It becomes coeval, crossed, divided and contested by the very same forces – religion –

that it seeks to expel into the backward and underdeveloped margins of its empire. To prise open this Occidental archive, and to dirty its shelves with these heretical and unauthorized matters – paganism, Judaism and Islam – is to propose an altogether more unruly study of the making of modern secularism.

Secularization, as the seemingly progressive disinvestment in the institutions and rites of religious certainties, turns out to be a homeopathic force. It does not cancel Christianity: the theology of individual redemption and teleological progress rather doubles and disseminates the belief system of modernity's historical winners. Monuments to wars fought, territories conquered and the world converted to its beliefs – European cities are brimming with these signs and symbols – propose a moral economy that considers itself the judge of mankind. God may well have abandoned his long hair and flowing robes, but he has certainly not withdrawn his support from the transcendental powers of the West.

The assumption is that whereas:

the West has surpassed the religious stage of Christianity, the world of Islam – its varied societies, histories, and languages notwithstanding—is still mired in religion, primitivity and backwardness. Therefore, the West is modern, greater than the sum of its parts, full of enriching contradictions and yet always 'Western' in its cultural identity; the world of Islam, on the other hand, is no more than 'Islam', reducible to a small number of unchanging characteristics.<sup>32</sup>

Thinking the relationship between the presumptions of an internal secularism (Europe, the West and its modernity) and an externalized religious world (Islam, Hinduism, the south of the planet and its underdevelopment), an altogether more complex picture emerges. Conjoined with the state, an apparent secularism becomes the name of a governance and the management of faith, belief and religion through modern technologies of power, and certainly not, as we are usually taught, the realization of a post-religious society. In the end, we could be pushed to suggest that this public manner of secularism (as opposed to a critical secularism) promotes religion as a category essential to its reproduction as a necessary partner in its ongoing formation.

Exploring what Talal Asad refers to as the epistemological assumptions of the

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<sup>32</sup> Said, *Covering Islam. How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, 10-11.

secular, and its imbrications in the practices and technologies of modern power, we can register that secularism is not really about personal choice, or the identification of an individual or collective state isolated from religion.<sup>33</sup> It is rather a discursive formation that is among the necessary conditions of a historical and cultural matrix, addressing the mediation and management of beliefs and convictions in the formation and direction of modern power and politics. Stripping away public announcements of the secular does not so much reveal the religious infrastructure of our faith in modernity as expose the historical constellation that is simultaneously sustained and sutured by religion, secularism and the institutional and everyday powers they exercise in shaping the horizons of sense. At this point, both public and private spheres as historical sites of the dispositions of power are already and simultaneously ‘christianized’ and secularized.

### Learning from Islam

What has occurred? To refer to the intertwining of liberalism and religion in eighteenth and nineteenth Europe is, as we noted, quite acceptable in historical and cultural terms. It is understood in both sociological and philosophical perspectives to be central to the making of Occidental modernity. Yet when we turn to the present it is as though the argument no longer holds. Of course, political and cultural configurations shift and change, they are contingent; however, there has been no epistemological rupture, no radical reevaluation of values. We are perhaps right to suspect that this previous order, even if displaced and unacknowledged, continues to discipline the core of the European public and private sphere, its technologies of power, and its bio-politics. Talk of Turkey’s entrance into the European Union in Germany, or of headscarves in France, and that inherited corpus of thought and practices immediately springs into life to sound the chord of the ‘lasting trauma’ of Islam for Christianity.<sup>34</sup> In an apparently secularized modernity we continue to grapple with the ghosts of a formation that refuses to pass away. At this point, the apparently sharp separation, and subsequent opposition, between secularism and religion falls, dissolved into an altogether more ambivalent fluidity. Public declarations of secularism become problematic. As a social and cultural practice it,

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<sup>33</sup> Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, 25.

<sup>34</sup> Said, *Orientalism: Western Representations of the Orient*, 59.

too, is caught, suspended and sustained in a constellation – Occidental modernity – in which Christianity and its variants was, and is, essential to its hegemony.

This is clearly, both in historical and philosophical terms, a complicated argument that requires a careful unwinding in order to identify its multiple modalities and affects. In these pages I have tried to separate out a public, institutional and superficial discourse on secularism from an altogether more incisive and largely ignored critical secularism, willing to historically and culturally examine its own premises and perspectives, willing to learn from its limits. What – and thinking of Gramsci's many meditations on the question of religion, popular culture, the institutional powers of Catholicism, and the realization of hegemony – becomes clear is that liberalism, secularism, and religion are not distinct categories to be contrasted, but rather provide the critical triangulation of a specific historical formation and its subsequent political and cultural configurations. Perhaps, and referring to the provocative title of this section, it might be instructive to look elsewhere for a moment. This is not in order to find a better realization of the role of religion in social and political life, but rather, in considering other forms and formulations, to help us register the limits of a specific configuration, peculiar to the West, that considers its perspectives universal and its solutions inevitably the most civilized and morally superior. Christianity, at this point, becomes the moral adjudicator of modern (Occidental) civilization.

Gramsci succinctly acknowledged such presumptions in his short comparative analysis in the *Quaderni del Carcere* of Islam and Christianity and their relationship to modernity. In both, he notes that it is not religion per se that is unable to molecularly adapt itself to modernity, but social and historical structures – such as feudalism and cultural isolation – that create obstacles to that process. Gramsci goes even further. He suggests that the absence of the massive religious hierarchy and institutional powers of the Church makes Islam potentially even more susceptible to eventual transformation and modernization. He concludes: 'Christianity has taken nine centuries to evolve and adapt, and it has done so in small steps, etc.; Islam is forced into a headlong rush'.<sup>35</sup>

In an important, pathbreaking, essay that further opens up such a critically intercultural space within modernity, Armando Salvatore and Mark LeVine have

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<sup>35</sup> Gramsci, op. cit. 333

examined the question of the public sphere and technologies of power in modern Muslim majority countries.<sup>36</sup> They consider the centrality of the Islamic concept and legal method of *Istislah* for seeking social good through mediation, compromise and consensus as being central to a Muslim understanding of the public sphere. They contrast this practice with the abstract, universal categories of law and justice that sustain the conceptual violence and frequently punishing modalities of reason in the West. Their argument is that the public sphere, in its singular Occidental abstractness, excludes other kinds of reason, and cancels the understanding of its own particular historical formation. They then extend their analysis through a Gramscian reading, attentive to the historical textures and cultural sentiments and formation of Islamic notions of custom, ‘*urf*, and habits or ‘*adat*, where ideas such as the public sphere and justice are certainly not absent, but neither are they simply poor copies of their Occidental counterparts. The very sense of the ‘public’, for historical and cultural reasons, is figured differently. It is neither transparent nor readily translatable into Western reasoning. As such it marks not simply a difference but also proposes a critical challenge.

What emerges most clearly from Salvatore’s and LeVine’s analysis is the Occidental lynchpin of the private citizen who, after all, ‘is just one – albeit historically powerful and largely hegemonic – practiced and theorized approach to the public sphere’.<sup>37</sup> The manner in which the public sphere is embedded in the dynamics of the modern Muslim world, exposes ‘secularly oriented rationality’ as being not the only normative language for public life.<sup>38</sup> This means to face the hubris – both historical and conceptual – that the distinction between public politics and private religion is ‘foreign to the nature and history of Islam’ (Sayyid Qutb) . This leads inevitably, as Ronald A. T. Judy points out, to a ‘historical criticism of European secularism’.<sup>39</sup> Such considerations render altogether more problematic the Habermasian conception of the ‘public sphere’, with its rigid dependency upon the liberal category of the ‘private citizen’. All of this stretches and reformulates the

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<sup>36</sup> Salvatore and LeVine. “Introduction. Reconstructing the Public Sphere in Muslim Majority Societies”.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Ronald A.T. Judy, “Sayyid Qutb’s *fiqh al-waqi’i*, or New Realist Science”, 116. This article provides an excellent critical survey, through the writings of Sayyid Qutb, of the conceptual contestation between ideas of social justice based in the Hobbesian social contract between the sovereign in the state and his subjects, and an Islamic understanding of individual freedom and social justice that recognizes no servitude other than that to the sovereignty of Allah.

Gramscian understanding of civil society to include multiple social and cultural articulations on which ‘alternative hegemonic configurations of publicness in the Muslim majority world and elsewhere base their forces and sometimes legitimacy’.<sup>40</sup>

In this altogether more complex conceptual mix, everyday practices and spaces receive and rework religion and tradition as forms of ongoing negotiation, mediation, refusal and resistance to an order that may be simultaneously local, national and international. This is close to Gramsci’s understanding of the hold of counter-hegemonic prospects of popular religion and its implicit desire for social justice among the peasants of southern Italy.

Remaining on the edge of this critical fault-line, where European categories do not readily transmute into other historical heritages, and recognizing that religion itself continues to haunt the very heart of the West, we are confronted with the task, already elaborated in different ways by Talal Asad and Gil Anidjar, of locating and provincializing secular modernity. In particular, as Salvatore and LeVine rightly insist, the myth of liberal politics secured in the figure of free, autonomous subjects and their associated decisional power, is rendered altogether more problematic. The complexity of forces that render accessibility to public recognition difficult, unequal and frequently unjust, transforms the abstract concept of the individual into an altogether less reassuring figure, certainly de-centered and de-potentialized with respect to the autonomous powers assumed and assured by the modern myth of citizenship. If in Occidental liberalism the state is premised on the apparently sharp distinction and subsequent contracts between the public and the private spheres, Salvatore and LeVine argue that other forms of public participation emerge when public reason is based on:

a practical reason sanctified by religious tradition, however variably interpreted. Such a perspective provides these discourses with a level of fluidity and adaptability that account in large measure for their success in mobilizing large numbers of people in their cause.<sup>41</sup>

While the authors justly underline that this fluid ambivalence cannot be automatically labeled subaltern or counter-hegemonic, they argue that ideas of public welfare and social justice are entwined in a complex sociopolitical matrix. Here in an historical

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<sup>40</sup> Salvatore and LeVine, 7.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

formation in which change is in custody to local coordinates and conditions, tradition – the entwining of popular forms of cultural life and religious customs that Gramsci recognized – also provides and provokes sites of transformation. This is to think with Gramsci where the practice of reasoning occurs, inaugurating a potential passage from common to good sense: in the traditions of the popular religious lexicon of southern Italian Catholicism, in the multiple and differentiated localities of contemporary Muslim communities. This is not to praise Islam (or Catholicism), or to extract from modern Muslim society an improved prospect of the common good. Rather, in contrasting the ambiguities and embedded responses to the forces of modernity with the abstract rigidity of Occidental definitions, an intercultural critique is rendered possible: sense is not a category but, evoking a lineage that runs from Ibn Khaldûn through Giambattista Vico to Marx and Gramsci, is rather the product of historical and cultural practices. This suggests that modern ideas of social justice and public welfare have a complex history in diverse cultural formations. These cannot be reduced to an Occidental version whose abstraction pretends universal validity.

Outside and beyond the liberal repertoire of tolerance, integration, and assimilation in which Occidental categories are secured as the norm, largely immune from criticism (that includes a radical secular criticism), it becomes altogether more pressing to elaborate the idea of an emergent public sphere that will challenge hegemonic power formations whose authority may be predominantly religious or purportedly secular. What was once considered to be the property and privilege of the West – the knowledges, practices and institutions that inform justice, well-being and freedom – will come, as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak might put it, to be ‘worlded’ in a manner that confronts its ‘widespread social hypocrisy’, and pose a challenge to its particular authority. There exist other ways of being in the world, of being in modernity.

Returning religion to an apparently secular Europe, the fundamental point here is that Islam is not simply in Europe, but also profoundly of Europe. Today, this is not only the case among its present-day immigrant populations from North Africa and Asia, but has been so for well over a thousand years (that is, for a longer period than Christianity has existed around much of the Baltic Sea): medieval Islamic Spain, Sicily and Malta, the Ottoman Empire, the medieval and modern Balkans. In other words, Islam refers to an internal component in the making of modern Europe and not

simply to the externalized other that mirrors European fears and self-fashioning.

Muslims are clearly present in a secular Europe and yet in an important sense absent from it. The problem of understanding Islam in Europe is primarily, so I claim, a matter of understanding how 'Europe' is conceptualized by Europeans.<sup>42</sup>

Historically, Islamic culture represented not simply the transmission belt of classical learning to medieval Europe, but was the site of a fundamental transformation and translation of that knowledge into modern concepts and concerns: from algebra to agronomy, from poetry to philosophy.

Like today's un-welcomed immigrant, the externalized and expelled body of Islam de-centers and dispels the unquestioned referent of an autochthonous Europe and its seemingly autonomous elaborations. The presumed homogeneity of a European space, temporality and identity is challenged by an altogether more complex, unstable geography, home to multiple rhythms, accents and compositions. Here, the assumed autonomy of the individual, the presumed secularism of the state, the triumph of reason and the progressive universalism of its culture is interceded and interrupted by ongoing practices and possibilities in which traditions, translations and other modes of reasoning exceed the liberal coordinates of Occidental hegemony. Modernity is transformed from an existing state into a potential that is folded into diverse makings of the world whose dynamic and unpredictable outcome, as Gramsci always warned us, is ultimately unknown.

It is precisely in this expanded and unauthorized world that we are confronted with the paradoxical fulfillment of religion as a seemingly secular power. Or rather, this is to appreciate the cultural and historical impossibility of thinking that Christianity (or Islam) 'can be unambiguously treated as a "religion"'.<sup>43</sup> The point here, and returning to Gramsci's insistence on the intricate interrelationship of Christianity and modernity, is that Occidental belief is not, as Max Weber might have put it, simply transferred into a boundless faith in rationalism and individual self-realization in the modern capitalist order. Individualized conduct and salvation are also ultimately essential components in the formation and practices of planetary bio-powers and politics. The nexus of religion and a seemingly secularized modernity does not simply

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<sup>42</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, 159.

<sup>43</sup> Bryan S. Turner, "Islam, Capitalism and the Weber Theses", 233.

refer us to observable cultural rites and religious customs, and Europe and North America is saturated in these, but above all, and more precisely, to the ongoing practices that reveal the religious infrastructure of the West's belief in itself and the missionary exercise of its powers on the rest of the world.

Definitions of the world in hierarchies of cultural value continue to mirror the historically sanctified ethnic superiority of the West. Occidental humanism, as the assumed epistemological and moral origin of knowledge, continues to propose its mission of worldly redemption in a rationality that is simultaneously racist and religious. In the persistence of the discriminatory categories of race and religion that continue to distinguish and subordinate both the non-Occidental world and its internal populations, the familiarity of common sense composes explanations for the existing bio-political order.<sup>44</sup> Paying attention to the intricate weave of cultural textures, to their historical formation and contemporary power, we perhaps need to excavate this archeology in order to judge better ourselves and others. If it is there that we seek to anchor our analysis in relation to critical freedom, is also there that we uncover the unacknowledged faith and belief of much modern secularism; in other words, as Gramsci pointed out, the genealogy of its politics. In the seemingly secular reach of the Occidental empire, its knowledge formation and methodologies, in its presumed ethical and ethnical preeminence, we cannot avoid the ancient rhythms of a theological heartbeat.

Sources of the chapter's epigraphs: Chraïbi, "Occidente estremo", 23; Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, ; Anidjar *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature*,47.

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<sup>44</sup> Amin, "The Reminders of Race".

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