

The Circulation of Secularism

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Published online: 27 November 2008
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Abstract Inquiring into the causes behind the spread of secularism in the modern world, this paper proposes that the concept has proliferated owing to its peculiar property as culture: It is simultaneously a piece of culture and also a reflection upon culture. In its latter capacity, it imagines a world in which alternative religious belief systems divide people. It spreads as a piece of culture because it enables sharing and, hence, community, across the cultural boundaries erected by religious belief. For this reason, some governments have embraced the concept and incorporated it into official state discourse. Other governments, in turn, have copied the language of secularism not for its intended meaning but for pragmatic purposes—namely, to proclaim a position within the community of modern nations. State discourse, however, irrespective of the reasons for which it was adopted, affects how ordinary people reason about religion. Reasoning from the possibility of alternative religions opens a space for unbelief. Through an analysis of constitutional language, census data, and interviews, the paper concludes that secularism has more to do with the circulation of discourse and the reasons behind it, than with an immanent versus transcendent solution to the puzzle of existence—the transcendent solution being the foundation for the circulation of religious belief itself.

Keywords Religion · Secularism · Discourse · Metaculture

Charles Taylor, in his book *A Secular Age*, outlines three views of secularism, all interrelated: (1) as a tendency to eliminate religion from government and public affairs, (2) as a decline in spirituality, and (3) as the general understanding that “faith... is one human possibility among others” (Taylor 2007: 3). His central concern is with the last of these—how people,

Thanks to Rachel Higgins and Julia Brinjac for their research assistance. This paper benefited from a lively discussion with members of the Culture and Interaction Cluster of the Department of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, to whom I presented a draft version. I also acknowledge the help given to me by participants in the fall 2007 Cultural Motion seminar at the University of Pennsylvania, with whom I brainstormed the ideas presented here.

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especially in western Europe and North America, though as well elsewhere, have come to regard spiritual faith as something that cannot be presumed of others. He wants to know how such a view of people could take hold and spread in the contemporary world.

My concern in this study is with “secularism” in Taylor’s third sense and specifically with its social circulation as part of culture. Whereas Taylor is endeavoring to provide an account from a perspective internal to belief systems in the West, I propose to take a discourse-centered perspective, looking not only at the beliefs per se, but also at the discursive forms in which those beliefs are encoded and through which they move through the world—through space and over time. My claim is that to unpack the phenomenon of secularism, one has to examine not just what people are thinking about, but also the linguistic forms through which that thought is made public and through which it travels. An understanding of the circulation of discursive forms simultaneously illuminates the spread of beliefs and conditions of belief.

I will be using the convention of italicizing words when I wish to emphasize their existence as things in the world, that is, as the graphic or spoken forms. I will put quotation marks around words and phrases when I am emphasizing the meanings attached to those forms.

The place to start this inquiry is with the term *secularism* itself—a word that appears to have entered circulation in the English language with the writing of George Jacob Holyoake (1854), for example, his 1854 pamphlet *Secularism: The Affirmative Philosophy of the People*. The philosophy Holyoake developed under this term resonates with Taylor’s concerns. Holyoake’s position is that morality should emanate from a concern for the well-being of humanity and not from beliefs about God or the afterlife. The word has parallels with the French term *laïcité*, although the latter one appears to refer more specifically to the separation of church and state than to a system of morality, such as that advocated by Holyoake.

In subsequent sections, I will return to the word *secular*, but I want to differentiate the circulation of “secularism” in which I am interested here from the circulation of this word form. The words *secular* and *secularism* play a role in the story about the circulation of the meanings Taylor tells and under which he groups them, but I will be most concerned here with tracing the fateful connection between the words *freedom* and *religion*, as well as various expressions linked to them. I will also be concerned specifically with the modern national period, that is, from the end of the eighteenth century to the present.

When I refer to the circulation of secularism, I am referring to the social circulation of a cluster of meanings as well as a cluster of linguistic forms, especially forms linking *freedom* and *religion*. My central claim is this: secularism makes for good circulation under certain conditions, namely, those in which differing beliefs tend to set communities of believers apart from one another. The secret of its propulsion through the world lies in the fact that it can move across boundaries created by differing communities of belief. In other words, it can enable sharing across boundaries where sharing is blocked, namely, the boundaries created by differing belief systems.

Secularism can do this because, as part of culture, it has a special property—the property we see in the words “freedom” and “religion” that are at its core. Secularism is about culture simultaneously as it is a part of culture. It is what I call “metaculture.” As metaculture, it is a lens to culture, a way of seeing cultures. It says in effect that the bearer of this metaculture is able to view differing belief systems as alternatives in the world, rather than viewing one as right and the others as wrong. At the cultural plane, the same individual who holds this metacultural view may be an ardent believer in the truth of his or her own religion. Secularism therefore enables individuals to have social relations with other individuals despite the different cultural belief systems in which they are immersed.

Because secularism is not only about culture, but also part of culture, the two individuals who subscribe to a secular metaculture actually also share culture—they share their metacultural views on religion. But, as culture that is shared, metaculture is not just a “condition of belief;” it is a set of concrete cultural forms that are publicly accessible. As I propose to show, the social circulation of secularism is enabled by the circulation of a connection between the ideas of “freedom” and “religion” as actually encoded in grammatical linkages between *freedom* and *religion*.

This paper is organized around three central propositions, on which I will elaborate in subsequent sections. The three propositions are:

- Proposition 1** *The public of a nation will tend to espouse an orientation to religion conforming to the prescriptions of whatever discourse about religion the state supports.*
- Proposition 2** *States may adopt discourses about religion for reasons other than the semantic meanings of those discourses.*
- Proposition 3** *People are capable of reasoning from state discourses about religion to conclusions about what views of the world are entailed by them.*

In short, I am proposing a more complex chain leading from discourse to belief than is usually assumed. I am arguing for a linkage—albeit one of influence and not absolute determination—between state discourses and the relatively public expressions by individuals in censuses and surveys. I am arguing that the reason for the circulation of discourses is not only the semantic meanings they encode, but also, and sometimes more importantly, the word forms as emblems. But, at the same time, I am arguing that once a discourse comes to circulate for whatever reasons, people are capable of reasoning from the emblematic forms to semantic meanings. Such reasoning can produce dramatic shifts in worldviews, such as Taylor proposes have taken place.

To narrow my scope, I concentrate my efforts here on discourses (words, phrases, clauses) about religion contained in the constitutions of modern states—that is, in documents purporting to be foundational for the organization of the state, such as the US constitution with its Bill of Rights. I propose to look at the constitutions of the 40 largest nations by population currently on the planet. To be sure, constitutional documents have varying statuses within states. Some constitutions are perhaps largely window dressing, not internally supported by the state, as has been remarked about the constitutions of the former Soviet Union and some Arab states.¹ Nevertheless, even in these cases—or so I contend—it is possible to garner evidence about the circulation of secularism.

In addition to the constitutional documents, I draw on two other sources of evidence: (1) census and survey data regarding religious identity and belief and (2) experimental interview data here in the USA. While there are problems of comparability in the census and survey data and while the experimental interview data represent a small sampling of only one segment of American society, both shed light on how state discourses pertaining to religion participate in the circulation of secularism.

¹ Notably by Spiro (1959), who referred to such constitutions as “facades,” and Loewenstein (1957), as well as others. For a similar view of constitutions in the Arab world, see Brown (2002), although his conclusion is not as dismissive as the earlier ones, and, indeed, echoes the argument here for a complex chain linking state discourse to cultural beliefs and practices.

Public Profession of Religion Tends to Follow State Discourse

The first proposition claims that state discourse about religion furnishes a framework for instructing people within a nation as to how they should talk publicly about religion—for example, how to respond to census and survey questions. The linkage I propose is, to be sure, looser than that found in many Christian religions, as well as Islam. In these religions, people are told precisely what to say about their beliefs. They are given the exact linguistic forms with which to express themselves. An example of such “instruction” is the Apostle’s Creed, which begins:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
the Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:
Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.

While the pronoun “I” may appear to emanate from the internal world of the person uttering the words, expressing that person’s inner beliefs, this “I”—along with the statement of belief—in fact comes from outside the person (cf. Urban 1989). It is a part of circulating discourse, passed between people over time and across space. The core expressions of religious belief within Christianity—at least within the Presbyterian, Lutheran, Catholic, and a number of other branches—are not, from a discourse perspective, expressions of the individual so much as replications of discourse that has been passed down over time and comes to the individual from the outside, from publicly circulating discourse transmitted in this case through religious hierarchies.

Nor is this true only of Christianity. One of the five pillars of Islam is the *shahada*—the expression of faith—which must be done in a formulaic way: “(I testify that) there is only one God, and Muhammad is his messenger.” As in the Apostle’s Creed, discourse here travels via replication in both form and meaning through the religious hierarchy to the individual.

I am not proposing that the linkage between state discourses about religion and individual expressions in censuses and surveys is as strict as in these communities of faith, but I am suggesting something analogous. State discourses about religion tend implicitly to instruct individuals how they are to publicly represent their attitudes towards religion.

From this perspective, there is dramatic evidence of what happens when a state radically changes its discourse about religion. I am referring to communist takeovers of states during the twentieth century, Russia being the paradigmatic case. In Russia, from 1721 until 1905, the Orthodox Church was an “established” church, that is, it was run as part of the Russian government and was the dominant religion within the Russian empire. It played a key role in Russification efforts, much as the Catholic Church played a role in colonial and early national governments in Latin America. Correspondingly, a majority of the population, in fact 72% according to the 1897 census, responded that they were Orthodox. Of the remaining 28%, 9.2% were Catholic (Roman or Greek), 3% Protestants, 4.2% Jewish, 11.1% were Muslims, and 0.4% Buddhists. No one was a “nonbeliever” (Krindatch 2006; Table 1).

The 1905 “Act of Toleration”—an important piece of Imperial Russian state discourse—guaranteed more freedom for non-Orthodox religions, but it was the 1917 communist takeover that dramatically shifted the state’s orientation to religion, with the government imposing a “cruel repression” (Kazmina and Filippova 2005: 1053–1054) on the Russian Orthodox Church. The language of the 1936 constitution made it clear that unbelief was to be sanctioned: “...the church in the U.S.S.R. is separated from the state, and the school

Table 1 Estimated percentage of population with no religious affiliation for the 40 most populous countries (ranked by % no religion).

	Country	% no religion
1	China	95.00
2	Vietnam	80.80
3	Russia	68.00
4	South Korea	49.30
5	Ukraine	38.00
6	Germany	28.30
7	UK	23.10
8	Peru	16.30
9	Canada	16.00
10	South Africa	15.80
11	USA	10.00
12	Japan	7.65
13	Brazil	7.40
14	Colombia	5.00
15	Congo, Democratic Republic of the	5.00
16	Italy	5.00
17	Poland	4.15
18	Mexico	3.10
19	Spain	3.00
20	Argentina	2.00
21	France	2.00
22	Indonesia	1.70
23	Pakistan	1.50
24	Burma (Myanmar)	1.00
25	Iran	1.00
26	Kenya	1.00
27	Ethiopia	0.90
28	Afghanistan	0.50
29	Bangladesh	0.50
30	Egypt	0.50
31	India	0.45
32	Nepal	0.45
33	Philippines	0.10
34	Thailand	0.05
35	Algeria	0.00
36	Morocco	0.00
37	Nigeria	0.00
38	Sudan	0.00
39	Tanzania	0.00
40	Turkey	0.00

These estimates are based on figures in the CIA World Factbook (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>). Owing to the disparate character of the censuses, surveys, and estimates on which they are based, these figures should be taken only as an overall gauge of comparative profession of religious identity in surveys and censuses. Where figures for “unaffiliated” or “none” or “unspecified or none” are provided, I have used these as the measure of the percentage with no religious identification. In the majority of cases, the World Factbook lacks such a category and indicates “other” or “unspecified.” In such cases, I have lumped these latter two together and taken half the value, assuming that some of the “other” category have religious affiliation

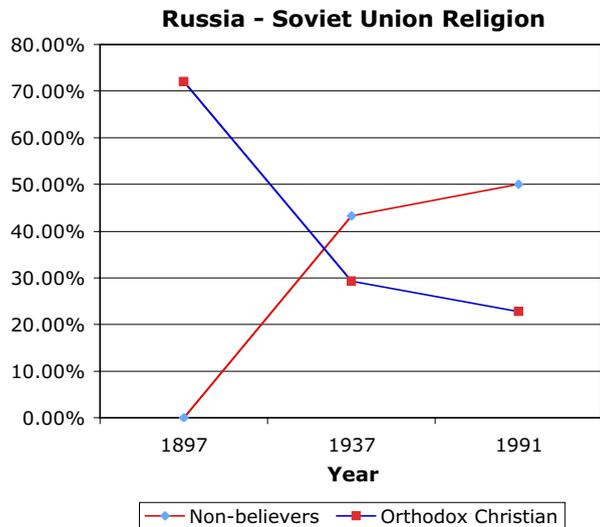
from the church. Freedom of religious worship and freedom of antireligious propaganda is recognized for all citizens” (Chapter X, Article 124). The “freedom of antireligious propaganda,” as a fragment of meaning-bearing discourse, provides an orientation to citizens contemplating a public response to questions about religion and belief. It gives license to secularism in Taylor’s sense that faith is just “one human possibility among others.”

That the public understood this message is indicated by the results of the 1937 population census, the only Soviet-era census to include a question about religion. In fact, it asked explicitly whether people were “nonbelievers,” and only asked about religious affiliation for those who were not nonbelievers; 43.26% said that they were nonbelievers, a dramatic change from the 1897 figures. It should be noted, however, that, unlike the 1897 census, the 1937 census questionnaire explicitly provided individuals with a category of “nonbeliever”—again, part of instructions as to how the public should represent their orientations to religion. Estimates for 1991 place nonbelievers at 50% of the population, a figure that still held for the late 1990s, the early post-Soviet period, as well (Krindatch 2006; Table 1). The CIA World Factbook lists just 27% to 37% as adherents of religions. The graph in Fig. 1 summarizes the results and highlights the efficacy of the state through its discourse and practices to shape public professions of belief and unbelief.

I take the Russian case as evidence of a causal relationship between the adoption of a state discourse promoting unbelief and public profession of “no religion” when asked in surveys or censuses. Of course, the state’s adoption of a discourse promoting unbelief goes along, in the Russian case, with various actions directed against organized religions—a fact that supports the claim of a causal relationship between these two forms of discourse: state and public profession through surveys and censuses. However, the causal role of state discourse is opposed to a point of view that regards unbelief as arising through developments internal to the belief systems within a population, a view, in other words, that the Russian population, on its own, without state instruction or sanctions, was moving in a secular direction.

The causal role of state discourse is confirmed by a broad global survey—at least as indicated by the 40 most populous countries in the world—of the percentage within nations of individuals having “no religion.” Table 1 summarizes these facts. While the figures for “% no religion” should be taken with caution, owing the lack of comparability in census and survey data (see

Fig. 1 Effects of state discourse and practices on the public’s profession of belief and nonbelief in late imperial and Soviet-era Russia.



the footnote in Table 1), there is an obvious overall pattern. Countries that, in the twentieth century, adopted Marxist–Leninist language as part of state discourse appear in the top half of the table, and countries showing the highest percentages of individuals professing no religious affiliation are communist or postcommunist countries. Countries with official state religions tend to be in the bottom half of the table, that is, among those with the lowest percentages of individuals professing “no religion.” Two exceptions are the UK, which has a special history with its “Church of England,” and Argentina, where the state supports the Roman Catholic Church. On balance, however, where the state promotes religion in its official discourse, the percentage of the population with “no religion” tends to be small or nonexistent.

I underscore the fact that the causal relationship I am proposing here is between two forms of discourse—pronouncements by the state regarding religion and relatively public acknowledgements by individuals of religious or nonreligious identity. This proposition does not make claims directly about the subjective orientations of individuals, in other words, whether they believe that existence can be explained in immanent terms, as Taylor (2007: 9 *passim*) dubs it, or, alternatively, that existence makes sense only from the perspective of transcendence, of spiritual forces that go beyond mechanistic accounts.

The response to survey or census questions about religious affiliation does not disclose belief directly. For example, a 2007 poll² in France showed that only 52% of those identifying themselves as Catholic felt that the existence of God is “certain or possible.” In many cases, individuals indicated that their Catholicism was a matter of family tradition. I am not proposing that this survey accurately gauges belief, only that questions about religious identity do not necessarily produce the same results as those about belief.³ However, survey questions about belief, like those about religious identity, tend to produce responses reflecting, in some measure, broader state discourses. As I will argue later in this essay, both are at a considerable semiotic remove from rock-bottom individual experiences of existence, the sense of wonder at being in a world, the mystery of life and death.

The first proposition concerns a tendency for public expressions regarding religion to follow the lead of state discourse. I stress *tendency*. Responses to censuses and surveys can also express resistance to state discourses, as, indeed, the Russia case also illustrates. While the percentage of “nonbelievers” rose from effectively 0% to 50% under the influence of Marxist–Leninist discourse, half of the population continued to profess adherence to a religion. Indeed, of the Russian case, Merridale (1996: 233) notes the presence of resistance to the 1937 Soviet census question regarding religion: “Some entered fake religions, or obscene remarks, in the space provided. More organized resistance was not uncommon, especially in areas where dissenting or unorthodox religious groups, such as baptists, seventh-day adventists and Tolstoyans, were powerful.” In fact, Stalin was displeased with the census results. As Merridale (1996: 225) notes, “Senior government statisticians had always known

² Cited in the US Department of State (2007) in the section on France.

³ In fact, the interviews done in connection with this research turned up statements like those in the French survey about belief. Here is an example:

Questioner: Can you state any religious affiliation, if you have any?

Respondent: I'm a recovering Catholic I guess you would say.

Questioner: And what does that mean?

Respondent: It means my mother was Catholic and I was raised Catholic but very actively no longer practice.

Questioner: Do you still believe in Catholic ideas or no? Are you actually not catholic?

Respondent: Yeah.

that the data collected would not be suitable for wide public dissemination, but within days of the enumeration campaign, the decision was taken to suppress them completely.”

It would be possible, though incorrect, to think of the coercive character of state discourse as applying only to the Soviet period of Russian history. In fact, as von Laue (1961: 354–5) noted, state discourse regarding religion had a coercive aspect in Imperial Russia as well, when Orthodox Christianity was the state religion. Concerning the 1987 census, he writes: “The prevalent suspicion toward all officials had made the answers given to the census takers highly untrustworthy. The peasants and businessmen were afraid of higher taxes and therefore had minimized their earnings or concealed their religion, knowing the dire consequences of religious dissent.”

At the same time, the answers to the 1987 Russia census were only “untrustworthy” if one regards them as a window to the minds of individuals, as revealing their epistemological orientations to transcendence and immanence. They are not “untrustworthy” insofar as the proposition I am putting forth is concerned. They are evidence about the relationship between state discourse and professions of religious identity in the relatively public contexts of censuses and surveys. In fact, they make clear the distinction suggested in the second proposition, namely, that discourses about religion can be taken up for other than their semantic meanings. In particular, they can be taken up to please the state, to reflect the will of the ruling elite—or, for that matter, to resist it.

Before turning to reasons for which states adopt certain discourses concerning religion, I want to focus on the peculiar character of the relationship between state discourses of religion and expressions of religious identity. My claim is that the former (state discourses) are *metacultural* to the latter (individual expressions), which are *cultural*. The metacultural plane is part of culture, but also stands above culture and, so to speak, looks down on it. It not only refers to the cultural plane but also exercises—or so Proposition 1 claims—a practical effect on it. In particular, it informs individuals of how religious identity is to be expressed relative to the polity.

The 1936 Russian constitution, for example, contained the sentence: “Freedom of religious worship and freedom of antireligious propaganda is recognized for all citizens.” That sentence formed part of Russian culture during the Soviet period. However, it also occupied a metacultural position relative to other cultural expressions, such as expressions of religious identity. As metaculture that is not only descriptive, but also regulatory of the cultural plane, it would have had the effect of legitimizing expressions of antireligious identity by an individual. From the point of view of religious identity, it would simultaneously inhibit claims that participation in the social community of Russia required religious identity and support claims to antireligious identities within the polity. From this perspective, the sentence would buttress—as I argued earlier is true of secularist discourse more generally—the possibility of social relationship without the presupposition of spiritual belief. Once discourse assumes such a metacultural role within a state, it has the effect of furnishing the context in which expressions of religious belief, not just religious identity, take place.

Indeed, the case of secular state discourse reveals why the struggle over what is to become metaculture is so central in modern national communities. Because such discourses are capable of playing a regulatory role relative to other discourses, they are capable of shaping the culture of people. Where the culture is not simply preexistent, passed on from prior generations, but actively created and recreated, metaculture provides the background against which the reshaping of culture—including beliefs about transcendence and immanence and their relationship to social relations—takes place. For this reason, struggles over metaculture are crucial to culture.

States May Adopt Discourses About Religion for Reasons Other Than Their Semantic Meanings

Perhaps the single most striking feature of the 40 constitutions⁴ studied here is the association between the word *freedom* (or *free*) and the word *religion*. The two are found together in 38 of the 40 constitutions, the exceptions being Iran and France.⁵ What this immediately suggests is that the language of these constitutions, as regards religion, does not simply grow organically out of the people—contrary to the “voice of the people” notion—but is rather copied from other sources. A close inspection of wording in specific constitutions reveals unmistakable instances of copying, for example the modern 1987 Philippine constitution, whose language is drawn from the US Bill of Rights, as can be seen, without further historical research, by juxtaposing the relevant portions of the two documents:

Philippines: “No law shall be made respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

United States: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”

An apparent connection to the US constitution is present in the Mexican constitution of 1917 as well, and there is an echo of the US language in the post-Soviet 1993 Russian Federation constitution:

Mexico: “Congress cannot enact laws establishing or prohibiting any religion.”

Russia: “No religion may be established as a state or obligatory one.”

Another, perhaps better, example of copying pertains to the language of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations, whose Article 18 reads as follows:

Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

Nigeria: “Every person shall be entitled to *freedom of thought, conscience and religion*, including *freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.*”

Ethiopia: “*Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include the freedom to hold or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and the*

⁴ All of the currently in effect constitutions cited here can be found on the internet, many through Wikisource “Category: National Constitutions” (http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Category:National_Constitutions). I have also consulted the individual government websites, which, in some cases, have an official English translation. While a number of the constitutions are originally in English or have official translations and while I have endeavored to crosscheck those that are translated into English from other languages, I have per force had to rely on translations in numerous instances.

⁵ While there is no use of *freedom* together with *religion* in the French constitution, in fact the Law of 1905 makes explicit reference to “freedom of conscience,” an expression used for freedom of religion elsewhere, as I will discuss below. The Iranian case seems to be the only true exception.

freedom, either individually or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest his religion on belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.”

Democratic Republic of the Congo: “Toute personne a droit à la liberté de pensée, de conscience et de religion. Toute personne a le droit de manifester sa religion ou ses convictions, seule ou en groupe, tant en public qu’en privé, par le culte, l’enseignement, les pratiques, l’accomplissement des rites et l’état de vie religieuse...”

Sudan: “Everyone has the right to freedom of conscience and religion and the right to manifest and disseminate his religion or belief in teaching, practice or observance.”

Tanzania: “Every person has the right to freedom of thought or conscience, belief or faith, and choice in matters of religion, including the freedom to change his religion or faith.”

Kenya: “Except with his own consent, no person shall be hindered in the enjoyment of his freedom of conscience, and for the purposes of this section that freedom includes freedom of thought and of religion, freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others, and both in public and in private, to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.”

I have italicized the sections in each of these six constitutions in which the wording is identical or nearly identical to that found in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Since the probabilities of such similarities being due to chance are negligible, it appears that borrowings have taken place in these cases.

Such formal similarities in wording suggest that the constitutional discourse surrounding religion in these cases is not the product of spontaneous developments internal to the cultures of each of these nations, but is rather something that has come into the constitutions from the outside. Were the similarities in meaning the product of internal cultural developments, we would expect the linguistic forms in which they are encoded to exhibit greater diversity.

While I am looking here at replication or copying, I do not want to suggest that there are no differences between the constitutions. Not all of the clauses pertaining to religion have simply been borrowed lock, stock, and barrel without regard for their meaning. Indeed, it is possible that in some instances, the wordings have been specifically adapted to local situations to better reflect local meanings. For example, the Sudanese constitution has reshaped the language to elide the possibility of changing religions, conceivably a purposeful change. However, the formal similarities suggest that the wordings have been imported for their pragmatic effect rather than for their semantic meanings. In particular, in these African constitutions, the words seem to reflect alliance with the United Nations declaration.

I am suggesting that constitutional discourse pertaining to religion, in such cases, does not so much reflect a “voice of the people” as signal the desire of the nation to conform to the global community of nations. The discourse of *freedom of religion* is emblematic. At the same time, I am not arguing that such discourses have nothing to do with a voice of the people. Proposition 1 suggests that in a nation with a functional state, there will be a tendency for people to express, in relatively public contexts like surveys and censuses, an orientation to religion conforming to the orientation supported by the state. This does not mean that their expressions in such relatively public contexts grow spontaneously out of inner, subjective meanings. But neither does it mean that such expressions have nothing to do with their subjective meanings. In fact, in the next section, I will argue that the adoption

of discourse for pragmatic reasons (to signal alliance with the state, for example) can result in reasoning about that discourse that does lead to subjective meanings. This is not a necessary outcome of the circulation of discourse as form, but it is a possible outcome—one in which circulating discursive forms work their way into subjective meanings, transform extant subjective meanings, and ultimately reshape world views, such as those about the immanent versus transcendent understanding of reality.

There is an analogy between a state adopting internationally circulating constitutional discourse for pragmatic rather than semantic meanings and a citizen expressing views for pragmatic rather than semantic reasons. In both cases, there is a looser linkage between discourse as form and discourse as meaning than is ordinarily supposed, and in both, there is the possibility that meaning will come, over historical time, to align with discursive form or vice versa.

There are striking instances of interconnections in the constitutions of a number of the communist/postcommunist countries. These pertain to the specific form in which religious freedom is expressed. Here, we find language of rights not just to believe in, but also to not believe in a religion. The discourse seems to encode a right “not to believe,” or to profess “unbelief,” and to place this right on an equal footing with the right to profess belief. I have already mentioned the 1936 Soviet Russian constitution, which put the “freedom of antireligious propaganda” alongside the “freedom of worship.” However, even the 1993 post-Soviet Russian constitution includes this language of alternativity:

Russia: “...the right to profess...any religion or to profess no religion at all...”

Something similar is found in the constitutions of China, the Ukraine, and Vietnam, albeit not Poland:

China: “No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion.”

Ukraine: “This right includes the freedom to profess or not to profess any religion.”

Vietnam: “The citizen shall enjoy freedom of belief and of religion; he can follow any religion or follow none.”

The formal device of alternativity may be more abstract than the lexical and syntactic similarities characterizing the replication of discursive form associated with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or with the “establishment” of religion, and it undoubtedly is connected to an attempt to communicate semantic meaning—that unbelief is permitted by the state. However, as in other cases, we have evidence of discursive form marking alliances among the states in question.

The alliances, in the case of discourses of alternativity, are particularly significant in relationship to the problem of secularism I am endeavoring to investigate. In Table 1 above, showing the rank order of countries as regards the percentage of those expressing no religious affiliation in censuses and surveys, these are four of the five at the very top. In other words, where the discourse of alternativity to belief is encoded in the constitution of a nation, the aggregate populations tend to exhibit the highest levels of unbelief.

In contrast, where constitutional discourse establishes a linkage between the state and a particular religion or belief more generally, we find aggregate populations exhibiting the highest levels of religious identification, that is, the lowest levels of unbelief. Whereas only two of the top 20 nations in Table 1—those with the highest levels of unbelief—have constitutions drawing a connection between the state and religious belief, 11 of the bottom 20 do. Of the 11

instances, six proclaim Islam as the state religion. But there are also countries like Indonesia, whose constitution includes the clause: “The State shall be based upon the belief in the One and Only God.” The 1997 constitution of Thailand states: “The King is a Buddhist and Upholder of religions.” Similarly, the 1990 constitution of Nepal describes the nation as: “a multiethnic, multilingual, democratic, independent, indivisible, sovereign, Hindu, and constitutional monarchical kingdom.” Even in the Sudan, where Islam is widespread, constitutional discourse connects the state to religion generally, not exclusively to Islam:

Those working for the state and those in public life should worship God in their daily lives, for Muslims this is through observing the Holy Quran and the ways of the Prophet, and all people shall preserve the principles of religion and reflect this in their planning, laws, policies, and official work or duties in the fields of politics, economics, and social and cultural activities; with the end of striving towards the societal aim of justice and righteousness, and towards achieving the salvation of the kingdom of God.

Such a state discourse gives no quarter to unbelief.

I have said that, with only one or two exceptions, all constitutions of the 40 largest nations contain discourse drawing a connection between the words *freedom* and *religion*. This strikes me as highly significant as regards the circulation of discourse. The modern nations of the world have, by and large, adopted constitutional language drawing a connection between freedom and religion. My proposal here is that the connection has to do first and foremost with the circulation of discursive form. Membership in the community of nations seems to exact of nations an expression of connection between religion and freedom analogous to the way in which (as formulated in Proposition 1) the public within a nation tends to express religious identity in a way that aligns with state discourse about religion.

At the same time, there appear to be subgroup alliances among nations as regards the specific discursive connection between freedom and religion. One such is the subgrouping that recognizes the freedom not to believe, expressed constitutionally through the discourse of alternativity, as discussed earlier. Here, constitutional discourse seems to promote both belief and unbelief. Another subgrouping is formed by those nations wherein constitutional discourse positively links the state to religion, but simultaneously permits other religions. There is no encoding of the possibility of unbelief or alternatives to belief here, only the freedom to profess belief. The constitutional discourse promotes belief but not unbelief. The constitution of Pakistan, for example, proclaims that “Islam shall be the State religion of Pakistan,” but simultaneously permits freedom of religious expression under the umbrella of state religiosity: “Subject to law, public order and morality...every citizen shall have the right to profess, practise and propagate his religion.” Freedom here appears to be freedom to express belief, perhaps even different beliefs, but not unbelief.

It is possible to see these two as ends of a continuum of possible connections between the words *freedom* and *religion*. On the one side, “freedom” means not only freedom to profess belief, but also to profess unbelief. On the other side, “freedom” means the freedom to profess belief, and, implicitly, not the freedom to express unbelief. This may seem a subtle distinction, but I want to argue that it is a crucial one. In the former case, the state promotes unbelief as well as ensuring the right to belief. In the other case, the state is ensuring the right to belief, but is not extending freedom to the right to unbelief.

In between these extremes are the constitutional discourses that deny a connection between the state and religion. Such discourses—like that of the US Bill of Rights, with its prescription that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion”—can more closely resemble those of the right to belief but not unbelief side of the continuum.

However, they can also appear to assert a space devoid of religion and, hence, to leave open the possibility of unbelief. This seems to be true of France, whose constitution proclaims: “France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic.”

I want to underscore the connection between *freedom* and *religion* as discursive forms that characterize the modern world community, at least as evidenced by the constitutions of the 40 most populous nations on the planet. I believe that this is a crucial linkage and that it is the engine driving the spread of secularism, in Taylor’s sense, through the world. The connection at the level of state discourses is a relatively recent one, going back to the US Bill of Rights, but becoming especially prominent only in the twentieth century.

Most constitutions from the nineteenth and even into the twentieth century did not contain this linkage. For example, the 1917 Mexican constitution echoes the US Bill of Rights with its formulation: “Congress cannot enact laws establishing or prohibiting any religion,” and proclaims that “everyone is free to embrace the religion of his choice.” However, its predecessor, the constitution of 1824, makes no such connection, proclaiming, on the contrary: “The Religion of the Mexican Nation is, and will be perpetually, the Roman Catholic Apostolic. The Nation will protect it by wise and just laws, and prohibit the exercise of any other whatever.” The constitution refers to the freedom of Mexico from Spain, but there is no association between the words *freedom* and *religion*, such as appears in 1917. Even the celebrated 1789 French Declaration of the Rights of Man contains the following sentence: “Therefore the National Assembly recognizes and proclaims, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following rights of man and of the citizen.” No connection exists in that document between *freedom* and *religion* as word forms. The first official French connection appears to be the 1905 French “Law Concerning the Separation of Church and State,” which contains the phrase *liberté de conscience*, “freedom of conscience.”

The substantive claim I am making is that the modern world community of nations is grounded, in part, in constitutional discourses bearing a specific formal signature as regards religion, a signature in which the words *religion* and *freedom* are connected through such expressions as “freedom of religion,” “freedom of religious belief,” “free profession, practice and propagation of religion,” “free exercise [of religion],” “freedom of worship, each according to his/her own religion,” “freedom to profess religion,” “freedom of religious worship,” “freedom of thought, conscience and religion,” “free to embrace the religion of his choice,” “freedom of creed religious or ideological,” “freedom of belief and of religion,” “freedom of personal philosophy and religion,” “to profess freely his religion,” “freedom of thought and religion,” and “free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rights.” In two constitutions out of the 40, the emblematic connection is made through a word related to religion, as in “freedom of worship” (Morocco) and “freedom of creed” (Algeria).

The claim is further that the adoption of constitutional discursive forms connecting *freedom* and *religion* may be first and foremost for pragmatic rather than semantic reasons—namely, to signal membership in that world community, with the semantic meanings of those two words remaining only vague or unelaborated. I contend that the circulation of the connection between these word forms is crucial to the spread of secularism in Taylor’s sense—secularism as the recognition that faith is just “one human possibility among others” that an immanent understanding of the world is possible without recourse to transcendence.

People Are Capable of Reasoning from State Discourses

When discourse circulates as relatively frozen form, rather than as active meaning, the forms themselves often appear odd, perhaps archaic, sometimes opaque, and, in any case, in

need of interpretation to penetrate the semantic fog surrounding them. The constitutional language about religion very often has this quality. Take, for example, the word *conscience*, which appears in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion”) and also in more than half of the constitutions I studied (22 out of 40), as well as in the 1905 French church and state law containing the phrase *liberté de conscience*.

The phrase “liberty of conscience” has a decidedly archaic ring to the ear of the contemporary American English speaker and with good reason. The form has come down to us from the 1600s, when it was widely used in England, and by some of the founders of American colonies, for example, William Penn (1670) in his *The Great Case of Liberty of Conscience One More Briefly Debated and Defended* and Roger Williams. The phrase “liberty of conscience” or “freedom of conscience” also appears in a number of American state constitutions. The linguistic form has been handed down to us across the generations and has spread around the globe, but, in the course of its journeys, some of the vitality of its meaning has been lost.

The same is true of other bits of circulating constitutional discourse pertaining to religion. The word *profess*, as in such phrases as “freedom to profess religion” or “liberty to profess a religion,” is an example. It has a feeling of remoteness from present-day speech that makes it appear to come from another realm. Despite this quality, or perhaps because of it, the word appears together with *religion* in nearly half of the constitutions (19 of 40). Even the phrase “establishment of religion,” as used in the US Bill of Rights, has a dated and impenetrable feel. School children in the USA learn the famously long word “antidisestablishmentarianism,” yet its meaning—as pertaining to positions in debates over the relationship of church and state—is to them still largely if not wholly opaque.

Despite the opacity and ambiguity in constitutional discourse—as well as other state discourse pertaining to religion—my claim is that people are able to reason from it to conclusions about what worldviews are or might be embedded in it. Such reasoning in turn informs their worldviews and vice versa. To explore these relatively public reasoning processes, I have chosen a set of constitutional statements more or less reflecting the range discussed in the previous section between those in which there is an official state religion to those in which the right to unbelief is explicitly formulated. The four statements are as follows:

1. There shall be a state religion, but other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony in the Republic. [Bangladesh]
2. Everyone has the right to freedom of personal philosophy and religion. This right includes the freedom to profess or not to profess any religion. [Ukraine]
3. This country shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. [France]
4. The State shall guarantee the freedom of belief and the freedom of practicing religious rites. [Egypt]

The statements come from the constitutions of the countries indicated, although the first was modified to eliminate the name of the religion (Islam) and third to eliminate the name of the country (France).

The statements (without mention of the countries from which they came) were presented to an assortment of individuals, mainly college students in the USA from various backgrounds, some religious, some not. I had researchers other than myself that conduct the interviews. Researchers had interviewees read the statements out loud and then asked them which of the statements they would like to have in the constitution of a country in which they lived and why. The researcher followed up with questions about whether the interviewee disliked any of the statements and why, and interviewees ventured thoughts on the other statements as well.

Individuals reasoned that the first statement, proclaiming a state religion, would inevitably result in attempts to coerce individuals into the state religion:

...well number one if there was a state religion even though it's set up to be equal like other religions are not discriminated against, like to some degree there will be some kind of discrimination.

I think that the first one, um, makes sense for a population where all, where most of the people founding it have the same religion, but I think it's a really dangerous idea to found a country on because if there is a state religion, it seems that the state is going to automatically be biased towards people of that religion. And eventually that bias will grow if it's not there initially.

...there could be certain advantages to being the same religion as the government is stated to be and you just, you wouldn't be on an even playing field.

Not all of the subjects interviewed were American, but they did nevertheless seem to espouse views consonant with the antiestablishment of religion position in the US Bill of Rights.

Similarly, the interviews supply evidence that people recognize the alternativity in the second statement and the explicit mention of a right to unbelief:

...because it emphasizes that everyone has their own right to freedom or not to have a religion...

There's no set...there's nothing saying you have to have a religion that you can't have a religion. It's just complete freedom.

...number two also gives people the right not to practice any religion...

I am not proposing that everyone everywhere would value the right to have no religion—"complete freedom." However, I am suggesting that they could recognize the discourse of alternativity, as I called it earlier, that the state acknowledges the possibility that some of its citizens might have no religion. The state, therefore, gives its consent to the possibility of unbelief. In other words, the language of alternativity asserts "secularism" in Taylor's sense of providing the "conditions of belief" or background understanding that faith is just "one human possibility among others."

As regards the range of possible state positions presented in the previous section between constitutions setting up state religions and those promoting a right to no religion, there seems to be no difficulty in individuals detecting the state's orientation. This is in accord with the statistical evidence presented in the first section, where states acknowledging the possibility of nonreligion tend to have the highest proportion of individuals expressing no religious affiliation, in censuses and surveys, and states with official religions have the lowest proportions of nonreligious citizens.

From the point of view of the historical trajectory of cultural circulation, the interesting areas are those in between these two poles. In particular, what is to be made of the word "secular" in the third statement? Does it mean that only the government is to be nondenominational in its orientation? Or does it suggest that religion should be banned altogether from society? As one respondent pondered: "...when it said secular I was wondering if it could only be secular, or is it, is it like the Chinese where it's mandated essentially? So if that just means the government itself is secular then that's fine..." What is important, from the point of view of public reasoning about state discourse, is the doubt occasioned by an assertion of secularism: Does it only exclude religion from the

deliberations of government? Or does it call into question all religion, suggesting that the society should have no religions?

I am referring here not just to the use of the word “secular” but also to the idea of a realm—the government or state—in which religion does not operate. If there is a realm in which it does not operate, then is religion necessary in other realms? And if it is not necessary in other realms, then one could imagine that the state sanctions or even promotes nonreligious identity and, hence, unbelief.

I am not suggesting that such reasoning unfolds instantaneously. The experiment sets up special conditions of contrast not immediately apparent to those living within a particular state discourse. However, I am suggesting that reasoning from state discourses to such conclusions can happen over the course of historical time. In other words, I am arguing that the alignment of the historically powerful word *freedom* with *religion* is a fateful one for religion.

While Roger Williams and William Penn may have been devout Christians, their promotion of “liberty of conscience” contributed to the circulation, through discourse, of the idea that there is no one true religion and, therefore, that it might be the case that no religion is true. Hence, the circulation of a discourse of “freedom of religion”—which is found in some variant of those words in 36 of the 40 constitutions studied here and which is present by association in two others, as well as in the 1905 French church and state law, that is, in 39 out of 40 constitutions—simultaneously promotes the background assumption or condition of belief that faith is just “one human possibility among others.”

Conclusion

I am now in a position to specify more precisely what is circulating and, simultaneously, the source of its propulsion. The what is a state discourse that connects *freedom* and *religion*—two powerful words—producing some phrase like “freedom of religion.” The phrase is emblematic and circulates across many cultural domains. Because its meanings are diffused, its interpretations can be variable. Indeed, the phrase is compatible with state religions, as in the case of Islam, as well as with godless Marxism–Leninism, as in the case Soviet Russia. It can have a meaning as narrow—as in the case of state religion—of not prohibiting the citizenry from practicing the religion. But it can also have a meaning as broad as that in Soviet Russia, where emphasis was on unbelief.

It would seem that the narrow meaning is incompatible with secularism⁶ in Taylor’s sense, yet even where there is an official state religion, the linkage of these words creates the possibilities for an interpretation that the state is willing to allow alternative forms of

⁶ The Indian constitution of 1950 uses the term “secularism” in a sense broader than that of religious freedom under the auspices of a state religion but narrower than the French concept. The Indian constitution mentions specific religions so frequently and with such specificity that it does not seem to promote a sphere independent of religion, so much as it does the cooperation among people of different religions in all spheres. For example, Article 25 states that “the wearing and carrying of *kirpans* [knives of a particular kind] shall be deemed to be included in the profession of the Sikh religion.” Of course, secularism here builds upon what is undoubtedly the world’s longest continuous history of the idea of “toleration,” going back to the Emperor Asoka in the third century BC.

religious expression, though it may ban the expression of unbelief.⁷ Even in this case, therefore, the propulsive force to which I have been alluding is operative: “freedom of religion” as metaculture is able to travel across boundaries established by religions as cultural systems of belief and practice.

At the same time, the tolerance of other religions under the umbrella of a state religion is already a considerable distance down the road from the frame of, for example, the 1824 Mexican constitution, which, as discussed earlier, protected the Roman Catholic Apostolic church “by wise and just laws” and prohibited “the exercise of any other whatever.” It is the exclusivity of this early Mexican constitutional discourse that the freedom of religion in its minimal sense overcomes. The freedom of religion clause suggests that the state will not only permit alternative religions within its borders, but will actually safeguard the practice of those religions and of the “profession” of the beliefs they promote. This is a minimal form of secularism.

It is a substantial step from here to the position first articulated in the US Bill of Rights in which government is forbidden from “establishing” a state or official religion. But it must be recalled that the American case involves the negation of an already circulating discursive form—the word *establish*, which had been widely used in UK for more than a century to acknowledge the adoption and regulation of a specific religion by the state, namely, the Church of England. The USA asserted its nascent “freedom” by denying domination by the English state, so that the forbidding of establishment was, in some ways, continuous with other forms of rejection. Even if the founding fathers only dimly perceived or failed to perceive at all the possibility of secularism in Taylor’s sense, that possibility was raised by the denial of *establishment*, a denial that could be seen as a denial of British dominance itself as much as a positive assertion of secularism. After all, the word form they chose was *establishment*, and there were other ways in which the relationship between church and state could have been expressed. Even if the discourse was created for pragmatic reasons, however—that is, differentiation from Europe—the choice had semantic consequences, consequences Americans have been confronting ever since.

In the Mexican case, independence from Spain left the dominant position of the Catholic Church intact. It was the revolt against the landholders that produced the constitution of 1917, and the true move towards Taylorian secularism that was already detectable in the 1857 constitution. Unlike the USA, which reacted to the British by denying “establishment,” the Mexican revolt borrowed phrasing from the US Bill of Rights: “Congress cannot enact laws establishing or prohibiting any religion.” The full meaning of this statement may have been clearer to the framers of the 1917 Mexican constitution than to those who crafted the Bill of Rights—they had knowledge of the more than 100 year history of the USA at the time of their work. However, even here, the reasons for adoption were probably pragmatic and analogical at least as much as semantic. The framers undoubtedly regarded a statement like that of the

⁷ Interestingly, some of the interviewees believe the idea of alternativity to be implicit in the notion of freedom, even when it is not explicitly stated as a right, as in the case of the fourth test alternative above. One interviewee commented:

Um, I think four is important because it’s, well the state guarantees the freedom of belief and the freedom of practicing religious rights, so it doesn’t necessarily say that it’s ok to not have a religion but I think it’s implied in its statement even though it doesn’t express it as explicitly as number two.

It seems not so implausible—special as this experimental interview situation is—that individuals could reason from a statement, such as No. 4 above, to the conclusion that freedom of unbelief and the freedom of not practicing religion is implicit in “the freedom of belief and the freedom of practicing religious rights.”

US Bill of Rights as way of denying the role of the Catholic Church, which had supported the dominant landowning class.

Of the 40 constitutions investigated here, 13 of them explicitly connect the state to religion.⁸ This is mainly through the formal device of declaring a state religion, as in the Bangladesh constitution: “The state religion of the Republic is Islam.” There is a clause connecting the name of the religion with the name of the state or with an anaphoric reference to it. Two of the constitutions, however, connect the state to religion generally, but not to a specific religion:

Indonesia: “The State shall be based upon the belief in the One and Only God”

Sudan: “Those working for the state and those in public life should worship God in their daily lives, for Muslims this is through observing the Holy Quran and the ways of the Prophet, and all people shall preserve the principles of religion and reflect this in their planning, laws, policies, and official work or duties in the fields of politics, economics, and social and cultural activities; with the end of striving towards the societal aim of justice and righteousness, and towards achieving the salvation of the kingdom of God.”

Of the remaining 27 constitutions, six have apparently no language connecting or disconnecting religion and state and three disconnect religion and state, but acknowledge a special place for God (Brazil) or the Catholic Church (Italy, Peru). The remaining 18 states contain language disconnecting any specific religion from the state. The three main formal ways of accomplishing the disconnection are (1) a clause forbidding *establishment* of religion, as discussed above (USA, Russia, Philippines, Mexico, Brazil); (2) the use of the word *secular* (Russia, Turkey, France, Democratic Republic of the Congo, India); and (3) language based on the phrase *separation of church and state* (Russia, Ethiopia, Ukraine, South Korea).⁹ The remaining constitutions use variants of these three or idiosyncratic language.

There is evidence here of formal copying in the efforts to disconnect religion from the state apparatus. Therefore, if such disconnection is a step along the path to Taylorian secularism, as I am proposing, then the step may have been taken, in many instances, for pragmatic reasons, in much the same way the connection between *freedom* and *religion* was adopted. Nevertheless, consequences for belief in transcendence could have ensued through the pathways of interpretation of state discursive forms.

So I am suggesting that the “condition of belief,” or the background assumption that spiritual faith is “just one human possibility among others,” circulates in a broader public not for reasons internal to the prevailing belief systems that existed several hundred years ago, but rather because of the connection between the word forms *freedom* and *religion* and their corresponding meanings. In an environment in which religions tended to seal off their

⁸ I am aware that there are, in theory, different ways in which states can be connected to or disconnected from religion. Loren P. Beth (1958: 124 ff.) argues for seven distinct ways: “Pure Theocracy, Total Separation, Mixed Theocracy, Total Identification, Total Conflict, Erastianism, Totalitarianism, and Partial Separation.” The British model of establishment can be thought of, in these terms, as Erastian, with the state controlling religion through the Church of England rather than promoting religion per se, which aligns it with the secular states and differentiates it from those where the state actually promotes a religion or religion generally. My discussion here will per force gloss over the subtleties at the theoretical plane in favor of the tendencies at the formal level of discourse.

⁹ The phrase “separation of church and state” was used as early as 1802 by Thomas Jefferson in his letter to the Danbury Baptists. He describes the establishment clause from the Bill of Rights as “building a wall of separation between Church & State” (Jefferson 1802).

borders from one another, the “freedom of religion” could circulate as metaculture,¹⁰ thereby enabling the creation of social relationships across these boundaries.

The immediate consequence of subscribing to a metaculture of “freedom of religion” is the assumption that the people with whom you interact may not share your religion. You may still expect them to have a religion and to believe in transcendence—that existence cannot be explained by immanent mechanism. However, “freedom of religion” as metaculture contains within it the seeds of doubt. My religion may not be the true religion, and, indeed, there may be no one true religion.

When the notion of no one true religion comes to seem the appropriate state discourse, thereby enabling social relations across religious boundaries, new pathways of interpretation are opened for citizens reasoning about state discourse. In particular, if there is no one true religion, then might it not be the case that there is no truth to religion? At such a juncture, it becomes obvious that a metaculture of “freedom of religion” should allow for the possibility of no religion, and, hence, “...the right to profess...any religion or to profess no religion at all...”

The “condition of belief” or the background assumption of secularism is, I am arguing, not internal to belief at all, *pace* Taylor. Rather, it is the product of the circulation of an explicit metaculture of “freedom of religion” at the level of state discourse. That discourse is interpreted to mean also that people have the right to profess no religion—an interpretation some states have taken further than others and whose citizens correspondingly profess less adherence to religion.

If secularism is a matter of circulation—the circulation of a particular metaculture—what can be said about subjective orientations to existence, about belief itself? Does the circulation thesis suggest that more and more people really do imagine or believe that existence can be explained without recourse to transcendence? I propose that this is not the case. If I am correct that secularism is really metaculture enabling social relations across differing domains of belief or unbelief, then professions of unbelief (or of belief in purely immanent accounts of reality) are really pragmatic responses to those circulating state metacultural discourses. They are to the metaculture of secularism what responses to the census questions regarding religion were to state policy in Imperial or Soviet Russia— attempts to either align with the state or to resist it. They do not occupy the deeper layers of meaning, where the shock of existence comes through and we have to ask anew: Why is there something rather than nothing? What is it all about? Those truly fundamental questions remain after the layers of circulation are peeled away. They cannot ultimately be reduced to a system of belief in immanence.

I am not arguing that no one has completely rejected transcendence. Certainly, many people claim that they have. I am arguing rather that the rejection is part of the processes of discourse circulation, an interaction with or participation in those processes. It does not tap into the core of being, where the shock of existence and the awareness of death can still overwhelm positioning within a sea of circulating discursive forms and meanings.

¹⁰ The 1791 Polish constitution, one of the three earliest modern constitutions, contained the clause: “...we guarantee freedom to all rites and religions in the Polish lands, in accordance with the laws of the land.” However, it also proclaimed: “The dominant national religion is and shall be the sacred Roman Catholic faith with all its laws. Passage from the dominant religion to any other confession is forbidden under penalties of apostasy.” Thanks to Dr. Karolina Szmagałska for bringing this to my attention. The formulation of metaculture to seal off boundaries of religions was a not an uncommon practice in early constitutions. For example, the 1814 constitution of Norway declared: “the Evangelical-Lutheran religion shall remain the official religion of the State,” and it stipulated that “the inhabitants professing it are bound to bring up their children in the same.”

The secret behind the propulsion of a metaculture of secularism is that it enables social relations across boundaries created by belief. This is the source of its power or force. But in crossing those boundaries, it simultaneously spawns the possibility of unbelief and leaves the possibility of unbelief in its wake. Yet if there were to be only unbelief in the world, if immanence did finally triumph over transcendence, there would no longer be a need for a metaculture of secularism. Its circulatory force would be sapped. This would in turn create the conditions out of which new belief could emerge and spread. Indeed, so basic are the questions of existence that answers to them provided in a world of unbelief would create tremendous propulsive force for belief, acknowledging the shock and awareness of existence to which any one of us could relate. Indeed, one might imagine a cycle starting anew in which different belief systems compete with one another, sealing themselves off in their endeavors to keep the faithful loyal to them. Such conditions would, therefore, facilitate the rise again of a metaculture of secularism, culture capable of crossing the boundaries and establishing social relations between people on different sides.

I have placed emphasis here on “freedom” and “religion” and suggested that it is the fateful connection between the two that gives rise to secularism in Taylor’s sense. While I have been concerned to trace this spread over the past two or two and a half centuries, roughly delimiting the period of national states and their state discourses, it is not hard to imagine that analogous circulatory processes were at work earlier. Indeed, in some sense, the seed of secularism is already present in the earliest ideas of conversion—the possibility of freely changing religious orientation—associated with Buddhism and later Christianity. Conversion enables the lateral movement of culture beyond the bounds created by transmission through families and communities over time. While conversion means adopting a true (or, at least, truer) faith, does it not also contain the seeds of what would later become the “freedom of religion?” A metaculture of conversion would have functioned in a world of religious communities closed by descent much the way a metaculture of secularism functions in a world of religions closed by belief.

The problem of religion takes us back finally to the mystery of circulation itself—why culture moves through world, where it is headed. I have argued that a metaculture of secularism acquires its circulatory force from the pragmatic possibilities it creates for establishing social relations across the chasms created by differing spiritual belief. In the course of its journey, it spawns the possibility of unbelief in its wake. But unbelief—or the belief in immanent understandings of existence—is itself part of culture. If culture drifts too far from its connection to experience, it risks losing its own propulsive force. A culture devoid of belief in transcendence can risk such a drift too far from experience of being. If I am right about existence being refractory to final reduction to immanent mechanism, then the belief in immanence must surely itself undergo change, at least acknowledging the possibility of transcendence in a sort of nervous and uncertain agnosticism. This imagines that culture, immaterial as it is, has something to do with the mystery that it is bound up with material processes in ways we have as yet failed to fully comprehend.

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