7. Postmodernity, Secularity, and Religion

Introduction

If the two forms of secularity I have analyzed so far, secularism and liberal secularity, differ in strength, they have in common a closed character that does not accept the religious other as equal. Highly antireligious secularisms such as Marxism-Leninism mimic liberal assuredness that theirs is the correct view, but one may tell the two apart by the more tolerant strength of the latter versus the weakly rigid antipathy of the former. Nonetheless, while liberal tolerance is an advance from secularist intolerance, it is still not true openness to religion as even a potential equal, but rather as precursor to, or substrate of, secularity. Before I sketch what a truly strong-open secularity can look like, however, it is necessary to provide a more stark counterpoint to the closed secularities already presented. What I call postmodern secularity is a third form of secularity, and it stresses openness to the validity of other belief systems. However, this is often achieved by sacrificing some of the cognitive strengths of liberal secularity to achieve inclusion.

While I call it postmodern secularity, I do not mean to equate it with postmodernism. Although they are related, I follow the convention of many writers and differentiate between the two. I call something postmodern if it engages with certain historical trends, such as the globalization of politics and economics, and refer to postmodernism as a more discrete set of theories that arose in the past several decades both in response to and in development of those trends. The theme that links the various responses is what Jean-François Lyotard called "incredulity toward all metanarratives,"[1] which in the context of this thesis denotes a challenge to the belief that secularity provides some kind of final or complete form of knowledge. While postmodernity and postmodernism are often seen as responses to modernity and therefore following from it, many writers

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[1] Lyotard, Jean-François, 1979, *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport sur le Savoir* (*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*), "Collection Critique" series (Paris, FR: Éditions de Minuit). This is cited in many places, usually in various English translations of the phrase.

acknowledge that their roots are deeper than that. One may better see postmodernity as the questioning nature of Enlightenment thought applied to itself, though the exact nature of this is debated.

Another debated point, and hotly so, is whether or not postmodernist thinkers are also relativists. Barry Allen, somewhat ironically, compares the situation to that during an era that was perhaps the height of faith in secularity: "As in the 18th century there were few who would openly own their atheism, so today "relativism" is not usually self-ascribed but deduced and denounced by critics."[2] While I will expand on all of these issues in this chapter, I would reiterate here that my purpose is not to analyze the work of any particular thinker or school, let alone create straw men to represent them, but to pose an ideal type for analysis. This ideal type allows me to identify theoretically pure elements that one may not find "in nature," as it were, which I will use later, in a more practical synthesis.

Relativism in Postmodern Secularity

Postmodernity, Postmodernism, and Relativism

Most authors differentiate between postmodernity, the conditions of contemporary life, and postmodernism, variously a philosophical school, a set of schools, or an aesthetic movement. David Lyon gives a clear juxtaposition of the two when he says that "postmodern*ity* relates to postmodern*ism* in that ... social, economic, and political conditions encourage a sense of cultural fragmentation and diversity."[3] Among the conditions Lyon notes are the development of both high-speed communication and consumerism, and thus a certain understanding of globalization. Because technological advances and political liberalism are their driving forces, the conditions are essentially modern ones, but the fragmentation and diversity they cause promote a skeptical attitude towards modernity itself.

2 Allen, Barry, 1994, "Atheism, Relativism, Enlightenment, and Truth," *Studies in Religion – Sciences Religiuses* 23(2): 167-177.
3 Lyon, David, 2000, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge, UK: Polity), p. 41.

Nor is this necessarily a very recent phenomenon. Many authors cite Friedrich Nietzsche as the first major secular thinker to criticize the conditions that modernity had created. Moreover, as I argued in the fourth chapter, the roots of such self-criticism go deeper than that, to the post-Enlightenment Romantics and even Enlightenment figures like Rousseau. As such, it is perhaps more accurate to refer to reflexive modernity,[4] where the critical nature of modern thought is turned on itself, but the term "postmodern" also has a long history. Even by the mid-twentieth century, historians and philosophers had begun using the term to designate a period beginning as early as the turn of that century as well as developments in both culture and thought in that period.[5] However, postmodernism as a distinct school of thought took shape in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Much of early postmodernism was aesthetic, as found in literary and architectural postmodernism. This was largely a response to modernism as an aesthetic style, which postmodern critics saw as being rooted in formal, rational principles that distanced people from direct experience. Postmodernists favored unmediated experience and, particularly in architecture, eclecticism and the revival of premodern forms.[6] Similarly, postmodern philosophy developed largely in opposition to the modern idea that one could achieve absolute knowledge of any sort through formal, rational thought. Notably, Michel Foucault's genealogical approach and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction emphasized the ways in which apparently objective knowledge has been shaped by many forces, notably power relations and the social location of those who define knowledge. Lyotard's definition of postmodern thinking as "incredulity toward all metanarraives" is the most succinct expression of the radical doubt with which one is left.

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4   A concept from Beck, Ulrich; Giddens, Anthony; and Lash, Scott, 1994, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition, and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Cambridge, UK: Polity/Blackwell).
5   Drolet, Michael, 2004, "Introduction," in: Drolet, Michael, ed., *The Postmodern Reader: Foundational Texts* (London, UK: Routledge): 1-35, pp. 4-7.
6   Ibid., pp. 7-12 for an expansion on these ideas.

A slew of intellectual currents and consequences flowed from this doubt when combined with the socioeconomic and political conditions mentioned above. Postmodernists celebrated nonmodern (and often non-Western) traditions and aesthetic styles, focused on image and representation rather than on content in communication and media, and criticized power structures of all kinds. Many people outside of modern institutions and power structures, who were differentiated by gender, sexuality, race, and so on, also made good use of this approach. In religious thought, as I mentioned in the second chapter, many theologians grappled with the consequences of postmodernism, and of the many cultural analyses that came from this Edward Said's *Orientalism*[7] is the most famous exposition of the ways the East has been conceptualized in Western thought. However, as my purpose here is to analyze postmodernism within secularity, I must leave these currents and turn to the philosophical question of whether postmodernism is inherently relativist.

As Allen noted, relativism is a quality not often self-ascribed so much as applied to many postmodernists by critics. However, in these debates the meaning of relativism is unclear. It is helpful to differentiate between two forms, simple and complex. Simple relativism is the belief that no one can find a purely objective viewpoint, so nothing is "true" and all truth claims are merely relative to their context. As Terry Eagleton stated, an advantage of this view is that "it allows you to drive a coach and horses through everybody else's beliefs while not saddling you with the inconvenience of having to adopt any yourself."[8] In turn, one can counter simple relativism with simple logic – if nothing is true, how does one prove it? This is not the *summum bonum*, however, of postmodernism. There is a more complex relativism in the idea that all beliefs are dependent on, and thus in that sense are relative to, a number of factors, including the

7 Said, Edward, 1978, *Orientalism* (New York, NY: Pantheon).
8 Eagleton, Terry, 1983, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell); quoted in: Patterson, Christina, 2003, "Terry Eagleton: Culture and Society," *Independent* (UK), 29 Sep., <enjoyment.independent.co.uk/books/interviews/story.jsp?story=447321> (as on 27 Jan. 2005). This is a position Eagleton no longer advocates, as is made clear in Patterson's interview, which is about his latest work, *After Theory*.

culture and experience of whoever holds them. This more subtle theory is advanced particularly well by Stanley Fish, who is a particularly suitable author to discuss here as he often applies this position specifically to religion and secularity.

Fish argues that no foundation for beliefs, whether concrete (text or person) or abstract (concept), is universally accepted, and for those that are widely accepted there is debate as to their implementation. Nor can there be an independent foundation, one that justifies belief without itself requiring belief (and thus being subject to interpretation). Rather, Fish contends, all beliefs are grounded in things like experience and social context, which are different for everyone. Moreover, any change in one's belief is worked out in relation to one's other beliefs and experiences. However, although there are no absolute foundations for belief, the ones that prefigure how one thinks "naturally" are still perfectly good at justifying what they have always justified in their own terms.[9] In truth, it is difficult to state Fish's position because it sounds too simple – one can not believe in a universal principle because one will always understand and express it in a particular way. While particular expressions may be true by their own criteria, this does not mean they will be universally accepted – someone will always have another way of expressing things. This does not mean that statements of truth are meaningless, but that meaning is always relative (in the complex sense) to a particular mode of expression.

Relativism, Ontology, and Common Ground

While this is a logically sound argument, Fish and (often to a greater extent) others over-, even mis-, apply it. A primary way this happens is though the confusion of ontology and epistemology. Some extreme, and simple, relativists may deny an external or objective reality as such – Fish does not. He does differentiate between facts that are independent of any given perspective, one's belief that a statement concerning such is true, and one's ability to inevitably demonstrate that to others.[10] Thus, For Fish truth is

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9 Fish, Stanley, 1999, "A Reply to J. Judd Owen," *American Political Science Review* 93(4): 925-930, pp. 925-927, for this summary.
10 Fish, Stanley, 2002, "Postmodern Warfare: The Ignorance of Our Warrior Intellectuals," *Harper's Magazine*, July, <www.findarticles.com/cf_dls/m1111/1826_305/88998669/p1/article.jhtml> (as

not arbitrary, is not relative to a "language game" as some would hold, but nor are all statements inherently obvious. For example, at the most basic level, if a person did not understand the language in which a claim was made, the claim would be in that sense meaningless, though the claim itself, properly translated, might be obvious. However, it is possible to overapply this idea, especially in analyzing science.

A telling example of this is what is variously called the "Sokal" or "Social Text Affair." In this, a physicist, Alan Sokal, submitted a paper full of shoddy science purporting to justify various postmodernist ideas to the journal *Social Text*, to see if the editors would publish it. They did, without the benefit of even a cursory review by a scientist. Sokal later revealed his hoax and defended it in a number of journals. He said that, among other things, he sought to demonstrate that a penchant for viewing all truths as socially constructed or relative, even in the complex sense, lends itself to the misunderstanding of scientific knowledge and an unwillingness, even inability, to judge that knowledge on its own terms. Sokal felt, as a leftist, that such a stance disabled the left in making critical judgments about the uses to which science was put.[11] While in itself the event proved nothing in sociological terms, as it was a single article and not a wide-ranging study, many of the responses highlighted the very points Sokal was trying to make.[12]

One of the coeditors of *Social Text*, Bruce Robbins, contended, "One conclusion *not* to draw is that if non-scientists like us are incompetent to judge what scientists do, then only scientists can be allowed to judge it."[13] This was a great misreading of Sokal's

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on 27 Jan. 2005).

11 The original article was: Sokal, Alan, 1996, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," *Social Text* (46/47): 217-252. He revealed the hoax in: "A Physicist Experiments with Cultural Studies," *Lingua Franca*, May/June: 62-64, and explained it further in: "Transgressing the Boundaries: An Afterword," *Dissent* 43(4): 93-99. Sokal maintains an archive with these articles and much related commentary at <www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/> (as on 27 Jan. 2005).

12 Fish himself responded: Fish, Stanley, 1996, "Professor Sokal's Bad Joke," *New York Times*, 21 May, <www.nytimes.com/books/98/11/15/specials/sokal-fish.html> (registration required, as on 27 Jan. 2005). However, his essay seems to miss the point of Sokal's piece and argue on another topic raher than to effectively criticize Sokal, so I will not use it here.

13 Robbins, Bruce, 1996, "Anatomy of a Hoax," *Tikkun*, Sep./Oct.: 58-59.

point, which was that it is imperative to know the difference between judging what scientists do and judging what the knowledge gained is used for, to avoid looking like a fool. Sokal repeatedly and explicitly praised *Social Text* and the humanities more generally for their role in the latter judgment. He sought only to argue against eliding "truth with *claims* of truth, fact with *assertions* of fact, and knowledge with *pretensions* to knowledge" – or ontology with epistemology.[14] Sokal would agree with a complex relativist stance that scientific truth *claims* are always relative to the ability or willingness of scientists to ask certain questions. However, he sought to demonstrate that it is just a short step from there to depreciating, if not denying, that some truth claims are made in relation to things independent of the maker.

A more fundamental overapplication that Fish explicitly makes is when he minimizes the possibility of communication based on common grounds. He moves from the idea that no statement can be universal to contend that it is impossible for one to convince otherwise someone who believes something one does not. For Fish, this is rooted in the incommensurablity of worldviews. While he believes that it is possible for people's views to change, this must happen in relation to their systems of belief and can not come from sources they do not accept. Fish takes as an example a hypothetical conversation between a Christian and an atheist – while two Christians could debate a point about Biblical interpretation because they both accept the Bible to be authoritative, such a conversation with an atheist who denies this fundamental proposition is impossible.[15] However, this takes as a given that, in the whole host of grounds one has for beliefs – authoritative texts, teachers, or experiences – the Christian and atheist will not share a single one. Were they to, although the Bible conversation would remain temporarily unresolved, they could perhaps build on their common grounds until they could both find purchase in that conversation.

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14 Quote from: Sokal, Alan, 1996, "Truth or Consequences: A Brief Response to Robbins," *Tikkun*, Nov./Dec.: 58. A fuller discussion of ontology, epistemology, and ethics features in "Transgressing the Boundaries."
15 Fish, "A Reply to J. Judd Owen," p. 926.

Moreover, Fish minimizes the possibility that two parties could come to similar conclusions based on different grounds. In analyzing the relation of religion to liberalism, Fish goes beyond saying that the religious should not accept the liberal claim to universality for reasons outlined above. Instead, he says, "The religious person should not seek an accommodation with liberalism; he [*sic*] should seek to rout it from the field, to extirpate it, root and branch."[16] This is not his personal view on the matter, however – rather, it is an exhortation not to "accept liberalism's invitation to bring those [absolute] convictions to the table of rational, deliberative, and open inquiry, because to do so would be to make rationality, deliberateness, and openness into their gods, and if they did that, they would be committing idolatry."[17] But to say this is to presume that no religion could justify, in ways perfectly consonant with its own tradition, rationality, deliberation, and openness, and thus come to that table on its own terms. Although all belief systems have irrational or closed manifestations, that they can also change I argued in the first and second chapters.

Postmodern Secularity and Religion

Perhaps this line of argument makes Fish and others look unreasonable or opposed to religious belief, which is not the case. Indeed, Fish specifically and postmodernists more generally are noted for their willingness to include religious belief systems as they are, rather than attacking them in a secularist manner or requiring them to conform to certain standards of public interaction as would a liberal secular. However, this openness is often predicated on a lack of engagement with such belief systems, either by minimizing the role of knowledge independent of beliefs or by assuming incommensurability of worldviews. Simple relativism aside, even complex relativism can encourage these tendencies. While there is much to be said for inclusiveness in spite of dissimilarity, a lack of engagement can hamper opportunities for true peacemaking.

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16 Fish, Stanley, 1996, "Why We Can't All Just Get Along," *First Things* 60: 18-26, p. 21.
17 Fish, "A Reply to J. Judd Owen," p. 929.

An able proponent of including religion in international discourse as a general principle is Scott Thomas. For him, "the global resurgence of religion" is rooted in three main things: the broader philosophical crisis of modernity, the more specific failure of modernity to produce democracy and development in the Third World, and a search by those for whom modernity has failed for their own authentic development.[18] Including religious voices in these latter projects is particularly important for Thomas. While he notes that liberal communitarian thinkers recognize that democracy and development are dependent on norms and values deeper than the mere political form of society, he contends that they disregard the religious roots of many of those values. As a result, liberal seculars do not have any real alternative to approaches based on the "Westphalian presumption," that religion must remain separate from public discourse.[19] A common theme for Thomas is that, philosophically, postmodernists and the religious both recognize limits to the secular disenchantment of the world, and thus they could work together on practicable alternatives. However, Thomas only briefly touches on possible dangers to including religion in public discourse, in terms of its promoting violence, and does not discuss possible responses to such an occurrence.

Such an approach of superficial inclusion underlies what I called the weak version of Andreas Hasenclever's and Volker Rittberger's constructivist approach[20] and the consequent promotion of religion as a force for peace in the first chapter. There is a tendency to take religion "as it comes," and attempt to include religious peacemakers without first providing an analysis of the inner dynamics of religious discourse and how it may promote both violent and peaceful responses to conflict. Douglas Johnston's and Cynthia Sampson's *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft* does this. Their

18 Thomas, Scott, 2000, "Taking Religious and Cultural Pluralism Seriously: The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Society," *Millennium* 29(3): 815-841, pp. 816-817.
19 Thomas, Scott, 2000, "Religious Resurgence, Postmodernism, and World Politics," in: Esposito, John L., and Watson, Michael, eds., *Religion and Global Order*, "Religion, Culture, and Society" series (Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press): 38-65, esp. pp. 39-46, for a discussion of communitarians. Another critique of the "Westphalian presumption" is in "Taking Religious and Cultural Pluralism Seriously," p. 819.
20 Hasenclever, Andreas, and Rittberger, Volker, 2000, "Does Religion Make a Difference? Theoretical Approaches to the Impact of Faith on Political Conflict," *Millennium* 29(3): 641-674, p. 647.

collection of essays highlights the role of religion as a force for peace in a number of conflicts, but in most of these conflicts religion itself was not at issue.[21]

It would not do to easily dismiss either Johnston or Thomas. For one, there is ample evidence of the peacemaking role religions can play when religion is not itself at issue, and that is reason enough for seculars peacemakers to engage with religious ones. Moreover, in Johnston's more recent work, he confronts the violent aspects of religion directly. His *Faith-Based Diplomacy* is a collection of essays on the role of peace-minded religious people in countering violent interpretations of their respective religions. In the introduction, he uses the metaphor of "fighting fire with fire" to highlight this role.[22] Likewise, Thomas eschews the development of a "thin" morality of global hospitality for a much more "thick" approach: "identifying those [hospitable] practices of particular religious and cultural traditions, the virtues necessary to sustain them, and cultivating and supporting them."[23] Such an approach requires differentiating constructive and destructive elements in different traditions to identify which to support.

However, neither Johnston nor Thomas prescribes a way to do this that truly promotes engagement between religious and secular views, relying instead on superficial inclusion. Johnston's faith-based diplomacy is solely conceptualized as a track-II or unofficial approach, and where he addresses official institutions they are only enjoined to employ specialists, such as religious affairs attachés or military chaplains.[24] He does not discuss how institutions might develop a widespread critical appreciation for the potential for religion. Johnston also explains a spiritual perspective supports many of the benefits of including religions, such as their often widespread and respected institutions or their leaders' personal qualities like perseverance and openness,[25] but he

21 Johnston, Douglas, and Sampson, Cynthia, eds., 1994, *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press).
22 Johnston, Douglas, 2003, "Introduction: Realpolitik Expanded," in: Johnston, ed., *Faith-Based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press): 3-10, p. 6.
23 Thomas, "Taking Religious and Cultural Pluralism Seriously," p. 841.
24 Johnston, Douglas, and Cox, Brian, 2003, "Faith-Based Diplomacy and Preventive Engagement," in: Johnston, ed., *Faith-Based Diplomacy*: 11-29, p. 15 for "track II" and pp. 24-26 for attachés and chaplains.
25 Ibid., pp. 14-22 *passim* for various points that may or may not be available to the secular but are

does not discuss the benefits of a secular view that one may wish to preserve. Similarly, it is difficult to find in Thomas's work an appreciation for what seculars could bring to the table once the "Westphalian presumption" is discarded. Their approach is largely to champion religious perspectives on peacemaking, which, while it is an important step, does not in itself produce a more inclusive model.

Postmodern Secularity in Practice

Science and Indigenous Knowledge

Debates concerning the understanding of "knowledge," which is often an important aspect of dialog between religious and secular worldviews, form the first example of postmodern ideas at work. Particularly in the field of development, "indigenous knowledge" has come to challenge knowledge derived from formal, scientific methods – which are also often labeled Western or colonialist. This can be a very useful approach because making use of local, experiential knowledge in underdeveloped areas can foster advances that scientific, experimental approaches may take much more time to introduce. Development groups can thus avoid reinventing the wheel.[26] However, proponents of this process can argue from an overly-postmodernist perspective, overemphasizing the limits of "Enlightenment" thought in order to make room for other ways of knowing.[27] When this happens, the idea of correct knowledge, or truth, howsoever arrived at, can become lost in the search for knowledge that comes from the right people.

A good example of this process is given by Nandini Sundar, who describes the situation in India, where the Hindu right has transformed "knowledge" into a cultural battleground. In February 2001, the University Grants Commission in India announced

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presented as religious.

26 Grenier, Louise, 1998, *Working with Indigenous Knowledge: A Guide for Researchers* (Ottawa, CA: International Development Research Centre).

27 Sillitoe, Paul, 2002, "Participant Observation to Participatory Development: Making Anthropology Work," in: Sillitoe; Bicker, Alan; and Pottier, Johan, eds., *Participating in Development: Approaches to Indigenous Knowledge*, "ASA Monographs" series, n. 39 (London, UK: Routledge): 1-23, pp. 6-7.

that it would fund departments in Vedic astrology and Hindu ritual.[28] The former in particular might appeal to proponents of indigenous knowledge, as astrology is rooted in precolonial achievements in Indian astronomical work that was denigrated by colonial education. Astrology has also become part of local, everyday "common sense" in that it guides and shapes practical aspects of many people's lives in India.[29] However, not only have many Indian scientists objected that astrology is incompatible with scientific norms of knowledge, but as Sundar points out it can also reinforce some of the more problematic aspects of right-wing presumptions of Hindu culture, not least the inferiority of women.[30] Thus a confrontation is set between scientific and religious approaches to knowledge, which here takes the form of a debate on indigenous knowledge.

In such a confrontation, it is certainly possible to take proscience arguments too far, as Jan Nederveen Pieterse accuses Bassam Tibi of in a pair of articles in *Theory, Culture, and Society*.[31] Much like secularists and some liberal seculars as described in previous chapters, Tibi can be somewhat adamant in his distinction between "scientific" and "fundamentalist" truth claims. He holds that the latter will always try to displace the former for narrow, communal political ends. Nederveen Pieterse calls this "dichotomic thinking." Nederveen Pieterse notes that one should ask what a supposedly "fundamentalist" project is really doing: "What is at issue is not indigenization per se but the wider orientation of which it forms part: whether it is inward looking only, or adopts a double gaze, inward and outward looking at the same time. The former yields provincialism, the latter creativity."[32] Unfortunately, Nederveen Pieterse does not offer a specific way to tell the difference.

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28 Sundar, Nandini, 2002, ""Indigenise, Nationalise, and Spiritualise" – An Agenda for Education?" *International Social Science Journal* (173): 373-383, pp. 375-376.
29 Ibid., pp. 376-377.
30 Ibid., pp. 377-378.
31 Tibi, Bassam, 1995, "Culture and Knowledge: The Politics of Islamization of Knowledge As a Postmodern Project? The Fundamentalist Claim to De-Westernization," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 12(1): 1-24. Nederveen Pieterse, Jan, 1996, "A Severe Case of Dichotomic Thinking: Bassam Tibi on Islamic Fundamentalism," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 13(4) 123-126.
32 Nederveen Pieterse, "A Severe Case of Dichotomic Thinking," p. 126.

If the focus is on the social location of the actors producing knowledge, one may lose the ability to criticize false information. This does not require limiting conceptions of truth to the scientific. Sokal argued as much – although a physicist, he cites the historian Eric Hobsbawm to show "how rigorous historical work can refute the fictions propounded by reactionary nationalists in India, Israel, the Balkans and elsewhere."[33] Without an ontology, a theory of being, that recognizes facts that are independent of actors, it is difficult to argue against people who use their preferred idea of truth to promote a political end. Including such objective truths does not necessitate essentializing all knowledge as physical or material – to do so would be to truly fall into what postmodernists might call an Enlightenment or Cartesian trap. Certainly, historical or social truths are subjective and must be interpreted, and such interpretations vary from person to person and group to group. However, one must also acknowledge the factual aspects of historical or social events. Otherwise, those with the best claim to indegenaity, not necessarily the best information, can set political and social agendas, as is happening in India.

Moreover, support for indigenous knowledge on account of its indigenaity, rather than its practical value, disguises the history of cooperation and contestation that creates hybrid forms of knowledge. Michael Dove illustrates this with an account of the ways that South-East Asian rubber smallholders have interacted with the wider world, in acquiring the rubber plant (native to South America) as well as in finding better ways of cultivating it than were used on managed plantations.[34] Dove argues that approaches that emphasize indigenaity mask the true interdependence, the give and take of the development of knowledge that favors neither the local nor the foreign. Tania Murray Li notes that a scholarly focus on the indigenous over the exogenous can also lend support to a "sedentarist metaphysic" that values the local that does not move over the

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33 Sokal, "Transgressing the Boundaries: An Afterword."
34 Dove, Michael R., 2002, "Hybrid Histories and Indigenous Knowledge Among Asian Rubber Smallholders," *International Social Science Journal* (173): 349-359.

foreign that has moved. In turn, this can promote violence toward migrants and others who are (perceived to be) outsiders.[35] These consequences represent what Nederveen Pieterse would call an inward-looking, provincial indigenaity – while outward-looking, creative forms are very possible, excessive focus on indigenous knowledge for its own sake can hamper their development.

Salman Rushdie and The Satanic Verses

The second example of postmodern secular responses to the role of religion in conflict concerns Salman Rushdie and the affair surrounding his novel *The Satanic Verses*.[36] Among other themes, *The Satanic Verses* tackles the idea of revelation through a highly controversial relation of the foundation of Islam. The title of the novel refers to a story from early Muslim history that Satan was able to slip a few verses into the Koran against Allah's will, although these were soon corrected, and the novel relates this in a fictional setting. Also, several passages relate a story of how Salman the Persian, an important figure in early Islamic history, sought to test Mohammed's memory by altering his transcription. These passages, though fiction, directly challenge the theological idea that the Koran is incorruptible, divine revelation. The passages also criticize both Mohammed, regarded as the perfect Muslim, and Salman, one of the first converts. Moreover, at many points Rushdie uses offensive language and images in his relation of these and other stories – Mohammed is called Mahound, an epithet used by Crusaders; several scenes depict a brothel in which the prostitutes take on the personas of Mohammed's wives to entice the "pious" clientele; and these and other important figures of early Islam are often insulted by other characters or treated with course language.

These aspects of the novel inevitably caused great offense to many Muslims. To

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35 Li, Tania Murray, 2002, "Ethnic Cleansing, Recursive Knowledge, and the Sedentarist Metaphysic," *International Social Science Journal* (173): 361-371. Li notes that "sedenatrist metaphysic" comes from Malkki, Liisa, 1992, "National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialisation of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees," *Cultural Anthropology* 7(1): 24-44.
36 Rushdie, Salman, 1988, *The Satanic Verses* (New York, NY: Viking/Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin).

prevent unrest, many countries banned the book outright. Muslim groups in the United

Kingdom sought similar action from the government, at first by formal, institutional

means, and then through more vigorous forms of protest. The most famous of these was

the burning of a copy of *The Satanic Verses* in Bradford on 14 January 1989. However,

all of this was to no avail – neither the publisher nor the government changed their

stances. Soon thereafter, the conflict became more international. In mid-February,

protests in India and Pakistan turned violent, and on 14 February, the Ayatollah

Khomeini of Iran issued a fatwa, a religious judgment, against Rushdie and any others

who cooperated in publishing the book, condemning them to death. While this was not

a common wish among British Muslims, people often conflated their position and that

of the Ayatollah. Here the conflict became a stalemate, with one side demanding the

book's banning and the other refusing on the principles of the freedom of speech. There

the issue has remained.[37]

However, there are other ways to read *The Satanic Verses*. As much as the book is

critical of Islam, more specifically of dogmatic Islam, it is also highly critical of

problems in the West, including racism and intolerance. This is brought out by the

development of the main character, Saladin Chamcha. Chamcha eventually leaves

England, where he has been a "proper" English-sounding radio personality who not

become an actor due to his Indian heritage. He returns to Bombay and retakes his birth

name, Salahuddin Chamchawalla. By doing so, he makes some peace with his family,

home country, and self. Thus, one could see *The Satanic Verses* as Rushdie's attempt to

make peace with his own, similar past and to act as a bridge between two cultures.

Unfortunately, he fails – in the end, as Bridget Fowler argues, his use of the "comic

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37 A particularly good overview of the early days of the affair comes from Lustig, Robin; Bailey, Martin;
de Bruxelles, Simon; and Mather, Ian, 1989, "War of the Word," *The Observer*, 19 Feb.,
<observer.guardian.co.uk/race/story/0,11255,603760,00.html> (as on 27 Jan. 2005). They
quote the full text of Khomeini's fatwa, which emphasizes that it was not solely directed against
Rushdie. They also note that the first UK book burning was in Bolton – the Bradford event was the
first that was well-reported by the media. See also Lewis, Philip, 2002, *Islamic Britain: Religion,
Politics, and Identity among British Muslims*, "2nd ed." (1st 1994) (London, UK: I.B. Tauris), pp.
156-160, for a narration of the events from the Bradford Muslim's perspective.

grotesque" as a way to demystify (but not necessarily reject) Islam makes it difficult or impossible for many Muslims to hear his message.[38] Nor did many of Rushdie's defenders (largely in the West) attempt to reinterpret *The Satanic Verses* to better suit Muslim audiences, relying instead on the argument that Rushdie's freedom of speech must be defended. For Pnina Werbner, to forsake an interpretive approach in favor of the free speech argument was to tacitly agree that *The Satanic Verses* was merely insulting but that this should still be defended. Muslims necessarily took this as justifying any attack on their beliefs.[39]

One Western critic who agreed with that conclusion was Richard Webster, writing in *A Brief History of Blasphemy: Liberalism, Censorship, and "The Satanic Verses".*[40] He argues that both Western free-speech defenders and Muslims in the West who burnt copies of *The Satanic Verses* misunderstood the message they were sending to one another.[41] The Bradford Muslims may not have realized the message they would send through the burning of a book, given the association with both more recent Nazi censorship and historical examples of religious intolerance in Europe. The fatwa exacerbated this concern in the West, though, Webster notes, this was out of the hands of the average Muslim. Equally, though, defending *The Satanic Verses* on any grounds sent the message that any Muslim beliefs and perhaps, by extension, Muslims themselves were acceptable targets.[42] Generally, Webster found no redeeming value in *The Satanic Verses*. Rather than it being a creative criticism of dogmatism, Webster found it to be merely insulting, and as such indefensible. However, Webster does not seem to engage with the story of Saladin Chamcha or any of the other themes, concentrating instead on those elements that gave offense.

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38 Fowler, Bridget, 2000, "A Sociological Analysis of the *Satanic Verses* Affair," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 17(1): 39-61.

39 Werbner, Pnina, 1996, "Allegories of Sacred Imperfection: Magic, Hermeneutics, and Passion in *The Satanic Verses*," *Current Anthropology* 37(supplement): S55-S69 (responses to S86), p. S69.

40 Webster, Richard, 1990, *A Brief History of Blasphemy: Liberalism, Censorship, and "The Satanic Verses"* (Southwold, UK: Orwell).

41 This is supported by: Lewis, *Islamic Britain*, pp. 156-158.

42 Webster, *A Brief History of Blasphemy*, pp. 134-135.

Taking an opposing view is Damon Grant, who argues, as many others do, that *The Satanic Verses* is more critical of the West than the Muslim world, and that it opposes violence justified by any belief.[43] However one defends Rushdie, though, "this must include a recognition that the very terms of the argument will make their conclusions unacceptable, even incomprehensible, to others." While this does not mean that violence is ever acceptable, neither can one expect a resolution.[44] What is left is, essentially, a continuing interplay between mutually incomprehensible groups. With Webster and Grant, then, one sees two variants of the postmodern secular approach to *The Satanic Verses*. The former is open to other viewpoints while only weakly defending its own, while the latter assumes, as Fish does, that dialog is impossible, albeit Grant argues that one attempt it nonetheless.

Multiculturalist Republicans and the Hijab in France

We now return to the case of France and the 1989 eruption of *l'affaire du foulard Islamique,* the affair of the Islamic veil. In the previous two chapters, I analyzed what Jeremy Jennings called traditionalist and modernizing – in my terms secularist and liberal – republicans.[45] Specifically at question was whether Muslim girls of the North African immigrant community ought to wear the hijab, or veil, to public schools in accordance with their private practice of Islam. This involved broader understandings of the *laïque*, or secular, nature of the French Republic and the space it would allow for religious symbols in the public sphere. Using the terms of Dominique Schanpper, a French Public intellectual who wrote on the subject, traditionalists sought to bar such public expression in favor of a absolutist understanding of French *laïcité*, or secularity. They felt it was the best expression of Enlightenment rationality and thus something into which it was worth assimilating immigrants. Modernizers such as Schanpper were

43 Grant, Damon, 1999, *Salman Rushdie*, "Writers and Their Work" series (Plymouth, UK: Northcote House), pp. 87-88.
44 Ibid., p. 92.
45 Jennings, Jeremy, 2000, "Citizenship, Republicanism, and Multiculturalism in Contemporary France," *British Journal of Political Science* 30(4): 575–598.

more tolerant of particular cultural variations provided they were grounded in an

understanding of universal norms, here represented by the ideals, if not the

manifestation, of the French polity.[46] We can now look at Jennings' multiculturalist, my

postmodern, republicans.

Multiculturalist Republicans tended to shift from emphasis on the universal as

ground for particularities to the particularities themselves as alternative or novel

expressions of the universal. Important to this position was research done by groups

like the Centre d'Analyse et d'Intervention Sociologique (Center for Sociological

Analysis and Intervention, CADIS). CADIS found that, rather than representing a

"fundamentalist threat" to the secular nature of the schools, many girls who chose to

wear scarves during *l'affaire* did so as a way to assert an identity both French and

Muslim.[47] This represented a possible attempt to base Republican values *on* an identity

inclusive of Islam, an identity marginalized if religious symbols were eliminated or even

merely tolerated in the public sphere. Moreover, many multiculturalist Republicans

realized Nederveen Pieterse's observation, that identities that were inward-looking only

risked closing off from one another. This could lead to the sort of tribalism that

traditionalist Republicans feared. Multiculturalists identified this possibility with

"American" multiculturalism and cautioned against it.[48]

However, there was hardly a unified group of multiculturalist Republicans. The

French antiracist organizations were split over a proper response to *l'affaire*. Some, like

SOS-Racisme, opposed the terms of the debate – they saw it as distracting from the real

question of the proper schooling of immigrants, whatsoever clothing they wore. Others,

like France-Plus, sought to defend the *laïque* nature of the public schools.[49] In this

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46 Taken from Schnapper, Dominique, 1994, *La Communauté des Citoyens: Sur l'Idée Moderne de Nation* (Paris, FR: Gallimard), as discussed in: Jennings, "Citizenship, Republicanism, and Multiculturalism in Contemporary France," pp. 589-592.

47 Gaspard, Françoise, and Khosrokhavar, Farhad, 1995, *Le Foulard et la République* (Paris, FR: La Découverte), cited in: Jennings, "Citizenship, Republicanism, and Multiculturalism in Contemporary France," p. 594.

48 Jennings, "Citizenship, Republicanism, and Multiculturalism in Contemporary France," pp. 593-594 passim.

49 Hervieu-Léger, Danièle, 1998, "The Past in the Present: Redefining *Laïcité* in Multicultural France,"

context, multiculturalist language was used to justify a number of positions, including

some that were rather more *laïque*. Many Muslims promoted a minimalist definition of

laïcité, understood as respect for differences and freedom of expression, not as any

particular way of organizing the social sphere. The only limit to the right of expression

was the rights of others.[50] This approach minimized the importance of common political

ideals in forming a society – freedom of expression alone does not guarantee that all

people will come to express similar views. Without agreed-upon methods of resolving

differences of opinion, for example on what rights one must respect in others,

communities may begin to grow apart.

Because of this disunion, the multiculturalist approach, though it had its able

proponents like CADIS, could also disguise more problematic positions. For example,

Rachel Bloul contends that, although the conflict was ostensibly about women and girls,

female perspectives were marginalized in the debate. Women and their behaviors

became cultural makers that differentiated one group from another.[51] Although this

happened among those that attacked the veil as well as those that defended it, it can take

a particularly insidious form when it occurs in defense of multicultural ideal. As Clare

Beckett and Marie Macey point out, multiculturalism that defends minorities by

defending cultural practices can obscure practices that violate other human rights. This

is particularly the case regarding rights related to gender and sexuality, as these tend to

be less open to public protection.[52] In this case, multiculturalist Republicans may have

overlooked the validity of feminist criticism, associated more with those opposed to the

veil, that it represented aspects of Islam that were contrary to women's rights. The work

of CADIS shows that this is not the sum of the multiculturalist position, nor was it the

in: Berger, Peter L., ed., *The Limits of Social Cohesion: Conflict and Mediation in Pluralist Societies* (Boulder, CO: Westview): 38-83, p. 67.

50 Bloul, Rachel, 1996, "Engendering Muslim Identities: Deterritorialization and the Ethnicization Process in France," in: Metcalf, Barbara Daly, ed., *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*, "Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies" series (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press): 234-250, pp. 238-239.

51 Ibid.

52 Beckett, Clare, and Macey, Marie, 2001, "Race, Gender, and Sexuality: The Oppression of Multiculturalism," *Women's Studies International Forum* 24(3/4): 309–319.

case for girls who freely chose the veil. However, a focus on the importance of the group and group norms at the expense of the individual is another form of the postmodern secular tendency to value knowledge according to its social location rather than its effects.

An Assessment

Strength versus Weakness

Now that I have analyzed postmodern secularity and shown how it applies to various cases, I can assess it in terms of the overarching themes of this thesis – strength versus weakness and openness versus closedness. On the first theme, postmodern secularity is relatively weak. By this I do not mean that it is necessarily poorly argued – it is easy to find proponents of each of the forms of secularity I have identified that do not argue their positions well. Rather, postmodern secularity is weak in that, in a number of ways, it disables substantive debate between people who hold different worldviews. The root of this weakness comes from the misapplication of complex relativism. To say that no absolute or universal perspective is possible because people must form their views according to their experiences is true enough. One is to a great degree shaped by one's upbringing and the religious or cultural background from which one comes. To extend this to say that people coming from different backgrounds, and thus holding different views, can never share anything that they can each call true profoundly circumscribes the possibility for communication and thus for peacemaking.

In part, this is a matter of the respective value placed on ontology versus epistemology, on one's understanding of a reality external to any particular perspective versus one's ability to fully explain that reality. This matter was vividly exemplified by the "Social Text Affair." Sokal felt that postmodernists, in the name of redressing imbalanced power relations in knowledge production, had undermined the academic value placed on facts demonstrable regardless of the inclination of the audience. A complex relativist like Fish does not dispute the existence of such facts, but rather he

argues that there is no way to demonstrate any given fact to everyone all of the time.

For Fish, one may form an ontology, a way one can describe what is external to one's

theories, but epistemologically there is no way to convince everyone of its value. This

leads to an impasse – essentially, it seems that this sort of postmodernism would have

physicists such as Sokal perform their experiments but not try to convince anyone other

than fellow physicists of their utility. However, this can lead to the sort of problem

found in certain approaches to indigenous knowledge – if one does not posit some

standards of objective truth, then "truth" is defined by whoever has the best

presentation, not necessarily the those with the best facts. This usually devolves into

"truth" being defined by the powerful, such as the religious right in India. This is ironic,

given that one of the original motives of postmodernism was to uncover how truth had

been historically shaped by power.

   Another key way in which complex relativism circumscribes the possibility of

communication is that it can be essentialist. This is especially clear in Fish's

presentation. For him, when religious and secular people come into conflict,

communication can not even get started because they will not be able to agree on core

tenets. For example, Fish clearly believes that religious and secular people could never

agree on the nature of public discourse. This essentializes both the religious and

secular, each in two ways. First, each side is defined by its commitments. Belief must

be paramount, such that any other common ground, even something as basic as desire

for peace, can not serve as a point to begin dialog. Second, neither side can change.

Because, by Fish's understanding, religious doctrine is inherently opposed to

"rationality, deliberateness, and openness," the religious person can never justify, for

religious reasons, these principles. There is no guarantee that either side can find

common ground on such contentious issues, but Fish deems it *pre facto* impossible,

removing any reason to even try. This can lead to a situation as with *The Satanic Verses*

– that some people relied on an ideal of free speech without attempting to assess or

reinterpret the speech itself came across, to Muslims, as a justification to slander their beliefs.

This essentialism links postmodern secularity with secularism, in that the weakness of each necessitates the belief that neither the religious nor the secular can change. For the secularist, the conclusion drawn is that they must remain implacable enemies and that each side should shore itself up as best it can for the inevitable conflict. Postmodern seculars are more accepting of the religious *qua* religious people, but not necessarily as partners in dialog to create a community.

Openness versus Closedness

The willingness of postmodern secularity to take the religious as they present themselves, if not truly engage with them, is distinctly different from both secularism and liberal secularity. Where they are both closed to religion, postmodern secularity is at least open to it. Fish put this succinctly in describing how one ought to respond to those with whom one disagrees because of their religion: "You do not attribute their recalcitrance to insanity or mere criminality – the desired public categories of condemnation – but to the fact" that they believe differently. Fish argues that one can admit this and still think that they believe falsely.[53] The secularist, on the other hand, would lean towards an explanation based on the irrationality – or even, as Fish says, insanity – of religious belief. For a secularist, to hold religious beliefs is not just to be mistaken but to fail to perceive the world clearly. The liberal secular may lean toward the explanation of criminality, especially if the religion in question is violating the liberal maxim that places religion in the private sphere. From a liberal secular perspective, because it can include privatized religion, a religious desire to act in the public sphere must be due to malfeasance.

A fundamental aspect of the openness of postmodern secularity is its complex relativism. Again, this is not the simple relativism that holds that all beliefs are relative

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53 Fish, "Postmodern Warfare."

to the believer, and that no one can stipulate "truth" for anyone else. Rather, this is epistemological relativism as found in critical realism. Here, one's knowledge of a real, independently existing world is limited and contextual, and one may be wrong. This is key to the work of Fish, and is what Sokal agreed with in his *Social Text* experiment. Although they would perhaps be at odds over the role of scientific methods or the possibility of objectivity, both warned against truth being defined by the powerful. Most importantly, complex relativism encourages a certain skepticism towards one's own beliefs. This allows one to better assess the beliefs of others on their own merits rather than according to predefined schema.

A willingness to take religious people at face value allows academics like Thomas or Johnston to assess the role of religion in conflict from a new perspective. Rather than defining religion at the outset in a way that will highlight certain behaviors or circumscribe it to a given social role, they are able to ask, "What do religious people actually do in social conflict?" This is especially true in Johnston's work. With Cynthia Sampson, in *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft* he assesses the activity of religious people in conflicts. Perhaps to the surprise of anyone with preconceived notions about religion as essentially a negative influence in conflict, Johnston and Sampson found that many peacemaking initiatives have roots in religious belief. This is an important first step, and Johnston takes the second in *Faith-Based Diplomacy*, in which he tackles the issue of how religious peacemakers may confront religiously-motivated violence. Such a stance allows Johnston, and similarly Thomas, to treat religious people as equals in peacemaking, and thus gain some valuable insights that a more closed approach might miss. The role of CADIS in France is an example of this – by asking young Muslim women what they meant by wearing the hijab, a different voice was brought forward. This voice could have been lost by relying only on the various authoritative perspectives, either Republican or Muslim.

Postmodern Secularity: Weak but Open

Thus, postmodern secularity is weak but open. Like secularism, it is weak in that it tends to essentialize belief systems, both secular and religious, rather than envisioning ways in which they can engage in constructive dialogue. However, unlike both secularism and liberal secularity, postmodern secularity is open to the fact of the existence of other belief systems as worldviews unto themselves, that make sense by their own lights. Rather than holding that there is one, secular path toward truth and that the religious are wrong or just misguided, postmodern secularity does not epistemologically privilege itself. However, without a strong view of one's own belief system, openness towards others' leads nowhere. This is the inverse of the conundrum of liberal secularity that, without openness toward such truths as may be found in other beliefs, one limits the strength of one's own. Fish succinctly if unwittingly describes the postmodern dead end – following the quote above, in which he argues that one must accept that other people believe differently even if one thinks that they are wrong, Fish adds:

> "And there you have to leave it, because the next step, the step of proving the falseness of their beliefs to everyone, including those in their grip, is not a step available to us as finite situated human beings. We have to live with the knowledge of two things: that we are absolutely right and that there is no generally accepted measure by which our rightness can be independently validated."[54]

Such a view is profoundly frustrating to peacemaking because it precludes any sort of meaningful interaction that could lead to a resolution of conflict. As noted above, however, all of this assumes that people never change their minds, and that they can never find common grounds *outside* of the issues of a conflict. Here is where the weakness of postmodern secularity defeats its openness. Its inclusivity is marred by an unwillingness to engage with others to seek common ground from which to address a conflict. The case of *The Satanic Verses* is an example of this. Grant and others felt that there were many substantive reasons that Muslims should take a deeper look at the

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54 Ibid.

novel. However, because they presumed that Muslims held a different and incommensurable view, they did not press the case. Rather, they relied on a free-speech argument that, to Muslims, sounded like justification of any abusive or hateful speech. Openness toward the beliefs of Muslims that could have encouraged their reinterpretation of the book was thus circumscribed. Theirs was a weak self-understanding that knew what it valued but was unwilling or unable to engage in the critical dialog necessary to express this.

Despite its openness, postmodern secularity is probably the form of secularity least likely to be beneficial in a situation of conflict where religion is an element. This is particularly the case where there is an extreme form of religion. Haideh Moghissi, citing Akbar Ahmed, finds that both postmodernism and religious fundamentalism are responses to "a world of radical doubt" caused the social and economic conditions mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Both critique liberal (often "Western") ideas and ideals and how they shape that world. However, where fundamentalism tends to propose a return to a more righteous past, postmodernism offers no solutions, just deconstruction of proposed solutions. Postmodernists stay at the level of discourse, whereas fundamentalists are willing to get political – and at times violent.[55] Postmodernism is a valuable approach for people in a secure enough position, politically or economically, to do such questioning. The critique of power and the way the powerful define knowledge is particularly important when a system becomes entrenched. However, the needs of many – in conflict or in development – require answers, not more questions, and fundamentalists provide these. Postmodern seculars generally do not. Moreover, postmodern secularity may not critically assess some of those answers, even if by secular lights they are problematic, because of the assumed incommensurability of worldviews.

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55 Moghissi, Haideh, 1999, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of the Postmodern Analysis* (London, UK: Zed), pp. 73-76, quote from p. 73.

Conclusion

With this analysis of postmodern secularity, we have completed our survey of the three ideal types of contemporary secularity. What remains is to combine these analyses, with their assessment of relative strength and weakness, openness and closedness, to seek a strong-open form of secularity. Doing this, and indicating the applications for such an approach to secularity in the contemporary world, is the burden of the third part of this thesis. If the sheer power of certainty is what secularism can bring to this project, and a strong, well-argued approach to knowledge is the benefit of including the liberal secular, the obvious benefit of postmodern secularity is its commitment to openness.

One of the reasons it is called *post*-modern thought is that, to an extent, it can stand outside modernity and critique it. Even if this is an essentially modern process, the application of modern critical thought to itself, that critical distance is enough to warrant differentiating such thought from modernism. It is this self-critical stance, and the concomitant openness toward the truths that may be found in others' views, that postmodern secularity brings. There are many benefits that have come with the development of secularity – for example, its celebration of formal reasoning and the many material and social advances stemming from the application of such thought. A strong secularity would promote these things, with the belief that they are generally good and not culturally specific. However, this can best be done only with the postmodern insight that there is not one, universal way these goods can be expressed. This, coupled with the self-criticism that comes from knowing that one's own view is not necessarily the best, opens up that strong secularity. This allows both strength and openness to bring the other to its fullest expression, avoiding the pitfalls of a liberal secularity not open enough to truly test its strength in dialog and a postmodern secularity too weak to be fully open. It is to an outline of this sort of strong-open secularity that

we now turn.*

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* Not cited but useful in this chapter were: Ahmed, Akbar S., 1992, *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (London, UK: Routledge); and Gellner, Ernest, 1992, *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion* (Basingstoke, UK: Routledge and Keegan Paul).