Editors' Note

This year, *Past Imperfect* would like to present a special issue entitled *Critiquing Secularism*, guest edited by Andrew Gow and Nakita Valerio of the University of Alberta. Following is an introductory note written by the co-editors, detailing the scope of the papers in this edition, as well as the critical theory underlining and uniting them. We invite our readers to seriously consider the title of this edition as they make their way through the pages – the proposition here is that few things escape critique, 'common sense' least of all.

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Critiquing Secularism

In the summer of 2017, the Tunisian, Jordanian, and Lebanese governments went about repealing sections of their legal codes that permitted the escape of rapists from punishment through marriage to their victims. In the comment section of the online *al-Jazeera* posting about the repeals, a netizen stated, "A win for secularism! Islam is a religious cult – it's an entire way of life for these people!" The commentator had obviously not read the report by Rothna Begum which clearly proved that the rape laws were not indigenous to anything resembling *shari'ah* law or Islamic jurisprudential rulings (*fiqh)* but were actually a hold-over from the colonial past in these countries – specifically the French Napoleonic Code of 1810. Begum noted that these provisions were only repealed in France proper in 1994. What interests us, however, are the cultural traces about secularism that we find in the comment below the article that, to the untrained eye, would likely go unnoticed. These traces contain the many epistemological and ethical assumptions within

secularism as an ideology that systems which mobilize it make imperceptible to its practitioners.

The self-description of secularism has the following basic assumptions: that it is new and modern – a break from the medieval past; that it is "areligious" and therefore neutral; and that it is rational and the ethical gold standard for everything from environmental to women's rights. Secularism pitches itself as common-sensical, the natural outcome of all historical progress. Ultimately, it is considered by its proponents to be "beyond critique". Our purpose is to demonstrate that no cultural system or ideology is deserving of such a status and that the more a position insists on its neutrality, the more suspect it becomes. We propose that insisting on the neutrality of secularism (as an ideology) hides/justifies the mechanisms of its power by placing resistance to secularism, or critique of it, in the category of self-interested 'partisanship' (i.e., vs. what is "neutral").

We would like to note that we shall use the terms "christianoform" and "protestantoform" to describe two important varieties of secularism. They go with the term "christianonormative", a calque formed on the useful queer studies term "heteronormative". By christianoform, we do not mean Christian or anything having Christian theological or ecclesiastical content, and likewise for "protestantoform", which is a subset of the former. We use these terms to refer to the fossilized forms or structural residue of Christian and especially Protestant religion in contemporary secular societies. We especially want to note that we do not see "christianoform secularism" as somehow identical with or merely succeeding Christianity, but rather as a structural outgrowth of the secular process by which religious *content* has slowly fallen away from western institutions and ideas over the past 50 to 100 years, a process that more often than not has stripped the spiritual, intellectual, or moral content from an institutional or cultural framework, leaving behind only its formal elements – and in many cases operating as much against the interests of practicing, committed Christians as structurally in their favour. What are the roots of secularism? What are the ontological assumptions of secularism? Various authors speculate as to the origins of the notion of the secular with some putting it as far

back as the 4th century. In *Christianity and the Secular*, Robert Markus argues that Augustine of Hippo developed the notion that salvation came through faith and grace alone (the "City of God") and that what remained was the Church and the material affairs of humankind (the "City of Man"). Between these two is an eschatological gap which represents a grey area regarding the end of times – if existence is divided into the sacred and profane, or along a saint/sinner binary, where is the space for conversion to Christianity which is necessitated in Christian prophecy? It is this ambiguity which licenses the secular to exist and which Augustine reluctantly admitted had to be neutral (as opposed to evil) in order to adequately accommodate Christian theological needs and incoming converts. One of the underlying assumptions that is immediately evident here is ontological dualism. Not only does Christian thinking become binary, meaning that is divides existence along the lines of good and evil (with a third zone of allegedly neutral secularism) but God Himself becomes distinct and separate from the world of Creation. Authors like Daniel Colucciello Barber in *On Diaspora* examine the epistemological and ethical consequences of adopting such a dualist ontology, and instead argue for the reintroduction of a framework of immanence to be the means by which Christian ontology is understood – as he states, "a paradigm of immanence is one in which the cause of being and the effects of being belong to the same plane." (xi) In an immanent framework, there is no transcendent point of reference, no externalized origin of sacrality by which we understand the value and dignity of things.

Why is understanding that a dualist ontology underlies Christianities crucial? The main reason is that because christianoform discursive environments gave birth to the notion of the secular, it should then come as no surprise that the ontology that underlies secularism is also dualist. These genealogical inheritances from Christianity exhibit not only how secularism is thus far from neutral, but also how it stands in contradiction to the immanent ontologies of many of the other cultural systems around the world. And further, a dualist ontology presupposed by secularism to be self-evident also facilitates the relegation of so-called "religion" to the private sphere – something that becomes hyperbolized in protestantoform

Christianities and their secular heirs. For cultural systems that are based on an immanent framework, the relegation of alleged religiosity to the private sphere and the alleged neutrality of the secular, public sphere are not only not relevant, but cannot be reconciled with such worldviews. In a worldview shaped by immanence, by contrast, there is no neutral public sphere and there is nowhere free from religious behaviour, ethics or understandings. Secularism cannot be understood from outside as that which is non-religious or areligious, because doing so would be to adopt a priori a secular worldview and its christianoform definitions of religion. Thus, while secularism purports to be neutral, universally relevant, progressive, and common-sensical, to anyone not completely immersed in (or colonized by) the secular worldview and its ontological assumptions, secularism is merely yet another cultural system to be examined, excavated and ultimately critiqued as any other would. Is secularism a religion? Is it "religiously neutral"?

Contrary to claims that secularism (as an ideology) is religiously *neutral* (esp. as articulated in the francophone model of *laïcité*), we submit that christianoform secularism can actually be understood as a religion of its own in two senses. They are not *proper* senses, by conventional Euro-American standards, of what constitutes a religion. According to those standards, a religion typically involves belief in a spiritual world, usually including some superior Being(s) or power(s), often joined to a set of practices aligned with such belief. But considering belief to be the main (or even only) constituent of religion is a christianonormative standard that casts all religion as isomorphic to Christianity. We are calling this the Model T Principle, since early Ford Model T cars famously came "in any colour one wanted" – as long as it was black. By analogy, christianonormative secularism posits that you can have any religion you like, as long as it looks and acts just like Christianity. We suggest that secularism itself actually qualifies as a "religion" by fulfilling this principle on an ontological and ethical level, and that it therefore avoids or precludes serious scrutiny in christianonormative discursive environments.

Entrenched in state constitutions (typically understood as, but not limited to, the "western world", including the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms),

freedom of *belief* is at once a well-meaning and flawed principle. For in many religious traditions, including Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim, issues of belief can vary in importance from minimal to large, but religious *practice* looms larger still. The *dīn* (way of life complying with timely interpretations of divine law) of a Muslim is her daily engagement with her religion and the practices it enjoins upon its members; a lapsed or lapsing observant Jew is said by others to be going off the *derech* (path, way) and thus to be *doing* something incorrectly, but still to be a Jew and a member of *am Yisra'el* (the Jewish people or community) nonetheless. Freedom of religious *practice* is a great deal more important in daily life to Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, practitioners of indigenous spiritualities, Orthodox Christians, and many others, than a formal right to *believe* whatever they choose. When secular institutions insist on supervising, adjudicating, and regulating religious practice, and when secularism as an ideology enjoins certain practices and forbids others, then both would seem to be prescribing what might be seen in Muslim terms as a *dīn* ("an entire way of life"). In this sense, then, secular institutions can act as religious ones.

The emphasis on freedom of belief over practice means that a democratic state dominated by members of one religious group can hardly force members of another to change their deeply held beliefs, but any state can make it nearly impossible, without even trying, for members of certain groups to practice their religious tradition as they would like. With the exception of the failed French revolutionary calendar (see Connor Thompson's article), secular states typically do not go out of their way to make the practices or beliefs endemic to the dominant group (e.g., to Christians or secularized post-Christians) more difficult; on the contrary, the seemingly neutral structure of the week and the major holidays revolves around the traditional Christian calendar (and customs) in the western world. It is possible to lead an entirely secular life within the rhythms of traditional Christianity, but that does not make those rhythms somehow 'secular' on their own. Figuring these as *secular* because many post-Christians do not understand them in religious terms does not change their religious content or their effects on members of other religious groups (see Melody Everest's article in this volume). Secularism is

thus in many instances (e.g., France, Québec) a jealous ersatz religion that simultaneously claims neutrality in order to suppress some religious practices, while structurally and implicitly facilitating others. In this, secularism acts as an all-powerful though unintentional concierge for Christian lifeways, including christianoform time and space – it acts as a kind of facilitator and regulator of a religion to which it claims it does not belong – but which it grew out of, and with which it is still engaged and involved, agonistically and often antagonistically. Secularism claims to be neutral in order to distance itself from its undeniable matrix, Christianity.

The second sense concerns state *acts* designed to make the practice of a religious tradition difficult, impossible, or illegal. Common examples include: bans on veils or turbans or other "religious" head-coverings, including the hijab and kippa, on fasting and circumcision, on building houses of worship, on kosher or halal slaughter; penalties for missing school on religious holidays, or the mere lack of provision for deferring examinations and other critical events, or to allow for the observance of prayer, religious festivals and so forth. In doing so, a self-declared secular state articulates a form of secularism that wittingly or unwittingly frames *other* (usually non-Christian) religious practices as contrary to the interests of an undefined *majority*, usually Christian and/or post-Christian. Secular states set up an implicit religious arbitration regarding the interests of that amorphous majority that often goes far beyond what any official representative of their official/majority religion (or former, residual religion) would ever have demanded. Christian *churches* sometimes opposed non-Christian religious practices in the pre-modern past (e.g., Judaism, Islam, indigenous ceremony), and many *states* actively suppressed them; few *churches* oppose non-Christian religious practice today, but many states do, and actively work to suppress it.

For a self-proclaimed secular state to legislate against a religious practice – especially, as in the case, at the time of writing this volume, of Québec's Loi 62 in the name of *religious neutrality* – makes it into a religious body and an enforcer of implicit religious precepts *de facto*, if not *de jure*. It should be noted that very few

practicing Christians, other than Dominionists and other extremist advocates of theocracy, would consciously want the state to act in this way; such bans are typically enacted by "non-religious" actors in the name of secularism under the banner of religious neutrality. Many committed Christians in fact abhor all such legislation, both on political principle and because they correctly sense, unconsciously or consciously, that any such legislation could in theory provide a precedent that would allow the state to aggressively regulate *their* religious practice as well. Hence the impetus to interfere in (non-Christian) religious practice constitutes the secular state as a religious actor that makes decisions not only about the status of religion in general, but about particular religious practices and their legal status, as James White shows regarding the German state, for example, in its chequered history of decisions about what constitutes actual religious obligations for Muslims. Bracketed here, evidently, are practices represented by some members of a given religious group to be religiously motivated but which contravene natural law, statute law, international law, and/or universally recognized human rights precepts, e.g., female genital mutilation, forced or under-aged marriage, and the like. There clearly are local and cultural limits to religiously framed/justified practices that conflict with existing legal norms, regardless of how such norms were constituted. This is clearly an area of ongoing political contestation and negotiation, as James White's contribution to this collection illustrates.

In nation-states in which there is an official or state church, such as England or Scotland, all talk of a "secular state" can function only by analogy.[1] States with a state church have an easier time of it, in fact: the norm is clear, so variations are also clear and fairly uncontroversial. Rather, the knottiest problems are to be found in those post-Christian states that have either abrogated any official relationship between church and state (the USA, France) or in which that relationship is

[1] See, for example, Steve Bruce, "The Secular Modern. An Empirical Critique of Asad", in: *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 4 (2013), 79-92. Bruce argues that secular societies arose accidentally in the anglosphere by virtue of the inability of religious actors, mainly Protestant, to agree on enough of a common core to anchor an official religion, leading via toleration to disestablishment or something similar that we now call secular. While this historical account is useful, it appears to us to be inadequate to explain the workings of *contemporary* secularism; we leave aside Bruce's critique of Asad's work as a separate topic deserving its own article.

stalemated in permanent estrangement/involvement (without the catharsis of a divorce), such as Canada and much of Europe. In both cases, claims to religious neutrality are worthy of attention because such states are de facto not religiously neutral, and any such claim functions to legitimate the secular as neutral while obscuring its roots and involvement in religion (specifically, whichever tradition looms largest in the past of the population's majority, such as Catholicism in France and Québec). Such state claims to neutrality are important because they allow attempts by members of specific religious communities to resist the imposition of religious precepts/standards by the state to be figured as non-neutral, as fundamentally *only religious* (sectarian) as opposed to *non-religious* or "neutral".

There is also the issue of secularism and modernity, with the former declaring itself the ultimate realization of the latter. The first 'culture wars', the *Kulturkampf* of the 19th century, fundamentally shaped both academic history and modern western political culture by portraying 'the Reformation' and 'Protestantism' as the engines of modernity (culminating in the work of Max Weber, co-founder of the modern discipline of sociology and Protestant triumphalist extraordinaire). Many textbook writers, whig historians, classical liberals, and culture-warriors would still like the "Protestant Reformation(s)" to have been the watershed between the putatively 'Catholic', ecclesiastical, authoritarian Middle Ages and a nascent 'Protestant', secular, liberal modernity. The last two decades of research on the Reformations and their consequences as well as the development of a corpus of scholarship re-examining and refuting key aspects of liberal and Weberian secularization theory (esp. since 9/11) suggest that the old 'Western Civ' (Cold War) textbook story of the Reformation as the dawn of secular liberal modernity is not merely wrong, it is fundamentally misleading and has pernicious consequences for contemporary political culture. That whig story fosters and subtends such paradigms as Samuel Huntington's tendentious 'Clash of Civilizations' hypothesis as well as related ahistorical and misguided calls for a "Reformation" of Islam (to once again unleash generations of religious warfare, as in 1524-1648?). Or, as Hamid Dabashi writes, "Civilizational thinking was invented to

unify [European nationalist] cultures against their colonial consequences. Islamic, Indian, or African civilizations were invented contrapuntally by Orientalism ...in order to match, balance and thus authenticate 'Western Civilization'." The question of whether or not modernity (or civilizational progress) is even a verifiable object is taken up by Talal Asad in *Formations of the Secular*, where he argues that it is a political goal or series of projects, of which certain principles tend to be bound to secularism but are not constitutive of it. (13)

So what constitutes secularism, then? An anthropology of secularism is not a new concept. As this is a historical volume, however, the papers that follow will primarily focus on case studies which serve to illuminate secularism in action and to examine both historical and contemporary issues, including: how *soi-disant* secular societies redeploy Christian religious cultures in mutated form, claiming a break with a reviled past while simultaneously retaining key features of that religious culture; and how public and political claims in the developed world about what is progressive, modern, liberal, and secular depend on Othering and Orientalizing both the European past and non-western cultures (e.g., portraying Islam as "medieval"), effectively equating them with each other so as to fit them into a modernizing, capitalist, Weberian Protestant trajectory.These papers were all originally written as term papers for HIST 614 (Department of History and Classics, University of Alberta) in Fall term of 2016. We felt they complemented each other in terms of method and approach despite treating widely varying contexts and phenomena, and we invited these students to submit their papers for potential publication. The authors have revised their paper three times, first in light of Andrew Gow's comments as instructor, second in light of Nakita Valerio's comments as co-editor, and third in response to their anonymous referees' comments. The co-editors and authors would like to thank *Past Imperfect* and its editors for their patience and professionalism.

In the first chapter, Adrian Christ argues against the conventional argument that the secularization of the Order of the Teutonic Knights was indicative of its diminishing power and moral standards. Instead, the author demonstrates that the

ideologies of the Order had deep structural similarities to those put forth by Martin Luther and his followers, facilitating the entire Order's relatively easy conversion to Lutheranism in 1525.

The second article, by Connor Thompson, explores the French Republican calendar and arguments by its proponents for its inherent rationality, in contrast to the alleged irrationality of the Gregorian calendar. Thompson demonstrates that not only was the rationality of the Republican calendar questionable, but that treating Christian thinking as irrational and the secularism of the Republican government as rational led to a sea of complications and contradictions in which a secular government defined religion against itself. Here, the internal contradictions of secularism's logic are revealed through a temporal excavation.

In the next chapter, Kristina Molin Cherneski asks whether or not gender equality is as problematic for secularism as it is assumed to be for religion, exploring the figure of the *Marianne* in the French Revolution as an allegorical figure representing the Republic and liberty. Ultimately, the author demonstrates that the visual language of the images blurs the division between the religious and the secular, and that the invocation of the figure of the *Marianne* actually obscures continuing gender inequalities for real women living in France.

Similarly, Kane Mullen's chapter on women within the scientific profession aims to complicate the rigidity of the distinction between secular and religious thought by demonstrating – that contrary to its popular declarations of female emancipation – secularism, so often cast as the great equalizing project, has actually in many cases retained and further entrenched inherited gender hierarchies and affirmed gender inequality, and in itself represents no distinct break or progress from the "religious" past.

Turning to more recent history, Melody Everest's chapter on the Canadian response to the Syrian refugee crisis examines the mobilization of Islamophobia in political discourse as a relic not only of Western Christendom's past, but a tactic of secularism to regard all "religious orthopraxy" as superstitious and with suspicion in

order to maintain the facades of rationality that secularism partly bases its power on.

Lastly, James White's chapter on the 2012 Cologne ban on circumcision explores the sparking of German national debates on religious freedom and the ethics of ritual practice in secular society. He argues that the ban was aimed at Othering Muslims in order to exclude them from a sense of belonging to German society.

With this collection, we hope it becomes apparent that our original al-Jazeera commentator revealed far more about the contradictions between the self-description of secularism and its philosophical realities than perhaps they intended. Not only is Islam an entire way of life, as they state, and which comes as no surprise to any practicing Muslim, but so too is secularism a comprehensive cultural system. Thus, the irony of their proclamation that the repeal of colonial rape law in Tunisia is a victory for secularism when the law itself had its origins in secular legal codes is further deepened by the fact that the repeal is actually a victory for the opponents of secularism – its so-called barbaric civilizational opposite, Islam.

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