

The Secular Bible

Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously

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Introduction: Secularists and the Not Godless World

Question: What is the opposite of faith?

Not disbelief. Too final, certain, closed. Itself a kind of belief.

Doubt.

Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*

NONBELIEVERS, THE BIBLE, AND RELIGION

In all but exceptional cases, today's secularists are biblically illiterate. Truth be told, their repertoire of knowledge about religion in general leaves much to be desired. It might consist of prurient jokes about the clergy, the citation (or miscitation) of a few noxious verses from Scripture, and maybe a Bertrand Russell quote thrown in for good measure. Secularists are free, of course, to disregard issues pertaining to religious belief. They do not need to pay attention to the actual words of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament or to those of the New Testament and the Qur'an. Nor do they need to think about the countless ways in which such words have been interpreted. These interpretations, incidentally, inspire those manifestations of piety that so puzzle nonbelievers: the fasting and the frenzy; the pilgrims on bloodied knees; the athletic feats of sexual repression; the acts of utterly selfless grace, and the wearing of turbans, *Yarmulkes*, veils, and other forms of sacred headgear, to name but a few. Secularists are free to remain oblivious to all this.

But perhaps now is not the best time to exercise this freedom. Contrary to what so many nineteenth- and twentieth-century social theorists believed (and hoped for), the species has not abandoned its faith in the divine. Karl Marx's optimism about the impending abolishment of

religion was unfounded. The masses have not turned away from their beliefs “with the fatal inevitability of a process of growth,” as Sigmund Freud predicted. And no, the gods are not “growing old or dying” – to invoke Émile Durkheim’s famous words. Presently, a situation prevails that few of those thinkers could have ever imagined possible: in most countries, the irreligious and areligious comprise a small minority, an exception to the rule of God. They live in a world abounding in ancient creedal antagonisms (and modern weapons). In Pakistan and India, and in Palestine and Israel, not to mention in regions where other segments of the Islamic world clash with the predominantly Christian United States, the old faiths seem to be engaging in an apocalyptic staring contest. One flinch and secularists everywhere may have the opportunity to experience the end of days right along with the euphoric faithful.¹

This book starts from the premise that indifference to all things religious is no longer a viable option for secularists. The word “secular,” after all, derives from the Latin term *saeculum*, which refers to “living in the world” or “being of the age.” In light of a revitalized and often repolarized religious scene, it would seem prudent for nonbelievers to take stock of the not Godless world and age in which they live. They will need to understand how ancient sacred texts impact the lives of citizens in modern nation-states. They will need to make sense of those inter-faith and intrafaith conflicts that will affect their lives for years to come. And although it may drive them to distraction, nonbelievers will need to confront religion’s durability, its pervasiveness, and perhaps even its inescapability in the domain of thought and social action.

If nonbelievers were to actually think about such issues, perhaps they would eventually ponder something that is rarely discussed: the anomalous and, in some places, precarious status of secularism itself. Although statistically small in number, secularists in many nations exert cultural, intellectual, and political influence disproportionate to their size. Or, as T. N. Madan describes it, “Secularism is the dream of a minority that wishes to shape the majority in its own image, that wishes to impose its will upon history but lacks the power to do so under a democratically organized polity.” To the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim fundamentalist, secularism is no dream. It is a globally hegemonic culture – the culture of (nondivinely authorized) Sex, Sex, Sex!, the culture of depravity that

invokes the flood and the blinding light. It is the culture that has *temporarily* perverted the rightful order of things.²

It is no surprise, then, that in societies or groups where religious extremists govern or are demographically numerous, free thinkers do not fare particularly well. The indignities suffered by the novelist Salman Rushdie are instructive in this regard. The book burnings, the threats, the murders, the contempt for the mischievous sovereignty of the imagination – this is what the empowered and undersecularized in any religion have in store for critical thinkers. While we are on the topic, let it be noted that it was not a secular militia that liberated the author of *The Satanic Verses*. A telethon hosted by a tuxedoed atheist did not precipitate his eventual release. There was no walkathon in which 1 million non-believers raised funds for his security detail by traipsing down Fifth Avenue holding placards, wearing fanny packs, and drinking lots of bottled water. Rather, it was the largesse of various Western democracies, Anglican Britain in particular, that saw him through the whole nasty episode. These are not Godless states. They consist of a religiously moderate majority that has made its peace with secularism. It is because these moderates tolerate secularism (and are to varying degrees secularized themselves) that nonbelievers are able to persevere and prosper. The mainstream religions of the Occident are the pontoons of secularism. Only by virtue of their tacit consent can this minority remain buoyant in the arts, letters, mass media, and so on.³

“Secular versus religious” is a convenient dichotomy, but it is one that misrepresents a complex reality. As the presence of the tolerant religious mainstream should indicate, the lines of demarcation are quite blurry. This is partly because the centuries-long process of secularization has had great success in “taking the edge off” of most extreme forms of religious devotion in the West. As the theologian Harvey Cox once phrased it, secularization “has convinced the believer that he *could* be wrong, and persuaded the devotee that there are more important things than dying for the faith.” It has also created a large class of believers who share considerable common ground with nonbelievers. We might refer to them as the “secularly religious.” Think of the Jewish man who pops up every year at Yom Kippur services with his Zoroastrian wife; the Muslim woman who regularly goes drinking with her friends in a sleeveless blouse

after a prayerless day at work; or the gay Christian who is deacon of his church.⁴

These examples are, admittedly, generic. Yet, they point to a substantial number of the faithful who demonstrate a self-conscious willingness to live in tension with more orthodox incarnations of their own religious traditions. The secularly religious do not have a major gripe with modernity. Old creedal antagonisms do not inflame their passions, and the burning of books is not their cup of tea. In fact, they are often friends, patrons, and even producers of the arts. Village atheists – who tend to associate all religion with religious extremism – need to ask themselves what it means to share so many similarities with those who are supposed to be their antithesis.

THE CURRENT CRISIS OF SECULAR INTELLECTUAL CULTURE

The secularist's lack of familiarity with the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and religion in general, we have just suggested, constitutes a looming political liability. But not everything is politics. This disregard of religion also points to a crisis and paradox of secular identity. Members of the overlapping secular sectaries (e.g., "secularists," "secular humanists," "free thinkers," "atheists," "agnostics," "brights," "universists") define themselves in opposition to religions, albeit religions about which they know very little. Above all, the secularist is *not* a Jew, *not* a Christian, *not* a Muslim, even though certain contingencies may have once imposed such a designation on him or her. To construct one's self against something that one does not understand, or care much about, does not make for a very coherent, compelling, or durable self.

It does not make for an influential or rich culture of ideas either. Presently, one would be hard pressed to identify more than a few recognizable intellectuals in the English-speaking sector who speak knowledgeably about religion *qua* secularists. Informed perspectives about the post-September 11 world, Church and State relations, fundamentalisms, and so on are almost nonexistent. A secular viewpoint, or something approximating it, is most likely to be articulated by a liberal or lapsed Jewish or Christian theologian. What ever happened to secular intellectual culture? It is a culture not lacking in historical import or integrity,

or in heroisms or good works on behalf of the species. Yet, it is currently experiencing something of an existential crisis. If it moves forward, it does so only by grace of inertia – momentum gathered in a prepostmodern golden age of science and reason. It is a trust fund baby, living off of the intellectual capital of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Bertrand Russell, Sigmund Freud, and Jean-Paul Sartre – to name just a few members of the pantheon.⁵

Believing intellectuals, in contrast, are thriving once again. The enlightenment critique of religion that came to maturity in the nineteenth century did not strike the fatal blow, the “kill shot.” Although staggered, theological modes of reasoning arose, dusted themselves off, focused, amended, and absorbed. From this experience, religious thinkers emerged craftier than ever. They now draw skillfully on the full range of sciences, social sciences, and humanities. In so doing, their proofs for the existence of God and the importance of belief, ritual, communities of the faithful, and so on have become increasingly rigorous and coherent. To the atheist or agnostic who wants to *rationaly* justify his or her own nonbelief, we say, “*Come prepared. Come armed with erudition. Shuck the Bertrand Russell quotes, for the love of God! Your opponents have regrouped. Do not take them lightly.*”

The retreat of secular intellectuals from the domain of religious questions is most visible in the realm of contemporary higher education. For how often does a village atheist teach a course on Scripture, sacred languages, hermeneutics, or church history? How often does such a person actually have any accurate and detailed knowledge of such things? As a result, many of the West’s most and least distinguished universities simply outsource their instruction of religious studies to the nearest seminary. Less promisingly, classes are sometimes taught by university chaplains or itinerant clergy. Often, one’s religious studies instructor is (or was) qualified to preside over a marriage, perform a circumcision, or administer last rites. This comprises one of those exquisite ironies of the Occidental research university – a bastion of irreligious thought if there ever was one. The militantly secular academy does not sponsor the explicitly secular study of any religious issue, nor has it ever denied employment to legions of theist intellectuals (under the condition that they refrain from all manner of proselytizing activities). Although this may illustrate the university’s enlightened tolerance of dissenting viewpoints, we suspect

that it says more about its complete lack of interest in this subject, if not its fiscal priorities.⁶

Secular intellectual culture, we have claimed, is undergoing a crisis. This crisis is aggravated by the absence of nonbelieving scholars who can speak coherently about religion. The situation in Old (and New) Testament studies illustrates this perfectly. This discipline, whose roots burrow deep into biblical antiquity, has always been dominated by *homines religiosi*. Professional biblicists, even those teaching at secular institutions, are usually trained in theological seminaries. The field is staffed almost exclusively by those who read the Witness incessantly and piously during their youth (although as we will see, many have become secularized themselves). Blasphemers, the morally incorrigible, and cultured despisers of religion – the types of characters who appear en masse in sociology, anthropology, and English departments – rarely venture into Old Testament scholarship. We cite an observation made by M. H. Goshen-Gottstein nearly 30 years ago, one that still rings true today: “practically all academic students of the Bible remain heavily indebted to their own tradition and upbringing. . . . However we try to ignore it – practically all of us are in it because we are either Christians or Jews.” As the exegete David Clines lamented, “it’s a bit of a scandal really that in the academic context it is religious believers who are setting the tone for the study of the Bible.”⁷

This is not to deny that, here and there, a few isolated New Secularists (i.e., refugees from a religious past) or Heritage Secularists (i.e., ethnic, life-long secularists) have labored in the guild of biblical studies. Yet, they have seldom scrutinized the Old Testament from a self-consciously nontheist perspective. Although they may occasionally grumble – and with good reason – about the overwhelmingly theological cast of the discipline, they have proffered few alternatives. They have not posed the really interesting questions, which go something like this: insofar as the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament has been studied in near exclusivity by Christians and Jews from antiquity to postmodernity, how would and how *should* scholars who bracket the existence of God make sense of sacred Scripture? What would their nontheist alternative look like? In what ways, if any, would it differ from traditional modes of scriptural analysis? The answers to be proposed here do not represent a privileged or authoritative perspective. They represent *one* type of

perspective – albeit one that deserves far greater representation in secular universities.⁸

“SECULARISM” REDEFINED

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. A more fundamental question must be addressed, namely, what do we mean by “secularism”? Our understanding is somewhat idiosyncratic. As we see it, secularism cannot be reduced to a political platform insisting on the categorical separation of Church and State. It need not apotheosize humanity and its capacity to reason. No particular emphasis is placed on the importance of living exclusively in the “here and now.” Nor are we seduced by the lure of hyperscientific rationality and its ability to power our triumphant march through history. Secularism, at its essence and at its absolute best, comprises an unrelenting commitment to judicious and self-correcting critique. Historically, it emerged in antagonistic dialectic with the most potent and intractable of human collective representations, that which is commonly referred to as religion. In confronting such a formidable adversary, secular thinkers forged a critical tradition of world historical significance, albeit one currently mired in a slump. Secularism’s “job” consists of criticizing *all* collective representations. Its analytical energies should be inflicted on any type of mass belief or empowered orthodoxy, whether it is religious, political, scientific, aesthetic, and so on. Voltaire’s *Candide* was certainly on to something when he declared, “isn’t their pleasure in criticizing everything, in seeing faults where other people think they see beauties?” Secularism, as we envision it, is elitist and heretical by nature. When it aspires to become a popular movement, an orthodoxy, or the predicate of a nation-state, it betrays itself and is not likely to succeed.⁹

This means that the secular study of the Hebrew Bible (or any sacred text) is animated by a spirit of critique. The motto of our enterprise might just as well be “*criticize and be damned!*” We are bound by honor to cast aspersions on the integrity and historical reliability of holy documents. A secular exegete reads such works in heckle mode. He or she cannot accept that the Bible is the infallible word of God (as fundamentalists are wont to argue), nor the word of God as mediated by mortals (as the secularly religious and most biblical scholars often contend), nor the distortion of

the word of God by prejudiced humans (as some radical theologians have charged). The objective existence of God – as opposed to the subjective perception of Him – is not a legitimate variable in scholarly analysis. The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament is a human product *tout court*.

Our next assumption marks a sharp break with existing secularism. Traditional approaches have always been predicated on a misty-eyed, person-centered humanism. The individual is seen as autonomous. Not under God. He or she is capable of comprehending and changing the world. Perfectible. “*You go girl!*” the secularist seems to exhort to all mankind. All this positive thinking is somewhat out of place. After all, nonbelievers categorically reject what most other humans believe to be true about the universe. Secularists are wont to think of religious beliefs as illusions, wish fulfillments, infantile projections, phantasmagoria, and so on. A wincing frustration with humanity, as opposed to an unqualified enthusiasm for its potential, would seem to be a more appropriate position for the secularist. The French novelist Michel Houellebecq recently eulogized the species in a manner more acceptable to the nonbeliever: “vile, unhappy race, barely different from the apes, which nevertheless carried within it such noble aspirations. Tortured, contradictory, individualistic, quarrelsome, and infinitely selfish, it was sometimes capable of extraordinary explosions of violence, but never quite abandoned its belief in love.” That’s better. That’s the secular spirit.¹⁰

We want, then, to detach secularism from its incongruously philanthropic moorings. Following one of the grandest (and presently least appreciated) strands in social theory, we advance a less sanguine assessment of humans. They are seen as virtuosi of self-delusion. We concentrate on their vulnerability to causal factors beyond their comprehension and control. The assumptions that they always accurately understand why they do what they do, or the consequences of their actions, are contested. Not everything happens because of conscious deliberation, not everything results from an act of will. In the same vein, we assert that history is inherently ironic; the least expected (and desired) outcomes are often the ones that come to pass. These are themes that will be visited repeatedly in our discussions of the Bible.

This skeptical appraisal of human agency, incidentally, has a lengthy intellectual genealogy. Disquisitions on our capacity for self-deception and mass deception appear in works as varied as Michel de Montaigne’s

essay “On the Power of the Imagination” and Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion*. Marx, for his part, spoke of illusions that bind and blind entire epochs. In his youth, he exhorted humanity to awaken from the dream it was having about itself. Following Auguste Comte, Émile Durkheim referred to the “anthropocentric postulate” – that is, the misconception that societies progress because of conscious human planning. Max Weber made much of “the ironic relationship between human intentions and their historical consequences.” In short, among some of the Church Fathers of secular intellectual culture, a deep skepticism concerning the divine has often been paired with *a corresponding skepticism concerning the human*. This is the omniscritical tradition we want to revive in the study of religious phenomena and is more in line with the curmudgeonly spirit of secularism.¹¹

CONCLUSION: THE CHALLENGE FOR SECULAR INTELLECTUALS

It has been insisted that secularists should get to know the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. Maybe we should also suggest, politely, that Christian and Jewish laypersons should get to know the Bible *differently*. Even within their own traditions, they will find alternatives to the simplistic readings and conceptions of Scripture to which they so often cling. College Bible professors – who are excellently positioned to make such observations – routinely express dismay at the immense bathetic gap that exists between the most sublime fruits of religious thought and the naive dogmas advocated by freshmen who have endured a basic religious education. Among many of our students, one notices a tangible poverty of knowledge concerning what their own storied intellectuals believed about the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. They attribute to the Good Book a transparency and intelligibility that some of the most venerated thinkers in the Judaeo-Christian tradition did not believe was there.

In an effort to transcend the parallel caricatures of the Hebrew Bible that predominate in both religious and irreligious lay cultures, we propose a counterorientation called “secular hermeneutics.” Aspiring to be unapologetic, it consciously performs an act of discursive aggression on Scripture and, by extension, those who hold it dear. It is a form of analysis performed in bad faith, invariably yielding un-Christian and

un-Jewish readings. For these reasons, this study will be taken by some as a polemic. This charge is unavoidable and, to a certain extent, warranted. *The Secular Bible* does promote ways of thinking about Scripture that could, conceivably, neutralize claims made on behalf of sacred texts by extremists (or just about anyone else). It is virtually guaranteed to displease certain Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

But this book is not necessarily intended for secular activists. It does not seek to equip nonbelievers with refutations that will definitively trump self-righteous men and women of God. Such refutations do not exist; it is the astonishing complexity of the Old Testament that always trumps any self-righteous claim made on its behalf. Besides, the secularist fulminating about all that is irrational in religion is a doleful cliché – about as enlightening and spontaneous as a member of the Soviet Politburo flogging the Italian fashion industry in the year 1972. Mustiness, block-headishness, and predictability have come to characterize contemporary secular writings on religion; a book-length, antireligious screed would be redundant.

Our goal, then, is *not* to cast the spotlight of enlightenment reason on the dumb show of religious belief. In truth, we can only express appreciation for accomplishments made by religious students of Scripture. The scholarly bibliography on the Bible produced by nonbelievers is negligible, but the amount of research produced by Old Testament exegetes is so immense that it defies quantification. Under no circumstances can it be written off as uninteresting or uncritical. As a body of scholarship, it rivals in ingenuity and scruple anything produced within the comity of secular university disciplines. No dumb show there.

The problem with modern biblical research is that it has not gone far enough. Too often, it has deferred to tradition, censured itself, and refused to pursue the delectably blasphemous implications of its own discoveries. Even at its most critical, Old Testament scholarship is the theological equivalent of the Loyal Opposition. For these reasons, we feel obligated to draw out or amplify certain heretical leads that have been alluded to by otherwise pious scholars. Ideally, secular hermeneutics provides new theories and methods for the study of sacred texts. But often it simply reads established theories and methods through the optic of a new, highly critical orientation. We really like the theologian John Macquarrie's description of secularism as "an attitude, a mood, a point of view, a way

of noticing and (equally) of failing to notice.” It is this secular way of noticing that redirects or unleashes the energy of our discipline in more critical directions. This attitude of radical doubt frees us, or perhaps forces us, to speak the unspeakable truth, truths, and truthlessness of the Hebrew Bible.¹²

Part I of *The Secular Bible* is devoted to the issue of how the Hebrew Bible was composed. With more than a few winks and nods, we pose some of the most commonly asked questions about this document’s origins. Who wrote it? Who do Jews and Christians think wrote it? To whom do modern scholars attribute its authorship? What does it mean? What is its enduring message to humanity? Why is it so difficult to understand?

The crucial distinction between the Bible’s contents and *interpretations* of its contents tends to be lost on many laypersons, whether they are secular or religious. For these reasons, we devote Part II to the problem of how Scripture is read. Of interest to us here are queries such as why is the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament so widely interpreted? What is the nature of the relation between religious intellectuals and their beloved Scriptures? Why does the text exert the history-altering effects that it does? Why is there so little agreement as to what it says? What role do readers play in constructing the Bible’s “meaning?” Much attention is devoted to professional interpreters, otherwise known as biblical scholars. The reader is forewarned that we are positively obsessed with them. Exegetes are the central protagonists of the opera whose stage notes you are now reading. We have cast them in every imaginable role. They are our betrayed Madama Butterfly, our unconscionable Pinkerton, soothing Suzuki, ambivalent Sharpless, and crazy Uncle Bonze too.

This, then, is a book about the Hebrew Bible’s composition and its interpreters. It is also a meditation on the predicament of secularism in a world where sacred texts are not the irrelevant artifacts that nonbelievers once thought they would be. Part III – the Judaism–Christianity–Islam component of our curriculum – provides concrete illustrations of the theories and methods discussed in Parts I and II. These chapters on intermarriage (in Judaism) and same-sex eroticism (in Christianity) examine how the Bible is dragooned into debates that affect citizens of contemporary democracies. The difficulty, if not the utter absurdity, of invoking this text in the sphere of politics is explored. Indeed, one of our central claims is that the peculiar way in which the Bible was composed

in antiquity makes it far too contradictory and incoherent a source for public policy decisions in modernity. Chapter [Eight](#) compares the role of interpreters in Judaism and Christianity on one side, and Islam on the other. Here, we explore the obstacles that confront Muslim scholars who want to liberalize prevailing interpretations of the Qurʾān.

The Secular Bible is intended for scholars and cultivated laypersons. We remind our nonspecialist readers of a few rudimentary terms and concepts. “Hebrew Bible” refers to a collection of ancient documents written in Hebrew and, to a much lesser extent, Aramaic. Those documents were assembled into a fairly stable canon by Jews somewhere between the second century BCE and the first century AD. Christians generally refer to what is *roughly* the same body of texts as the “Old Testament” (although many official Christian Old Testaments are translations from Hebrew into languages such as Greek and Latin). More than 2,000 years ago Jews, and later Christians, began feverishly interpreting their Hebrew Bibles and Old Testaments. We use the phrases “Rabbinic/Talmudic literature” and “writings of the Church Fathers/patristic literature” to designate two of the most influential bodies of scriptural interpretation ever produced. The reader, ideally, will have a more nuanced understanding of these concepts by the end of this book.¹³

It is hoped that this inquiry will serve as a prototype for examinations of other foundational religious writings. In the monotheistic sphere, we envision works with titles such as *The Secular New Testament*, *The Secular Talmud*, *The Secular Church Fathers*, *The Secular Qurʾān*, and *The Secular Hadith*. The goal is not to establish a chain of academic franchises, but rather to outline a coherent nontheological, nonapologetic paradigm for the study of sacred Scriptures. To speak of the awesome complexity of religion critically, judiciously, and with clarity – this is the challenge and responsibility of secular intellectuals in a not Godless world.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Discussions of the current plight of secularism are appearing with increasing frequency. An excellent start would be the pitch perfect essay of Wilfred McClay, entitled “Two Concepts of Secularism,” in *Religion Returns to the Public Square: Faith and Policy in America*. Eds. Hugh Heclo and Wilfred McClay. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University

Press, 2003, pp. 31–61. Many Indian scholars have explored secularism and its discontents in their own country. Their debates are wide ranging and entertaining, and raise issues of interest to polities far and wide. We would recommend Brenda Cossman and Ratna Kapur's *Secularism's Last Sigh? Hindutva and the (Mis)Rule of Law*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 81–135, as well as the balanced collection of essays edited by Rajeev Bhargava, *Secularism and Its Critics*. Delhi: Oxford, 1998. Of special interest is the critique of secularism in the previously mentioned volume advanced by T. N. Madan. Studies of the demise of "secularization hypothesis" (which, as we note in the Conclusion, is not the same thing as secularism) are too plentiful to be mentioned here. Rodney Stark's "Secularization, R.I.P.," *Sociology of Religion* 60 (1999) 249–273, provides a good, if somewhat strident, overview. The complex question of the absence of secularists in fields that study religion, most notably biblical scholarship, is explored in our own, "'Poor Bird, Not Knowing Which Way to Fly': Biblical Scholarship's Marginality, Secular Humanism, and the Laudable Occident," *Biblical Interpretation* 10 (2002) 267–304. One of the few works of biblical scholarship working from an explicitly non-confessional angle is Philip Davies' *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995. A handy and reader-friendly reference guide for those who want to familiarize themselves with basic concepts involving the Bible as a text is Paul Wegner's *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999. Finally, a wonderful, critical, "big picture" study of the Bible can be found in Robert Carroll's *Wolf in the Sheepfold: The Bible as a Problem for Christianity*. London: SPCK, 1991.