

Religion and Politics in International Relations

The Modern Myth

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Religion is not a Standalone Category

This book is a critique of *discourses* on ‘religion’ and ‘religions’, not a description or analysis of any ‘religion’ as such. I am especially concerned here with such discourses as they appear in International Relations literature, and in texts closely related to IR such as Politics and the Social Sciences. This is admittedly a broad interpretation of the term ‘international relations’, but not much broader than the comparable content of the Special Issue on Religion and International Relations published by the journal *Millennium* (2000: 29(3)).

When we talk unreflexively about a religion such as Hinduism or Christianity we assume that it exists as a distinct entity in the world, and this tendency to reification or misplaced concreteness is strengthened by wide discursive forces around us, such as the media, academia and the publishing industry. The combined force of these discursive agencies tends to construct the belief that Religion itself, or specific religions, exist in the world as empirical objects of investigation with distinct characteristics which can be described and analysed. This reification of ‘religion’ is evident in recent stories told in IR, politics and the social sciences of religion’s ‘resurgence’ or ‘return from exile’. Quite often, as I will show in detail in this book, such writers even represent ‘religion’ as an agent acting in the world with malign intention. If challenged, they might defend themselves by saying that this is merely metaphoric language. But perhaps all mythology starts in metaphor before it becomes transformed into a powerful figment of the imagination projected onto reality and determining decisions about action. For the myth of religion and religions as essences and even intentional agents in the world has many ramifications, some of them potentially dangerous ones, for example in directing homeland security operations, or in foreign policy decision-making by state agencies.

It is not obvious in what sense any particular ‘religion’ exists at all. We all know, when we are pushed into thinking seriously about it, that religions are not things that exist in the world in the same sense that, say, chairs and tables seem intuitively to be such empirically encountered objects. Religions are classifications designed to indicate a distinct kind of institution, experience or

practice. Yet religions are spoken of, written about, described, analysed and compared *as though* they are phenomena that can be observed. That religions are not themselves the objects of empirical investigation, but collective acts of the imagination, does not mean that they have no kind of reality.

The same might be said about other collective acts of the imagination, such as institutions – churches for example. What we actually observe are people behaving in certain ways in a certain kind of environment and buildings, and we have few problems in referring to the church at the end of the street, or in saying that the neighbours go to church every day. However, if we claimed to have observed the Universal Church, that would obviously be more problematic, because the Universal Church exists at a much more abstract level. It is an ideological construct which is much more difficult to locate. This does not mean it has no reality as such. Historically the idea of the Universal Church has been given such power that many generations of people have lived and died in the belief that it is a reality. In that sense it *is* a reality. One could say that the Universal Church has been a powerful myth celebrated in the Mass and the anointing of kings, and defended by armies and ecclesiastical courts. But it would be very difficult for anyone to claim to have seen the Universal Church, and to write a description of it would be to write a description of how generations of people have imagined it, including those who have had power in producing authoritative representations of it.

Religion is an even more abstract category, and right from the start there is a problem about the relation between ‘religion’, ‘a religion’ and ‘religions’. The claim that we have observed and can describe the Universal Church is problematic enough. But to make a similar claim about this family of terms is arguably even more problematic. Religion in English has for centuries (since the Reformation) referred mainly to Christian Truth, especially in the form Our Protestant Faith. To find out the meaning of this complex claim to truth would require consulting a whole range of experts in English, German, Dutch, French and some other languages – theologians, liturgists and church historians, for example. Religion as Protestant Truth was (and by many still is) contrasted with the superstitions of Catholics and other pagans, which I suggest would only have been referred to as ‘religion’ in an ironic sense. If religion has referred to truth, and in English has been almost always used to refer to Protestant Truth, then any other claims to truth would not have been considered ‘religion’ in any real sense, since by definition these have been considered to be false. To study ‘religion’ would therefore be to study Protestant ideology in its historical formations and its claims to truth about the meaning of the world and the ends of human existence. However, what constitutes religion in this sense has always been disputed. Others would argue that Christian Truth is really truth according to Catholic (or Orthodox) theology and practice. To claim to observe or research or describe ‘religion’ in this sense would be an elusive goal. One could not easily say that ‘religion’ exists except as a complex history of contested ideas and discourses about Ultimate Truth.

It would also be quite different from the modern idea that one can study 'a religion'. On the above idea of religion as truth, few Christians would have accepted the idea that 'Christianity' is 'a religion'. The idea of 'a religion' implies one of a kind or class of objects of investigation, and this is a modern idea with its own history. There is an important semantic difference between studying Christian Truth and its vast complexity of theological, liturgical and juridical contestation, and studying 'a religion' as one of a kind. For the modern idea of 'a religion' is the classification of 'secular' sociologists, historians and court judges. One would first have to know what to include as 'a religion', and what to exclude. The idea of 'a religion' as one of a class of things would require studying the history of a modern idea and how it came into being historically, and the much wider context of ideas within which it has operated as a system of classification. One would need to be able to give an account of the relation between any particular religion and the general category of religion. This in turn would be to exclude, either implicitly or explicitly, a whole range of claims about truth and a whole range of beliefs and practices and institutions which are deemed to be 'non-religious' or 'secular' in the modern sense, such as political or economic. To do this, one would have to research what certain kinds of authorities have deemed to constitute a religious practice or institution as distinct from a non-religious or secular practice or institution. Such authorities would include the 'scientific study of religions' as an academic discipline since the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, and the decisions of modern secular courts in many different countries. And since what constitutes a religion and what doesn't is the topic of continual contestation, it is as or more difficult to claim to study 'a religion' as it is to study the older meaning of 'religion'. Both terms operate in different semantic contexts, have a different logic of use, and are inherently contested according to significantly different criteria and by people with different purposes.

Religion, a religion and religions in the plural together form a general modern category or family of categories used for classifying a kind of practice and institution, not something which has any clear, empirical referent which can be observed. Furthermore it is a category that can easily be confused with the older usage of 'religion' as Christian truth, which has also been deeply contested but according to a different system of criteria. Yet in modern discourse the term religion is used as though it is obvious what is meant. Though there is a modern history of debates about the proper definition of religion, many of which are entirely contradictory, few people doubt that religions exist. There are standard lists of religions and world religions. There is a vast publishing industry claiming to offer descriptions of these supposed entities. They are taught in schools and universities. They have been constructed since the late eighteenth century and have increasingly become the objects of empirical knowledge. And religion is a special and distinct area of interest for some academics in IR, sociology and politics.

Religions, while not things that exist in the world as empirical objects of experience, have been imagined in ways that have huge power over all

of us. The belief in the existence of religions has become an intuitive item of common sense, and is propagated by a range of powerful agencies such as constitutions, courts, the media, the rhetoric of politicians, and in the theorized research of academics, for example in religious studies, the social sciences and IR. This is still true despite the critical deconstruction of the category especially within religious studies over the last 20 years. The vast academic and non-academic publishing industry on religion and religions still churns out books on the religions of the world such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, Shinto, Zoroastrianism, African traditional religions, pre-historic religions, religions in Ancient China, Roman religion, Greek religion, or the religion of the Pacific Islanders. The effect of this industry is to generate the illusion, often made theoretically explicit, that religions exist in the world as distinct kinds of things; and that these religions are manifestations of religion itself, a kind of universal essence which incarnates in all human groups, in all languages, at all periods of history and pre-history. The religious essence is also believed to manifest itself in special kinds of experiences and to be detectable in the 'religious' dimensions of life. It is this whole discourse on religion, religions and the religious with which I am critically concerned, and which I argue constitutes a globalizing modern myth with its own ideological work to do. And it is this wider myth that is being taken up and propagated over the last 15 or 20 years by IR and political science.

However, the critique of the category 'religion' leads us inevitably into a critique of all those categories deemed to represent the 'non-religious' secular. There could be no secular 'politics', for example, without 'religion'. Indeed, there could be no secular discipline such as IR without 'religion', a point acknowledged by some of the IR writers discussed in this book. The two categories are parasitic on each other. This is a historical and a conceptual claim about collective imagination. We could not imagine the non-religious secular domains such as 'politics' without the category religion operating as its binary other. Many scholars working in IR, politics and various other secular disciplines may claim to have no interest in religion, or to see it as marginal to what they do. Yet the marginalization of what is imagined to be 'religion' is simultaneously its inclusion by negation. I am arguing that the formation of any secular domain imagined as 'non-religious' is historically dependent on the conceptualization of religion as a distinct and different domain, even where this is unacknowledged, or where the scholars, journalists, lawyers or politicians are simply unaware or uninterested.

The secularity of those scholars who *do not* take an interest in religion is as dependent on the modern category 'religion' as those who do take an interest. However, the claim to be studying religion, or describing it, is obviously necessary for its re-inscription as part of the furniture of our world. When we claim to be researching, studying or describing some religion or other, or some religious experience or aspect of existence, we do so on the implicit or explicit

assumption that our object of research is essentially different from 'politics' or from our own research activities. The latter, being imagined as 'secular', are deemed to be essentially different from what we are researching. Religion and politics, religion and the state, or religion and the secular university are typically represented as separate and distinct domains that at certain points come into contact with each other. In these representations, religion and politics, or religion and secular social science, are imagined as having nothing *essentially* to do with each other. When the political scientist studies politics, she does so with the same assumption that politics and the secular state has nothing essentially to do with religion, even though religion might in specific circumstances impinge on politics, and become an issue and even a problem. One frequent variation on this construction, propagated by IR specialists and social scientists, is that when religion and politics get mixed they become volatile and dangerous. But this is the same principle found in constitutions such as the US Constitution. There is the idea that a wall must be constructed to ensure that these distinct substances do not come into collision with each other. They have become essentialized as two different substances with distinct essences that must be kept separate. In the language of the IR specialists reviewed in this book, religion 'returns from exile', or 'resurges' irrationally and fanatically and threatens the calm, rational and only reluctantly violent liberal state.¹

The argument here is that, historically and conceptually, the idea of religion as a universal essence manifesting in specific religions, and the idea of politics as a distinct, non-religious domain, emerged (in English at least) in the late seventeenth century and did not become powerfully institutionalized until the American and French Revolutions and their respective proclamations of a new world order. But the meanings of the key terms in these proclamations are deeply ambiguous, for the revolutionaries were appropriating older Christian discourses of religion as Christian truth and transforming them in the context of a new Euro-American world order. The new terms and meanings proclaimed in these seminal moments were hotly and violently contested, but gradually they won the day and became the basis for the contemporary globalizing myth of religion and secular domains. The continuation of the same words 'religion' and 'secular' from the old regime to the new one has acted to disguise the fundamental transformations in the meaning and typical use of these terms, and has facilitated the illusion of an essential continuity. One deeply embedded assumption made by historians and many others is that the modern distinction between religion and the secular is a continuation of a distinction that has always existed in 'Christianity'. I shall argue that this is a fallacy, a backward projection of a new distinction which was probably first articulated in the late seventeenth century and which has come to constitute a fundamental constituent of modernity. Even 'Christianity' is a reified modern invention that is continually recycled as a historical essence.

One way or another, 'religion' has become a special kind of attribute, practice or institution essentially different from non-religious ones. In this

sense 'religions' and 'world religions' are modern inventions. It is in this sense that it seems relevant to point out that no-one has ever seen a religion, any more than they have seen a 'state' or a 'nation' or a 'market'. This is also true about a large range of other general categories, and without them we would not be able to say very much at all. But categories of the kind I focus on in this book have become invested with great ideological weight in modern Anglophone theories about the world. They have been invested with misplaced concreteness. They lend themselves to myth. We act *as though* they are in the natural and inescapable order of things. These categories of modern ideology stand over and above us as though they have an independent existence, and as such have become alienated from our own collective productivity. Much of the globalizing Anglo-American world is organized according to these imagined entities or domains.

'Religion' and its proclaimed separation from the non-religious 'secular state', for example, is a matter of constitutional and juridical importance. The distinctions between religion and politics, or between religion and science, are fundamental to modern institutions and practices. Such terms have been elevated in significance beyond merely abstract categories without which we could not speak or write, into fundamental beliefs about the world. Globalized categories such as 'religion', 'politics' and 'nation state' have become the reified objects of the contemporary world order. These are more than abstract categories, but powerful rhetorical constructs or even myths that we believe in. These categories are invested with powers and indeed define powers of great historical and contemporary significance. In this book I want to show how 'religion' and 'religions' are invented or re-invented by a sample of writers in International Relations. Some of these writers unquestionably believe in 'religion' and 'religions'. Others see that religions are modern inventions, and attempt to question them as such. But a key point is to notice how the invention of religion and religions is also the invention of the non-religious secular domains of natural reason that constitute our common sense experience of the world.

Religion is generally understood as a universal and distinct kind of human practice and institution. Though it is frequently (though not always) defined by 'belief in the supernatural', religion is generally seen as a natural aspect of human experience and action. Also, religion in general has some problematic relationship to religions in particular. These 'religions' have been set up in modern discourse as things that exist in the world, things which belong to a general class but each with their own essential characteristics. These essential characteristics can be listed and compared with the essential characteristics of other similar things (Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Shinto, Sikhism, Roman religion, Greek religion, Native American Religion and so on). I shall suggest that these are all modern inventions that have been transformed through the power of rhetoric into distinct figments of the imagination. They serve both specific and more general ideological requirements.

The invention of religion and religions has also been the modern invention of the non-religious ‘secular’ domains such as the nation state, politics and economics. These domains are mutually parasitic, and we could have no modern idea of a non-religious state (for instance) without the idea of a distinct and separate domain of ‘religion’. For example, imagined as a specific religion, ‘Hinduism’ is an idealized, colonial construct that masks the actualities of power relations in colonial and postcolonial India. As a member of the universal class of ‘religions’, Hinduism serves as a myth that simultaneously constructs the myth of the secular state.

‘Politics’ is widely assumed to be an obvious feature of the ancient and modern worlds in all cultures everywhere. Politics is ubiquitous, and to claim that politics is a modern invention will also seem counter-intuitive. However, I would suggest that, typically, politics as an Anglophone category has two significantly different modes of deployment. In one it refers specifically to a distinct domain of non-religious rational action separate from another domain, ‘religion’. This usage emerged only in the late seventeenth century, and ‘politics’ seems to have been invented around that time as a word. Yet politics is also used in the far more general sense of ‘power’. As such, everything can be political. If politics merely means power – and it is often ambiguously used in this way – then historical and ethnographic universality is acquired but at the expense of specificity and meaningfulness. Power in human relations is probably one of the few genuine universals, like hunger or fear; but as such it carries little analytical weight. Yet, in modern rhetorical constructions, ‘politics’ has also been invested with the different and more specific meaning of non-religious rational action. In modern usage, ‘politics’ is ‘secular’, and therefore stands as separated from ‘religion’. The predominant modern usage of ‘politics’ refers to a domain of rational, problem-solving action separate and distinct from the irrationality of religious superstition. In the *imaginaire* of modernity, if religion and politics mix, then the result is thought to be unstable and dangerous, leading to fanaticism and terrorism. Therefore in modern discourse ‘religion’ ought not to be involved in power, which is the proper domain of rational politics.

This ambiguity in the meaning of ‘politics’, either ‘power’ in a very general sense or power in the more specific sense of secular, provides the category with a flexible, ideological deployment. The modern assumption – that religion in its real nature is (and therefore ought to be) uninterested in power/politics and merely concerns itself with salvation in some ‘other world’ – is tacitly projected backwards into the past and horizontally into other cultures. Thus kings are secular and non-religious but priests are religious – a modern fabrication that bears no relation to historical evidence – and ideally excluded from the power structure. If priests are, or have been, involved in power, then that is an over-extension of their legitimate interest.

I am not a trained historian, but I cannot find a sustained discourse on ‘politics’ in English in the sense of a domain of rational action separated from

'religion' before 1680. Probably more expert historians than me can prove me wrong. But if I am right, then we have an extraordinary and misleading flexibility in the category 'politics', on the one hand as a distinct domain separated from another domain called 'religion', and on the other hand a vague reference to power which exists universally between humans. The rhetorical illusion generated by this ambiguity is that the modern distinction between two domains, religion and politics, is inherent to all human groups at all periods of history.² This Anglophone discourse not only cognitively colonizes the non-Anglophone world through globalization but also colonizes the Anglophone or more generally the Europhone past.

This book, as with my previous published work, is not an attack on those theorized practices, commonly classified as 'religious', which many people hold to encompass what is truly valuable in our personal and collective lives.³ It is a critique of the modern practice of classifying 'religious' as against 'secular' domains as though these categories are part of the order of things. It is a critique of the religion–secular binary and its function in sustaining the myths of modernity. It is a claim that such a classificatory practice is itself ideological. By classifying a specific range of theorized practices as religions, faiths or spiritualities,⁴ it thereby exiles them and simultaneously constructs the domain of the secular as in accordance with natural reason. One of the unintended effects of these acts of classification is that they marginalize a range of different ways of representing moral and metaphysical dimensions of existence into an irrational or at best non-rational sub-category, a hived-off basket of other-worldly fantasies, while simultaneously legitimating another range of representations such as politics, economics and the nation state as inevitably in accord with 'natural reason' and common sense. The kinds of collective and personal moral vision thus classified as 'religions' and 'spiritualities' become effectively emasculated and cordoned off from the public space and confined to the realms of private 'faith' in tacit distinction from the hard realities of factual science and rational secular politics. In this way the metaphysical assumptions, acts of faith and value commitments underlying secular domains tend to be relatively hidden from scrutiny. Secular institutions and the natural rationality that supposedly legitimates them stand over against us as the common-sense reality, the natural order of things, the way the world is.

It is frequently held that the separation of religion and politics originated historically in the second half of the seventeenth century as a movement in favour of toleration, and when this separation is considered at all it is still often legitimated in contemporary society in this way. Toleration is indeed an important virtue. But I shall argue at various points in this book that, while there is some historical truth in this narrative of origins, it is exaggerated. The idea of religion as a distinct and separate category of practices arose in part and initially as a tool of the Christian administration of colonized subjects, and became increasingly entrenched through the emergence of new class interests

as a way of legitimating not only scientific knowledge but also new concepts of ownership, new forms of labour and productivity, and new concepts of rationality. This imagined separation was not only about toleration for a new emerging class of entrepreneurs and industrialists, but also about the needs of colonial rule.⁵ These were presumably connected, and it would be a mistake in my view to see toleration only as an issue internal to Europe. Christian Europe was subjected to change through the processes of overseas colonization as much as were the overseas colonies. One product was the invention of Christianity as ‘a religion’, a thoroughly modern idea projected back in the mythical reconstruction of our own collective past. Another product was ‘political economy’ or the science of economics, which represents itself as the description of real and natural forces in the world – the non-religious and factual. This is also the emergence of a supposedly essential distinction between faith and knowledge, between the natural and the supernatural, or between hard science and metaphysical belief.

I will argue in the final chapter that Marx’s critique of political economy is still of fundamental importance to the demystification of modern ideology. This book is partly an experiment in applying critical Marxist theories of mystification and alienation to belief in ‘religion’ and ‘religions’. Marx did not do this. When he critiqued religion as mystifying and alienating, it was almost always the Christian churches and church-states, and the particular myths that sustained them, that he had in mind, and their function in legitimizing the feudal order and the bourgeois capitalist order. Marxists have tried to apply similar analyses to other so-called ‘religions’ such as Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, or Confucianism, and so on. I want to distinguish what I am doing in this book by looking critically at the modern belief in the existence of ‘religions’ as such and in general, and thus at the parasitic other of ‘religion’, the secular. My attempt to deconstruct the myth of religion and religions is equally an attempt to deconstruct the myth of the secular. These two are joined at the hip, and constitute a single, two-faced category carrying a message that says ‘we are essentially different’. Belief in ‘religion’ and ‘religions’ as objects of secular knowledge (and by extension of control and even suppression) is shared as much by Marxists as by non-Marxists.

Therefore my analysis, which is indebted to Marx in significant ways, does not conform to the usual Marxist path of analysis, because I shift attention away from the ideological function of Christian churches, church-states and the myths they propagate, and their Buddhist, Hindu, or Muslim presumed equivalents, to the ideological function of the whole mythical discourse on religions in general. In general, the existence of religions is not itself normally treated as a myth or even as a problem. Religions are thought of as complex phenomena that include a mythical aspect or dimension. Buddhism, Islam or Sikhism, for example, are usually assumed to contain myths or even tacitly to be mythological constructions of the world; but the *descriptions* of these phenomena by secular scholars are taken as factual rather than mythical and

derived from empirical observation rather than 'faith'. We 'know' that religions exist because we observe them, describe them, analyse them, compare them, praise them or denounce them. But what we do as secular people has nothing essentially to do with religion. Religious studies and the social scientific study of religion, for example, are widely assumed to be non-theological, empirical, secular disciplines. Most Marxists, who think of themselves as secular social scientists or economists, share this belief. There is a Marxist tradition of analysing the ideological function of specific 'religions' such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam or so-called African religions in legitimizing political or economic power; as such they are treated as specific kinds of ideology, distinct from secular ideologies. Such and such is a religion, as distinct from a secular ideology, even though they share similar functions. In contrast, I am analysing the very idea of religion and religions, and yet borrowing from Marx to do that. So I could say that I am refocusing the object of the Marxist analysis away from particular religions to the discourse about religions as such. And I want to show that this discourse is itself a myth, not *essentially* different from any other myth, with important ideological work to do in the legitimization of the 'secular'.

Hopefully, it may be clearer to the reader that the ideology that mystifies us is not the invention of religion and religions as such, but the religion–secular binary. The secular domains and their supposed essential difference from religion and religions are an integral part of the myth. The invention of religions has facilitated the invention of natural reason that transforms modern rhetorical constructs like the rationality and inevitability of capitalism and 'politics' into common sense. The mythological nature of our belief in self-regulating markets, self-maximizing individuals and private property has been mystically transformed into the inherent nature of things, the real world of facts and rational decision-making. These myths, which have been invented by largely male elites with specific interests at specific historical moments, have become transformed into a dominant and globalizing view of the world that appears to us as inevitable and incontestable.

My argument, however, is derived not only from Marx, but from other sources too. One source is an ironic one. It is the observation that Marxism as a tradition could be (and sometimes has been) seen as a religion itself, despite the claims made by Lenin and many other Marxists that Marxism is a scientific analysis of history and economics. There is a strong resemblance between Marxism and Christianity, a point argued for example by Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy*. Though Marxism is sometimes referred to in religious studies books as a 'pseudo-religion', 'quasi-religion' or 'religion-like phenomenon', not many Marxists would see it as such, and many such as Lenin have viewed it as secular science and as the foundation of the secular socialist state.

But I want to extend this idea to the observation that *liberal capitalism* and its theorization by liberal economists is itself very similar to what is widely

thought of as a religion or a religious ideology.⁶ Liberal capitalism and liberal economic theory are rarely referred to as a religion, but on the contrary are hardly seen as an ideology at all. Capitalism is generally assumed to be part of the ‘natural’ order of things, and secular scientific economists would see what they do as essentially different from what theologians do. Of these three – Marxism, Christianity and secular capitalism, only Christianity is normally classified as ‘a religion’. Yet all three have strong resemblances. For example, they all offer a final resolution to the problems of human existence. They are all significantly founded on metaphysical beliefs that are not derivable from empirical observation. They can all be seen as *soteriologies* based on acts of faith, that is, as doctrines of human liberation from a condition of ignorance, suffering or lack of true freedom and self-realization. In this way I want to question the supposed essential distinction between ‘religion’ and the modern world of global capital, the nation state and the ‘secular’ social sciences. The whole range of human practices and institutions are better thought of in terms of overlapping resemblances, similarities and dissimilarities in their characteristics. The idea that all the practices and institutions of the world can be classified into this Anglophone (or more widely Europhone) *either–or* religion–secular binary is an astonishingly implausible idea. The real task is to try to understand how such an idea can ever have gained ground and become so important in the definition of modernity.

Another source of my approach is the anomalies in the classification of what counts as a religion and what does not, and the problem of defining religion.⁷ I go into this issue in greater detail in other chapters. It needs to be born in mind that I began in religious studies and so I came at the problem from the ‘religion’ side of the binary, and was for a long time unconscious that the problems I encountered with the category of religion from within the field of the study of religion could equally be approached from the other side of the binary division, say from the point of view of the secular study of politics or IR, or from the point of view of constitutional history and the arbitrary interpretations by courts, in countries as diverse as India or the USA or France, as to what does and what does not constitute an essentially religious belief or practice. To briefly indicate just one example of such an anomaly, traditional practices such as yoga or vipassana meditation are normally classified as religious and as parts of the ‘religions’ Hinduism and Buddhism. They are taken to be characterized by faith in unseen forces or entities or states of being such as ‘pranayama’, ‘kundalini’, ‘karma’, Brahman, gods and goddesses, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and unconditioned insight (mukti, moksha, nirvana, satori). Yet people who are experts in yoga and meditation say they are based on empirical observation and experiment. They are in the first place *practices*, and these practices confirm experimentally the claims about their truth. They are ‘look and see’ philosophies. But in this sense they arguably share more with the empirical sciences than with Christian faith in the Resurrection, the Virgin Birth, or the Trinitarian God. That experienced yogis can stop their own

hearts beating or can be buried alive for a week without fear or damage to their mental or physical health are taken by their practitioners as empirically observable signs that their theories of human nature are true. To say that these are not true science and that therefore they are acts of religious faith is a piece of arbitrary dogmatism based on a simplistic and unsubtle binary opposition imposed from outside.

This is merely one example of many which can be cited from my own and other people's research. Another example, again taken from India, is whether 'caste' and untouchability are religious or merely social institutions. This was one of the earliest perplexities I had in my studies of the so-called 'religion' of Hinduism. It was not until much more recently that I came to realize that this is a problem which Indian courts have been struggling with for several decades, a problem which they in turn inherited from the Anglophone classification systems of the British colonial administrators. This is one example of the more general problem courts have had, in countries as different as the USA and India, in determining what constitutes a secular as distinct from a religious practice.

I have now come to realize that the history of court decisions in India (to continue with the example with which I am more familiar) on relations between 'religion' and the secular state runs side-by-side with a vigorous public debate among the intellectual elite about the meaning of 'secular' and 'secularism'. So contested is this term that some participants have argued that secularism in India has its own meaning and cannot be equated with 'Western' secularism. Some Hindutva theorists have argued that much of what has been included in the religion Hinduism is really not religious at all but secular, the traditional customs of the Hindu nation, and that the Westernized 'secularism' of Nehru and its legacy in Congress is a pseudo-secularism. These debates show that what constitutes religion and what constitutes secular domains such as politics or 'society' in India are so hotly contested that it makes no sense to deploy these categories as though they usefully describe any stable realities in the world. These are widely disputed modern colonial constructions that do not seem to translate well into Indian (or other non-European) languages.

Constitutions simply announce the nation state and its separation from, and relation to, religion and religions. This announcement or proclamation provides the rhetorical context for a discourse on 'freedom of religion' as a right, and non-interference by religions in the affairs of the state. The courts then have the task of deciding the cut-off points in specific cases. But the courts' decisions are largely arbitrary and based on highly imprecise criteria that change over time. And besides, there are good arguments for claiming that the secular courts themselves are not essentially different from religious institutions. The resemblances between what are typically classified as 'religious' institutions and the sacralizing procedures of secular courts in their pursuit of the realization of justice are strong. I have argued elsewhere, and will argue again in this book, that there are so many anomalies in the distinction between

religious and non-religious institutions, practices, and experiences that the whole discourse becomes too problematic and loses its power to convince.

Why, then, do we continue to assert this distinction, and to embed it into so many of our theoretical constructs and everyday beliefs about the world? What does it mean to claim, as IR writers are doing, that religion has returned from exile and is resurging? The binary distinction between religious and secular is powerfully institutionalized in universities and parliaments and constitutions. But what kind of narrative can we construct which provides us with a plausible reason for its successful institutionalization in the first place? This question has to be answered at least in part by historical contextualization. But I have already suggested its ideological function in constituting modernity. By inventing a distinct, ideally privatized, sub-rational domain of 'religions' based on belief in the 'supernatural', or in another unseen 'spiritual' dimension, we have simultaneously been able to invent an equally imaginary 'real world' of natural reason which is assumed to underpin the material and factual domains of the state, politics and economics. This is a largely masculinist invention of a tough-minded realism where solutions to practical problems are sought through confrontation with the facts, logical analysis, strict measurement, rational bureaucratic organization and negotiation; a domain arrived at through progressive recognition of the world 'as it really is'. In this way the enchantments of the modern world – the upward march of Progress towards Self-Realization through mastery of Nature, the liberal Secular State as inherently peace-loving and democratic, Individuals as self-maximizing entrepreneurs endlessly raising all living standards through harmonies of self-regulating markets, Private Property as the natural condition of rational living, and Scientific Paradigms such as evolutionary biology as descriptions of the way the world actually is in itself (what Kant referred to as the dogmatic delusion) get transformed into unchallengeable realities and common places. In contrast, powerful competing ethical and metaphysical paradigms have been mass-labelled and emasculated as religions, or associated through propaganda with some innate propensity to irrational violence. Many economists, who themselves work with mythical postulates masquerading as hard-headed, factual, empirical science, would be outraged by the idea that what they do is not *essentially* different from what 'religious' folk do.

The invention of the fantasy world of religion, and its function in transforming a historically-specific secular ideology into the inescapable nature of things, has parallels in the invention of 'tradition' and its function in the invention of modernity. Like religion and the secular, tradition and modernity are the same two-faced coin. The illusions of modernity such as the march of progress are parasitic on the simultaneous invention of tradition.

My critique of discourses on religion is also partly derived from the academic postcolonial and orientalist critique of the colonial constructions of world religions. Not much postcolonial discourse critiques its own secular positionality, and much of this kind of writing continues to deploy the

category religion with little critical consciousness of its parasitic relation to the myth of secularism. Yet at the same time there is now a considerable literature which argues that religions such as 'Hinduism', 'Buddhism' and 'African tribal religions' are the reified inventions of missionaries, colonial administrators and European scholars, albeit in cooperation with indigenous colonial subjects, usually a section of the literate male elite of the colonized countries.⁸ My own addition to this observation is that these complex processes of inventing 'religions' as objects of secular knowledge has simultaneously been the invention of the idea of the non-religious secular in its various formulations, including belief in disinterested secular scholarship itself, as though secular scholarship is itself objectively factual and non-ideological. Though I cannot here go deeply into the postcolonial literature, it seems fairly clear that Orientalism is characterized typically by the opposition between *our* secular rationality and modernity as against *their* traditional, religious irrationality.

Belief in these non-religious secular domains is not *essentially* different to belief in religion, but is ideologically constructed *as if* it is. This indicates the expression used in the sub-title to this section – *religion is not a standalone category*. It exists in binary opposition to the category of the secular. They are mutually parasitic, in much the same way as 'supernatural' and 'natural', 'spirit' and 'matter', or 'faith' and 'knowledge' are mutually parasitic categories. Religion and the secular are really two sides of the same categorical coin, and whenever we claim knowledge of religions we are engaged in an ideological practice which simultaneously and tacitly asserts the natural rationality of the secular.

Some readers will have noticed that, given what I say about the ideological nature of belief in secular objectivity, then my own position becomes problematic, not least because I am employed in a secular university and receive my salary from secular funding agents. Where do I stand? What are my own commitments? This is a fair question and in principle an important issue, and I try to deal with this partly in Chapter 4, which sketches my own research background; and partly in the final chapter. But, in the first place, I would only say here that the critical deconstruction of the myth of modernity and its dependence on the religion–secular binary is an argument like any other argument, and will stand or fall depending on its reception by a readership.

But there is fairly obviously an intention to raise some moral issues about our responsibilities as academics, whether we work in International Relations, the Social Sciences, Politics, or Religious Studies. One part of the argument concerns the value and purposes of the vast accumulations of secular knowledge recorded in the never-ending proliferation of books and journals which we academics compete to produce. How does all this knowledge production improve the quality of life, virtuous living, or further the ends of justice? Or are these issues irrelevant? Do our universities, in their search for fame, prestige, money, students and glittering careers, do anything worth doing at all, apart from re-inscribing the categories of the status quo? Do we

really believe that the radically unequal current distribution of the world's resources is inevitable, and anyway not really our business? Is there or is there not a connection, however indirect it might appear, between our discoursing on religion and religions, on the one hand, for example the facile linkage of 'religion' with irrational terrorism; and on the other the use of economic theory to justify the brutal conditions of sweatshop labour, not much different from slavery, operated by vastly wealthy capitalist corporations and corrupt elites?⁹ The arguments underlying this book do not definitively reveal such a linkage, but raise the subterranean connection of religion as a classification with the naturalization of capital and economic theory. I do at least hope to encourage a more explicit debate about the relationship between world disorder and our functions as teachers, knowledge-producers and competitive seekers after funding opportunities.

To put it bluntly, I do believe that the current ethos of Western universities, the way they are funded, the values of market competitiveness which they increasingly promote, the use of profitability as the main criterion for judging the value of academic achievement, are wrong. But it is more than this. Universities, on my argument, have become (perhaps they always were?) ideological state apparatus, agencies for the relatively indirect and disguised legitimization of the state, which has as one of its most pressing functions the management of corporate capital. Therefore, according to the views expressed in this book, universities should be a sacrosanct space for reasoned democratic dissent without fear of a managerial class whose own ideological and ethical inclinations may be closer to the views of a commercial corporation.

These possible connections between power and moral accountability of academic knowledge production seem even more directly pressing in the case of a discipline such as International Relations. This is not a personal matter about the moral and intellectual integrity of individuals in a specific academic discipline. I have no reason to doubt that personal standards of moral integrity are as high there as anywhere else, and it is certainly not my concern to set myself up as any kind of moral exemplar. It is an institutional and structural matter. These ideological commitments, according to my arguments, gain their efficacy because they are not fully conscious or disclosed. The production of discourses on religion appears innocent and disinterested, as though we are only describing and analysing the facts. But IR as a discipline, its journals, its theories, its senior personnel, are closely connected to powerful agencies and presumably has far more influence on the way people in important national and international agencies construe the world and conduct policy. I cannot help assuming, therefore, that even those academics from the discipline of IR who do not agree with my arguments will see that the issues they raise, for example about the uses of 'religion' for classification purposes, and the way that we represent other people and their so-called 'religions', have significant implications in terms of the uses and misuses of power.

Even in the event that these ideas (which are of course not mine alone, yet are still very much a minority position) should influence debates already taking

place, they are likely to change little outside the critical self-reflexivity of some sections of the intellectual community. The powerful agents of ideological reproduction will presumably continue. Furthermore, there is nothing to 'put in its place' such as a ready-made counter-ideology. My proposal is anyway an attempt to deconstruct 'politics' as a supposed domain of non-religious rational action, not to enter into that domain and extend it. In that sense my project is a negative one. 'Politics' is part of our problem. Unlike in the time of Lenin and the cadres who founded the Russian Socialist party, and who were able and willing to deploy and organize an anti-capitalist tradition of theorizing and establish a socialist state through revolution, no such situation exists today. The idea of a secular socialist state is as vulnerable to critique as any other kind of secular invention. If there is going to occur any kind of transformation in collective consciousness, it can only be the result of quiet and non-confrontational subversion, and the systematic critical deconstruction of the categories and discourses which mystify the contemporary world [dis]order. That is a moral commitment, not a 'political' programme. There is no reason why universities should not be sites for a critical, democratic debate on our own institutionalized self-images and self-legitimations; the purposes of our 'research' and the accumulation of secular knowledge; the real or supposed innocence of our work; and its intended or unintended consequences.

Notes

1. See Cavanaugh (2009), for a powerful and extended critique, including some good historiography concerning the modern invention of religion. See also Cavanaugh's essay in Fitzgerald 2007b. Germane to this whole discussion is the influential work of Russell T. McCutcheon; see for example McCutcheon, "They Licked the Platter Clean": On the Co-Dependency of the Religious and the Secular', *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 19, 173–199
2. I have discussed this issue in Fitzgerald 2007a and given examples of how this confusion of different logical deployments of 'politics' operates in the texts of historians and others.
3. I was recently accused of this at a conference, by someone who clearly never read any of my publications. I had a very similar reception from a political scientist when I suggested at a seminar that 'politics' is a modern colonial invention as much as 'religion'.
4. I agree very much with the arguments of Jeremy Carrette and Richard King in their powerful book *Selling Spirituality: the Silent Takeover of Religion* (2005). One crucial point for them and me is the following: if, as they and I argue, capitalism, as imagined by neoliberal dogma, is not essentially different from what would typically be classified as a

religion, then where has the ‘secular’ disappeared? Is the production of secular universities essentially different from a form of ritual? And hasn’t ‘religion’ become such a universal container that it loses its point?

5. See Cavanaugh (2009) for some additional historical analysis.
6. More recently Robert Nelson (2001) has argued that economics is a religion, in his *Economics as Religion*. However, see Cavanaugh’s (2009: 108/9) critique of Nelson. See also Carrette and King (2005).
7. I have given many examples of the problems of defining religion and connected issues in *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (2000).
8. I cannot give full details here of this literature since it would take me too far afield and take up too much time and space. Two books that can take the reader into the issues quickly are King (1999) and Bloch *et al.* (2010).
9. Consider for example John Pilger’s documentary on *The New Rulers of the World*, available online at http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=john+pilger+new+rulers+of+the+world&aq=1/. This documentary is not concerned ostensibly with ‘religion’. It is solely my argument that the invention and discoursing on religion and religions is a constituent ideological factor in legitimating a view of the world that considers such mass exploitation for the purposes of ‘profit at any cost’ the inevitable result of market forces and ‘naturally’ self-maximizing individuals. When Muslim or other groups band together to oppose this they are labeled as ‘religious fanatics’ or irrational ‘religious nationalists’.