

with a new preface by the authors

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is
critique

secular?

Blasphemy,
Injury and Free
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Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech

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With a New Preface by the Authors

Fordham University Press

New York | 2013

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Originally published as *The Townsend Papers in the Humanities*, no. 2,
by The Townsend Center for the Humanities, University of California, Berkeley.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

15 14 13 5 4 3 2 1

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Preface, 2013

SINCE THE INITIAL PUBLICATION of this volume, some of our readers have asked why we did not provide a more direct answer to the question “Is critique secular?” The title was meant to question whether a secular worldview is altogether different from a religious one, such that each has a distinct epistemology irreconcilable with the other. Further, the title was meant to challenge the presumption that critique is necessarily secular and, conversely, that secularism is by definition the condition of critique and self-criticism, distinguished from religious orthodoxy, which is regularly considered to be dogmatic. This book tries to grasp the nature of these two assumptions and to ponder their implications for the operation of secularism—its productions as well as its exclusions.

The assumption that critique is secular implies that secularism enables an active critique of an object or way of thinking as well as creating the very atmosphere in which intellectual positions are opened to criticism. It also depends upon a discursive casting of both terms—*critique* and *secularism*—as a priori and universal, uninflected by particular histories and cultures. Secularism, appearing as the opposite of religion, is understood to be structured by reason and objectivity rather than belief and attachment. And critique,

appearing as the opposite of orthodoxy, dogmatism, or fundamentalism, is understood to be structured by a commitment to transparency and rationality rather than faith or fealty. The conventional account, dependent upon ahistorical and a priori categories, thus features a linked series of constitutive oppositions: secularism-religion, critique-orthodoxy, reason-belief, judgment-obedience, truth-faith, transparency-opacity. Through these linked oppositions, secular societies and subjects know themselves to be committed to reason and self-reflection. Perhaps most importantly, this discourse establishes secularism itself as the privileged lens through which the undertakings and reactions of “the religious” are framed and interpreted.

These conventions governing the contemporary discourse on secularism have many significant epistemological and political consequences, several of which we seek to address in this volume. First, we explore the way a particular conception of secularism is central to the identity of the West (liberal, democratic, tolerant, critical), juxtaposed against its imagined other, which in this historical moment has become consubstantial with Islam. As it is deployed today, this opposition is not only dependent upon and generative of a monolithic and parodic account of Islam, it also prevents Western secular societies from certain kinds of self-reflection and self-knowledge—reflections that would tunnel under and thereby weaken the binaries on which this opposition stands. To this end, the essays in this volume aim to destabilize the metonymic chains of association that include secular-reason-critique-West and religious-irrational-fundamentalist-Islam/East, and to destabilize their very status as binary oppositions. We aim both to reflect on some of the problematic entailments of this discursive order and to rethink the possibilities for critique that emerge from opening it up to critical reflection, thus introducing a different valence of the critical and a mode of genealogical understanding that exceeds the binary opposition between the religious and the secular.

Second, we aim in crafting this conversation to call into question the standard normative account of secularism as a principle of state neutrality toward religion, including a resolute separation of church and state, religion and law, ecclesiastical and political authority. Secularism is conventionally taken merely to limit the provenance and reach of religion, to sequester it in the private sphere, rather than to define, transform, or generate the meaning and structure of religion. Secularism, in other words, is conventionally viewed as an organizing structure for what are taken to be a priori elements of human life—public, private, political, religious—rather than a discursive operation of power that generates these very spheres (and not only their boundaries) and suffuses them with content. Moreover, the conventional formulation of secularism is strongly normative: it holds out an entelechy of becoming that all states and societies are expected (or urged or commandeered) to judiciously follow, key among them societies that are understood to be stuck in a culture of unreason and belief, fealty, orthodoxy, and religious authority. It is at this point that the normative dimensions of secularism converge with the claim of Western civilizational superiority, mutually generating and fortifying each other.

As we work to take apart these kinds of conceptions and presumptions, we do not proceed without presumptions of our own. Rather, we take the universal claims of secularism to have a history that contributes to the production of the modern West, along with the West's view of and conduct toward the non-West. Beyond calling this mutually imbricated self-other (West–non-West) identity into question, we follow recent scholars who have argued that secularism does not merely organize the place of religion in nation-states and communities but also *stipulates* what religion is and ought to be, assigning its proper content and generating religious and secular practices and self-understandings accordingly.¹ We also understand secularization to be a process of disseminating the ethos, ethics, cosmology, and quotidian practices of hegemonic religious traditions across secular societies, not simply sequestering religion;

even as they are divested of their religious robes and nomenclature, religious strictures, sensibilities, and ordinances appear in law, commerce, social norms, and state-subject relations—a point made by thinkers ranging from Marx and Weber to Schmitt. This stipulation and dissemination occur in both non-Western societies whose level of secularity is often questioned and those regarded as paradigmatically secular, such as the United States, France, Britain, Germany, and the Netherlands. It is important to note, however, that the argument that secularism is engaged in a twofold process of stipulating and disseminating religion does not simply give the lie to secularism's claim to neutrality; rather, it allows us to see how the religious and the secular are co-constitutive, indelibly intertwined, each structuring and suffusing the sphere of the other. To put it another way, to track the career of modern secularism is of necessity to track the trajectory of modern religion. This is perhaps the analytical move in this book that is most unsettling for readers unfamiliar with recent scholarly rethinking of secularism and hardest to countenance for those who remain persuaded by a nominal conception of secularism as the principle of state neutrality toward religion and a concomitant indifference to religious truth. This very presumption, we argue, forms one of the most clearly “uncritical” moments of the premise that critique is always secular and secularism is always critical.

We proceed, then, from the view that secularization reproduces and disseminates even as it transforms culturally and historically specific religious content, and that it generates particular religiously inflected (albeit disavowed) modalities of law, ethics, subjects, and consciousness. Given the post-Reformation European origins of modern law, politics, and the nation-state, this religious content is, unsurprisingly, often Protestant in character and carries related sensibilities and values. Key among these values is the idea that religion is a matter of subjective and interior belief, whose proper locus is the individual conscience rather than religion's phenomenal forms (rites, liturgies, rituals, scripture). Such a conception comports closely

with (and helps to generate) the liberal ideal of free will and individual autonomy. It is bound up with the modern judgment that religion, to be squared with freedom and enlightenment, must be freely chosen by a rational and deliberate agent, culled from a variety of equally valid options. Indeed some scholars regard this attitude toward religion as a distinctive marker of Euro-Atlantic secularism.² In other words, the embodied forms are assigned secondary status, while beliefs are made primary. Such a conception of religion is naturalized in secular societies to such an extent that its presuppositions and requirements go unnoticed until they collide with other competing conceptions of religion, which are then often dismissed as backward, fundamentalist, insincere, or simply traditional.

These issues take on pressing significance in light of recent public discussions in Europe and America that charge Muslims with being insufficiently secular, hence comporting poorly with Euro-Atlantic standards of citizenship. This charge was manifest in the 2005 and 2008 Danish cartoon controversy, various dimensions of which we take up in this text as iconic of similar controversies that continue into the present. In the cartoon controversy, Muslim protests against denigrating depictions of Muhammed were regarded by many secularists (Europeans and non-Europeans alike), as well as the popular press, as a sign of Islam's incapacity to "handle criticism." This alleged incapacity in turn was treated as a sign of orthodoxy, secularism's putative opposite. The popular view was that Muslims who could not tolerate offensive speech, including visual representations, expressed a larger limitation, namely, an uncritical attitude toward Islamic strictures and doctrinal presuppositions and the inability to bear criticism of their own beliefs.

This rendering of Muslims and Islam is itself a kind of caricature, one that bolsters criticisms of Islam, within the United States and Europe, to the effect that its practitioners have no capacity to tolerate caricature. So the case for secular criticism relies on the production of new caricatures, thus raising the question: What is the relation between secular critique and caricature? How do we think about

this circular operation of power? On the one hand, it seems to presuppose that secularists are entitled, if not morally obliged, to caricature Islam in order to show (and produce) its exclusion from secular attitudes. On the other hand, Muslims are defined, more or less essentially, by their failure to tolerate caricatures or criticisms of Muhammed or any other aspects of their own religion. Muslims who live in European societies, then, must prove their eligibility for admission to secular society by demonstrating their capacity to endure caricature and to have their Prophet mocked and debased, shown in sexual and intoxicated ways that demean Islam. It is not Muslims' tolerance of other religious traditions that is at issue, but their tolerance for enduring the kind of criticism embodied by debasing caricatures of Islam. So those who experience such actions as injurious (leaving aside for the moment legal debates about the distinction between injury and offense) have only two options: they take and accept the injury as a sign of their capacity to assimilate, or they publicly object to the injury and thereby demonstrate their inassimilability, their failure to comply with the norms of secular tolerance—characteristics that disqualify them for citizenship.

Now one way to subject this formulation of secularism and a caricatured Islam to critique is to expose not only its operations of power and hegemony but its hypocrisy. There have been more than a few occasions in which many in the secular West rose up in outrage against degradations of Christianity or of Israel equated with Judaism. Among the best known is the enduring fury over *Piss Christ*, a 1987 photograph by the American artist Andres Serrano that depicts a small plastic crucifix submerged in a glass of the artist's urine. Among the most recent is the uproar over a cartoon in the *London Sunday Times* following the 2012 Israeli election that depicted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu constructing the West Bank separation wall with the bodies of Palestinians sandwiched and bleeding between the building blocks. After outraged Jews around the world claimed that the demonic portrayal of the Israeli leader conjured up the anti-Semitic fable of blood libel and hence

constituted an unacceptable instance of anti-Semitism, Rupert Murdoch issued a “major apology for [the] grotesquely offensive” cartoon published in his paper.³

The inconsistency and hypocrisy in the supposed openness of secular societies and secularized religions to criticism, caricature, or degradation underscores the fact that secularism is actually partial to some religions over others, and that this partiality, rather than neutrality, is more fundamental to secular institutions and practices. But charges of hypocrisy and inconsistency are neither the most interesting platforms of critique nor the ones we pursue here. Instead we aim: (1) to understand the normative presumptions about religion and interpretation underlying the view, held by many secular Europeans and circulated in the popular press, that Islam is uncritical; and (2) to show what other conceptions of religiosity and interpretive practice were at stake for some of the orthodox Muslims in relation to the iconic status of Muhammed in Islam. So part of our task is to examine the conditions under which these apparently incommensurable frameworks of intelligibility can be thought together.

Indeed, the impugning of orthodox Muslims as uncritical often rests upon the judgment that they fetishize Islam’s phenomenal forms—Muhammed, the veil, the Quran—at the expense of the deeper spiritual meanings and human values that underlie religious experience. This Protestantized conception of religion enfolds a concomitant semiotic ideology in which signs stand apart from the meanings they signify, objects from subjects, signifiers from signified. According to this construal, Muslims who felt offended by the Danish cartoons were understood to have committed a category mistake, collapsing a necessary distinction between the subject (Muhammed as sacred) with the pictorial object (published representations of Muhammed). If the protesting Muslims were schooled in this distinction, they might have been able to appreciate that what is really sacred (the idea of prophecy) remains untouched by the satirical representations of Muhammed (considered as mere signs, not as part of the Prophet himself).

This semiotic ideology, along with the secular conception of religion to which it is tethered, is operative in a variety of contexts today. One example is the argument in France that the ban on the veil does not violate the religious liberty of Muslims because it does not intervene in anyone's beliefs (the proper locus of religion); the ban merely limits the public expression of those beliefs. Hence the notion that the interiority of belief can be disjoined from its public expression conditions both the secular denunciation of outrage against the cartoons of Muhammed and the secular argument that bans on the veil are not violations of religious freedom. Yet such an understanding of the relation between religion and signs contrasts with another way of relating to sacred icons. Many orthodox Muslims understand the relationship between the revered object and the reverential subject as a form of cohabitation and relationality, one in which outward or phenomenal signs do not simply signify prior subjective meaning but rather performatively constitute the conditions of reception and subjectivity. Such a conceptual relationship is not novel to Islam but permeates other religions as well. One example is the important tradition of Corpus Christi in medieval Christianity, according to which the Eucharist did not stand in for the divine but embodied his materiality. We might also recall the work of philosophers such as Wittgenstein, C. S. Peirce, and J. L. Austin, who, in their different ways, have made us think of semiotic practices as constituting experiential fields rather than serving the sole purpose of communicating meaning or as modes of symbolic signification.

So how is the reader to receive the juxtapositions we offer between normative secularism and its clash with different religious epistemologies, presuppositions, attachments, and veneration? Are we saying only that secularism takes various forms depending on the function it serves and the fields it constitutes? It would be easy to regard this move as sufficient, since it pluralizes secularism, dislodging the Western monopoly over the meaning and substance of

the secular, showing “other ways” of inhabiting it—one Protestant, another Islamic, perhaps others still, all arranged on a platter of world religions, each offering its own unique interpretation of secularism. Such a strategy fails to adequately appreciate, however, the prescriptive and normative thrust of secularism and ignores how secularity is not simply a culturally specific value but a political episteme that structures modern societies in modular and similar ways. This way of thinking about secularism has some instructive parallels with earlier debates about capitalism in the eighties and nineties. Scholars trying to think through the global forms capitalism took in non-Western societies were often asked if they were trying to pluralize the Eurocentric account of its emergence and development. A key response to this query argued that it was not the fact of plurality that was so interesting but the challenge of how to conceptualize its variation(s) in relation to the normalizing thrust of a universalizing project.⁴ The questions we suggest in this volume for rethinking the trajectories and forms secularism has taken across the Western and non-Western divide in some ways parallel this earlier conversation and may provide readers a way of stepping back from the reductive binarism of universality (secularism) versus particularity (religion).

This volume asks readers to question the terms of intelligibility that govern a particular normative conception of secularism and to engage in the difficult task of translating across temporalities, rationalities, and structures of affective investment. To understand the challenge of this form of translation, let us return to the much-celebrated “right to offend” in secular societies. Regarded as the *sine qua non* of a secular sensibility, this right became the basis of the legitimate circulation of the Danish cartoons of Muhammed in Europe and beyond. One might begin by asking: What if “offense” does not quite capture what was at stake for many Muslims? What if we need to enter into another form of reason or understanding to grasp what was at stake? Such an entry would not be equivalent

to translating Muslim practices into liberal legal frameworks—that is more likely to be an act of assimilation to a secular framework than an understanding and engagement with the perspectives of those who decried the cartoons. Nor is the point for secularists to learn how to identify with the perspective of the “other.” Rather, the question is how we might articulate the conditions and limits of the secular legal norm and associated epistemological and interpretive frameworks that bear this “right to offend” as an absolute principle. Those limits are exposed precisely when we see how the religious relation to embodiment that links subjects and objects in a sacred relationality cannot be conceptualized within the secular legal framework. In considering the incommensurable notions of understanding in this encounter, we have to rethink what the practice of cultural translation requires. Translation can be a form of assimilation, but also a mode of “giving over” to a countervailing perspective in an empathic vein. A different alternative for translation emerges, however, when we are compelled to identify and sustain sites of untranslatability. In effect, letting the untranslatable situation stand sometimes opens up another field of understanding that serves at least two different purposes: the first is to map incommensurable views without seeking to reconcile them; the second is to see how these very incommensurable domains constitute, inflect, and even suffuse one another without projecting a broader dialectical unity to which they ultimately tend. The self-limiting function of secular critique takes place when it comes to terms with the epistemic limits of the secular as such; it is marked by the encounter with the untranslatable, which means that it must turn to another form of mapping and understanding—genealogy—if not a different form of critique, to illuminate this encounter. Kant argued, of course, that critique is everywhere concerned with the limits of what can be known. Perhaps it can now be said that secular critique, if it is to remain critical, must be concerned with the epistemic limits on the knowable imposed by secularism itself.

Indeed, the task is not merely to show that critique belongs ex-

clusively to a modern European secular narrative, or to once again bring in “the other” to decenter or provincialize that narrative. In the case of the Danish cartoons, for instance, we have to consider those modes of embodied reasoning that link the subject to the image, that is, where the image constitutes a living connection between the subject and the divine. The embodied form of relationality directly challenges the distinction between belief and representation presupposed by the secular legal discourse invoked to adjudicate the dispute between cartoonists and pious Muslims. If the debate on the status of the cartoon continues to happen exclusively within that legal framework, then the result can only ratify that framework and the foreclosures (and absorptions) it entails. So it is important to reverse course, not in order to side with religion against the courts, but to understand this stand-off better through posing a different set of questions. The secularist might ask: What is the ethical relation to the religious practices and phenomenal forms of religious life that exceed the idea of religion produced by secular discourse? What language is available, and what kind of practice of translation becomes obligatory, to mark the limit of that horizon, the field of incommensurable practices that constitute secularism’s “outside” and to remap the relation between secularism and religion in a way that does not ratify the epistemic priority of the secular or perform a simple reversal of valuation? Prior to any possibility of adjudicating the Danish cartoon controversy within the terms required by secular forms of public policy and legal judgment, we have to ask: Can the incident and the injury even be named or known within that discursive horizon? Do we not need first to know how best to understand what has happened before we enter into adjudicating it? If we say no, then the language of adjudication itself furnishes the default terms by which to describe the phenomenon, which means that the challenge to that language posed by the relevant religious tradition or practice is muted from the start and so ruled out of the description itself.

To raise these points is not to take a position on the cartoons, namely, whether they should be prohibited or not. Rather, it is to