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The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director



March & April 2019

Issues 7-8: *The Secular Synecdoche*

On a recent trip to Austin, I had the opportunity to attend an exceptional panel discussion on the historical relationship between the late Mongol (Yuan) empire and the Mughal empire founded by the Timurids in 1526. The consistency of that relational history and how it handled the question of what constituted “religion” and “the secular” in



Akhbar at Court
(fl. 1556-1605)

the so-called pre-modern age was the task at hand. It was dealt with fluently and with great skill by the participant scholars, and prompted questions like “can we even consider the idea of secularity before it existed?” Additionally, the whole concept of the Enlightenment in Western Europe (or “the West” as we like to refer to it), has been both useful and problematic. Since the

late 18th century, the question of what constitutes “the modern person” has supposedly moved us into a new realm of self-reflective, heuristic exceptionalism. But how might we consider the way this idea of “the secular” plays into our own contemporary society—especially as we hear it so often used as the negation of our religious practice? How does this assumed dichotomy display itself within theological schools and seminaries, and ultimately what might play out in the libraries that support those schools, through collection development policies, presentations, lectures, and even cataloging rubrics? What constitutes division in categories of *theological* knowledge in distinction to *informational* and *religious history* knowledge? I’ve been in several conversations since coming to Bridwell about the nature of what constitutes the divisions and similarities between theology, religion, and the broader categories of “world religions,”—a term that Prof. Ruben Habito and I have discussed in respect to recent scholarship that has identified “world religions” as a Protestant

invention that prioritizes categories of Christian predominance in dialogue. Authors like Robert Orsi, who wrote *History and Presence*, which effectively critiques the legacy of the Enlightenment and Donald Lopez Jr., the renowned Buddhist historian, have argued that these constructions of non-Western religions were reflections of the very missionary powers themselves: where Protestants viewed positively the Buddhist, because Buddhism were more ethereal, meditative, and “thinking” religious traditions parallel to the Protestant world-construction; while the Catholics saw Hinduism in their image, as having many gods (like many saints). Tomoko Masuzawa authored a major work in this area, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, where she takes a broad view of Protestantism’s entrenched grip on how the narratives of other religions are told, and even taught, indicting no less than Ernst Troeltsch and his methodology of universalist social structure. No matter what the obvious distinctions may be, *theology* and its *Wissenschaftliche* siblings in *Religious Studies* possess a more complicated and nuanced relationship than what we might imagine.

In mid-March, I attended a conference in Denver for a few days, and on the last day, I took a short ride up into the Rockies on a local bus to get to Boulder. While there, I managed to find several outstanding bookshops, but also to my surprise and delight, an exceptional eatery called the *Dushanbe Tea House*, which apparently was brought piece-by-piece from the Central Asian country of Tajikistan. Its interior and exterior design were beautifully crafted with both fine detail and vibrant color. As I looked at the anomalous architecture in downtown Boulder, I thought all at once of the long history that was in that building—where it had been, and what experiences were had by its builders, owners, and patrons. It was clearly



designed and articulated in a place half-way around the world, rich and expressive with the religions of Islam, Buddhism, and Tengrism, for example; but also, a place that was thoroughly Soviet and purposefully atheistic for greater part of the 20th



Dushanbe Teahouse

century, and for the last couple decades it has been in the United States. How do we render something like that in the context of what it means to be secular: *can a building be secular? Can it be both secular AND religious? What does that even mean?* We designate chapels and churches as ‘consecrated’—why not ‘con-secularize’ some spaces? If you do a search for the phrase ‘libraries are sacred,’ for example, you’ll get several thousand Google hits—“sacred spaces” “sacred communities,” “sacred institutions,”—and it doesn’t matter if it’s a theological library or an engineering library—the least of the sacral spaces, presumably! This language is vast and commonplace. One writer even went so far as to write a book, *Sacred Stacks: The Higher Purpose of Libraries and Librarianship* by Nancy Kalikow Maxwell (2006).

In whichever way that we identify our spaces and places, our actions and practices, as sacred or secular, we are in many ways creatures of ritual, especially in our communities. After all, what are college athletics, if not sacred? There’s nothing secular about it—except maybe the catering and hot dogs, and even that is a form of “communion.” The etymology of *sacred* is from Latin, for “holy,” while *secular* is from the word for “age” or “generation.” It is in some ways a distinction between *an action or designation of something* as having a distinct connection to God, the divine; while the secular is based in *time* and the earthly tension of how *we relate to our movement through that continuum*. We might even argue that these are neither equivalents, nor opposites, even if they are generally seen in this light.

Among the many theorists of religion and scholars who populate the halls and pantheons of religious studies, theology, and even apologetics, the debates

that we argue are recurrent, if not perpetual, and deal with the very question of this division: what does it mean to understand and view the world through the lens of either the secular or religious, the profane or the holy? A few years ago, I gave a lecture about C.S. Lewis’s confrontation with modernity, and how his life’s work was a trial of contradiction and contrast with T.S. Eliot. Lewis was especially concerned with the issue of natural law and humanity’s attempt at trying to control what was in God’s domain. Lewis crossed between the theological, the poetic, and the apologetic, where he found the worldview and approach of Eliot to be in stark contrast to his own sense of God and natural law. And even though the surface tension was about poetics for these two literati, the core issue for Lewis was about humanity’s understanding of nature and God—in effect, how we as *homo sapiens* view the world as either being in our control *or* the control of the divine. It was yet another division of sacred and secular.

For those who are more in the camp of the objectivist “truths” (whatever they are!), characters like Charles Taylor and Talal Asad populate the scene and—for some—either corrupt the mind or liberate it from the shackles of what is seen as the arrested development of the soul. Asad, in particular, sees no difference between the secular and religious, inferring as much that religion is merely an anthropological expression of symbols rather than anything else phenomenological. The critiques have been across the board, some empathic, some savage. There are even those whose assessment is centered in a critique of Asad’s own identity—his father was a Ukranian Jew, who converted to Islam, moved to Pakistan, and became one of the foremost scholars of Islamic law, even serving as one of the advisors, who drafted Pakistan’s constitution. The critiques, then, are of how Asad has presented himself and his life in the crucible of his father’s multi-valent identity, and how *secular* and *religious* are but similar though different sides of the same coin.

Back in Bridwell, this question of the secular and the religious has come up in various conversations. We are, after all, at a theological school, but one that is part of a larger university setting, even if



being a university that has “Methodist” in the name. What constitutes the distinctions? Especially when we speak of the term “religious,” but in the context of “religious studies,” there isn’t really anything “religious” about “religious studies,” except the idea that it is an object of the study that is identified, in distinction to “theological” studies, which has the element of its ethical, moral, and confessional attributes. Is this another matter of “church and state” politics—or is it something more?

As we have been planning for the current renovations, several rooms and storage areas have been inventoried of their contents. In one, we discovered the old statue of Shiva from Southeast Asia, which had been in one of the basement cabinets. I’d always liked the sculpture since I first



Sort of Like a Faculty Meeting, But Different

saw it, and as we were considering putting it away for a year in storage offsite, I thought it might be nice to bring it out into the daylight. As we did, it came through my office and passed in front of the straight-laced and observant John Wesley—who sits piously on my wall, keeping an eye on me all day long. But you’ll see

in this contrast, that the two may seem at first glance to be in conflict but could actually complement one another. Perkins students study the legacy of Wesley, while if they do at all, SMU students who might be aware of Shiva study the *history* or *literature* about Shiva and Hinduism. Though Wesley is *not* a god to most people (I know there are some among us, who chant affectionate tones to our good friend J.W.), and Shiva is not a Methodist, there are similarities that might surprise us. A common theme to both characters is *creation* and what that means to the life, existence, and ultimate fruition of humanity in this world. Wesley wrote his two-volume *Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation* as an attempt to clarify what this imperative and central tenant of theological discourse meant for his fellow humankind. Shiva, who stands at the center of the Hindu traditions

regarding creation, is designated as the individual god who symbolizes time, in part, through the earthly cycles of creation *and* destruction. And yet, we might wonder, if we think of those Western constructions of “the secular” as delineating “time,” is Shiva, the Hindu god, then in fact a “secular god?” Or, must we recognize that categories themselves fall short of either suitable explanation or understanding, and we must retreat to an amenable and genteel approach to how we speak about the great curiosities of religion and theology?

In addition to the ideas about creation, we have ideas about how the legacy of creation, i.e. history *itself* is documented and written about, and how we tell stories about the past in general. But also, how is it that we tell stories about the present, about religions, about secularity, about each other? There are, for example, many books written about India—there are ones especially about how the British treated native Indians, and the role that the British empire played in “educating” the Indian population. But as noted Indian writer and member of parliament Shashi Tharoor rightly points out, India *before* the British was a highly educated, successfully developing country, with one of the highest GDPs in the world. Once the British came in, it was pillaged and left for nothing—except for English accents and a prim connection to Oxbridge that presented a front of an education system that supposedly made the Indians “better and more educated” people, which has subsequently been seen as another colonialist narrative. Others too, like William Dalrymple, who’s book *The Last Mughal* details this turn of positions about how the “West” looked at India and the case of the 1857 “rebellion”—an idea that for more than a century was seen as insurrection or mutiny, but under more critical eyes of post-colonial scholarship, has been assessed now as one of liberation from British colonialism. And within that narrative, the secular and the religious have come together in constant conversations, especially concerning the role of missionaries and their status in the worsening conflict. Part of examining history is reflecting on the hard parts, the uncomfortable parts, the complicated and



disturbing parts, which may mean coming to terms with where the Church (*any* church or religious group in power) had gone wrong, and that future generations would have to acknowledge and reconcile honestly and earnestly.

As a church, as a denomination, as a beloved community of people who share values, but also debate ideas, there is still a point of conflict that comes in many ways to the issue of secular and religious, though maybe not in as explicit terms. In the last weeks of March, the United Methodist Church met in great strife and division, about what constituted “traditional values,” and what was seen as more moderate or “progressive values.” The divisions about sexuality and morality came amid what was understood as influences from society and relativism—the idea that the “modern” or even “secular” world has pushed an agenda in contemporary society that is not inherently “religious” according to older notions of what constitutes Biblical inerrancy or orthodoxy. Are these the real tensions that exist in our world today, whether Methodist conflicts or others? Even if the granularity of the debates is expressed in terms of this kind of behavioral norm or that kind of marriage, the broader underlying tension is about the parameters of worldviews, which are taut in the paralysis of defining disparate understandings of the sacral in nature against how we understand that definition of *time* and that construct about our understandings of *the secular*.

Not long ago, I was in Dayton, Ohio with my daughters, at the National Air Force Museum.



ICBMs and Nuclear Warheads (above), and Enrico Fermi (upper right).

During the 3-hour-long tour of this astonishingly massive facility, we walked through the gallery of ICBMs and nuclear warheads. I explained to my children, as we stood below these 60-foot weapons, that these missiles could destroy the world swiftly and easily, without people even being aware that they were being deployed. My older daughter was deeply concerned, and we had a long discussion about what this meant for human

existence and survival in a world where these kinds of weapons of mass destruction (aka WMDs) were present and ready for use at a moment’s notice. A



few weeks later, we were all in Chicago and ended up taking a drive through Greenwood Cemetery in the Woodlawn neighborhood, in search of the grave of Enrico Fermi—the architect of the nuclear bomb, and the very warheads we stood beneath in Dayton. The more we discussed this, the more it made me think of the possibility of two different worlds—not necessarily like the Augustinian *City of God*; rather, the world of our present, our families, our communities, ourselves, and our hopes; and the other of complete annihilation through human-made conflict and destruction. These two sides bring to mind the favorite statement of naysayers of religion: that “it is religion that has caused the majority of wars in human history.” I recall some years ago a Soviet engineer proudly declared this to me, when he found out that I studied religion, to which I promptly replied: “...but it was engineering that *enabled* the technology in *every single* war in human history.”

There will always be some sort of conflict in this world, whether it’s driven by distinctions of the secular or sacred, or something else completely different. Nonetheless, we have choices to make, that will allow us to tend toward either conflict and disintegration, or the cultivation and preservation of humanity through the goodness of our own sisters and brothers in this world. The choice is ours.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

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