

The Advent of the Secularocene

by Jean Baubérot

Secularisation is often presented as a Western model that was exported during decolonisation; but according to M. A. Meziane, it was in fact spread by colonialism itself as an instrument of domination.

Reviewed: Mohamad Amer Meziane, [Des empires sous la terre. Histoire écologique et raciale de la sécularisation](#). La Découverte, 2021, 346 p., €22.

This book sets itself a highly ambitious goal which involves, starting from the concept of “imperiality”, connecting the internal effects of secularisation in Euroamerica to its external effects outside of the West, as created by colonial globalisation. The author here completely breaks with the grand narrative that was put forward by sociologists of religion from the 1960s to the 1980s¹ (a narrative which, more or less, endured thereafter), and instead claims that secularisation is not at all a Western model which, as had been assumed up until then, spread across the planet during decolonisation². On the contrary, he claims, it was in fact spread by direct colonial enterprises, such as the occupation of Algeria or India, or indirect ones, such as the progressive subordination of Turkey through to the disappearance of the Ottoman Empire. These enterprises imposed secularisation through a process of domination in which the mimetic rivalry of Western powers played a crucial role. This process delineated “the racial frontiers of the world, creating a hierarchical division

¹ Cf. O. Tschannen, *Les théories de la sécularisation*, Genève, Droz, 1992.

² The American sociologist Peter Berger was the author who most defended this perspective. At the turn between the 20th and 21st centuries, he changed his view and then argued that the world was “de-secularising”.

between this East and this West, [...] this blackness and this whiteness” which Europe claimed to “want to unite”. Meziane believes that the system of apartheid, far from being reducible to the sole exception of South Africa, “could refer to the very kind of racial segregation” operated by Europe in its colonies.

The great originality of this book lies above all in the way it also analyses secularisation in terms of its “subterranean” effects, namely within the framework of a “subterranean history of the state and capital”. We are reminded of the importance of the secularisation of Church assets, and in particular monastic assets, since this led to the exploitation of the subsurface, which the monks themselves had no use for. Generally speaking, the fossil fuel economy “requires a secular readability of the subterranean world”, which is emptied of the non-human beings of the mediaeval imagination, and, for example in Indochina, of the belief “that a dragon resides underground.” Secularisation then becomes “the birth of a new climatic order, of a new geological era, [...] the advent of the Secularocene.” In short, according to the author’s innovative theory, “the critique of the heavens turned the Earth upside down”... and engendered the changes to the climate we are currently experiencing. The book’s two perspectives are connected by the idea that a “useful exploitation” of the world’s resources required a racial division of labour in which, as the Saint-Simonians explained, “Europeans provide intelligence and capital and indigenous people provide labour and raw materials.”

The book begins with an important chapter on Bonaparte’s Egyptian campaign. This expedition marked the end of Christian imperialism, which had already been challenged by the Reformation and the Peace of Westphalia. This fact did not give rise to a political modernity founded on nation-states, but rather to the resurgence of an imperial project stemming from the Enlightenment, which was exported outside of Europe, and transformed religion and tradition into a “cult³” in relation to which a secular political power must admit a plurality of beliefs (cf. the Napoleonic regime of

³ In France, following the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685) and thus the prohibition of Protestantism, the terms “religion” and “Catholicism” tended to be used synonymously. As a result, from the 1789 Revolution onwards, the word “cult” became the legal term used to refer to religion. This constituted a double change compared to the situation under the *Ancien Régime*: firstly, it implied an acknowledgement of religious pluralism – people frequently (as is mentioned in the review) used the term “cult” in its plural form (thus, the 1905 law defining the separation between Church and State proclaims: “The Republic guarantees the free exercise of cults”); and secondly, the term “cult” refers back to a view of religion as defined by the liberal political philosophy in the tradition of John Locke, as opposed to an integralist view of religion.

“recognised cults”). Furthermore, the experts who accompanied this expedition announced the development of Orientalism and of Saint-Simonian engineering.

At the same time, the Egyptian campaign would also turn out to be emblematic of two other points that would remain crucial through to the 20th century: the imperial rivalry between France and the United Kingdom, with the Russian Empire in the background; and a very ambivalent relationship to Islam, in which “Mohammed” goes from having the status of Antichrist to that of legislator, whose legacy Bonaparte claimed to be continuing, thus implicitly rendering the role of prophet obsolete. This perspective led, in Algeria, to the Quran being reduced to a family code defining the personal status of the non-citizen French subject. The racialization of Islam was marked in particular by the development of the concept of “Catholic Muslims” by the Court of Appeal of Algiers (in 1903) and, more generally, by the idea of Muslims being inconvertible, while at the same time denying any possible universality of Islam due to its supposed “theocratic impurity”. In a different context, the non-conversion of Indians under British rule bears witness to a colonial secularisation through the separation of the missions and the state, and the idea of the inherent immobility of tradition.

These, then, are some of the most striking ideas from this book which ends with fascinating suggestions in which Meziane situates himself in relation to authors such as Derrida, Foucault or Arendt. It is the latter to whom he seems to me to be closest to, due to his view of imperialism as a system of unlimited expansion. This does not in any way reduce the specific value of this book, since Arendt herself never wrote an “ecological and racial history of secularisation”.

A Non-Teleological Philosophy of History

I have had to outrageously summarise a dense piece of work, but I hope that I have shown how very relevant it is. It is based on an impressive amount of documentation and on an equally impressive ability on the part of its author to connect facts and processes that are usually disjointed into a unity of perspective, and to demonstrate the importance of elements that are often considered to be anecdotal. We might mention, for example, the fact that Cardinal Lavignerie’s Toast of Algiers, in 1890, took place, precisely... in Algiers, and that, consequently, the rallying of the Catholic Church to the French Republic was first proclaimed in a colonial situation.

Furthermore, there were several occasions, as I read this book, when I was able to mentally add to it facts which supported its perspective. Thus, if we stay in Algeria, the Act of Capitulation proclaimed, as well as the respect of the “indigenous people’s” religion, the respect of their women. As a result, in spite of the sharp hostility of the medical profession, Empress Eugénie was able to help a woman (Miss Reinguer de la Lime) register at the Algiers medical faculty, so that Algerian women could enjoy the “benefits of medical science” without having to be examined by male doctors: the Empress thus abolished the taboo which, in France (unlike in Anglo-Saxon countries), prevented women from becoming doctors. Which all goes to show that the road to “emancipation” can be a winding, and even paradoxical one!

I did not choose this example randomly since, in a certain way, its ambivalence reflects many passages in this book which reveal various reformative, modernist and pacifist utopias as ultimately constituting instruments of secularising domination. And if, at the end of the book, Meziane states loud and clear that it is “only a series of contingencies” that have led to the connections he identifies between secularisation, imperialism and the accumulation of fossil fuels, this may be to correct the impression he sometimes gives of there being a kind of ineluctable structural link between these different elements. Indeed, his approach seeks to put forward a non-teleological philosophy of history – a very commendable endeavour, but a rather difficult one, in which the author does indeed take position in the philosophical camp, drawing from historians what they can contribute on the factual level, but without really taking position with regard to the various issues raised by sociologists.

Thus, Meziane takes relatively little interest in the social reception of the ideas whose genealogy he has reconstituted. What influence did the many authors he has selected have? He does not hide the fact that, at times, a “literature which may seem minor” seems to him to be the most significant. However, he does not mention a man like Pierre Larousse, who may indeed have no claim to be a great theoretician, but whose *Le Grand Dictionnaire Universel* fed into the discourse of the Third Republic’s middle managers – and Larousse viewed Buddhism and “Mohammedanism” as more “tolerant” than Christianity⁴.

Furthermore, the perspective Meziane has taken seems to me to lack interactionism. His focus on how ideas feed into each other risks giving the impression that philosophers are somewhat (I am exaggerating here) the cultural masters of the world; and his insistence, which admittedly is often welcome, on the role of the state

⁴ Cf. J.-Y. Mollier & P. Ory (ed.), *Pierre Larousse en son temps*, Paris, Larousse, 1995.

risks favouring a top-down imposition. But the process of secularisation was also operated by social classes that turned out to benefit from the social changes it led to. Thus – this is an important but often overlooked aspect – secularisation transformed the social understanding of death, which, from a passing into “the hereafter”, became an end of life that should be pushed back, to the benefit of doctors, who thereby came to supplant the clergy socially. One of the key differences between the contemporary West and djihadis is that the latter, in their own way, view death as a passing into a “hereafter” that is more desirable than the prolongation of life “here below”.

I will here take the liberty – while apologising for it – of raising my own personal situation, since it seems to me to be quite significant. Various works I have written as a historian are quoted to better define this or that fact, but I am never mentioned as a sociologist who has challenged the all-encompassing paradigm of secularisation by drawing a distinction between “secularisation” and “laicisation”⁵. I note, in fact, that while secularisation is conceptualised, the social use of the term “*laïcité*”⁶ is included without being analysed theoretically. Yet it seems to me that the author’s approach would have gained in precision had he distinguished secularisation in the socio-cultural field and laicisation as related to the socio-political field; two concepts which are autonomous, even if they overlap with each other. In this perspective, *laïcité* becomes the political regulation of individuals and groups entertaining differentiated relationships with secularisation⁷, even if some social agents are trying, today, to “culturalise” *laïcité*. Of course, nobody is obliged to adopt this perspective, but since it exists, why not discuss it?

A Few Flaws – the Pitfall of a Sweeping Project

We can thus identify a few flaws in the author’s ambitious project – which is preferable, of course, to a lack of ambition. These flaws seem to me to be of three types.

⁵ Cf. Jean Baubérot, “Laicism” in George Ritzer (ed.), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, vol. 5; Jean Baubérot - Micheline Milot, *Laïcités sans frontière*, Paris, Seuil, 2011; Jean Baubérot, *Les laïcités dans le monde*, Paris, PUF, 5th edit. 2021 (the 6th revised edit. has just gone to press).

⁶ This term originally refers to the constitutional principle of political secularism in several Romance language countries: France, Mexico, Bolivia, Turkey, most countries in French-speaking West Africa, Italy (Constitutional Court ruling, 1989), the federated state of Québec.

⁷ Cf. J. Baubérot, *Les Laïcités dans le monde*, Paris, Puf, updated 5th edition, 2020 (2007); J. Baubérot-M. Milot, *Laïcités sans frontières*, Paris, Seuil, 2011.

The first flaw is that the concept of “imperiality” is focused on the secularising mutations affecting an imperiality of Christian origin, without any comparisons to other imperial enterprises being carried out. Such other imperial projects are either only alluded to, as is the case for the Mongol, Ottoman and Persian empires, or ignored, as for Japan or China. These last two cases should really have been taken into account. While the long 19th century, ending in 1914, was the century of Europe’s hegemony over the Ottoman Empire, it was also the moment when, in 1905, Russia was vanquished by the Japanese Empire, which completely contradicted prevailing racist theories and, together with American mediation, shifted the centre of the world from the Mediterranean (which remains central in this study) to the Pacific Ocean. Many French people were staggered by the defeat of the “Russian ally”, but some of them, on the left, were enthusiastic: Anatole France, for example, rejoiced at the failure of racialism, and made fun of its supporters. Clemenceau (and others) revealed his “Japanophilia” for quite similar reasons⁸. The moral of the story being: in the West, there was perhaps more disparity than this book reveals.

The case of China would support the author’s argument as far as the 19th century is concerned, but not for our own era. This reveals one of the book’s other limitations: the lack of taking into account the situation over the past few decades. At the end of the day, what about those empires that had a *polytheistic backdrop*? And if I put this book into a socio-historical perspective, I would suggest that the perspective of sociologists of secularisation can be correlated with a triumphant West, convinced that its model will survive despite decolonisation. Meziar’s endeavour, just like the works of Talal Asad and others (such as Dipesh Chakrabarty)⁹ is contemporaneous with the decline of Western imperiality in the face of other imperial enterprises.

Then – second flaw – the breadth of the perspective adopted by the author necessarily leads to him making more or less debatable shortcuts. Here are two examples: the fact that, in Protestantism, the term “evangelism” does not mean the same in English and German is minimised; whereas in contrast, a lot of importance is given to the “cult police” articles of the French Law of 1905, which separated the Churches from the State, without really realising that these were not just public order measures, which had in fact very much been liberalised compared to earlier projects, but also “guarantees” of the free exercise of cults against those who might want to

⁸ M. Séguéla, *Clemenceau ou la tentation du Japon*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2014.

⁹ Cf. in particular, T. Asad, *Formation of the Secular*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003 et D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000.

hinder them. The novelty of this law was the proclamation, for the first time in France, of its 1st Article on “freedom of conscience”, which Article 31 applies equally to religious and non-religious beliefs.

Such shortcuts are inevitable, but they are sometimes made worse by the book’s cyclical structure, which, on various occasions, leads to a recurrence of certain statements where it would perhaps have been more appropriate to provide a consistent argumentation to which the author could then have referred back in the rest of the book. The author sometimes gives the impression that he somewhat views historico-social reality as a reservoir of examples from which he can draw whatever feeds into his “central thread” – even if this means, in fact, signalling through frequently fascinating notes that other perspectives are possible. To give one example: the author mentions, in a note (on p. 237), that the current Saudi Mining Code is “closer to the Napoleonic model than to the positions of the Hanbali theological school”. Is this a paradox or not, given the book’s main argument? It would have been interesting to look into this in more detail. Instead, some of the pieces of the puzzle can feel a little as though they have been pushed in somewhat forcefully. This is of course the other side of the coin of having embarked on such an ambitious project, and thus does not in any way diminish its value.

Finally, a third flaw: as we have already mentioned, this book shows how utopias have not just supported, but actually shaped what is described as the “Secularocene”. We might, in this context, refer to Weberian concepts of the “paradoxes of consequences”, of “unintended effects”, etc. And, since Meziarone rightly rejects any linear sense of history and insists on its “rebounds”, should we not then pay particular attention to the fact that the symbolic ideals of justice, democracy, peace, dignity, social, racial and gender equality etc., which are always more or less instrumentalised and hijacked by the powers-that-be to serve their own purposes, also have a “spectral” dimension, which creating unexpected historical rebounds and new dynamics? In this case, these are double-edged swords, and not just, ultimately, tools at the service of the powerful.

I would have liked to see this aspect appear more clearly. For example, on p. 209, we read that the “religious liberalisation of institutions” in the United Kingdom in the 1820s and 1830s “was nothing to do with moral tolerance; it was the other side of the way in which the state reinforced its power over the official Church and ensured it kept control over dissident Churches”. By juxtaposing “moral” and tolerance, the author makes himself look good as someone who is refusing an axiologically engaged

historiography. But it seems to me that he is wrong not to take into account the specific socio-political issues of “freedom of conscience”, where different social forces have come into conflict with each other. This connects once more to the absence in the book of a concept of laicisation, and sometimes makes it run the risk of indulging in monocausality.

It is the role of a reviewer to present critical remarks in the hope of thus contributing to a reflection on some fundamental questions. The fact remains that this study makes a fine contribution to intellectual debate, in these current times when so many players are pushing it downhill. Indeed, by following his “central thread” with a dense argumentation, the author has developed a novel approach to secularisation, which we will have to take into account in future.

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