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THINKING ABOUT RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND POLITICS

Talal Asad

Since the closing decade of the millennium social friction generated by the presence of substantial numbers of Muslim immigrants in Europe and the threat of Muslim terrorists have given a new impetus to the fear of politicized religion. Violent and intolerant “Fundamentalist movements” have emerged not only in the Muslim world (although these are the most frightening in the West) but also in India, Israel and the United States. The secular values of liberal democracy are under siege. Or so much of the Western media tell us. Academics who teach religious studies have responded eagerly, seeing in this an opportunity to demonstrate the public relevance of their expertise. What is to be done about the dangers to liberal democracies of religious belief?

More generally one may ask: what *are* the relations between the secular promise of liberal democracy and the conditions for private belief in transcendence? There is no simple answer to this question, of course, because modern religion has both hindered and aided “liberal” values, and because liberal values are more contradictory and ambiguous than is sometimes acknowledged. But I want to begin with other questions: What *is* “religion”? How has it come to be defined in the ways it has? What are some of the political consequences of making *belief* central to the definition? I’ll address these questions by discussing some aspects of Charles Taylor’s work, *A Secular Age* in which he argues that secularization cannot be narrated as a simple subtraction story (i.e., as the gradual abandonment of superstition and intolerance) but must take the form of an account of historical re-making in which the choice of belief and unbelief come to have an equal and equally protected status in the liberal democratic state. I want to think beyond this very important point, however, and I’ll try to do this by looking at the ambiguous notion of belief as both Taylor and some anthropologists have dealt with it. I’ll urge the importance of studying the senses in order to identify ways they can build sensibilities and attitudes that are distinct from beliefs. I’ll then draw on a recent ethnographic work that is concerned with the place of listening in the contemporary political scene in Cairo: Charles Hirschkind’s *The Ethical Soundscape*. I’ll conclude with some questions about the connections between sensibilities and politics.

It is by now well known that the modern concept of religion as an object of systematic study is relatively recent. The term *religio* is of course quite old, but it did not have the sense that emerged in early modern times. Roughly from the seventeenth century on the idea gradually crystallized among European thinkers that in every society people believed in supernatural beings, told stories about the origin of the world and about what happens to the soul after death; that in every society people instituted rituals of worship and deferred to experts in these matters; and that therefore religion was not something only Christians had.

Skeptics have long written about the origin of religion. However, for most of them it was not the *concept* of religion that was puzzling, only its emergence was. At least since the Enlightenment one important approach to understanding religion has consisted in what anthropologists call “the sociology of error.” The main question was: What gave rise to such patently false beliefs in the first place? The testing of belief propositions in this matter – and thus their falsification – tends to depend on a highly simplified language ideology that predicates both the counter-intuitive character of religious belief-statements and the irrational character of religious conviction. “The sociology of error” invented by Victorian anthropologists for understanding religion eventually gave place to another approach in which a different set of questions was raised: Is religion a universal? What kinds of belief and practice are peculiar to religion? What meanings do religious beliefs and practices give to life? What functions does religion perform? Anthropologists and others sought to explain religion by reference to externalities – that is, by looking for its social function or for its cultural meaning. The concept of religion itself remained virtually unexamined in this approach.

To my knowledge, Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962) was the first book to present a historical sketch of the concept of religion in the West and to suggest that it was relatively recent.¹ Smith also argued perceptively against

¹ Unfortunately I had not read it when I wrote my 1983 essay on the definition of religion in anthropology (published in *Man*, N.S., vol. 18) that was eventually republished as Chapter 1 of *Genealogies of Religion* (1993), and it was therefore unable to benefit from its insights. Jonathan Z. Smith’s pioneering essay *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (1982) was also not available to me in time. Since then other studies have appeared in which the concept of religion has been historicized. Notable among these are Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (1888), Peter Harrison, *‘Religion’ and the religions in the English Enlightenment* (1990), Daniel Dubuisson, *L’Occident et la religion: Mythes, science et ideologie* (1998), and Tomoko Masuzawa’s *The Invention of World Religions* (2005).

essentialist approaches, and yet in the end he didn't quite break free of a residual essentialism himself.² He sought to substitute the word "faith" for "religion" in order to avoid the danger of reification, but *this* move led him to an emphasis on religion as an ineffable experience. It's not that there's anything wrong in stressing the importance of experiences that are difficult to articulate when discussing religion. What is questionable is his making a *particular* language-game the basis of a *universal* conception of religion as "faith" – as when he writes: "My faith is an act that *I* make, myself, naked before God."³ The latter phrase appears to indicate an unmediated innerness opening up to the divine gaze, so that my faith is at once an enactment (confronting God), and an experience (of an authentic subject) that constitutes that act as an act of faith.

The reason there can't be a universal conception of religion is not because religious phenomena are infinitely varied – although there is in fact great variety in the way people live in the world with their religious beliefs.⁴ Nor is it the case that there is no such thing as religion, as some have suggested.⁵ It is that defining is an historical act and when the definition is deployed it does different things in different times and circumstances, and responds to different questions, needs, pressures. The concept "religion" is not merely a word: it connects to vocabularies that bring persons and things, desires and practices together in particular traditions in distinctive ways. This applies also to religion's twin "secularity" that brings different sensibilities into play in different historical contexts: thus the institutional practices and psychological responses that define *laïcité* in contemporary France are largely foreign to those that define "the separation of church and state" in today's United States.

² See my essay, "On re-reading a modern classic: W.C. Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion*", in Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (eds.), *Religion and Media*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.

³ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991 [1962], p. 191, emphasis added.

⁴ Robert Orsi's *Between Heaven and Earth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) depicts with insight and compassion the way the ordinary lives of individuals are shaped by a range of religious emotions, sensibilities, and objects.

⁵ Thus: "most anthropologists would now maintain, that there is no such *thing* as religion, other than the somewhat, but only somewhat, similar phenomena one finds in different places, and which remind the observer, in a theoretically insignificant way, therefore, of what we have been brought up to understand by the term", Maurice Bloch, "Are religious beliefs counter-intuitive?" in Nancy K. Frankenberry (ed.), *Radical Interpretation in Religion*, Cambridge: University Press, 2002, p. 13. What this nominalism leaves out is how things recognized as "religion" in one place consist of things (including practices) that hang together – but differently in different traditions. This "hanging together" is what makes "religion" real, and it poses the theoretically significant question of how and to what extent one religious vocabulary can be translated into another.

To define is to repudiate some things and to endorse others. Defining what is religion is not merely an abstract intellectual exercise; it is not just what anthropologists or other scholars do. The act of defining (or redefining) religion is embedded in passionate disputes, connected with anxieties and satisfactions, affected by changing conceptions of knowledge and interest, related to institutional disciplines.⁶ In the past, colonial administrations used definitions of religion to classify, control and regulate the practices and identities of subjects. Today liberal democracy is required to pronounce on the legal status of such definitions and thus to spell out civil immunities and obligations.⁷ When definitions of religion are produced, they endorse or reject certain uses of a vocabulary that have profound implications for the organization of social life and the possibilities of personal experience. For this very reason academic expertise is often invoked in the process of arriving at legal decisions about religious matters.⁸ In all these legal functions, liberal democracy (whether at home or abroad in its colonies) not only works through secularity, it requires that *belief* be taken as the essence of religiosity. The ambiguity of this notion of belief needs to be spelt out.

Scholars as well as others usually assume that belief, both private and public, is expressed in the solemnities of ritual. Thus Victorians, like evolutionary anthropologists then and now, tended to interpret rites as “magical” ways of coping with difficulties of the natural environment. Protestant theologians who were also students of “primitive religion,” such as Robertson Smith, took the view that “true Christianity” required that it be stripped of “Catholic magic,” i.e., of superstition; what mattered was true *belief*. But later anthropologists saw all this as a methodological mistake.⁹ Rituals, they maintained, were not to be regarded as primitive ways of adjusting to nature, not as evidence of primitive minds. As actions rituals had a social function of their own. Some anthropologists like Edmund Leach proposed that rituals weren’t instrumental actions at

⁶ An account of the reconstruction of Sinhala Buddhism through its confrontation with colonial Protestantism is David Scott’s fine essay entitled “Religion in Colonial Civil Society” in his *Refashioning Futures*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

⁷ An example of this is discussed at length in my article, “Trying to Understand French Secularism,” in Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (eds.), *Political Theologies*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2006.

⁸ An outstanding study, whose author was called by the courts as an expert, is Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

⁹ Some of the most influential British social anthropologists immediately after World War II were also Catholic converts: E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Godfrey Lienhardt, David Pocock, Victor Turner.

all; rituals symbolized something, communicated cultural meaning. Thus for Victorian evolutionists as well as for many of their anthropological successors the modern notion of “belief” attributed to what used to be called primitive peoples was essential to the concept of ritual. Whether it took the form of a cosmology or of culturally defined norms, whether it was to be reconstructed from explanations offered by practitioners or read into social actions and arrangements by resort to Western theories of signification, the idea of *belief* was central to an understanding of the repetitive activities classed as rites and ceremonies.

“Ritual,” as a component of religion, became a distinct theoretical category of “meaningful action.” Whereas John Austin had taught scholars that using words was a way of doing things,¹⁰ the symbolic approach to ritual took doing things to be expressions of meanings – albeit embedded pre-reflectively in social imaginaries or systems of symbols. For anthropologists drawn to a symbolic approach social imaginaries might be seen as beliefs that were not (yet) articulated.

Several anthropologists who addressed the question of belief did so with respect to the universalism versus relativism debate in which the concern was cognitive and primary attention was paid to implicit meanings in ritual.¹¹ Thus Malcolm Ruel observed in a widely read article that “the performance of the [Christian] creed is as complex, symbolic and condensed an act of ritual as any other liturgical act and is consequently as much subject to the categories developed, for example, by Turner for the analysis of ritual symbolism.”¹² The Christian creed, Ruel pointed out, combines two senses of belief – belief *in* a divine Person (the living Christ) and belief *that* a sacred Event had occurred (crucifixion and resurrection). Both were symbolically united in the ritual utterance (a performance) of the creed, a particular instance of a general phenomenon.

The anthropologist Maurice Bloch took linguistic performance itself as the paradigm of symbolic action, and argued that the very “formality” of oratory (as in the

¹⁰ J. L. Austin, *Doing Things With Words*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962.

¹¹ For example, Jean Pouillon, “Remarks on the Verb ‘To Believe’” in Michel Izard and P. Smith (eds.), *Between Belief and Transgression*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982 [1979]; Dan Sperber, “Apparently Irrational beliefs” in Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (eds.), *Rationality and Relativism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1982; Malcolm Ruel,; Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas*, California University Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1994; Maurice Bloch, *op. cit.*

¹² “Christians as Believers,” in John Davis (ed.), *Religious Organization and Religious Experience*, London: Academic Press, 1982, pp. 16-17.

formality of polite manners) was a crucial means of social control and political domination. Formal communication – including religious ritual *and* political oratory – was to be seen as *the denial of choice*, and therefore as submission to traditional authority.¹³ Since traditional authority, in Weber’s influential view, was one of the three modes of legitimate domination, this approach to ritual therefore reinforced the idea that the autonomous subject needed to break from tradition and from the imitation of the past it demanded from him or her – and to choose her own beliefs.

The claim that ritual had a repressive social function resonated with the view that liberal religion should primarily take the form of private belief, and with the historic Protestant rejection of Catholic ritualism. It re-enforced the well-known notion that ritual was not only non-rational but also, by virtue of its being symbolic and therefore separated from interiority, anti-political in the sense of the politics that liberal democracy values. However, the notion that formality is necessarily an external form of coercion is questionable, for it is only when forms become elements in a Goffmanesque strategy that they serve as a means of control over others.¹⁴ To the extent that public forms contribute to the making and remaking of the self in a social world, to cultivating it – where, in other words, external forms are part of *developing* subjectivities – its effects are different. In that context, what the embodied subject learns to say and do, how it handles behavioral and verbal forms in relationship to others, are at the centre of its moral potentialities and not merely an external imposition.¹⁵ In short, if one thinks of ritual not as an activity that denies choice by imposing formalities but as aiming at aptness of behavior, sensibility and attitude, one may see the repetition of forms as something other than a blind submission to authority. For the aptness of formal performance (whether this be politeness or reverence) requires not only *repeating* past models but also *originality* in applying them in appropriate/new circumstances. In other words, although at one level the cultivation of appropriate formality necessary to ethical virtues may not allow

¹³ Maurice Bloch, “Symbols, Song, Dance and Features of Articulation,” in *The European Journal of Sociology*, 1974; the argument about formality and domination is elaborated in the Introduction to his *Political Language and Oratory in Traditional Societies*, London: Academic Press, 1975.

¹⁴ Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical sociology has made this theme famous. See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959.

¹⁵ See Saba Mahmood’s important account of this process in *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

unlimited choice, it does require the exercise of judgment. Like the rules of grammar, forms are at once potentialities and limits, necessary to original thought and conduct.

It was Marcel Mauss who offered the most fruitful insight into the study of ritual. In his famous essay entitled “Body Techniques” (1934) Mauss ignores the divide between religion and secularity – he has no investment in constructing a category called ritual as a component of a universal called religion; his concern is to explore the way attitudes, whether sacred or profane, were formed. Most importantly, he asks questions without reference to belief. Mauss has no interest in the construal of experience and the question of individual choice but in the mode in which the human body, as a thing, exists, acts and is acted upon. His work encourages the thought that secular sensibilities and experiences (like the religious) require particular “social-psychological-biological” conditions, that the distinctive attitudes and desires underlying secularism as a political arrangement presuppose particular configurations of the senses. At the sociological level it should be evident that while some culturally valorized senses form part of theorized disciplinary projects, others emerge out of the chance convergence of various political-economic forces and the regulatory strategies these give rise to – in modern industries, mass markets, cosmopolitan cities, modern transport and communications, and not least: in modern warfare. So of course ideas, including religious ideas, are important for thinking about ethics and politics in modern liberal society, but they are linked to feelings and senses in multiple and unpredictable ways.

Liberal critics and defenders of religion as a universal phenomenon have argued with one another over the implications of religious belief for modern ethics and politics. Central to both sides of the polemics is the notion of “belief,” regarded at once as a privilege (the subject’s ability to choose her belief) and a danger (belief’s incitement to violence and intolerance). A first step towards understanding ground shared by both positions is to review the classical Lockean doctrine of religious freedom that set some of the main ideological terms for this argument.

According to a modern argument belief should not be coerced because that affronts the dignity of the individual person. Perhaps a more common view is that belief cannot be coerced. That, of course, is the core of John Locke’s theory of toleration and one part of the genealogy of secularism. The theory rests on a new religious psychology

and a new concept of the state that were beginning to emerge in seventeenth-century Europe. This allowed Locke to insist that the prince's attempt to coerce religious belief – including belief in the salvational implications of religious practices – was irrational because impossible. All that force could secure was an insincere profession of faith and outward conformity. Therefore – so the argument went, and still goes – force employed by civil government should be directed only at securing objective public interests: the protection of life, limb, and property. Some liberal philosophers have countered the awkward example of brainwashing by arguing that this merely creates *inauthentic* belief, however *sincerely* it may be held.¹⁶ Authenticity, they say, consists in the subject's ability *to choose* her beliefs and act on them. In this fashion the idea of belief reinforces the idea of an autonomous subject. But does the insistence that authentic belief is quite different from a sincere and yet inauthentic one mean that the act of saying something passionately without choosing should be pronounced inauthentic? If someone says that she is doing something not because there is no logically conceivable alternative but because there is no moral choice (like Luther's "Here I stand: I can do no other") what follows for ethics and politics by labeling this act inauthentic?¹⁷

In fact, of course, external forces *can* make subjects do or refrain from doing things, and they *can* persuade them to trust some piece of information as true: that is what discipline and the organized cultivation of sensibilities (that is, awareness of and responsiveness toward persons and things) do. So although the insistence that beliefs cannot be changed from outside appeared to be saying something empirical about "personal belief" (its singular, autonomous and inaccessible-to-others location), it was really part of a political discourse about "privacy," a claim to civil immunity with regard

¹⁶ For example Susan Mendus, *Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1989. Mendus borrows this distinction from Bernard Williams.

¹⁷ A friend has pointed out to me that authenticity may be defined without reference to choice if belief is seen as the *byproduct* of my own inquiries with which I identify but that is not imposed by brainwashing. This nonvoluntarist alternative to the idea of authenticity without invoking choice is appealing, but I'm not entirely persuaded by it. What exactly is the relation between "my identity" and "my own inquiries"? Are the assumptions on which my inquiry depends *mine* even when I have acquired them from others (parents, teachers, advertisers, newscasters, etc)? And if I have examined them, when can I say that I have done so adequately? Finally: Are my beliefs truly mine only when they result from an *intellectual* effort?

to religious faith that reinforced the idea of a secular state and a particular conception of religion.¹⁸

In *A Secular Age* (2007) Charles Taylor describes the historical formation of modern secular society in which the claim to personal belief can be made and defended. Although there is virtually nothing in this book on the liberal democratic state as such,¹⁹ Taylor understands that contemporary Western Christianity, with its commitment to the right to choose one's religion – or to reject all religion – depends on it. (The fact that “religion” is here explicitly taken to mean “Western Christianity” is not, by the way, simply a limit self-imposed because Europe happens to be the object of study; it is also the standard for judging and evaluating other religions, secularisms, and modern predicaments.) The fact that humans are taken axiomatically to be “self-interpreting animals” – a view Taylor has elaborated brilliantly in previous publications – helps to explain why this is first and foremost an intellectual history.²⁰

The book's first chapter opens with the following statement: “One way to put the question I want to answer here is this: why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but inescapable.” (p. 25) Taylor answers this question by tracing the reform that led

¹⁸ That claim has tended to be made against the state, not against the market – where intrusive advertising is typically transmuted into internal compulsion (the desire to consume) that is then rendered a matter of subjective right and individual responsibility. And of course, the claim cannot be made in a general way against parents or teachers.

¹⁹ There are brief references to the fact that the modern state – and common institutions and practices – are no longer connected to faith in God. This point is spelt out in other texts where Taylor deals with secularism. For example: “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism and “The Politics of Recognition”*, edited by Amy Gutmann, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992; “Modes of Secularism,” in *Secularism and Its Critics*, edited by Rajeev Bhargava, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998; Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004; and also Gerard Bouchard and Charles Taylor, *Building the Future: A Time for Reconciliation*, Abridged Report, Government of Quebec, 2008.

²⁰ Eloquently in his essay “Embodied Agency,” in H. Pietersma (ed.) *Merleau-Ponty: Critical Essays*, Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1989. For example: “Moreover as a bodily agent I can not only act on things, but *things can act on me*. My field is not only articulated into zones of accessibility and inaccessibility, but into zones of threat and security; and these different distinctions are of course closely interwoven: a cliff at my feet delimits not only a zone of inaccessibility but also of danger. And this because action and suffering are interwoven. My surroundings being relatively encumbered, so that I can't move around easily, I can experience as quasi-imprisonment.” *Ibid.*, p. 5 (italics added). The emphasis here is on the meaning of things accorded by the embodied agent – almost as though the objective of cliffs was to “act on me,” and my embodied agency recognized that act as meaningful for me. Cliffs are not acknowledged as indifferent to me.

to “social imaginaries” shifting from transcendence to immanence, eventually giving birth to religious pluralism in which belief can be freely chosen (or abandoned).

However, the notion of belief that Taylor relies on in this account is not entirely clear. To begin with, there is the old question of identifying belief as a state of mind. It was Rodney Needham who first critically examined how Anglophone ethnographers identified the religious beliefs of the people they studied.²¹ What exactly, he asked, is being presented to the reader when the ethnographer claims to be writing about the interior state of believers? His answer was a skeptical one: Because these states are necessarily expressed socially – through language – there are no inner states that are universal. Not everyone found this answer conclusive, but Needham’s study drew attention to the problematic linguistic relation between *experience and its interpretation*.

How to identify belief – especially in so-called “higher religions” (a nineteenth-century notion invoked by Taylor)? Medieval Christians, for example, often rejected orthodox doctrines (such as the immortality of the soul, the resurrection, the incarnation, virgin birth and purgatory) although it is not clear whether this meant a rejection of religious beliefs as such or the adoption of alternative religious beliefs. The difficulty is this: What are to count as *religious* beliefs? Should beliefs denounced by the medieval Latin church as *superstitio* (wrongheadedness) therefore be regarded as secular beliefs? Or should they be pronounced religious on the criteria provided by those Enlightenment critics for whom all religion was superstition? Is the intention to carry out a particular act crucial to its religiosity? If so, how and by whom is that to be judged? Clearly how the phenomenon of belief that historians write about should be understood is a complicated question.

Recently medievalists have come to recognise the problem in translating Latin words we now assume correspond to the modern English “belief” (or French “croyance”).²² Take the word *infidelitas*, often glossed quite simply as “unbelief”:

²¹ Rodney Needham, *Belief, Language and Experience*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1972.

²² My comments on the medieval Latin usages of what we now translate as “belief” rely heavily on Dorothea Weltecke’s excellent “Beyond Religion: On the lack of belief during the Central and Late Middle Ages” in Heike Bock, Jörg Feuchter, Michi Knecht (eds.), *Religion and Its Other*, Frankfurt: Campus, 2008. But I have also consulted Rudolf Bultmann and Artur Weiser, *Faith*, (Bible Key Words), London: Adam & Charles Black, 1961, especially Part IV that deals with New Testament usage. Chapter 6 of Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) provides a very

Infidelitas was typically used in secular contexts such as charters, laws and historical narratives; it usually meant breaking a contract or an oath, acting in a disloyal manner or breaching someone's trust. *Infideles* were thus not simply those who failed to hold orthodox convictions; they were first and foremost those who acted disloyally in some way, or those who, through acts of treason or misfortune, were no longer a part of the relations that bound together God, Latin Christians, and their king one to another. *Credere*, the Christian Latin word rendered into English as "believe" usually had an ethical rather than an epistemological sense, meaning "to trust someone" more often than "to be convinced that a proposition was true." Thus Dorothea Weltecke, who has written on this subject, cites the case of Aude Fauré, a young peasant woman, who was brought before the Inquisition: she was unable, she said, to *credere in Deum*. What she meant by this, Weltecke points out, emerges from the detailed context: She took the existence of a God for granted. It was because, in her desperation, she couldn't see in the Eucharist anything but bread, and because she found herself struggling with disturbing thoughts about incarnation, that she had no hope of God's mercy. It is not clear that the *doctrine* of God's body appearing in the form of bread is being challenged here; what is certainly being expressed is her *anguished relationship* to him as a consequence of her own incapacity to see anything but bread. In short, it is not that our present concept of belief (*that* something is true) was absent in pre-modern society but that the words translated as such were usually embedded in distinctive social and political relationships, articulated distinctive sensibilities; they were first of all lived and only secondarily theorized. Taylor would very probably agree with this, but then one would have to say that what is primarily at stake in the story of secularity is change in what Wittgenstein called an entire "way of life," in which the understanding of everyday experience and behavior do not necessitate interpretation. It is not that disbelief was impossible at one point in history and then very possible at another but that the word "belief" is being used in radically different ways in the two cases, indicating different lived orientations. So one may wonder whether the story of secularity is best told not as a shift from "transcendent" to "immanent" imaginaries through which individuals *interpret* their experiences but as a

useful history of the English word "belief" that is consistent with Weltecke's discussion of the medieval Latin.

series of untheorized shifts in ways of living. If one took the latter course one would have to go beyond the story of how imaginaries such as “deism” led to “humanism,” how ideological reforms were carried out, by asking how the “drive to make over the whole society to higher standards” (Taylor, p. 63) – the very urge to “reform” – itself originated.

Taylor of course isn't primarily concerned with beliefs as theories but with how lived experience acquires its sense and plausibility. He wants to recount how “the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual, or religious experience takes place” is gradually changed: How the pre-modern “porous self” – that doesn't distinguish itself from forces in its environment (and therefore confuses internal wish with external cause) – gave way to the modern “buffered self” that assumes “a clear boundary between mind and world, even mind and body.” (One wonders how being in love, or in mourning – or even being paranoid – is to be accounted an experience of the “buffered” self. I don't mean to imply that the modern self is really no different from the “pre-modern” self. My point is simply that binaries like “buffered” and “porous” don't capture the complexity of selves in relation to the world, to conceptions of inside and outside, to the way the senses work, in different cultures, classes, moments and epochs.) It is, says Taylor, when the modern “disenchanted” individual attempts to restore something felt as a historical loss, to overcome the “modern malaise” that is an outcome of distorted Reform, that he seeks re-enchantment by choosing one of a number of spiritual beliefs on offer. One may suggest that it is because Taylor is here working with an intuitive definition of religion in terms of *transcendent* – Christian – *beliefs*²³ that he ignores the enchantments imposed on individual life by secular consumer culture – as well as by modern science and technology.²⁴ Enchantment as an objective state of being in the grip of “false causes” (superstition) has always been of major concern to orthodoxy. In modern, secular life enchantment is not absent; it is simply subjectivized as a state of rapture and delight.

At any rate, at the end of the book one gets the clear sense that for Taylor a reconstituted Christianity would preserve the virtues of liberal modernity without its

²³ “So ‘religion’ for our purposes can be defined in terms of ‘transcendence,’ but this latter term has to be understood in more than one dimension. Whether one believes in some agency or power transcending the immanent order is indeed, a crucial feature of ‘religion’ ...” (p.20) Belief is not all there is to religion, of course, but it *is* a central concern of Taylor's book.

²⁴ See, for example, Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1987; and Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

malaise. One cannot go back because there is no golden age: a true Christianity must be re-imagined. This confidence in the possibilities of *proper* Reform may explain his dismissal of those who regard modern life as having a tragic character – i.e., those made cruelly aware of the impossibility of resolving a calamitous human impasse brought about by one’s own blind actions, by the uncontrollable things that surround one, and by the treachery of interpretation.²⁵

As I understand Taylor, it is precisely the modern individual’s interpreted experience that leads to its optional character. And while it is true that the idea of belief in Taylor’s story does not always have the sense of a proposition, the centrality of the notion of “construal” by the buffered self in this story seems to presuppose something that is capable of being articulated – if not propositionally then in the form of a narrative.

But before proceeding I’d like to make a distinction between sensing and interpreting in order to characterize “believing” (*that* something is the case) as an analytical category, and I’ll do so by drawing on R. G. Collingwood’s distinction between feeling and sensing on the one hand and thinking (and believing) on the other. Only in the latter, Collingwood points out, does it make sense to talk of *failure* having occurred because feeling is not a directional activity.²⁶ There is nothing *in* feeling and sensing that can be said to constitute a mistake; thoughts – and beliefs as thoughts – can contradict each other, but feelings and sensations cannot unless they are made the objects of interpretation (thinking); the two are analytically distinct. One may, of course, be mistaken about the *cause* of what one feels, but in apprehending causes one is already in the realm of what Collingwood calls “thinking” as opposed to “sensing.”

Collingwood reminds the reader that the word “feeling” has been used to refer to a range of body states, including sensations (hot/cold, hard/soft, bright/dark, etc.) and emotions (pain or pleasure, anger, fear, jealousy, etc.), which have been variously classified in more recent literature on the subject. Sense and emotion aren’t alternatives, as the sensation of seeing or hearing might be; they are structurally combined. Our

²⁵ There is nothing “heroic” in this awareness. For a thought-provoking discussion of the modern political predicament as a tragic one, see David Scott’s study of the Haitian revolution, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

²⁶ See R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938, especially Chapter VIII. Collingwood’s entire discussion of this topic seems to me more persuasive than Taylor’s use of “man as a self-interpreting animal,” because the former allows for understanding without interpretation in a way the latter doesn’t seem to.

experience of the world is thus partly sensuous-emotional and partly intellectual, but since mistakes are made only at the level of thinking and interpreting not at the level of feeling, one should not assume that an interpretive frame *always and necessarily* accompanies sensing and feeling. It is true that we normally see things *as* something, but we are also sometimes startled by seeing or hearing something *we cannot understand*. We sense the world before we turn to interpreting it. Circumstances that lead to belief aren't always available.

How does it happen that in modern capitalist society Christians and non-Christians, believers and non-believers, live more or less the same life? Put another way: unless you knew someone well you couldn't tell whether she was a believer or not merely from the way she lived; what does this say about religious belief? One answer may be that religious belief where it exists among moderns is *so* deep that it has at best a very tenuous connection with observable behavior. Sometimes the connection is denied altogether, as in this statement of the prime minister of Ontario quoted in a local newspaper: “‘As premier, I have made decisions that defy the beliefs of my own religion,’ Mr. McGuinty said, citing his support for same-sex marriage and abortion. ‘My Catholicism, my private faith, does not determine my position.’”²⁷ This suggests that it is not so much the neutrality of the liberal democratic state that protects belief but the modern disjunction between belief and behavior that permits this kind of neutrality. If that is so, one can gain another insight into how belief in modern society can be taken to be an internal, private state – and as such a crucial site of freedom.

It is worth pondering why there is no mention in Taylor's story of the global crises that threaten the world today: climate change, the militarization of space and of disease, increasing poverty and unceasing demand for economic growth, nuclear proliferation, war and terrorism; the word “crisis” appears in the entire text only in reference to the loss of personal meaning, to the need for salvational belief. But what if liberal democracy, which guarantees Christians and non-Christians their right to choose their own belief, is unable to confront the global crises – because, as critics have so often said, as a form of government it is permeated by special interests and exceptionally

²⁷ S. Agrell, “It's wrong to fund private religious schools.” <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20070917.wlibs0917/BNStory/ontarioelection2007/> accessed December 8, 2008.

receptive to corporate power, because it favors or at least permits the extension of market rationality into all social relations, and because its citizens are easily pushed into nationalist paranoia? What if liberal democracy²⁸ not only impairs the development of virtues necessary for dealing effectively with global crises but also (and more importantly for the present argument) continually disrupts the conditions on which what Taylor calls “the sense of fullness” depends? And what if, paradoxically, it is precisely the continual feeling of disruption, *of uncertainty*, that feeds both the power of liberal democracy and the promise of liberal reform?

To explore how religion, belief, and politics are linked to one another we need to enquire not only into institutional landscapes but also ask a number of questions about the body, its senses, and its attitudes. For this we need ethnographies of the human body – its attitudes to pain, physical damage, decay, and death, as well as to bodily integrity, growth and enjoyment, to the conditions that isolate persons and things from or connect them strongly with others. What architecture of the senses – hearing, seeing, smelling, touching, tasting – do particular attitudes and sensibilities depend on? How (whether through projects or fortuitous developments) do new sensory perceptions take shape and make older ways of engaging with the world (older experiences) and older political forms *irrelevant*? In trying to answer these questions the researcher will of course need a framework of interpretation to help identify the senses and their expression, but the senses themselves do not *necessarily* require meanings.²⁹ The researcher will understand

²⁸ I am reluctant to speak here of “so-called liberal democracy” for two main reasons: First, I am concerned primarily with the structures that articulate actually existing liberal democratic societies – capitalist economies depending on unrestrained growth and consumerism – and not with what some citizens believe liberal democracies ought to be. Secondly, to speak of *so-called* liberal democracy is to assume (mistakenly, I think) that the public language of liberal democracy used by defenders and critics of the political order is clear and unambiguous, that sound argument can fatally undermine the ideological justifications of rulers – and thus dissolve the drives (conscious and unconscious) that are embedded in existing institutional structures.

²⁹ The work of Walter Ong, especially *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (1958) and *The Presence of the Word* (1967), is relevant to these questions because he was among the first to trace shifts from the reliance on hearing to primary emphasis on seeing. Ong has rightly been criticized for recounting an overly simple story of historical stages in the development of human communication (from oral culture through alphabet and print to the electronic media). In fact, both in the past and today orality and writing have been intertwined in complicated ways. Let me give an example from the Islamic scriptural tradition, in which the senses of hearing and seeing, reading and reciting are closely intertwined. Thus the Qur’an (which means “recitation”) is deeply rooted in complex continuities – quite apart from the major schools of interpretation that have provided it with its meanings. The earliest text, written in a primitive seventh-century Arabic script, seems to have been treated as a kind of musical score, a prompt for the oral rendition that depended on memorization through reiteration. Sign and sound went together but not in any direct or

that it is possible for someone unpredictably to encounter something that transforms her, to be gripped through her senses by a force (whether immanent or transcendent) *without having to interpret anything*.

The anthropological historian Alain Corbin has taken up the problem of changing perceptions of the world appropriated by the different human senses – hearing, seeing, touching – without being primarily concerned with interpretation.³⁰ Thus his study, *The Foul and the Fragrant*,³¹ traces the densely interwoven discourses on the cramped condition of the urban masses, the conditions of contagious disease, and the practices of individual hygiene in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French society. One eventual consequence of these conditions, Corbin observes, was an added emphasis on the priority of clear sight: “there was increased concern for light in private dwellings, as in public space; this was the beginning of the great swing in attitudes that was to give uncontested supremacy to the visual.” (154) Corbin points out that it was not always the ideas themselves that immediately changed but rather that the new form of perception made for a “new intolerance of traditional actuality.” (155-6) For example, he notes that up to the end of the eighteenth century animal-based perfumes (such as musk) had been used by women to emphasize their odor but in the nineteenth century, in the new concern for personal hygiene, these were discredited in favor of perfumes that would disguise body odor while at the same time evoking discreet intimations of the feminine.³² These feelings were not interpretations (as sensation and affect they could not be *mistaken* by the subject: only thinking about them could make them so). But they were, nevertheless, part of what was given to experience – and therefore available for interpretation.

Shifts in sensory perception endow experience of other people and things with complicated emotions (anxieties and pleasures), a function not merely of what is sensed but how. The new arrangement of the senses associated with new patterns of living

fixed way. It was only because the oral traditions were continuous that they were able to provide an immanent frame for the written text, and thus for its scholarly reception over the centuries. An effort has always been required to abstract the Qur’anic text as an intellectual *interpreted* object from the relationship between the charged sound and the attentive body with its growing store of memorizations.

³⁰ For a discussion of methodological possibilities and pitfalls in this field, see “A History and Anthropology of the Senses” in Alain Corbin, *Time, Desire and Horror*, (1995).

³¹ Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986.

³² Corbin, p. 73.

contributed to an aspect of modern subjectivity that we might provisionally identify as secular: “Techniques of ventilation, insofar as they acknowledged the need for space between bodies and gave protection against other people’s odors, brought individuals into a new encounter with their own bodily smells and, as such, contributed decisively to the development of a new narcissism.” (95) If Corbin is right, then this narcissism, this love for one’s purity and integrity, may have reinforced the thought that one’s *private* experiences and beliefs ultimately define who one is in the world.

Smell, unlike vision, is a passive sense; it cannot be switched off at will, as seeing can. (This is not to say that the faculty of smell cannot be cultivated.) As an involuntary medium of contamination it may cause anxiety. There is a resonance between some emerging sensory orientations Corbin points to and arguments made by the anthropologist Mary Douglas in her book *Purity and Danger* (1966). The notion of pollution, she maintained there, depended on the belief that a system of categories had been transgressed or confounded: “uncleanness,” in her famous phrase, “is matter out of place.” Purity rituals are therefore attempts to restore the triple order of living body, society and cosmos that has been confounded. Douglas helps us to see why Corbin’s narcissist might have an inclination to paranoia – for it is precisely the anxious search for systematic meaning in a world believed to contain a hidden threat to one’s personal purity, and to one’s system, that would make him a paranoid. This may also help us to explain the *urge* to Reform – the drive to rectify systems regarded as being continually in danger.

Corbin’s stress on the consequences of new sense perceptions as part of an uncontrolled world of changing *things* seems to me important because it puts into question the attempt to account for transformations by reference to the unintended consequence of intellectual reforms. Of course, attitudes and sensibilities are deliberately cultivated in the body by institutions and social movements. But whether deliberately cultivated or unintended, the senses (whose *sense* we usually take for granted) are central to the public life in which people participate, to the ways they promote, submit to, resist, or remain indifferent to the forces of political life.³³ The modern secular state is not

³³ In *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard, 2000) Leigh Eric Schmidt examines the retraining of the ear that was promoted, through a range of

simply the guardian of one's personal right to believe as one chooses; it confronts particular sensibilities and attitudes, and puts greater value on some as against others. And yet the work of the senses has received less attention than the function of beliefs in the study of politics. What *has* come to be increasingly discussed is discipline: discipline in the cultivation of attitudes as well as in the regulation of individual conduct by authorities. But important though discipline is, the conscious cultivation of behavior and belief is not quite the same thing as the unintended shifts in the sensorium described by anthropologists and historians like Corbin.

The familiar story about the role of discipline in the formation of civilization too often fails to pursue *all* the disparate effects of discipline, whether intended or not. But assuming that discipline is central to the story, we encounter an intriguing question when we consider so-called "fundamentalists" in the contemporary Middle East. Thus although in Euro-America the disciplined subject is said to be the distinctive figure of modernity and its freedom, the presence of discipline in Muslim life generally and Islamic movements in particular is commonly taken in the West as evidence of precisely its opposite. The existence of rules of conduct (of dress, comportment, daily prayers, etc.) and the cultivation of sensibilities (the control of emotion in speech and behavior towards others, and reverence towards the sacred voice) are seen as constraint and suppression. This is an example of precisely what arguments for toleration warn against: if political or religious authority imposes norms of conduct and doctrine on the individual, and if this imposition is accepted, then this must be a case of "sincere but inauthentic belief." Yet one difference is that the discipline for pious Muslims is connected to a strong sense and orientation of divine presence. I suggest, therefore, that instead of approaching such behavior in terms of belief (in this case of *inauthentic* belief or "false consciousness") one might enquire into how the bodily senses are cultivated or how they take shape in a world that can't be humanly controlled, and hence into what politics these formations

embodied regimens, by Christians and deists alike. Schmidt's main concern is with changing attitudes of religiosity but the story he tells about the retraining of the sense of hearing is also crucial to the formation of secular attitudes. Connected to the re-training of hearing is the move from an unreflective acceptance of the senses to one in which all the senses are assessed and disciplined as sources of reliable knowledge. (An aspect of this is treated in Peter Dear's *Discipline and Experience: The Mathematical Way in the Scientific Revolution*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995.) It was through this contrast that the modern meaning of belief as mental assent came to be foregrounded, and Christian claims to truth were put on the defensive.

makes possible or difficult.

This leads me to a study by an anthropologist who has tried to formulate the questions in his ethnography of Cairo in just this way: Charles Hirschkind's *The Ethical Soundscape*. Hirschkind's monograph is not in an account of ideas and beliefs but an analysis of exchanges that belong to a particular way of life. He asks how the enormously popular practice of listening to sermons in contemporary Cairo shapes religious sensibilities and what some of its consequences are for politics. Throughout Islamic history attending the Friday sermon has been an important part of Muslim subject formation. Hirschkind analyzes the reception of sermons as an active process, one in which the faithful listener cultivates her ability to attend. Listening to sermons in modern Cairo is no longer confined to the Friday mosque, and it is no longer a one-off experience. Taped sermons can now be heard numerous times, in many urban contexts, without supervision. Hirschkind describes this by the felicitous phrase "undisciplined discipline."

Political oratory and media entertainment have affected sermon styles and so made new connections with the institutions of national life as well as with the transnational Islamic community (the *umma*). This movement has grown partly in response to the Egyptian state's attempts to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood that constitutes the most serious popular opposition to it. Hirschkind's account of the movement describes how the practice of cassette listening promotes an acoustic sensibility opposed to the state's obsession with spatial control, as well as to the *nouveaux riches* who have withdrawn into their clean, orderly, gated communities. Contained in this opposition is an unending struggle for how "real Islam" is to be lived. What Hirschkind calls a counter-public is thus an Islamic space of moral distancing from the hegemonic religious-secular order. For example many Islamists, he tells us, regard the regime of personal discipline as helping to develop a responsiveness that might moderate, if not totally negate, the seductions of a neo-liberal consumer culture. The movement is certainly not liberal, it doesn't promote and defend autonomous individuality in which the subject is always encouraged to make its own choices; its aim instead is to form moral subjects capable of acting in national politics. And its future development can't be predicted.

Since Hirschkind did his fieldwork for this study, an oppositional movement has emerged known as *kifaya!* (“Enough!”). *Kifaya* overlaps with the counter-public that Hirschkind describes, and it brings together a variety of social elements – Muslims and Christians, Islamists and secular liberals, men and women, professionals and labor unionists – in a coalition against the authoritarian, neo-liberal state. It is not that there is now a happy union of all these elements, but that an irreducible plurality persists as a foundation of political sensibility. What gathers secular liberals and Islamists together – despite a measure of mutual unease – is precisely *not* their belief, but their oppositional attitude, their common feeling that circumstances in Egypt have become intolerable, more specifically their sense of outrage at the brutality of the state. They speak of their opposition as something they did not *choose* but were compelled to take up. However, this situation is not merely negative; it also provides a space of daily interaction and negotiation. Discreet and not so discreet intrusions by American state power, as well as the stranglehold that the Mubarak regime has on the political-economic system, make teleology virtually impossible. What the future holds remains unclear. But the religiosity of individual Muslims involved in this movement whom I’ve encountered is a mode of being often inwardly unsettled yet outwardly civil. This religiosity seeks the cultivation of feelings attuned to mutual care within the community, and in that sense it can lay claim to a democratic ethos. To what extent this is successfully cultivated among significant numbers of people is of course another matter, but my point is that belief in the sense of private conviction has little to do with it.

I end with a question that needs to be thought about here. It is an old question but one that hasn’t, in my view, been satisfactorily answered: How does *democratic sensibility as an ethos* (whether “religious” or “secular”) accord with *democracy as the political system of a state*? The former, after all, involves the desire for mutual care, distress at the infliction of pain and indignity, concern for the truth more than for immutable subjective rights, the ability to listen and not merely to tell, and the willingness to evaluate behavior without being judgmental toward others; it tends toward

greater *inclusivity*.³⁴ The latter is jealous of its sovereignty, defines and protects the subjective rights of its citizens (including their right to “religious freedom”), infuses them with nationalist fervor, and invokes bureaucratic rationality in governing them justly; it is fundamentally *exclusive*. My point is not to argue that the two are *necessarily* incompatible. I simply ask whether the latter undermines the former – and if it does, then to what extent.

I suggest, finally, that the modern *idea* of religious belief (protected as an individual right) is a function of the secular state but not of democratic sensibility.

³⁴ See the remarkable work by Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2008) that describes some of these attitudes by distinguishing what they call radical democracy from liberal democracy.