

Awkward and Alive: Secularization and Religion Reconsidered¹

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Religion and secularization are often seen as representing opposing sides of the modern or post-modern divide. In Europe and North America, secularization has been identified with an Enlightenment understanding of modernity, and religion associated with a residual or even outdated sense of the spiritual or the divine. Debate over the public role of religion in “secular” Europe has been more pronounced than in “religious” America.² In India, China, Turkey and many other parts of the world, secularism has been upheld against the influence of religion in the public sphere, in particular in government and education. In contrast, resurgent religious communities, whether Christian, Muslim or Hindu, have sometimes criticized secularism, or they have identified it with religious, cultural and moral decline.

Discussions and debates over religion and secularization are global in nature, but at the same time they are related to one another. I begin this lecture by speaking of theology and secularization in North America, a theme that has been with me for most of my academic life.

Secularization, Theology and Religion

When I began my study of theology and religion, there was a different emphasis in the study of secularization than there is today. Indeed, from the end of World War II onward, the relationship between Christian faith and secularization was an important theme in the study of Christian theology in Western Europe and North America. Protestant theologians spoke about “demythologizing” Christianity (Bultmann), faith as “ultimate concern” (Tillich) and the need to speak of a “religion-less Christianity” for a “world come of age” (Bonhoeffer). I was a university student in the mid to late 1960s, and it was in this context that I first began to put Christian faith together with a commitment to social and political change. Popular books such as *Honest to God* (1963), by Bishop John A. T. Robinson and *The Secular City* (1965) by Harvard theologian Harvey Cox gave us a religious language to speak about our involvement in the world. The “Death of God theologians” (Gabriel Vahanian, Thomas J. J. Altizer, William Hamilton and Paul van Buren) argued that traditional religious language was no longer credible to “modern people” and the only way for religion to survive would be by becoming thoroughly secular. This was appealing to many Christian intellectuals.

¹ I am grateful to Prof. Eduardo Fernandez for his response to my paper and to the questioners in the audience who helped me clarify my discussion at some points. I have incorporated some of these responses into this revised version of my text.

² See Peter Berger, Grace Davie, Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe?: A Theme and Variations* (2008) also *Secularization and the World Religions* by Hans Joas and Klaus Wiegandt (2009).

Those of us interested in the world beyond the North Atlantic drew on the insights of the Dutch theologian and historian Arend Theodor van Leeuwen who went even further. In his prescient book, *Christianity in World History: The Meeting of the Faiths of East and West*,³ he analyzed in broad sweep the end of cultural Christendom. We might say that this was a book about globalization, but globalization of a very particular kind. van Leeuwen argued that secularization was a process of emancipation from religious constraints which had its roots in the history of Israel, and, subsequently, in the life and work of Jesus Christ. Christianity and the secularization process belonged together, because they both proclaimed a liberating message. Religion and secular spheres were related dialectically and they could not be separated. The expansion of the West, van Leeuwen argued, was revolutionary because it brought the rest of the world into a secular orbit, challenging traditional religions, belief systems and cultures of all kinds. When the great religions of Asia came into contact with Christianity and Western colonial expansion, they could never go back to the way things were. van Leeuwen was speaking about secularization as a process, not ideological secularism. Christianity, in his understanding, participated in or even initiated the process and challenged all religious and political idolatries, including “Christian” ones. It sought to liberate human beings from all that enslaved them.

The problem with this earlier generation of secular theologians, including van Leeuwen, was that theirs were contextualized, Western and Protestant expressions of the relationship between religion and society, but were not recognized as such.⁴ van Leeuwen universalized a Euro-American view of the secular, or more accurately a Dutch Calvinist view, which presupposed a universal Christian understanding of world history. In this sense, his work reflected the colonial and imperialistic project of the West, even though it proclaimed a message of liberation from particularistic oppressive traditions. In the words of the great American historian Charles A. Beard, “the bee fertilizes the flower it robs.”

Because Christianity was part of the Western colonial project, secularization associated with the West has been by and large repudiated. By the mid-1970s it had become clear that religion in most parts of the world was not only alive and well, but that religious communities were undergoing revivals and were developing in new ways, despite all the predictions of the secularization theologians. Peter Berger and his colleagues then began speaking about a “desecularization” of the world.⁵ Over the past thirty years, there has been a resurgence of Islam from Indonesia to North Africa, over against the secularization of the West. India has witnessed the growth of Hindutva (or Hindu nationalism), a direct challenge to the secular origins of this modern state. Buddhism has been renewed and revived in many countries, and different Buddhist communities have developed a variety of relationships to secularization. Christianity, particularly Pentecostalism, various forms of evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism, is growing

³ Arend Theodor van Leeuwen, *Christianity in World History: The Meeting of the Faiths of East and West* (New York: Scribners, 1964). van Leeuwen also wrote one of the best theological interpretations of Marx and Hegel, originally delivered as the Gifford Lectures: *Critique of Heaven* (New York: Scribner, 1972) and *Critique of Earth* (Guilford: Lutterworth Press, 1974).

⁴ See Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War?: Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p.18.

⁵ See Peter Berger et al, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

rapidly in the Global South. All these religions have been playing an increasingly assertive role in public life all over the world.

Despite the revival of religion, secularization has not gone away. In many countries, the resurgence of conservative religious communities has produced a renewed appreciation of secularism. In some ways, we have come full circle, at least in theological and religious studies. Over the past ten or twenty years, there has been a renewed interest in the complex relationship between secularization and religion. Peter Berger has revised his views once again; his most recent book is entitled, *In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions without Becoming a Fanatic*.⁶ David Martin, best known for his work on Pentecostalism in Latin America and the Global South, has called for a revised general theory of secularization.⁷ Debates over the “new atheism” have been well-covered in the popular press, religious leaders are again challenging purely secular visions of reality, and cultural critics in many parts of the world have joined the debate.⁸ We live in interesting times.

Religion and secularization can be liberating or confining. Secularization has offered hope to people entrapped by traditional cultures and beliefs just as religion has provided hope for people in oppressive secular societies. Religious choice can be compelling, conventional or equivocal, but it is also a reflection, a reaffirmation or a rejection of some version of the secular.

The question I want to put before you this evening is this: What does secularization mean for our work in theology and religious studies at the GTU, and how does this relate to religious practice in the communities of which we are a part?

A Secular Age

The most important book on religion and secularization published in the last decade is Charles Taylor’s monumental study, *A Secular Age*.⁹ Taylor is a philosopher and religious thinker, firmly rooted in Roman Catholic faith and tradition. His book is a wide-ranging historical and philosophical discussion of secularity in Europe and North America (more than 800 pages in length), its origins, growth and development over the last five hundred years.

In contrast to the secularization theologians of the 1960s and 1970s – none of whom he discusses or cites – Taylor is interested in the secular as the dominant *historical* reality for religion and religious thought in the modern age, rather than in secularization as a theme for

⁶ Peter Berger with Anton Zijderveld, *In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions without Becoming a Fanatic* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).

⁷ David Martin, *Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005).

⁸ See Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (Ignatius Press, 2007); Rowan Williams, “The Mission of the Anglican University in our Present Age,” September, 2009 (<http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2535> accessed 25 September 2009). The work of Slavoj Žižek should also be mentioned, for he has written widely on the subject of religion and secularization.

⁹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

theological reflection. He speaks about three meanings of the concept of secularism (vis-à-vis religion), and these set the terms for his study:

1. The secular as “public spaces emptied of God,” i.e. the disappearance of government legitimacy dependent on religious belief, and of state sanctioned religion. The modern state, in this sense, is neutral with regard to religious belief. There is a separation of religion and politics. This can be termed *political* secularization, or Secular 1;
2. The secular as “the decline in religious belief and practice” in modern society. This refers to the modern phenomenon of the decline of religion in comparison to the supposed flourishing of religious belief in traditional societies. The number of religious adherents has indeed gone down in some, but not in all parts of the world. This can be termed the *sociological* secularization, or Secular 2;
3. The secular as “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged...to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.” The secular, in this sense, describes the plurality of belief and non-belief in modern society, and the need for individuals and communities to make religious choices. This is the understanding of secularization that Taylor is most interested in, and he describes it as “the condition of belief in our age.” This can be termed the *cultural* meaning of the secular¹⁰, or Secular 3;

Taylor is describing the secular age in the North Atlantic region; he is not developing a universal framework for its study. Still, we can say that these three understandings of the secular may be relevant, in a limited way, for understanding religion elsewhere. Thus, almost all nation states, with the singular exception of Islamicist governments are secular, in the sense of Secular 1. Secular 2 -- “the decline in religious belief and practice” -- is true for northern and western Europe, and perhaps Japan, but it is not true for most parts of the world, including the United States, Africa, Latin America and most parts of Asia, including China. Secular 3 -- which is Taylor’s most important category -- is now pretty much universal, although the cultural conditions of religious belief and practice vary widely from place to place.

Throughout his book, Taylor contrasts the difference between the demands of religious belief in Western societies with what he calls the “norms of Western civilization” (p. 745). He describes all three kinds of secularism in Christian terms as the separation of the immanent from the transcendent, the decline of religion as “embedded” within a society to religion as a communal option or an individual choice. Taylor argues that through secularization, something is lost (a sense of enchantment with the world) but something is also gained -- a spirit of social reform or revolution. He wants to affirm all the good that has come through secularization and the Enlightenment, but he recognizes the price that has been paid.

Taylor is particularly interested in Secularism 3 (culturalsecularization), and indeed, this is part of his distinctive contribution to the debate. But Taylor is not simply a neutral observer. He believes that the story of secularization in Western societies only makes sense in light of the

¹⁰ In using the terms political, sociological and cultural secularization, I am indebted to Richard Madsen. See Madsen R. *Discerning the religious spirit of secular states in Asia. The Immanent Frame*. 2009. Available at: http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/2009/02/05/discerning-the-religious-spirit-of-secular-states-in-asia/. Accessed February 12, 2009.

continuing relevance of the spiritual dimension for human life. And we can only speak of the spiritual by reconnecting to our own religious traditions. Taylor is deeply influenced by the sociology of Max Weber, in particular his understanding of religion in the bureaucratization process and the rationalization of Charisma, but it would be a mistake to see him simply as a modern day Weberian, or even as a sociologist or social historian.

Taylor is a philosopher interested in religious questions who uses history and sociology in an interdisciplinary way. Unlike all of the theologians of secularization from the 60s and 70s, Taylor is a Roman Catholic; tradition and ritual are central to his religious understanding. His sacramental understanding can be contrasted to the thorough-going Protestantism of the secular theologians. In a sense, this defines his interest in religion over against their interest in theology. Still, Taylor shows the deep influence of Roman Catholic theologians in his work, such as Jacques Maritain, Thomas Merton, and, especially, Ivan Illich.

From Illich, Taylor derives his perspective on the relationship between Christianity and secular modernity. Through the attempt of the Church to insure and guarantee Revelation and the place of the Church in society, the best becomes the worst (*Corruptio optimi quae est pessima*, the corruption of the best is the worst).¹¹ The Incarnation is turned inside out. Secularization is related to Christianity, in Taylor's terms, but in an unusual way: "Corrupted Christianity gives rise to the modern (*i.e. the secular*)." (p. 740) In the process, there is also a separation of the intellectual, cultural, and political elite, from popular culture and popular religion, the latter still harkening back to traditionally "religious" and less secular times. The elite become promoters of the religious modern, or secularization (I will have more to say about this presently.)

There are various ways of understanding religion in terms of Secularism 3. There is the "traditionalist" option, which simply disregards the secular and encourages religion as a life apart. In Western Christianity, this is the position of conservative Catholics and Orthodox, and of some sectarian Protestant traditions associated with the Radical Reformation. Protestant "fundamentalism" uses a rationalistic secularized framework to defend Protestant doctrines, "Biblical" Christianity and a particular set of ethical norms over against "secular" culture and modernity; it is an effort to conquer modernity, rather than a rebellion against modernity.¹² On the other side, there is the "progressive" Christian position of liberal Protestants and Catholics, which seeks accommodation with the secular by "Christianizing" certain aspects of modern (or post-modern) culture. For liberals, the modern or the post-modern can mean the realization of Christian ideals. This was the position of the secular theologians, including van Leeuwen. Both of these positions, in different ways, let the secular set the terms. The "fundamentalist" and the "progressive" positions tend to defend religion in rationalistic ways alone, and neither of them has a real sense of the "enchantment with the world" that religion once represented.

Taylor does not opt for either of these, because they put the traditional religious and the modern secular in opposing camps. Secular modernity enhances human well-being, on a scale unprecedented in human history, but at the same time it can imprison and dehumanize people, by subjecting them to an unrelenting series of rationalistic and mechanistic rules and

¹¹ See Ivan Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future...* p. 1, 29.

¹² Bert Hoedemaker, *Secularization and Mission: A Theological Essay* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998), p. 6.

disciplines. It is the systematic disciplining of society that Taylor finds troubling. In true Catholic fashion, and with a sleight of hand, he accepts the need for the rules, the disciplines, and the organized rationality of the secular order, but he sees religion, in particular Catholic Christianity, as connecting us to a larger, more encompassing whole, in ways that both reform and disrupt the secular cultures in which we live. Religion is not just the realm of the mind and reason, but also embodies myths, rituals and other practices, not all of which can or should be secularized.

For Charles Taylor, one can fully recognize the conditionality of religious choice in a world of belief and non-belief, but this does not reduce the personal or communal aspects of religion to relativism. Secularization does not have the last word. The transcendent still reaches beyond the immanent. This, in any case, is my understanding of what Taylor has tried to do in his magnificent *magnum opus*.

Secularization, Religious Practice and Popular Religion

Taylor and most other philosophers, theologians and religious theorists have focused on religion and secularization in the world of ideas, i.e. on questions of thought, faith and belief. This is understandable insofar as their primary community of accountability is other philosophers, theologians and religious theorists. The strength of this position is that it sees religion as a way of thinking that can be compared to non-religious (or secular) thought systems, but this is also its limitation. I want to suggest that we can open up another dimension of the discussion by seeing religion as a matter of practice, observance and doing, as much as it is a matter of faith, belief and thinking.

This seems to be Karen Armstrong's point in her latest book.¹³ She is interested in recovering the importance of religious ritual, ethical action, and practical discipline in religious life. Religion involves hard work as well as serious thought. Religion, she contends, is something that people do, "its truth is acquired by practical action." Like driving a car, or learning to dance, paint or cook, you cannot simply depend on manuals, texts or ideas. Learning religion in a secular world takes time and perseverance. There is a knack to it (which Armstrong for some reason associates with the early Daoists); some people can acquire religion easily, and there are those who are better at it than others. Armstrong is writing for a popular audience, for those who have a preference for "spirituality" rather than traditional religion, but I think she is right to refocus attention on practice.

Practice, observance and doing are important for the study of theology and religion more generally. When I first went to teach at Nanjing University in China in 1981, it was the beginning of a time of intellectual ferment. A few years before, Deng Xiaoping had popularized the slogan, "Practice is the only criterion of truth." There was a specific political purpose behind Deng's remarks – the criticism of Maoist absolutism – but in the academic world, Deng's emphasis on practice came as a call for free thinking and experimentation. Practice, and not political dogma, was now valued, and practice meant exploring once forbidden topics, learning from the world beyond China and trying out new ideas that might be relevant for a people still reeling from the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution era (1966-1976). For some, it also recalled the Neo-Confucian emphasis on the unity of knowledge and practice.

¹³ Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* (New York: Knopf, 2009).

It was in this context that religious studies emerged in China, as intellectuals began looking at religion – and the practice of religious believers – in a more sympathetic and understanding way. Over the last twenty-five years, theology and “Christian studies” has grown very rapidly in China. For many, religion represents an alternative to secularization and secular values. It fills a “spiritual vacuum.” Today, many of the so-called “culture Christians” and Christian intellectuals see themselves doing theology and religion in a secular context.¹⁴ In Hong Kong as well, many theologians and religious leaders see “secularization rather than inter-religiosity” as the main theological concern.¹⁵ One of the questions this raises for theologians and religious scholars is the relationship between religious thought and religious practice.

This is not only or even primarily a question for China. One of the consequences of secularization in Europe was the separation of religious thought from religious practice, and with it, the separation of elite from popular religion. The two go hand in hand. Before the European Enlightenment, popular and elite religions were closely linked because religion was firmly embedded in society. Theologians and church leaders (the elite) described the same phenomena as the Christian masses, but at a higher level of rationality; popular and elite Christianity were two expressions of the same reality. Beginning with the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Council of Trent, however, the intellectual, cultural and religious elite increasingly interpreted religion in more rational ways, in part a result of their own disenchantment with the world. In Charles Taylor’s terms, the immanent became increasingly separated from the transcendent. Popular religiosity continued much as it did before in the Roman Catholic world, but among Protestants, it developed in different ways. This separation of popular from elite religion involved a separation between thought and practice. It has also had an impact on the academic study of religion, right down to the present day.

There is a popular element in elite religion (and vice versa), but these do not set the terms for established institutions and theologies. By popular religion (or devotion), I mean practices of an overtly other-worldly character that are predominantly developed by the laity, often without clerical guidance or instruction. Some scholars say that these represent an “incomplete” social differentiation of religion from other aspects of culture, which is another way of saying that they are not fully secularized. Some examples of popular Christianity would be the endowing of Orthodox icons with “magical” properties, practices of penance associated with devotion to Roman Catholic saints, Protestant Biblicism, and Pentecostal faith healing. Popular religion is diffuse and non-institutional. It is often the religion of the poor, the illiterate and people who have been marginalized. Popular religion emphasizes the immediate benefits of religious belief.

In recent years, many scholars have developed a more appreciative and nuanced understanding of popular religion. They see that it has its own value and arises from a symbolic

¹⁴ See 俗世的神学：基督教文化学刊(*Theology in a Secular Context: Journal of the Study of Chinese Culture*), 2002:8, especially the essays by Zhuo Xinping, Zhao Dunhua, Sun Shanyang, Liu Xiaofeng, and Yang Huilin.

¹⁵ Paul Kwong, “Identity in Community: A Quest for an Authentic Theological Agenda for Hong Kong SAR,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Birmingham, 2008), p. 317.

relationship with what is sacred and foundational, something that has been lost in modern secularization. The study of popular religion and the practice of religious communities in a sense collapses the secular-religious dichotomy. Popular religion, according to some contextual and liberation theologians, is the people's attempt to do theology and practice their faith. It may contain features of fatalism and oppression as well as of joy and liberation. Popular religion makes use of a variety of forms that have been neglected or disregarded by theologians and church elites. These include songs, stories, art, dance, performances and rituals. Historians see popular religion as developing alongside elite religion in every religious tradition. It has a different, but no less valid, starting point from the more rational, institutionalized and text-oriented religion of the elite. To study popular religion historically means to focus not on religious institutions, ideas and leadership, but on community practices, cultural forms and the ways in which religion is integrated with daily life.

I have thus far been speaking of thinking and practice, popular and elite, primarily in Christian terms. This is my own area of study and the Christian church is the context of my own religious practice. But the distinction I am trying to make extends further. Prof Adam Chau, a specialist in Chinese religions at Cambridge University, has developed an analytical framework emphasizing different ways of "doing religion."¹⁶ Doing, not thinking. He observes that in the very long history of religious development in China, different ways of "doing religion" evolved and cohered into five easy-to-identify "modalities". Chau sees these as relatively well-defined forms that different people can adopt and combine to deal with different concerns in life. The contents within these forms can vary widely, across different religious traditions. The "five modalities" are:

1. **Discursive-scriptural**, involving mostly the composition and use of texts. This would include the study of Daoist and Confucian texts, the chanting of Buddhist sutras or the use of the Bible or Koran in Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities. In the terms I have been using, this modality emphasizes the religious thought of elites;
2. **Personal-cultivational**, involving a long-term interest in cultivating and transforming oneself. This would include various *gongfu* practices, individual devotion related to a particular religious community, religious practices aimed at cultivating health and longevity. This would be a modality of elite as well as popular religion;
3. **Liturgical**, involving elaborate ritual procedures conducted by ritual specialists. In many religious communities, funerals stand out as a prime example of this. But other ritual practices associated with popular festivals, religious holidays, weddings, bar (and bat) mitzfaqs are also examples. This too is an elite and popular modality;
4. **Immediate-practical**, aiming at quick results using simple ritual or magical techniques. Examples would include fortune telling, curses and blessings, the recitation of simple prayers, etc. This is primarily a popular modality;
5. **Relational**, emphasizing the relationship between humans and deities (or ancestors) as well as among humans in religious practices. *Fengshui* would be a fine example of this, but so would the devotion to ancestors, nature-oriented rituals, or various practices associated

¹⁶ David Palmer, Glenn Shive and Philip Wickeri, eds. *Religious Life in China: Culture, Society and Politics*. Oxford University Press. forthcoming

with finding a husband or wife. Both elite and popular Christianity have their own relational understandings.

These five modalities cut across different religious traditions in China, and perhaps they are relevant for the study of religion elsewhere. They are not exclusive categories, although some traditions emphasize one more than the other. An individual or a community may “do religion” in one way or in all five. These “five modalities for doing religion” suggest one way of recovering the interrelatedness between popular and elite in the study of Chinese religion. In a sense they also suggest an alternative framework for the relationship between religion and secularization. Despite secularization, these five modalities of religious doing have not gone away, and they represent, in different ways, what Taylor means by Secular 3, the “move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged...to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”

Conclusion

I have been trying to relate the ways in which we think about religion and secularization to how we view religious practice. This is of course related to how we ourselves practice religion. One can certainly study religion here at the GTU without believing or practicing anything having to do with faith or religion at all.¹⁷ For those of us who are attached to religious communities, this would not be possible. There are times when we need to distance ourselves from our own religious beliefs and communities in pursuit of the truth. But there are also times when we have to be able to embrace our religious practices and communities for the sake of the truth.

I have been reading the works of the Anglican priest and theologian Richard Hooker (1554-1600) over the past few months. Alongside Shakespeare and Francis Bacon, he is one of the outstanding thinkers – and most elegant writers – of Elizabethan England. He was the first theologian of the modern era to have taken history seriously; he was fully conscious of the fact that he was writing from a particular place, for a particular time. He realized that we are never fully rational beings, and so we cannot even decide on our own what it is to be fully human. We are very strong on context here at the GTU, and we should see Hooker as foreshadowing what theology finally discovered in the late 20th century.

Hooker combines what I think is needed when we reconsider the subject of religion and secularization, critical thinking and religious practice, popular and elite religion. Hooker was writing at the dawn of what Charles Taylor calls our secular age, although it must be said that Elizabethan England was hardly “secular” in the sense that we understand the term today. Still, he understood the conditionality of all we do or think, and yet he does not allow conditionality to set the terms for theology or religion. He agrees with the continental reformers that our righteousness and practice are imperfect, but he goes a step further to say our faith and our thinking about faith are also imperfect. Thought alone, therefore, cannot set the terms for religious truth. Therefore, Hooker sits lightly to both comprehensive theological constructs and Christian faith fervently expressed. He was deeply engaged in the intellectual controversies of

¹⁷ There is also a separation of thought from practice in secularization itself. There is what might be termed “popular secularization” – consumerism, social networking, MTV, etc. – as well as “elite secularization,” neo-liberalism. Suffice it to say that the reintegration of religious thought and practice has implications for secular thought and practice as well.

his day, but he never lost sight of what it means to be a parish priest. Rowan Williams, therefore, calls Hooker a “contemplative pragmatist:”

...he is **pragmatic** to the degree that the accumulation of historical precedent has real intellectual weight, in the light of our ineradicable folly, selfishness and slowness as human thinkers, and he is **contemplative** to the degree that his guiding principles are seen by him as received, not invented, as the uncovering of a pattern of ‘wisdom’ in the universe, focused in and through the Word incarnate.¹⁸

Hooker seems very contemporary, as I read him. He was a religious (contemplative) man in a secular (pragmatic) age. I do not want to think of Hooker as a “model” but as an example of how the relationship between religion and secularization could be construed.

There are different kinds of religious practice and many ways of “doing” religion: textual, spiritual, cultivational, liturgical, service-oriented, missionary, dietary, magical, practical and relational. The list can continue. And I haven’t even gotten into all the historical, theological, psychological, sociological, anthropological and interdisciplinary approaches we study at the GTU. There are more than just five modalities of religious practice and intellectual inquiry.

In academia, at least here in California, we can say pretty much whatever we want. But what we do is important. It is what makes life interesting, what gets us into trouble, what keeps us up at night, what confuses us, what makes us cry and laugh, what makes us angry or happy, what may even redeem us. Our grasp of religion and theology is always awkward in a secular age, but it gives us life, keeps us moving and informs our doing.

In my title for this lecture, I have borrowed the words “awkward and alive” from W. H. Auden. Those of us of a certain age and with a certain disposition know the lines by heart.

Ruffle the perfect manners of the frozen heart,
And once again compel it to be awkward and alive,
To all it suffered once, a weeping witness.¹⁹

Notice that the word “alive” here is associated with suffering. In his context, Auden was speaking about human suffering in the modern world. Religious practice is also a response to suffering, but that is the subject of another lecture. In this lecture, I hope that I have been able to ruffle manners, hearts and minds. Or, at the very least, I have provided some thoughts on a subject that will not go away.

18 November 2009
San Anselmo

¹⁸ Rowan Williams, *Anglican Identities* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 2003), p. 26, 38. For this and the foregoing on Hooker, I am indebted to Williams’ two chapters on Richard Hooker in this book.

¹⁹ W. H. Auden, “Commentary on In Time of War,” *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings, 1927-1939* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1977), p. 269.