MEIS-GA 1770 - 005:
Secularization and Secularism
Fall 2018

Professor: Ismail Fajrie Alatas
Office: Room 518, King Juan Carlos I of Spain Center
Email: ifalatas@nyu.edu
Office Hours: Monday 3-5, or by appointment

About this course

What is the relationship between the political and the religious? How are both domains constituted and distinguished? What processes led to the emergence of the “secular” as an epistemic category? What kinds of epistemic and practical negotiations are involved in the constitution of the “secular” and the “religious”? These are the basic questions explored in this course. Because the secular is so much part of our modern life, it is not so easy to grasp it directly. Consequently, in this seminar, we will pursue and consider the origins and grounds of the purported secularity of some preeminent modern institutions: (1) knowledge, literature, and the University, (2) state and society, and (3) the law. The principal aim of the seminar is to reflect on the question of the secular and secularism from a perspective that is historically deeper and categorically broader than the one prescribed by the usual set of well-circulated texts on the subject. We begin by exploring recent revisions of the categories of religion and the secular by contemporary political theorists, anthropologists, philosophers, and scholars of religion. We then move on to consider different sites of secularity. Throughout this course we question the assumption that secularism is a singular phenomenon by observing its global varieties. We look at Euro-American formations of secular modernity as well as debates on and modern management of religion in other parts of the world.

Focal points of the seminar will include: the (1) relation between modernity, secularity, and European hegemony considered in a broader historical perspective; (2) place of religion in the university, considered in light of its medieval beginnings, its early modern doldrums, and its modern reforms; (3) secularization of the Bible—its transformation from religious books to literary masterpiece; (4) secularization of space and time: the impact of newly emerging sciences on the chronotopic order of the European episteme; (5) the question of law in relation to (over/above) religion; (5) literature and criticism as art, science, and profession.

Requirements

This is a seminar, and full participation in discussions is expected. Each member of the seminar will lead class discussion, to be arranged at the beginning of the semester. In addition, each week each member will submit brief commentaries or questions in response to the readings, by way of Forum on NYUclasses. These should range, roughly, between 200 and 700 words. They are meant to focus and support the discussions. There will also be a final paper on a topic negotiated
between members of the seminar and instructor, in conversations that should begin very soon after the semester starts. The final paper should be submitted no later than December 12th 2018.

Materials


All other items are on the NYUclasses site for this course, under “Resources.”
Schedule

Part I: Thinking about Religion and the Secular

Week 1: Introduction

Week 2: Defining Religion

Week 3: Defining the Secular
- Talal Asad, Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity, 2003:
  - Introduction: Thinking about Secularism
  - What Might an Anthropology of Secularism look like?

Part II: Sites of Secularity

— Knowledge, Literature, University —

Week 4:

Week 5:

Week 6:
Thomas Albert Howard, Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University, 2005.
Week 7:

— State and Society —

Week 8:

Week 9:

Week 10:

— Law —

Week 11:

Week 12:

Week 13:

Week 14: Presentation and Discussion of Research Papers (12/05)