

[Running head: Introduction]

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Introduction

The early medieval secular: spectrum and strategies

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This special issue seeks to fill a gap by taking the first steps towards locating the early Middle Ages in the broader history of the secular. While it has generally been assumed that a division between religion and secular was impossible to make in the early medieval period, taken together the articles in this collection show a variety of early medieval seculars, all arising from a general assumption that distinctions could, indeed had to, be made between what was secular and what was not. The introduction proposes that scholars should think in terms of a spectrum of secularity; key to determining what sits within this spectrum must be the identification of secularizing strategies, i.e. attempts to draw a distinction between religious and secular in a particular context. Such an approach offers the possibility of a history of the secular that does not privilege one time or place.

Anachronism and alterity are the Scylla and Charybdis between which the early medievalist must sail, in 'constant tension between a modernizing perspective, which soon becomes anachronistic if pushed to its extremes, and archaizing tendencies that turn the early Middle Ages into an exotic and utterly foreign country'.¹ Readers may suspect that the editor of a special issue on the early medieval secular has been consumed entirely by the Scylla of anachronism. The impossibility of separating religion out from early medieval politics, societies or world-views is frequently repeated in scholarship of the period. If anything, the conviction that the modern concept of religion (as something distinct and bounded from other, 'secular' forms of human activity) cannot meaningfully be applied to late antiquity and the early Middle Ages has only grown in recent research that challenges us to write an

account of the period ‘without religion’.² And without religion there can be no secular, best defined as that from which religion is separate, absent or removed.

Nonetheless, the impossibility of the early medieval secular remains rather odd, since secularity has been identified in the periods that both precede and follow the early Middle Ages: as Charles West’s article in this collection discusses, many histories of the secular locate its origins in the Gregorian Reform movement of the eleventh century and all students of early medieval religion will be familiar with Robert Markus’s work on late antique secularity. Markus, in particular, has had a major influence on subsequent early medievalists – including the contributors to this special issue; but for Markus himself the early Middle Ages was an age sadly drained of the late Roman secular through a process of de-secularization that he eloquently traced in a series of publications from the 1980s onwards.³ Robin Whelan’s contribution suggests that early medievalists, as enthusiastically as they have seized the insights of much of Markus’s writings, have not always really engaged with this narrative of de-secularizing decline. This special issue seeks, therefore, to fill a gap as it presents the first important steps to locating the early Middle Ages in the broader history of the secular. The aim is not to reject Markus’s scholarship, but to draw inspiration from it while seeking a nuanced understanding of what role the secular may or may not have had in the centuries between Augustine of Hippo and Gregory VII.⁴

The articles collected here do not present any uniform image of the content of the early medieval secular – indeed they stress the varied and changing ways Christians in the European Middle Ages separated religion from its opposite. For many scholars this act of separation, the process of differentiation, is central to the modern understanding of religion and the secular: ‘What is modern . . . is the isolation and naming of some things as “religious” and others as “not religious”.’⁵ What falls within ‘religion’ and what within the ‘secular’ is less significant than the simple fact that a distinction between the two has been

made: modern Western secularity encompasses a variety of different ways of drawing these boundaries (as a simple comparison of France, the United Kingdom and the United States would show), so it would seem perverse to approach the history of the religion/secular divide as if the content of the secular mattered more than the process of separating it from religion. In other words, we can argue that the early medieval secular existed, not as a particular aspect of society with an agreed definition and boundaries, but as the result of a process of differentiation.

That process was early medieval Christianity's inheritance from antiquity. Jesus's distinction between what was owed to Caesar and to God (Matthew XXII.21; Mark XII.17; Luke XX.25) gave scriptural licence for Christians to differentiate two separate spheres of human activity; while we should be wary of assuming this secularizing move was unique to Christianity in the ancient world, 'secularism's history is inextricably bound with that of Western Christendom'.⁶ As Christians struggled to negotiate how their God's exclusive demands for worship might allow them to live in the Roman empire, some thinkers used this distinction to find a space where Christians could operate as good citizens – in the process giving us the first (if distinctly problematic) recorded appearance of concepts like 'freedom of religion'.⁷ Constantine's conversion only brought more reasons to allow some room for the secular: the religious diversity of the fourth century and the pagan heritage of Roman culture encouraged a deliberate policy of 'neutralization';⁸ the increasing involvement of political rulers in the disputes of bishops stimulated a clerical rhetoric on the separation of worldly and religious authority. Even a writer like Pope Gelasius I (r. 492–6), recently portrayed as a key player in the early medieval misunderstanding of Augustine that permitted the de-secularization of Western society, believed that Christ's plan for humanity involved the separate administration of eternal and temporal matters by distinct authorities.⁹

The modern observer might draw a sharp contrast between Gelasius' clericalism and the modern separation of church and state, but so too did Gelasius distinguish his own time from earlier pagan periods when priestly and royal offices had been blurred. Gelasius and a modern secularist share the process of differentiating and separating, although they disagree on the content of the different spheres that they separate. What is anachronistic about the early medieval secular may not, then, be the 'secular', but rather the definite article applied to it as if there is one, objective and neutral concept of what the secular is. I have found it useful to think in terms of a spectrum of secularity: not a sliding scale of 'religion' to 'not religion', but rather a wide array of perspectives all united by the fact that they depend on a distinction being drawn between 'religion' and 'not religion'. Key to determining what sits within this spectrum must be the identification of secularizing strategies: rhetorical or intellectual moves to draw some distinction between religious and secular in a particular context.¹⁰ The same basic issue can be identified in all the articles gathered here: early medieval uses of the secular were strategic in that they were shaped by the rhetorical needs of a given situation.

In his *magnum opus et arduum*, *A Secular Age*, the philosopher Charles Taylor speaks of the replacement of the 'porous self' with the 'buffered self', the human agent separated from and independent of spiritual forces or supernatural powers.¹¹ Robert Evans's article shows us Carolingian historians partially putting up the buffers in the early ninth century in response to political and social setbacks: such writers actively refused to elucidate how the hand of God had shaped recent history, displaying a distinct (if selective and situational) lack of porousness in their works. It was with St Augustine's similarly buffered vision of history that Markus began his account of late antique secularity, where he showed how the Bishop of Hippo stressed the moral and spiritual opacity of post-biblical history, making it 'secular', rather than 'sacred', history.¹² Some years ago, Mary Garrison revealed that it took severe contemporary crises to knock Alcuin out of such a secularized view of the world;¹³ Evans

shows that similar crises could push Carolingian authors independently to embrace this Augustinian secularity.

The early medieval secular, however, was not just the continuation of Augustine's world-view into the post-Roman era. Writers could use terms like *saeculum* and *saecularis* to mean a variety of different things, some very similar to the Augustinian definitions that Markus prioritized and some very different; Whelan emphasizes that studying this multiplicity of meanings reveals that 'the secular' as a rhetorical device never drained away from the early medieval west – indeed references to the secular explode in Latin Christian writings in the period after Augustine, when they should have disappeared according to Markus's model. Looking at writers from Ostrogothic Italy, Justinianic Africa and Merovingian Gaul, Whelan shows us a variety of seculars: Augustinian indeterminacy, the state in opposition to the church, worldly corruption and legitimate but less religious aspects of government.

Even when references to the secular were frozen in the authority of the biblical text, their significance did not remain stable. Gerda Heydemann shows us Carolingian churchmen repeatedly isolating and naming some things as the *saecularia negotia*, from which the religious soldier of Christ had to keep themselves pure (II Timothy II.4). The process of differentiation was common, but the content of the secular changed substantially over time and between different Carolingian commentators using this verse as a focus in their debates about the political involvement of churchmen. Biblical injunctions provided the means for bishops to present the right balance of duties between the pastoral and the governmental for Carolingian churchmen, or for exegetes to question the balance being struck in practice. How a given text defined 'secular business' was usually a strategy for promoting a particular vision of how ecclesiastical office-holders were to relate to royal government. Recent research has moved away from the nineteenth-century cliché of 'church versus state', while

stressing that intense debates about where the boundaries between the religious and the secular lay were at the heart of the ideological crisis of the Carolingian empire.¹⁴

Charles West's article similarly discusses how a single legal text could inspire different commentary as it passed through successive periods when anxieties about stressing the division between the secular and the religious were particularly acute. As he takes us from the fifth century to the eleventh, stopping en route in the ninth, West describes a history of variations on a theme: the constant of clerical legal immunity was tweaked in different contexts as clerical authors took very different stands on how civil and church law might cooperate and interplay with each other. This mixture of agreement on the ideal of a division between religious and secular with regular shifts in the definition of what was contained within those separate spheres is the leitmotif of the whole issue. That Gelasius' separation of the priestly and royal powers (discussed by Whelan), Carolingian understandings of Paul's warnings about *saecularia negotia* (Heydemann), Leo of Bourges' ruling on the jurisdiction of ecclesiastical and civil courts (West) and Einhard's account of Charlemagne with God excised (Evans) are all very different to each other, does not mean that they do not all share a key underlying unity: all reveal early medieval people differentiating and separating religion from 'not religion'.

The articles in this issue make a claim for inclusion of the early Middle Ages in a history of secularity that is an exploration of how humans in different contexts distinguish religion from the secular, rather than a Whiggish tale of how one particular (modern Western) definition of what religion and the secular ought to contain emerged. It is worth noting that scholarly accounts of the origins of the modern religion/secular divide stress the strategic use of secularization just as I have here. Historians and theorists have proposed that early modern thinkers responded to political and cultural upheavals, such as the Wars of Religion and increased global interconnectivity, by embracing strategic separations between religion and

the secular: e.g. by privatizing confessional belief and identity in order to preserve harmony in increasingly religiously diverse societies, or by delegitimizing some forms of violence as sectarian to strengthen the authority of nation states, or by identifying a distinct, universal human activity (Religion with a capital R) that allowed for the study, categorization and control of both European monotheisms and the growing number of ritual and cultic practices witnessed around the world.¹⁵ It is the comparative success of these secularizing strategies that has resulted in the widespread modern Western assumptions about what religion and the secular are.

That the strategies deployed by Augustine, or any of the thinkers studied in this special issue, were less successful in the long term, that they merely reveal ‘situational differentiation’ and not ‘systemic differentiation’,¹⁶ hardly negates the obvious family resemblance they share with the strategies used in the early modern period (and beyond). If we understand the history of the secular as the study of how men, women and societies have strategically sought to make distinctions between religion and ‘not religion’ in response to their different situational needs then the early Middle Ages clearly has a place in that history, without danger of undue anachronism. And if the early Middle Ages can find a place in the history of secularity then so, surely, can much else excluded from traditional accounts of the emergence of Western modernity. Indeed, perhaps the most useful thing about the approach taken here would be that it does not necessarily privilege one particular place or time as providing a fixed definition of what the secular is.

But the purpose of the articles that follow is to enrich our understanding of early medieval Europe through consideration of the secular, and I am very grateful to all the authors for having done so. This project first emerged when I was a Research Fellow at Churchill College, Cambridge, and I remain very thankful to the Master and Fellows (and to the University of Cambridge’s History Faculty) for providing the material support to help get

it off the ground. I hope the readers of this issue are as educated and as excited by what follows as I have been.

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¹ M. de Jong, 'The Empire that was always Decaying: The Carolingians (800–888)', *Medieval Worlds* 2 (2015), pp. 6–25, at p. 20.

² See, especially, C.A. Barton and D. Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York, 2016); N.J. Ristuccia, *Christianization and Commonwealth in Early Medieval Europe: A Ritual Interpretation* (Oxford, 2018).

³ E.g. R.A. Markus, 'The Sacred and the Secular: From Augustine to Gregory the Great', *Journal of Theological Studies* 36 (1985), pp. 84–96; *idem*, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, 1990); *idem*, 'The Secular in Late Antiquity', in É. Rebillard and C. Sotinel (eds), *Les frontières du profane dans l'antiquité tardive* (Rome, 2010), pp. 353–61.

⁴ For previous critique of Markus's model: É. Rebillard, *Christians and their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450CE* (Ithaca, 2012), esp. pp. 91–6; P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 2013), pp. xl–xlii; C. O'Brien, 'Kings and Kingship in the Writings of Bede', *EHR* 132 (2017), pp. 1473–98, at pp. 1497–8.

⁵ B. Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven, 2013), p. 4. On differentiation as key, see D. Pollack, ‘Die Genese der westlichen Moderne. Religiöse Bedingungen der Emergenz funktionaler Differenzierung im Mittelalter’, in M. Lutz-Bachmann (ed.), *Postsäkularismus: Zur Diskussion eines umstrittenen Begriffs* (Frankfurt, 2015), pp. 289–334; originally published in *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 47 (2013), pp. 273–306.

⁶ J. Berlinerbau, ‘Political Secularism’, in P. Zuckerman and J.R. Shook (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 85–102, at p. 87. See J. Assmann, *Herrschaft und Heil: Politische Theologie in Altaegypten, Israel und Europa* (Munich, 2000), p. 40 for the possibility of some such distinction in ancient Egypt.

⁷ Tertullian, *Apologeticum* XXIV.6, ed. E. Dekkers, CCSL 1 (Turnhout, 1954), p. 134. R.L. Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom* (New Haven, 2019), ch. 1, esp. p. 11; Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*, chs 3–7, esp. pp. 108–12, provide a rather more nuanced view of Tertullian’s use of the phrase.

⁸ H. Leppin, ‘Christianisierungen im Römischen Reich: Überlegungen zum Begriff und zur Phasenbildung’, *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 16 (2012), pp. 247–78, at pp. 259–65.

⁹ See Robin Whelan’s contribution for the recent scholarship on Gelasius. Gelasius, *Tractatus* IV.11, ed. E. Schwartz, *Publizistische Sammlungen zum acacianischen Schisma* (Munich, 1934), p. 14.

¹⁰ Cf. Barton and Boyarin's analysis of Tertullian and Josephus, e.g. *Imagine No Religion*, p. 213: 'One of the available "apologetic" strategies was to divide off something called *religio* or *thrēskia* from its general usage as part and parcel of an entire cultural system and mark it as a distinct and complementary realm to that of the Roman Empire, thus anticipating in some ways, modern usage of "religion" as something different from and not necessarily in conflict with the "political."'"

¹¹ C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), especially pp. 37–41.

¹² R.A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 1–21.

¹³ M. Garrison, 'The Bible and Alcuin's Interpretation of Current Events', *Peritia* 16 (2002), pp. 68–84.

¹⁴ E.g. M. de Jong, 'The Two Republics: *Ecclesia* and the Public Domain in the Carolingian World', in R. Balzaretti, J. Barrow and P. Skinner (eds), *Italy and Early Medieval Europe: Papers for Chris Wickham* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 486–500, at p. 487.

¹⁵ See J. Bossy, 'Some Elementary Forms of Durkheim', *Past and Present* 95 (1982), pp. 3–18, at pp. 5–8; T. Asad, 'The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category', in *idem*, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993), pp. 27–54; W.T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford, 2009), chs 2–3; G.G. Stroumsa, *A New*

Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason (Cambridge, MA, 2010), pp. 14–38;
Nongbri, *Before Religion*, p. 6.

¹⁶ See Pollack, ‘Die Genese der westlichen Moderne’, pp. 296, 306–7 on the early Middle Ages as a period of ‘situational’ but not ‘systemic differentiation’ between religion and politics.