

SECULARISATION AND THE SECURITISATION OF THE SACRED
A RESPONSE TO LEWIN'S FRAMING OF THE GEARON-JACKSON DEBATE

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Abstract

In this article, I make a response to Lewin's insightful and judicious contribution to the Gearon-Jackson debate. I address the central and important arguments made by Lewin in relation to three aspects of my theoretical orientations on religion in education: (1) what Lewin rightly identifies as my 'propositional' interpretation of religion; (2) the politicisation of religion as secularisation; and (3) the securitisation of religion in education as a 'securitisation of the sacred'. I argue some theoretical framing for this is necessary and that an engagement with the (propositional) realities more helpful than their denial, and that precisely because religion is propositional it can be so used or directed to political and security purposes. In sum, to ensure there is no sense of equivocation in my response I greatly welcome Lewin's intervention, but defend my propositional interpretation of religion and defend too my conceptualisation of the politicisation and securitisation of religion in education. Prompted by Jackson's critique and Lewin's subsequent intervention, this response is offered then as a bridge to facilitate further theorisation of the politicisation and securitisation of religion in education as an aspect of secularisation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the light of a seeming resurgence of religion to public prominence there have been over recent decades some excited claims from numerous academic and other sources lording over the death of secularisation, succinctly framed by the statement, 'God is back' (for example, Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2009). The idea of a resurgence to religion in education has

given many religious education scholars a deserved sense of renewed purpose in their endeavours, seeing a new national and international political and security relevance to religion (Casanova, 1994; Cavelty and Mauer 2012; Davis, Milbank and Zizek 2005; Haynes 2008; 2009; Hovey and Phillips 2015; Scott and Cavanaugh 2004; Schussler Fiorenza, Tanner and Welker 2013; Seiple, Hooper and Otis 2011); and including enhanced acuity in the importance of religion to education (Jackson, Miedema, Weisse, and Willaime 2007; Weisse 2009; Jackson 2014). In a paper published in this journal five years ago I posed a question whose ramifications are evidently still relevant today, within and beyond the field of religious education: 'If God is back, on whose terms?' (Gearon 2012a; 2016).

This question is important as the situatedness of political and epistemological power is critical to debates about secularisation, defined here by a shift in power away from religious to political authority (Chaves, 1994; cf. Casanova, 2009).

I maintain now, as I did then, that if religion can be said to have resurfaced as an important aspect in the public square, including in education, it is 'in terms of political and not religious discourse, for the former (in arguments over citizenship, democracy or human rights) predominantly frames the latter' (2012, p. 153). I developed this argument more systematically in a number of publications, framing such developments as a 'politicisation' and a 'securitisation' of religion in education (Gearon, 2012a; 2012b; 2013a; 2013b; 2013c; 2014a 2014b; 2015b; 2016; 2017; also Gearon 2008; 2003). Evidence of religion's public and educational prominence, I argued, is not necessarily a symptom of counter-secularisation. In fact it may be evidence of the contrary, a continuing decline in religious spheres of influence. In the 2012 article I reviewed the different linear and cyclical notions of secularisation (for a full review of the literature on secularisation, see Gearon, 2012a; critically including Berger, 1999; Bruce, 2002; Davie, Berger and Fokas 2008; Habermas, 2008; Habermas and Ratzinger 2008; Stark, 1999). It is not strictly true therefore that I rely 'on a binary between secularisation and its counter' (Lewin 2017a, p. 3). The significant charge made against me from Jackson, however, is that I construe the trend as counter-secularisation, especially in citing of Weisse, of a major European research project, 'Religion in Education A contribution to dialogue or a factor of conflict in transforming societies of European Countries (REDCo)'. I re-state here the following claim by Weisse:

In most European countries, we have assumed for a long time that increasing secularisation would lead to a gradual retreat of religion from public space. *This tendency has reversed itself in the course of the past decade as religion has returned to public attention.* (Weisse, 2011, p. 112, emphasis added)

It is true Weisse does not here use the term (as I do) of ‘counter-secularisation’. Yet Weisse’s statement does imply an apparent *volte face* in the state of religion in public life, and goes on to suggest this as further evidence of the renewed role of religion in education. I argued that this may be the case but that close examination of this public/ political prominence is strictly controlled in terms of a political not religious discourse.

Carl Schmitt in his classic work *Political Theology* had long identified this when he stated that ‘All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularised theological concepts’. By this he had meant that the theological had and would become further transposed into the political, ‘ . . . not only because of their historic development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver – but also because of their systematic structure’. Thus, ‘The idea of the modern constitutional state triumphed together with deism [over] a theology and metaphysics’ (Schmitt, 2005, p. 36; Gearon 2012a, p. 162). Evidence of religion’s public prominence is not necessarily, then, a symptom of counter-secularisation (Gearon 2012a).

Nevertheless I am happy to concede the usefulness of Lewin’s post-secular notions, as ‘some kind of complication of the secular’ (Habermas, 2008), or ‘disenchantment with the very idea of disenchantment’ (Vattimo, 2003, p. 30) and accept with the post-secular is ‘not secular, nor is it exactly religious or non-religious –certainly not in the familiar ways we have been accustomed to understand these terms’ (Ergas, 2015). These are not arcane matters. Bauman’s (1991) pioneering analysis of a relatedness of modernity and the holocaust parallels Arendt’s (2004) historical genealogy of the origins of totalitarianism in western colonialism and imperialism (Gearon 2010). I think in short there is more at stake than some religious educationalists seem to realise. Religion does indeed continue to be a critical force in contemporary geopolitics and a powerful fact in educational debate (see Gearon, 2017a; 2017b). Here a short additional response cannot do justice to a debate that must continue, but I am glad to have the opportunity to make some additional commentary (Gearon 2017; 2017a).

In a judicious and insightful piece of analysis, then, David Lewin has helpfully entered a conciliatory tone by contextualising the ‘Gearon-Jackson debate’ through a refining of our notion of secularisation (Lewin 2017a). Lewin is right to do so. Lewin acknowledges ‘Gearon’s argument about the reduction of religion to the political is both plausible and of concern if we are interested in understanding religions on their own terms’. However, he detects too ‘a deeper problem of reductionism, one that Gearon does not explore’ and argues that ‘there is a subtler framing of this debate . . . namely that religion is assumed to be about commitments to a set of beliefs, propositional truth claims or worldviews’ (Lewin, 2017a, p. 6).

2. A 'PROPOSITIONAL' INTERPRETATION OF RELIGION

Lewin's suggestion that I – and indeed Jackson – adopt a propositional interpretation is for my part a charge I am happy to accept. (Jackson would I imagine be less satisfied.) As Lewin notes I was indeed a student of Ninian Smart and while I can never have been said to be an avowed phenomenologist of religion I did learn from Ninian Smart the insights of phenomenology's honest attempt to understand a religious tradition from within the framework of that tradition. Smart's initial six and then seven dimensions – ritual; narrative and mythic; experiential and emotional; social and institutional: ethical and legal; doctrinal and philosophical: material or aesthetic (Smart, 1999). This framing of different dimensions to fit all religious traditions remains problematic and can lead to often justified charges of an epistemological imposition (Barnes, 2006; 2008; 2014; 2015). Yet in relation to Lewin's (2017a) claim that 'religion is assumed to be about commitments to a set of beliefs, propositional truth claims or worldviews' (p. 6) he is correct to think of this as one aspect of my interpretation of religion. By this I am not saying nor have ever suggested that other interpretations, and in the works Lewin cites of mine there are replete with a multi-disciplinary appreciation of the contributions made to a religion and ultimately religion in education. Yet, in terms of the basic propositional nature of religion (and aware we are in dangerous generalised territory here), it would be rare to find a religious tradition from which such truth claims would be absent. Worldviews are more than relevant to 'debates about indoctrination, or competing rights between children, parents, religious communities and nation states, where religious identity is assumed to be about a commitment to a set of beliefs or truth claims, resulting in an opposition between those who see religious identity as entailing an absolute commitment'. Worldviews and truth claims are the intuitive first base of religious commitment. We only have to look at the credal statements of the world's religions to make this obvious (cf. the more developed hermeneutics of Lewin, 2016; 2017b).

Jackson (1995; 1997; 2011; 2014) I know has an epistemologically and politically more liberal view than I on this, and following Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1962) provides strong evidence from ethnographic studies of difference to show that singular lines of definition or demarcation of religions are not only unhelpful but misleading and falsifying; suggesting in turn that my own position is 'essentialist' (Jackson 2015a). As Lewin points out such matters of the interpretation of religion are widespread and notable but in the contemporaneous and classical literature (I'Anson and Jasper, 2011; Smith, 1962, 1987; Williams, 2012) though neglected in religion and education (Lewin, 2016). I am not certain this is strictly accurate, as Wright (2003; 2007) and Barnes (2004, 2015) to name two notable scholars have argued for the truth claim

territory in religious education. Nor does this propositional necessarily 'elide important dimensions of religion ... the intrinsic aesthetics of religious life or the way practices are undertaken'. Smart's aesthetic or material dimension at the most basic level would allow this, and I am of course aware of the aesthetic-hermeneutic scope for further refining of views and interpretations as a framing of dialogue to advance understanding by way of avoiding too dogmatic grasp of knowledge. There is nothing in my position which would disallow the richness of an aesthetic-hermeneutic given by for example in Gadamer's magisterial *Truth and Method* (Gadamer 2004), and as can be demonstrated from the application of this hermeneutical method in empirical work I have undertaken on the interface of aesthetics, politics and religious authority (Gearon 2015) and in relation to aesthetic of value learning trajectories (Kuusisto and Gearon 2017).

Yet a basic propositional stance I take as commonsensical. A short reminder of the saying by CS Lewis might be helpful and show the ways in which the propositional assent to doctrinal truth is not incompatible with a rich aesthetic or hermeneutical frame. In a talk in Oxford addressing the question whether theology was poetry, the famous author and popular religious thinker stated: 'I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else' (Lewis, 2017). In this regard I am happy to be called essentialist.

Lewin's own stated case from a religious tradition is *not* an exception that proves the rule. Lewin suggests: 'The Hindu who worships Christ, Buddha, Krishna and other local deities offers an image of religious inclusion that sidesteps many of the problems of indoctrination, or of competing truth claims.' Having studied and in a sense lived Hinduism in India I know this not to be the case – the Hindu pluralist praxis stated is itself a doctrinal positioning not the avoidance of one.

Without truth claims too there can be no conversion of life. It is, if we look to the literature that Lewin himself cites on Augustine, religion is often and precisely a decisive matter of *choice*. It is not as Lewin claims a Protestant or post-Enlightenment construction. Read Augustine's *Confessions*, for instance, for an account of the moment of his final conversion, notably the incident in the garden in Milan, and we are witness to a decisive and dramatic change which is precisely 'voluntaristic', a matter that is of the will. And in terms of propositional positioning, we only have to look at the texts and traditions of all of the world's religion to note that religion is indeed about 'believing certain things or adopting a religious worldview'. If this is essentialist, I am happy to remain so.

3. SECULARISATION AND THE POLITICISATION OF RELIGION IN EDUCATION

However, Lewin is right to see the seeds of a new form of propositional secular thinking emerged from the Enlightenment onwards, but they were forms of thinking which engaged obviously and self-evidently with the stated claims of religious authority (Pals, 2016). As such, the propositional secularism neatly framed by Lewin is in fact and has always been interested in not only limiting the political but also the epistemological influence of religion. Secularism cannot be so easily separated from the ‘historical and progressive secularisation’ (Lewin 2017). Further, historical and progressive secularisation is substantially integrated with the history of ideas from a range of disciplinary and epistemological perspectives which views which are at best ambivalent and often antagonistic to religion. This does not have to be ‘conflated with irreligion or atheism’ but often can be. In fact, since Lewin mentions Taylor – ‘the real significance of secularism is not the containment of belief to the private sphere (secularity 1) or the decline in belief itself (secularity 2), but a shift in the conditions of belief which have made unbelief viable (secularity 3)’ (Lewin 2017a, p. 11) – my point would be exactly with Taylor, for it is in precisely the ‘conditions of unbelief’ which have not only made ‘unbelief unviable’ but which have allowed unbelief to flourish. In the political domain this is nowhere more strongly illustrated in the use of ‘civil religion’ to determine the political uses of religion in education (Jackson and O’Grady, 2007; cf. Rousseau, 1968, notably the penultimate chapter of *The Social Contract*; Bellah, 1967; and my 2012 discussion).

We need to frame this political debate, then, historically (at least in the history of ideas), and, as Lewin understands, in wider epistemological context. I did this in the works to which Lewin refers but provided also a later and extended analysis. As a sympathetic critic noted of my examination of the post-Enlightenment epistemological foundations of religion in education:

Each of the disciplines – psychology, politics, phenomenology and aesthetics, but also natural sciences, social sciences, and philosophy, seven in total – understand religion and religious education in a purely immanent account of knowledge. Thus each reduces religion and religious education to its own lowest common denominator. Secularity’s pretended neutrality masks a definite agenda which appears in different guises, conditioned by the history of the respective discipline (Newell 2015, p 235)

Politically, this same reviewer rightly states my view accurately:

If religious education is a political and epistemological captive of modernity, how much more is public education and public knowledge pressed into service (Newell 2015, p.236)

Here, I am of one mind with Lewin when he argues that: ‘Jackson seems to underestimate the extent to which social theory permeates our interpretations of religious phenomena ... In other words, a variety of religious perspectives might conceal a hegemonic framing of religion by the secular’ (Lewin 2017).

So I cannot but continue to think it important to frame the politicisation of religion in education for what it is, or to identify what Lewin calls the ‘implicit structures’ that ‘always already’ frame the debate (Aldridge, 2015). Unmasking what is there is a critical task of any hermeneutics as I am sure my own critics appreciate. And I am aware too that the struggle for supremacy of one interpretation over another remains, as Foucault (1980) identified, an element of any debate however much we state that our allegiances to multi-perspectival hermeneutics. On the politicisation of religious education, I think there has been what we might all be able to agree a self-evident and undeniable global political framing of the aims of religious education (see Davis and Miroshnikova 2012).

4. THE SECURITISATION OF THE SACRED

But I do want to suggest that the political becomes ever more important, a matter of life and death, when it transmogrifies into the domain of securitisation, significant to some of my critics and contentious to others (Barnes, 2014; Baumfield, 2013; Freathy, 2015; Jackson, 2015; Jackson and Arweck, 2016; Newell, 2014; Stuart-Battle, 2016; Teece, 2015; Wilson, 2015). Here I have shown how this politicisation of religion in education has become ever more integrated with security agendas, what I term the ‘securitisation of religion in education’ (Gearon 2012a; 2012b; 2013a; 2013b; 2013c; also Gearon, 2014; 2015a; 2015b; 2016; 2017a).

The leading proponents of one of the most influential schools of thought in security theory, the Copenhagen School, have too recognised religion as increasingly securitised (Laustsen and Wæver, 2000). In education, we do not need to look beyond the near all-pervasive references to 9/11 in the religious education literature to see this is the case, and to my mind one of the clearest exemplars of this is evidenced in the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Organisation for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) publication *The Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (Toledo 2007). There can be few better illustrations of the meeting of political agendas with security concerns addressed (however indirectly) by a religious educational framing. It is my analysis of these political and security concerns as the politicisation and securitisation of religion in education which are a particular target of critique (Jackson 2015).

As the OSCE itself states, it has a ‘comprehensive approach to security that encompasses politico-military, economic and environmental, and human aspects’. It therefore addresses ‘a wide range of security-related concerns, including arms control, confidence- and security-building measures, human rights, national minorities, democratization, policing strategies, counter-terrorism and economic and environmental activities’ (OSCE 2017). The OSCE traces its origins to 1970s détente and the creation of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in

Europe (CSCE) as a forum for Cold War dialogue. Its history is integrally connected then to the Cold War and what might be termed – post-secession of Crimea to Russia – a late or renewed Cold War. In this latter context, in particular on the borders of Europe, the OSCE is especially active, its missions in Ukraine having had especially high prominence in recent years. An obvious question to me, but one which seems to have sparked a little vitriol has been my question: Why is a Cold War security organisation engaged in religious education? The OSCE has in this context educational concerns in helping to develop cultural understanding and reduce conflict, what is described as the ‘human dimension’ of security.

There is not space here to explore except briefly the deeper, structural context which this preoccupation by OSCE intimates. In brief, though, security studies has in recent decades been divided into two increasingly inter-related factions: ‘realists’ or ‘traditionalists’, who argue military activity, warfare and defence are how we should define the term security, and those aligned to the ‘critical security project’ who argue for a more inclusive notion of security to include issues of human security (Dunn Cavelty and Mauer 2012). Thus a plethora of security agendas have entered the public sphere and become ‘securitized’. Securitization theory, though not without its critics a notion not without its critics (see van Munster 2016), has been an influential frame for exposition and analysis of the ways in which security issues have spread beyond narrowly or explicit militaristic domains.

In securitisation theory, then, often associated with a group of scholars known as the Copenhagen School, notable among them being Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan, this widening and deepening of security agendas includes a number of sectors (Albert and Buzan, 2011). So Buzan et al (1997) identify five such security sectors: military, political societal, economic, environmental (see also Huysmans, 1998). It is, as cited above, Laustsen and Wæver (2000) who, prior to 9/11, suggest adding religion as a sector category.

Suffice to say, though, the frame of securitisation theory, OSCE involvement in religion in education can be seen as a ‘securitising move’ (for example Taureck, 2006; Gearon 2017a). It was Milbank once called a ‘policing of the sublime’ and what I term here a ‘securitization of the sacred’.

5. CONCLUSION

David Lewin’s contribution to this debate has been to provide some support for the notion of a politicisation of religion in education. Precisely because religion is propositional it can be so used or directed to political and security purposes. If secularisation is defined by a shift in power – benignly to allow the flourishing of religious plurality or malignly as a repression of religious forms of life – any contact of religion in education with security-tinged organisations

must be noted. Thus, post-9/11, the post-secular has engaged religion in education in the same security agendas which current geopolitics has embroiled religion more generally, and this is an important element in debates around secularisation. The securitization of the sacred is a critical aspect of secularisation which requires further articulation and theorisation. I have attempted to provide some theoretical framing for this and would suggest an engagement with the (propositional) realities more helpful than their denial. This response is offered then as a bridge to enable and facilitate such dialogue between religious education theory and theories of securitization.

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