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Secularism, Humanity, and Social Transformation

Craig Calhoun

Arizona State University and LSE

What Max Weber called the differentiation of value spheres has been fundamental not just for modern social thought but for modernity itself. It is a basis for distinction of academic disciplines, for ideologies like the notion of a free market sharply distinct from politics and states, and for the relegation of religion to private life or a space somehow separate from the rest of social life. This effort at differentiation has influenced both social imaginaries and material institutions. But it also distorts efforts to observe modernity.

The idea of secularization is a case in point. It commonly incorporates a notion of complete neutrality, a view from nowhere and always. But we have no vantage point outside history from which to look at ostensible secularization with perfect objectivity and undistorted perspective. Do we look from a position of faith, or unbelief, or vague religious identity without consistent practice? Each has been shaped by the history of secularization. Do we look from universities? These are deeply implicated in the very changes we would seek to understand. Do we look as citizens of modern states? These are deeply shaped by both ideologies of political secularism and efforts to enforce it through purges of religion from the public sphere (as previously of minority religions). Do we look from the vantage point of international relations? We cannot escape a history of political theology, thinking about sovereignty as the radical autonomy of national states, and of relations among states as limited to instrumental agreements or conflicts.

The idea of secularization focuses attention on certain questions and obscures others. We ask about the presence or absence of religion in international relations, in state operations, in public life, in science or knowledge, and in the practices of individuals. We ask whether states should recognize religion at all, and if they do, how they can achieve fairness among religions or between the religious and non-religious. We ask about the sources, virtues, and limits of tolerance. We ask whether religion needs to be defended, or opposed, or will fade of its own accord.

But the transformations in which questions of secularization are embedded also involve reconstituting categories of thought that are not narrowly about secularization or religion. I began with one example, the idea of distinct spheres of value and societal operations. Arguments about the relationship of politics to economics, for example, tend to take for granted that each of is a

distinct domain (or value sphere). Each is to be understood internally – as distinct from imagining that religion integrates them with common ideas of value, purpose, commonality – or indeed inevitability and possibility. The idea that politics and economics are discrete domains grew up alongside the ‘emancipation’ of each from religion, but it influences much more than how religious either is.

The issue is not just that we cannot be neutral when we look at secularization. It is that the organization of thought bundled in with secularization encourages us to think such neutrality is possible not only with regard to secularization, but also in regard to technology, economic organization, the nature of the human, and the social value of community. We are led to imagine that not only thought but institutions can be in this sense neutral, disembedded not just from religion but from basic questions of value and perspective.

I want to concentrate centrally – in line with the theme of this conference - on the related questions of what it means to be human and the relationship between individuality and sociality. These questions need to be addressed in ways that recognize both religious and secular influences as entwined with each other and as constitutive for what we see and sometimes for what we don’t.

Multiple and Limited Secularizations

The idea of a linear historical process of secularization was almost taken for granted for most of the 20th Century. Some embraced it, arguing against religious influence in this or that domain. Some sought to resist it. Most didn’t think about it much, but tacitly assumed some version of a secularization story. In varying combinations, this story emphasized religion’s decline. It was consigned to the realm of ‘private’ rather than ‘public’ life and to domestic rather than international politics; and it was compartmentalized apart from other increasingly prominent institutions, including science and markets, but also most education, health care, and government itself.

Such accounts were influential among academics, with some variation across disciplines, among a broader range of intellectuals, and among both political and institutional leaders. This was true in the US where religious participation remained widespread and religious ritual and symbol remained part of public life, if diminished. It was even more prominent in Europe where formal church attendance declined earlier and more rapidly and, in some countries more than others, religious symbols were more fully banished from public life. This became a central concern of many religious leaders and organizations, but many still saw it as a master trend.

Recently, though, a number of scholars have questioned whether secularization was in fact general to modernity. Some have suggested it was more specific, perhaps a European exception to global trends. Others have demonstrated that secularization was not so complete or so irreversible even in Europe as was long claimed.

Both sides of this debate have seen secularization largely through what Charles Taylor has called a ‘subtraction story’. They have pointed out reductions in religious participation or influence, or they have pointed to ways in which religion still mattered or even mattered anew. In this arithmetic perspective, there was simply more or less religion. If religion did not decline overall,

it was confined within some realms of life or social policy and excluded from others. Secularization was seen as a decline or displacement of religion that left the rest of society more or less as it had been.

This view is mistaken on several dimensions. To be sure, processes that we can call secularization did take place. Their importance has been fundamental. But secularization has been part of a much wider transformation than simply a decline of religion. In the first place, religion itself has been remade, not just reduced or marginalized. Second, the institutions, cultures, and actors that we regard as 'not religious' have been remade, in some cases ostensibly emancipated from religion, or made anew with minimal reliance on religion but, in any case, made different in ways beyond simply reduction of religion. Third, as sharp and significant as the religion/not religion boundary may seem, transformation has produced a remarkable range of hybrids and interrelationships. Fourth, the common notion of secularization bundles together distinct phenomena that do not always coincide.

Scaling up and increased mediation are central to religion as well as to the secular structures that sometimes compete with religion. The transnational reach of religious communications and organizations has been increased, for example, from Western missionary activity through migration-based extensions like global Sikhism to the rise of network Christianity. Islam may have spread with physical movements along trading routes from the Middle East through Asia, but Muslims are now linked by a variety of new media. The Yoido Church beams televised messages to satellite congregations around the world. In these processes and more, religion has been restructured not simply displaced or replaced. Its growth cannot be dismissed as somehow a throwback to the premodern. It is part of modernization (if that word still has meaning).

If the transnational reach of religion has grown, so have the transnational reach of markets, gambling, trafficking, and pornography and both states and international organizations trying to police each. The role of religion has been reduced in many settings, though not clearly in all. Subtraction stories are misleadingly linear.

Subtraction is a poor description of a marginalization shaped largely by the expansion of secular power, authority and capacity to organize. The rise of modern states, markets, and science-based health care all did push religion into different and generally smaller spaces of modern social life – though in different degree in different places. In Europe, states that were previously protagonists in religious struggles increasingly banished religion from public life and the internal workings of government. But states also thereby took on the task of deciding what is and isn't religion. The administration of colonies also committed European states to deciding policy towards religion – and religions. This meant both determining the relationship between colonial and indigenous religions and also simply deciding what counted as religion. This project of administratively recognizing diverse religions is arguably key to the production of the very category religions. In the US, the plurality of ways to be Christian came to the fore, but eventually there were also questions about both other immigrant religions and indigenous religions. The state looked more favorably on religion, but this too committed it to the work of demarcation and recognition. For example, religious organizations receive a tax exemption, but this requires the Internal Revenue Service to define what is and isn't a religious organization.

In addition, as Alfred Stepan points out, stabilization of the relationship between religion and modern states was not a one-way process. At least in democracies, it required recognition and

toleration in each direction. Religious leaders recognized state authority and states recognized the legitimacy of at least some forms of religious practice and institutions. But in the very toleration demarcation and boundaries were embedded.

The founders of the US banned establishment of religion not to minimize it, but so it could be free from state control. It was to be free as a matter of individual inspiration and reflection and as a matter of institutionalized practice. This resolved problems integrating colonies in which different Christian denominations had been established or favored. It also helped to create a marketplace of religion, a free individual choice of congregations, denominations, and practices that may have been responsible for much of the greater flourishing of religion in the US compared to most of Europe.

Over time the US Constitutional prohibition of established religion came to be understood as requiring a separation of church and state. This doctrine is often taken as definitive of a secular state, but there are important others. In particular, there is a doctrine of fairness. In India, for example, the state funds and legally recognizes religion, but is deemed secular by maintaining a 'principled distance' and funding different religions proportionately. In short, there are a variety of different secularisms, both in relation to states and on other dimensions.

Publics

The intellectual and policy habit that compartmentalizes religion in a realm of 'private' life can be taken to imply that religion has simply become less and less public. But this is wrong. Public religion has played a range of constitutive roles in modern life. To take just one, religious nationalism has grown more influential – though it has ebbed and flowed - partly because nationalism itself has been solidified as a dominant structure of modern identities. Hindu mobilization in India is a pre-eminent example today but we could point to Russian Orthodoxy, Polish Catholicism, and other variants. Equally, though, we could note the challenge transnational Islamism delivers to national state projects seen as corrupt or ineffective.

Public religion is not limited to politics but also expressed in largely apolitical public forms of religious devotion. The Hajj, Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, is not without political significance and significance to the Saudi state's claims of eminence among Muslims. But it remains religious first and not contained by any political project. It has ancient roots, but it has grown enormously to involve more than two million pilgrims annually, aided by modern transport infrastructure and media representations. The Catholic pilgrimage of Lourdes is neither antique nor declining. It dates from the mid-19th Century visions of St. Bernadette and today involves some 5 million visitors annually. The Camino de Santiago (or *Peregrinatio Compostellana*) was a medieval pilgrimage recurrently revitalized, particularly since the 1990s. Of course, not all who walk the Way of St. James do so out of explicitly religious motivation, though even for the secular there is something inescapably religious about it (something not eclipsed by use of the word 'spiritual' instead of 'religious').

At the same time, these pilgrimages also support substantial businesses from inns along the way to travel agencies and airlines to get pilgrims to their starting points. As with medieval cathedrals, religious projects can both be businesses and be the occasion for lots of more or less secular business activity. It is not only new forms of self-discipline and interior convictions about

salvation that can connect religion and economic life, even capitalism.

At the same, religious engagements helped drive the spread of literacy, print media, and debate in the public sphere. It is an oddity of Habermas's famous book on the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* that it never discusses religion, and that its account starts with the development of literary, market, and political publics in the 18th century. This reflects the tacit exclusion of religion common in thinking about secular institutions. In fact, there would be a strong case for starting the story of modern publics in the 17th century, tracing the story of vernacular literacy to translation and printing of the Bible, seeing the circulation of sermons and tracts as basic to the rise of a larger scale public sphere. Of course, this scaling up and modernization of the public sphere doesn't provide a definitive beginning to the story of publics. This would necessarily stretch back to the ancient world and reflect developments in republican thought and practice in the centuries just before and overlapping the Protestant Reformation.

Extending the modern story back at least to the 17th century could also remind us of the rise of science as itself a public phenomenon, shaped by invisible colleges of correspondents, new institutions like Britain's Royal Society, and the insistence that all scientific findings be made public for dispute, testing, and correction of errors. And, of course, there were other dimensions, even a spatial, architectural one in which a core feature was the development of Europe's towns around public squares like Bologna's *piazza maggiore*. Crucially, there was the rise of the state.

The development of publics (gatherings, networks of communication, spaces and spheres and policies but for the moment let me just say 'publics') was an important feature of European, Western modernity (and many alternative modernities around the world. Religion – and indeed religious conflict – played a central role in this. It is important that religion was part of the story of the formation of the modern public, even the modern secular public, but it is also important that religion was not the whole story.

The constitution of secular public spaces cannot be understood just in terms of the management of relations to religion – banishing religious argument, or insisting on 'translation' of religious discourse into secular terms, or providing for neutrality among religions. It is necessary also to ask whether public discourse is to be confined in what Taylor called 'the immanent frame', understanding based on science and similar approaches that take the material world as all there is.

Religions can appear simply in the form of identities claimed by actors demanding voice or power in public matters. It can then be managed as a potential power.

But, of course, to speak of religion is not only to speak of a contender for power. Religion is also an effort to understand and to seek deeper meaning. If we cannot find room for religion in public discourse, can we benefit from religious traditions as a source for rethinking the human, for rethinking value, for rethinking the social order? And will efforts to manage religion stifle other forms of moral imagination and indeed imagination of what is possible, with or without divine inspiration?

As I have argued, the disciplining of publicness to exclude or manage religion was never simply a subtraction of religion. It was a transformation. We need to ask what else was disciplined to the margins along with religion. It was not only divine inspiration that was made suspect in the particular formation of modern publics as, ideally, spheres of rational-critical debate on subjects

of material policy concern for modern states. It was also human imagination.

Scale

At the same time that religious practices, communities, and authorities were transformed to produce a secular age, and publics became a central feature of that age, the scale of societal organization grew enormously. Certainly, there were far flung empires and long-distance trade before the modern era. But our era has been constituted partly by the building of infrastructures and systems that enable social organization on an unprecedented and very large scale. We produce the food to feed 8 billion human beings, most of whom now live in cities. At least 20 of those cities have more than 15 million inhabitants (though there are debates on exactly how to count). They are nodes in transportation and communications systems that connect all the continents of the world and connect the actions of each person to others in a constant work of coordination and sometimes conflict.

These systems are in some degree ‘self-moving’ or automatic – as the movements of prices in relation to supply and demand can proceed without the intervention of king or politicians in Adam Smith’s famous image of the invisible hand. This is a difference in kind that is closely related to difference in scale. It is not just that there are more people, in more widely dispersed social relations. The development of socio-technical systems that are at least partially auto-poetic transforms human relatedness. We have relationships with other people whom we confront face-to-face. Some of these are really meaningful relationships like those which constitute families and communities, some are more casual, like relations with shop clerks. But a growing proportion, indeed by far the majority, are indirect relationships, not only not face-to-face but connecting us to people we don’t know and cannot even in principle know. It is not enough to say that modern life is shaped deeply by sociability with strangers, though this is very true, whether we speak of the crowds in a public square at Carnival or at an election rally or even of the many anonymous addressees of political speeches. Modern life is also made possible by and deeply shaped by relationships organized through socio-technical systems in which people play roles, but are not sociable, not addressed as persons, even anonymous ones.

Yet there is also power on a new scale. States are bigger and they play different roles. State power is not just ‘coercive power’ – the kind of power exercised by monarchs who could say ‘off with her head’ like the Queen of Hearts in Alice in Wonderland, or governments that put people in prison or detention camps as states do in unprecedented numbers today. Militaries and police are important but modern states also wield ‘infrastructural power’. They build highways and telecommunication systems, they run schools and hospitals, they provide unemployment insurance and old-age pensions, they subsidize efforts at industrial innovation and international trade, and of course they collect taxes in ways that are not only large-scale but never simply neutral. States exercise their power both in relation to actual persons and in relationship to socio-technical systems.

So do corporations. I have in mind mainly business corporations, but in fact philanthropies and many non-profit organizations also operate as corporations. They also wield power. Some business corporations are in fact larger and more powerful than most states. Apple, Amazon, Google, and Facebook – and Huawei, Alibaba, and Ten Cent are among the current giants. These are not democratic. In general, they are not objects of public address in the same way states are

(though this is not impossible). When we speak of a public corporation, we mean only one whose shares are traded publicly rather than held exclusively within a private group like a family.

Scaling up and increased mediation are, if I may be forgiven the word play, powerful secular trends. They have at once been more or less linear over time, echoing the root of the term secular in measurement of worldly time by contrast to eternity. And they have reflected the emergence of sociotechnical systems knitting the world together with less and less reference to religion. The issue is not just whether devotion has declined. It is whether the literal mediation of priests is as important in a world of mass literacy, telephones, TV, and new media. To take a simple and obvious example, modern states maintain secular diplomatic corps.

Community and Its Limits

All these changes reconstitute the world. In this reconstitution, growth in the number of human beings and in the scale of their settlements and systems of power have been ‘secular trends’. They have marched forward in time, never reversed, at least so far, by cycles of retreat to counteract advance. They have shaped our secular experience, that is our experience of the material, temporal world, which if religious we may still contrast to a more eternal or timeless reality. Human beings live longer lives. We live amid constant transformations of technology, of culture, of relationships. We live amid constant, mediated awareness of at least some of what is happening at great distance in the world, but at the same time. And we live with an apparent acceleration, a quickening of change. The sociologist Hartmut Rosa has argued that acceleration is the defining feature of the modern era, not just change but its quickening pace. Already 150 years ago Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote of capitalism that: “Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned...”

One doesn’t have to be a Marxist to see the truth in this characterization. It still makes sense in our era of smart phones, artificial intelligence and gene editing, of globalization, instantaneous market updates, and cyberattacks. But we may doubt the conclusion Marx and Engels drew from this, that as a result humanity would be “at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.” It is far from clear that accelerating growth in scale and constant disruptive change have freed humanity from illusions or compelled us to realism. We seem, for example, to have a very hard time facing ‘with sober senses’ the possible eradication of our ‘real conditions of life’ by climate change and environmental degradation. In fact, this seems to be yet another accelerating process of change and growing scale that we experience as continuing without end.

I do not intend this lecture to be a catalog of material changes and challenges faced by humanity. Rather, I have tried simply to evoke these and to indicate how integrally connected are the ‘secular trends’ of worldly transformation and the process we call secularization. The transformation of the place of religion in the world did not take place independently of all these other transformations.

This broader sense of transformation is necessary, I want to suggest, to fully make sense of the

challenges posed today by new appearances of religion in secular public space, and by the terms chosen for the theme of this conference, ‘individual’ and ‘community’.

Let me turn to community first. It is misleading to use term ‘community’ for all the forms of social existence and commitment in our lives, for all that stands as the social counterpoint to ‘individual’. But this is what we tend to do when we counter-pose individual to community as the two seemingly self-evidence forms of human existence.

Community has its full meaning in webs of relationships that knit human beings to each other in mutual commitments. Community commonly incorporates families, but this need not be part of the definition. We can, for example, meaningfully speak of monastic communities or other communities of faith in which individuals are more autonomously members. In the Christian tradition, the faith communities of the Patristic Era are often taken as models. Community was identified not with cities, but the body of the faithful in the larger city, whether Ephesus, Corinth, or Rome. We think of community often in its place-based form: the village or small town, paradigmatically, but also the urban neighborhood or the communities forged within cities by those who share ethnicity or faith or indeed lifestyle choices and choose to make this the basis for interdependence. Place-based communities are particularly important today, in the context of climate change and environmental degradation, because they anchor concrete and specific human relationship to nature, and potentially care for the endangered natural world.

Contrasting local community to larger scale society was a staple of 19th century social thought, invoking binary oppositions like *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft*. These focused attention on transformations not only in scale but also in kind of social relationships. Cities, they suggested, were sites of more voluntary association, less sense of community of fate. People were knit together by contracts not statuses. The anonymity of cities allowed new kinds of freedom as people could express different sides of themselves in different contexts. And all of those allowed new levels of individuation.

At the same time, though perhaps misleadingly, the notion of community was also claimed for trans-local solidarities, pre-eminently those of nations. It is in national publics that questions of religion and secularism are most acute, not at the local level. Here the rhetoric of community necessarily meant something different from the local context. It could not be a matter of densely interconnected relationships. Even small nations of just a few millions far exceeded that possibility. Rather, nations involved categories of people joined by common culture, or legal citizenship, or political sovereignty or subjection. They were built not out of face-to-face relationships but out of mediated relationships and representations. Nation was in this sense a competitor to local community. And political publics came to be organized overwhelmingly in national terms. Sometimes religion has been central to national political identity, and this secular engagement has itself transformed religion. Contemporary Hindu nationalism is an example. But even where we would not speak of specifically religious nationalism, as Benedict Anderson shrewdly observed, the phenomenon of nation (or nationalism) has more in common with public religions than with political ideologies as conventionally understood. It is a creation of culture and emotion, a way of seeing the world and understanding the self, and indeed sacred.

Individuals

Religions – or specific religious actors and movements – were agents in this transformation, not

simply its victims. Early in modernity, the forms of personal and public piety previously restricted to religious specialists like monks were extended to lay people. There were increasing calls for active choices and demonstrations of conviction rather than only tacit compliance. Denominational and doctrinal struggles reinforced this trend. The very intensification of religion paradoxically helped lay the conditions for clearer personal or institutional choices not to be religious.

Modern individualism was pioneered partly in this religious transformation. Prayer, professions of belief, and reading of scripture all became increasingly individual. There was increased emphasis on an 'interior' to the self. Max Weber saw shifting understandings of salvation to a new ideology of self-discipline which he thought essential to capitalism. Michel Foucault traced growing individualism to the interplay of power and knowledge and the internalization of domination as self-discipline in the transition from religious domination to supposedly humane post-Enlightenment Europe.

But what it is to be a human individual has itself changed, partly because of these changes in societal organization. We can see something of the shift in the ways nations are imagined and rhetorically constituted. Modern nations may use a vocabulary of family and lineage but they much more basically connect individuals into the whole. It is as though nationality is inscribed into the very body, or at least the personal identity of individuals. In this sense individuals are understood not through their webs of personal relationships, or of roles like parent and child, sister and brother, but as equivalents in a series. Nation is a pre-eminent example of this serial notion of individuals as units in a larger categorical identity, but not the only one. This is also the main way in which individuals are understood as bearers of human rights, as citizens, and as owners of property.

Each fits with the 'punctual' self of Western modernity, one token of a type, one unit of a whole. But it is in tension with the idea that each of us is possessed of a unique individuality. In different ways, a variety of Western thinkers have distinguished treating other people merely as objects from treating them as subjects of value. Immanuel Kant's argument against taking any other person to be merely means to our ends, our goals and uses, is a prime example. Martin Buber wrestled with the same issue in distinguishing the 'I/it' relationship from the 'I/Thou'. The 'I/Thou' relation involves recognition of the other as a person, as having a spiritual dimension, and thus as a potential path into relationship with God. Levinas develops similar ideas in his notion of alterity.

To Be Human

Individualistic as modernity is, it has produced social relations on an unprecedented scale and in ways that challenge individuals and direct relations among individuals. Here we come to my last major theme.

What joins human beings in the larger category 'humanity' and what makes humanity of special value? There are a variety of answers in different historical traditions. Religion is central to many of them. But the process of secularization and the wider societal transformations to which it is linked, has encouraged the forgetting or hollowing out of some of these. And there are now new challenges.

For example, the book of *Genesis* tells us that human beings are created in the image of God.

This gives rise to long interpretative traditions which I can't begin to summarize. They take up many ways in which being created in the image of God distinguishes human beings including not least free will, knowledge of good and evil, reason, and the capacity ourselves to consciously create – that is, to continue the process of world-making begun but not ended by God's Creation.

Then again, also with roots in *Genesis*, there is the notion of a Great Chain of Being, or of a natural hierarchy intrinsic to Creation, in which humans are placed below God and the angels but given dominion 'over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground'. Versions of the Great Chain of Being elaborated the distinct places of different sorts of human beings, Lords and serfs for example, in a relational but very hierarchical understanding. They distinguished the human from other living creatures both on earth and in heaven. We are not mere animals, but neither are we gods or angels. We are also living, of course, and thus distinct from the no longer living though they too have a special status in the order of the universe (varying among religious traditions from the veneration of ancestors to souls awaiting elevation from purgatory into heaven).

In many religious traditions a core understanding of being human and human individuality centers on the soul. For Christianity, this stretches back through Augustine to Plato. It shapes thinking about the place of human beings in the natural hierarchy (above other animals and below angels). It informs understandings of Christ as both God and person, of the Eucharist, of the migration of souls, and ultimately in medieval political theology, of the King's Two Bodies – which in turn becomes a basis for the idea of a corporation as a person. Being an individual and being human are linked through the notion of soul (though there is more to the construction of individual standing as personhood – in law and eventually in citizenship). I don't propose any exposition of this, or of the meaning of eternal soul in relationship to this mortal coil that we might slough off at death, and still less of differences even within the Christian tradition let alone between it and others. But arguably modern Western individualism develops on the basis of notions of the individual identity of souls. There are interesting questions I cannot answer about this changes with new vocabulary sacralizing human life as such, rather than souls, or with claims of spirituality rather than specific and soul-centered religion.

This rhetorical framework for thinking about the human was at once both readily available and influential. It is, for example, the framework in which the 16th Century Disputations of Valladolid (at least the side represented by Bartolomeo de las Casas) tackled the question of whether or in what sense the native inhabitants of Spain's New World colonies were human. Did they have eternal souls and thus require care and protection, albeit in a paternalistic understanding, and ultimately efforts at conversion and salvation? Or were they a lesser kind of being, perhaps above animals but less than human, and suited only for labor (as Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda argued)?

Reliance on both the idea of souls and the image of the Great Chain of Being has faded. A notion of natural individuality came to the fore. This was sometimes linked to expressive notions of self, as in the Romantic tradition. This helped inform 'depth psychologies' like psychoanalysis. In the liberal tradition, individuals were fundamentally owners of property and consumers with irreducible tastes; thinking about citizenship was shaped by both ideas.

But by the late 20th century, the idea of a distinct genetic makeup replaced the idea of soul as the basis for recognizing both individuality and humanness. This genetic makeup was regarded as 'natural' and unalterable. If this view is still intuitive to many, it is also under challenge.

Techniques of genetic engineering have made rapid strides in recent years. Using CRISPR-Cas9, however, scientists already have the capacity to change the genetic makeup of unborn babies. Parents who are the carrier of genes for potential diseases may be eager to have children born freed from that risk by changes to their genomes. Indeed, vulnerability is an essential part of the human condition – though looking to the circumstances and existential predicaments of humans is different from finding an interior essence. In any case, there is motivation for experimentation on humans. This is illegal in most countries, though regulation may or may not be effective. Famously, though, it has already been done in China where genetically altered babies have been born. Moreover, as Benjamin Hurlbut has suggested, however much the first experimenters have been stigmatized as deviant, pursuing this goal is much more deeply supported in the relevant scientific fields (which are also commercial fields).

Of course, gene-editing has its own risks. But although there are powerful commercial and governmental interests at issue, scientists largely claim the right and capacity to regulate themselves. This claim to autonomy is directly related to the differentiation of value spheres and the notion that science must be kept free from religion and politics (though the idea of keeping it separate from commerce seems to have lost purchase).

Yes, gene-editing challenges our received notion of the human, and of what is and isn't beyond our control. The capacity to alter the genetic code shaping the lives of human individuals raises questions about what it means to think of those individuals as creatures of God or nature. It raises questions about the idea that humans are basically equal or deserving of equal rights. It raises questions about who should have the authority to change the genes of another person. Parents? If so, on what basis? Do they own their offspring? In most regards we think not and generally think the idea of people owning each other repugnant. Should access to the technology be governed by states? Or markets (as is happening in the West)? Can any one state adequately regulate it in a world what it can be made available to the rich through medical tourism?

Organism and Mechanism

In the 17th century, the distinctiveness of the human was articulated in another kind of contrast: of man to machine. This was shaped by the search for perpetual motion, the development of mechanical clocks, and a craze for developing mechanical birds and all matter of automata. For some, human beings were just a special kind of self-moving machine. For others, the distinction of human self-movement by free will was fundamental. But note something familiar in the issue which appears today in debates about artificial intelligence, though these are commonly impoverished by the thinness of understanding the human. That is, having all but forgotten the notion of soul, having lost faith in both the Great Chain of Being and the idea of creation in the image of God, we are easily drawn into thinking that we are just algorithms, complex structures of code given organic, genetic form on a carbon base rather than rendered on chips in silicon. And so many in the 'transhumanist' movement find it easy to imagine eternal life, not with God, but by virtue of some possible uploading of the contents of their brains into computers. More than a few are investing large sums of money in being frozen to await this rapture.

In my view, this sort of thinking goes deeply astray in trying to understand what it is to be human, as well as in imagining migration into machines. For many, this is a view of human beings becoming Gods, creators of life. Arguably this is an extension of the Biblical notion of being created in the image of God, but it is a quite radical one which presumes the absence of

that original God of the Creation described in Genesis. But let me leave the possible theological failings of this view aside and note two other ways I think it goes wrong that bear on the notions of individual and community.

First, the idea that as persons we can be reduced to intelligence, or to the processes of our brains, is extremely dubious. Modern neuroscience stresses that our brains are not autonomous and self-contained, that they are part of complex neural systems in which all the parts matter, that our cognition and emotion are influenced also by chemical processes, and that cognitive-neural system works only in relation to our bodies, managing relations to internal and external disturbances, perhaps seeking homeostasis, but in any case, deeply embedded.

Second, the notion that human intelligence is contained within individual brains or even individual bodies is misleading. Human intelligence is the product of sharing and learning, of language and culture, of communication and social relationships. The point is not just that our thinking stands on the shoulders of giants (and others) who have gone before. It is that we think in language and in dialog, not in isolation.

Artificial intelligence may and probably will grow dramatically more powerful. It will transform material production and change or eliminate many jobs. It will change the way all the socio-technical systems that connect us work, from transport to water supply to record keeping. It is already changing the work of doctors, lawyers, architects, and policemen. So, I don't mean to suggest it is not powerful. Rather, I want to suggest that processes of automation are largely social process. We began the process of automation not simply with mechanical birds or the first computers but with the modern state, the business corporation, the factory and all the sociotechnical systems that work by establishing 'workflows', sets of instructions to govern the work of the whole. As Thomas Hobbes wrote on the first page of *Leviathan* what is the state but an artificial person?

NATURE (the art whereby God hath made and governs the world) is by the art of man, as in many other things, so in this also imitated, that it can make an artificial animal. For seeing life is but a motion of limbs, the beginning whereof is in some principal part within, why may we not say that all automata (engines that move themselves by springs and wheels as doth a watch) have an artificial life? For what is the heart, but a spring; and the nerves, but so many strings; and the joints, but so many wheels, giving motion to the whole body, such as was intended by the Artificer? Art goes yet further, imitating that rational and most excellent work of Nature, man. For by art is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMONWEALTH, or STATE (in Latin, CIVITAS), which is but an artificial man, though of greater stature and strength than the natural, for whose protection and defence it was intended; and in which the sovereignty is an artificial soul, as giving life and motion to the whole body; the magistrates and other officers of judicature and execution, artificial joints; reward and punishment (by which fastened to the seat of the sovereignty, every joint and member is moved to perform his duty) are the nerves, that do the same in the body natural; the wealth and riches of all the particular members are the strength; *salus populi* (the people's safety) its business; counsellors, by whom all things needful for it to know are suggested unto it, are the memory; equity and laws, an artificial reason and will; concord, health; sedition, sickness; and civil war, death. Lastly, the pacts and covenants, by which the parts of this body politic were at first made, set together, and united, resemble that fiat, or the Let us make man, pronounced by God in the Creation.

Even before the latest advances in machine learning and AI, we have long been engaged in creating organizational systems that in some combination supplement and supplant human action. In the contemporary world, we place great emotional emphasis on direct interpersonal relationships. But to a very large extent our world is given its structure not by these but rather by indirect relations mediated through technological and organizational systems. We relate to other people not as visible, knowable individuals but obscured in the indirect relationships of complex socio-technical systems some of which seem to move of themselves. Or we relate to them as the serial units of categories – say members of nations – and again not directly as persons. This does not make a stronger recognition of humanness or spiritual communion impossible. We can, for example, approach human rights with ideas of reverence for all human beings, each equally exemplifying the category. But it is a challenge to see the spiritually, sacredly human in, say, market actors.

And what of corporations? The idea that a corporation is itself an individual has become highly influential. The idea is encouraged in much corporate law (though there are differences in national legal traditions). There are competing accounts. Corporations may be understood as merely creatures of contract. They may be seen as concessions or assignments of the authority of the crown or the state. But corporations are distinguished from their investors, managers, and other members. This is integral to notions of limited liability that make modern forms of joint stock ownership possible and with it the trading of shares of ownership in stock markets.

Influential roots of this notion of the business corporation are in fact religious. In canon law, the bishop as owner of church property is a legal (and ecclesiastical) construct separate from the human personhood of the individual incumbent (a ‘corporation sole’). The concept is analogous to that of the ‘king’s two bodies’ which enables us to say ‘the king is dead, long live the king’ and ensure the smooth succession of rule as well as property. In secular law, this directly influences the treatment of private corporations as distinct from public. But it informs the legal standing and legitimacy of corporations generally, including giant business firms. CEOs and business gurus even speak of the souls of corporations. This way of thinking about corporations as a kind of persons also creates a fundamental asymmetry between human individuals and these artificial individuals. Like ordinary human beings, at least those of legal age and competency, corporations can own and sell property, enter into contracts, and sue or be sued in courts of law.

By an extraordinary, but perhaps predictable, extension, corporations in the United States are now treated as citizens possessed of civil rights. In the decision called *Citizens United*, the US Supreme Court famously determined that corporations are entitled to the protection of free speech the US Constitution granted to citizens, and thus that there should be no limits on their financial contributions to political campaigns. *A propos* of religion and secularity in matters of public policy, this then becomes one of the arguments deployed to assert that there should be no restrictions on the political activities of religious bodies (though this leaves unaddressed the special status of tax exemption).

Conclusion

The rise of the state, the corporation, and the global market all raise anxieties about loss of community and questions about what it means to be a human individual. So do artificial intelligence and genetic engineering. But can these questions be answered entirely within the ‘immanent frame’?

The term 'post-secular' grants that there was some time or at least some intellectual consensus when secularity could be presumed, but then suggests that this presumption no longer holds. So secular a thinker as Jurgen Habermas has argued that we must not only accept that religion is part of public life, but ask whether it has potentially valuable, even crucial contributions to make. Religions may contribute specific ideas to contemporary debates, even secular ones.

At the same time, though, the way we seek to differentiate the religious and the secular can hamper us in our ability to grasp both the history and the future directions of our society and the choices open to us. How we understand both individual and community – and the rest of human life and society – is deeply shaped by the ways we have produced distinctions between the religious and the secular – as well as simply by religion.

Our self-understandings, our ideas about what it means to be a human being and a person, and our relationships to each other are all potentially of fundamental spiritual importance. For many kinds of relationships, however, this is obscured in our contemporary world. It is by how we think, and by the asymmetry between our directly interpersonal relationships and the organizations and systems that facilitate social organization at very large scale.

If we lose our capacity to say what it means to be human and why we value humanity, we become inarticulate in a host of other discourses from human rights and citizenship to the ethics and legal regulation of human-altering technologies. Our hopes for both individuality and community are undermined.

Yet, perhaps the most important distinction of being human is the capacity for transcendence. Is it our ability not just to compete economically or to distribute power politically or to invent technologically but to remake ourselves that is most distinctive?

The importance of religious and other imaginations is in part, the effort to transcend the conditions immediately given to us and given to life. This pursuit of transcendence may be secular, a pursuit of a better temporal world. It may be focused on more otherworldly goods. But part of being human is in fact the potential for transcendence, the effort to want to have better desires than those we immediately feel, the effort to make the world and ourselves better than we are.