Towards a transregional history of secularism

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Towards a transregional history of secularism: Intellectual connectivity, social reform, and state-building in South and Southeast Asia, 1918–1960

Clemens Six[1]

Abstract

This article argues for a transregional historical approach to explain the career of political secularism, i.e. the ideas and practices that inform the modern state's relationship to and administration of religion, in the 20th century. More specifically, it asks in how far we can understand secularism in South and Southeast Asia between the end of the First World War and decolonisation after 1945 as a result of transregional patterns that evolved within and beyond these regions. The argument is based on three brief case studies on Atatürk's Turkey as a contested source of inspiration for state secularity and religious reform, regional women's networks to foster secularism and social change in the 1930s, and secularism as a strategy of postcolonial state-building and territorial integration. Conceptually, the article suggests to use global intellectual history as a means to combine research on connectivity with historical comparison.

Keywords Asia · Decolonisation · Global intellectual history · Secularism · Space · Women's history

Introduction

In their essential contributions to the sociology of religion, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim and, more recently, Steve Bruce, Grace Davie, José Casanova, and Peter Berger facilitated a better understanding of how the notion of the secular turned

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into a central concept of European intellectual history.[1] Their works indicated how modernisation and rationalisation may have contributed to the declining influence of religion, where secular statehood came from, and how European imperialism in the late 19th and 20th century transformed both religion and the secular.

Lately, however, an increasingly inter-disciplinary field including scholars of religion, political science, anthropology, and history has reinforced and thereby also re-oriented the debate about what is as now seen as a truly global career of two dimensions of the secular: (political) secularism, which denotes the ideas and practices that inform the modern state's relationship to and administration of religion; and secularity as the set of concepts, norms, values, and sensitivities that define secular societies (cf. Asad, 2003; Mahmood, 2006). By illustrating the diversity and also contradictory nature of these phenomena in different societies since the 19th century, a global comparative perspective nourishes doubts about the adequacy of the linguistic and conceptual tools we apply to make sense of the secular. Since terms such as secularity, secularism, or even religion emerged in the context of European (and US-American) history, it seems problematic to continue and simply expand their application into a truly global framework.

Representative of many others, Linell E. Cady and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd have demanded a "new conceptual vocabulary (…) that is better equipped to reflect the growing array of practices that escape, circumvent, and confound both Enlightenment epistemology and the constraints of traditional religious authority" (Cady & Hurd, 2010, p. 21). What Cady and Hurd hope this new vocabulary would enable us to do, is to transcend the rigid dichotomies between the religious and the secular in order to see and understand, better than so far, the inter-connectedness of both at a conceptual level as well as in (past and present) daily life. However, these two scholars leave us in the dark as to where such vocabulary might come from, how it would look like, and which broader epistemic systems (beyond an Enlightenment rationale) might substantiate its conceptual capacities.

In this article, I challenge this need for an alternative vocabulary because it would not solve what global comparative approaches are actually struggling with. Instead, I suggest to move towards a transregional historiography of secularism that addresses various facets of this phenomenon. The broader debate Cady and Hurd refer to in the above quote is between those who see secularism primarily, if not exclusively, as an idea or as a form of ideology (Taylor, 2007, 2011; Kuru 2007; Bilgrami 2012 & 2014), and those who would like to shift our attention to concrete forms of political, administrative, legal and social practice, which, in this reading, ultimately determine the meaning as well as the concrete historical manifestations of secularism (Keddie 1997; Blom Hansen 2000; Smith 2003; Bhargava 2010; Berger 2014; Künkler et al., 2018; Six, 2018).

While I do agree that we need a fresh look into the historical evolution of political practices in particular in the grey zones between 'the religious' and 'the secular', the core challenge of comparative studies is how to avoid what Giovanni Sartori has once

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[1] This article is a further developed and more concise version of my 2021. *The Transnationality of the Secular: Travelling Ideas and Shared Practices of Secularism in Decolonising South and Southeast Asia*. Leiden, Boston: Brill.

called "conceptual stretching, or conceptual straining" (Sartori, 1970, p. 1034). Such stretching might result from two tendencies: expanding to global, i.e. non-Western comparative fields; and accepting loose definitions of the secular to gain wide applicability (cf. Enayat, 2017). As a consequence of both, we risk turning the core concepts of this research field into vague, amorphous, and ultimately useless analytical tools. As I see it, this problem cannot be tackled by an altogether new vocabulary, which would sooner or later run into the same trouble provided we do not want to accept the fragmentation of this research field into disconnected regional studies.

As an alternative, I will argue in the following that the career of (political) secularism in the 20th century was the result of various transregional processes that selectively fed into each other and ultimately resulted in what we might call a global secular age. In his landmark study on the history of secularity in Western societies, Charles Taylor recognised the evolution of "a secular age" as the result of a unique civilizational grammar of "Latin Christendom", which later became "the modern West" (Taylor, 2007, p. 15). This grammar created the possibility of the death of God and its comprehensive moral, philosophical, and political consequences.

In their guiding volume on "a secular age beyond the West", Mirjam Künkler, John Madeley, and Shylashri Shankar took a further step in this discussion and examined the evolution of secularities in the 20th and 21st century to illustrate the different manifestations of the secular in the nation-building processes of the Global South (Künkler et al., 2018). The contributors to this book demonstrate how modern states in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East translated the nexus between politics and religion into specific secularities determined by the colonial past and the evolution of locally specific arrangements after decolonisation.

Building on these important works, this article argues that for the last 100 years or so, we can indeed speak about an emerging global secular age that was as much the result of national histories as of transregional intellectual exchange and other forms of connectivity across large geographical and cultural distances (see also Six 2021). In this perspective, the formation of large-scale territorial European empires, the growing resistance against imperial rule after the First World War, and the growing connections between anti-colonial milieus across imperial borders facilitated the coming of a secular age during which secular values and practices emerged as a new global context for communities, the state, and religion.

An important first step towards a transregional historiography of this global secular age is a distinct understanding of the heterogeneity of secularisms in the 20th century. For my purpose here, I define secularism as the diversity of state practices and political ideas, by which modern states maintain a strategic distance to religious communities and beliefs in order to implement their inherent strive for social engineering. James Scott's meanwhile classic characterisation of 20th century "high modernism" includes several elements that also deeply transformed religion in that era: the administrative ordering of society and nature; the ideology or, better still, various ideologies of designing social relations on exclusively rational grounds; and an authoritarian state that leaves little space for an autonomous sphere of civil society, which, as a consequences, has only limited means to reign in the state's ever-growing appetite for regulation (Scott, 1998, pp. 4–5). All three elements developed a significant impact

on the realm of religious communities and believes, which became increasingly integrated into and adapted to the modern state's bureaucratic functioning.

How state authorities designed this strategic distance to religion and operationalised its regulatory measures, however, depended on the political requirements of national elites, the immediate historical context of state-building, and negotiations with religious protagonists. In this light, the distance between the modern state and religion has always been strategic because it allowed for variable degrees of cooperation with, control of, and intervention in religious affairs depending on the state's own interests related to institutional power and political legitimacy. In this light, global comparative studies of the secular can thrive precisely because they enter profoundly different empirical and historical contexts beyond the assumption of a universal secularisation paradigm.

The inheritance of concepts such as secularism derived from European sociology and history results today in the methodological question of how to think about the relationship between globe-spanning processes of, for example, the establishment of the modern, bureaucratic, and rationalised state and the relevance of local specificities, adaptations, translations, and independent formations of the secular. This task is close to the agenda of transregional history, namely how to interpret local/national specificities in the light of regional as well as global cross-border dynamics without giving the latter any form of deterministic weight (Stoler & Cooper, 1997, p. 27). From this perspective, the diagnosis that comparative studies of the secular need re-reorientation as they globalise seems correct, while the cure through an altogether new vocabulary appears beside the point.

To make my suggestion more concrete, I address the question in how far we can understand secularism in South and Southeast Asia between the end of the First World War and decolonisation after 1945 as a result of transregional patterns that evolved within and beyond these regions. I thereby use transregional as an umbrella term for various forms of connectivity and exchange across imperial and national borders. The decades after 1918 are a particularly rich source for historical secularism studies because the consequences of the Great War, the disintegration of the Ottoman as well as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the rise of the United States as a major international power were strongly felt beyond Europe. What Erez Manela called the "Wilsonian Moment" (2007) around 1918 provided a strong impetus to popular protest movements against imperialism in the Middle East and Asia. Although usually unsuccessful, this impetus nourished anti-imperial discourses and solidarity constructions in the following decades (Slate, 2012, Chap. 3). The regions of South and Southeast Asia are significant as a traditional testing ground for religious diversity (Reid, 2007; Formichi, 2014), a meeting place of different European Empires in the 19th and 20th century, and lively debates among local elites particularly during the inter-war period about secular statehood, social reform, and the role of religion in society and politics (Six, 2018, Chap. 1).

Within the regions of South and Southeast Asia, I will mainly concentrate on India and Indonesia and make some side notes on Singapore and Malaysia to make three points. First, there is a growing body of literature, usually in the form of edited volumes, that facilitates a truly global comparative perspective of secularism (cf. Jacobsen & Pellegrini 2008; Warner et al., 2010; Cady & Hurd, 2010; Calhoun et al., 2011;

Dressler et al. 2011; Berg-Sørensen 2013; Burchardt et al., 2015). A specific concern thereby is to move away from the interpretation of European cases as standard-setters on a worldwide scale and thereby de-centralise the historical perspective on secularism (cf. especially Bubandt & van Beek 2012; Ghosh, 2013; Losonczi & van Herck, 2015; Künkler et al., 2018).

Such collected volumes tend to string together various country studies in the form of national histories, whereas the editors try to make sense of the comparative, sometimes also transregional facets of secularism in the volume introductions as well as the conclusions. However, truly transregional approaches to the history of secularism in, for example, Asian societies are to my knowledge non-existent so far (van der Veer 2009 & 2014 encourage inner-Asian comparison, though). In the empirical examples I discuss below, I experiment with a transregional approach that draws the attention to cross-border and especially cross-empire forms of entanglement and exchange about secularism.

Doyle (2014) suggested the term "inter-imperiality" to capture the dynamics between and across modern (European) empires that facilitated the global accumulation of capital, the simultaneous evolution of differentiated forms of governance in various empires, but also the emergence of transregional forms of resistance against modern imperialism. Inter-imperiality refers to various forms of transregional structures including "relations among many levels of world residents, stimulating solidarities and conditioning encounters, and generally shaping trans-hemispheric interactions in ever-tightening circuits of travel and technology." (Ibid, 182) The argument I would like to derive from Doyle's concept is that there existed an inter-imperiality of (anti-)colonial secularism and that this form of inter-imperiality had a significant, even decisive impact on decolonisation and religion in South and Southeast Asia.

Second, many scholars agree that colonialism played a key role in the modern formation of religion as well as the secular. Colonialism and its leading protagonists such as colonial bureaucrats, military officers, and political decision-makers in the colonial metropole as well as in the colonies produced and transformed secularism and the politics of religion in many profound ways (Fitzgerald, 2007; Copland et al., 2012; Berman et al., 2013). For Talal Asad, who strongly influenced secularism studies as a research field in anthropology and beyond, secularism is inseparably connected with the rise of the modern capitalist world system and its inbuilt structures of inequality and control. Both factors have historically favoured European states (Asad, 2003, p. 7; cf. also Roy 2009). Saba Mahmood, who builds on Asad's work, argued similarly that variations of secularism ought to be understood in relation to a "universalizing project", which centrally included the subordination of Asian, African, and Middle Eastern societies to various forms of Western domination (Mahmood, 2016, p. 208; Mahmood 2006; critical Enayat 2017, pp. 14–16).

The central role of colonialism and its structures of inequality in our understanding of the formation of secularism is indeed justified. But there is more to the evolution of secular ideas and practices in the colonial context. Jürgen Habermas suggested once in a very different discussion to distinguish more clearly between ideas that owe their (global) dissemination to systemic coercion and control and those who spread due to their inherent persuasiveness (Habermas, 1998, p. 221). The point of this dis-

tinction is not to neglect any facet of colonialism's relevance in the evolution of secularism, but to complement this view with a stronger focus on local agency in the colonised societies. Secularism has never been the sole product of colonial coercion. Historically more adequate is to see it as results of relationships, negotiations, and contestations between colonial elites and indigenous protagonists as well as among local interest groups and their diverse visions on the role of religion in state and society. Thus, in the examples I discuss below I particularly emphasise the agency of non-colonial and anti-colonial forces in the definition and practice of secularism in the colonial context. The attempt thereby is to move away from the fixation on the colonial state, its institutions, and bureaucratic agents towards social formations and networks on the fringes of as well as outside the imperial power apparatus.

The third point I wish to make concerns the debate I mentioned above between those who see secularism primarily as a form of ideology and others who interpret secularism as a form of practice. The distinction between these two views is not always very sharp, but it does have consequences for how we interpret the historical evolution of secularism.

Secularism as ideology has a clear origin, usually the Christian-European context from where it 'diffused' to other regions (Madan 1998; Bruce 2003). Secularism as practice, on the other hand, refers to the administration of religious affairs by state authorities, the political handling of disputes around religious sites and other conflictive issues among religious communities, the design and implementation of secular educational reform, the state's religious reform programmes operationalised through legal intervention, financial incentives for and budgetary control of religious organisations etc. In this understanding, secularism is more diverse in its (local) contexts of origin, is less a coherent and predefined set of ideas but an improvised, situational, and spontaneous pragmatism that evolves under concrete practical constraints, and is rooted in different (again local) forms of practical sense or practical reason. Such a practical reason is, according to Bourdieu (1998), a product of socialisation and provides people with a notion of how to do things in their immediate environment. Similarly, secularism can be interpreted as a practical notion of how to do things related to religion in the context of modern state-building and social change.

To better grasp the relevance of ideas and practices for historical forms of secularism, I suggest to re-locate the debate into a framework of global intellectual history. This framework is still largely work in progress and does not yet provide any systematic approach. Some important contributors to this debate such as Benedict Anderson highlighted the empirical agenda of what might be called global intellectual history but have never explicitly used the term themselves (Anderson, 2016, esp. Chapter 4; Anderson 2005). Others carry global intellectual history prominently in the titles of their books but make no effort to define it (Aydin, 2017).

I take the approach by Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori as a starting point, who proposed global intellectual history to focus on the comparison of intellectuals, intellectual practices, ideas, and concepts across geographical and chronological distances (Moyn & Sartori, 2015, 7). "Intellectual" here does not only mean theoretical or academic in a narrow sense, but also includes a broader spectrum of themes such as religious beliefs manifest in daily life, debates about the boundaries of religion in society, ideas about the state and its core functions, views on and definitions of

modernisation and so forth (see Subrahmanyam 2015). What makes this intellectual history global, is "not the geographical spread of the concept or thematic but the fact that a comparison between geographically constrained spaces is possible even without a connection between them" (Moyn & Sartori, p. 7). In other words, although connectivity remains an important motivation to compare multiple ideas and debates on the secular in different historical and spatial contexts (see Subrahmanyam 2017), the agenda goes beyond such connections and also includes the analysis of parallel developments or globally shared sources of inspiration located in a common framework of globe-spanning transformations. In this view, "the global" is not merely an analytical concept the historian applies to understand the scale of (modern) historical change. It is also a subjective category utilised by historical agents themselves to make sense of their times and spaces. In this article, I thus try to understand disruptions, conflicts, and struggles over the meaning of secularism outside Europe that occurred simultaneously through and beyond direct connectivity in the context of various empires after World War I until decolonisation (on the role of ruptures in intellectual history see Kapila 2014).

A facet I consider necessary to add to such a global intellectual history, however, is the social and political dimension of intellectual work in the context of decolonisation. Empires were political and social spaces that facilitated but also impeded the flow of ideas between the colonies and the metropolitan areas, among diaspora communities, and across imperial borders (Ballantyne & Burton, 2012, Chap. 3; Armitage 1998; Muthu, 2012). Women and men who participated in the discussion on secularism, secularity, and anti-imperialism were part of networks rooted in local, imperial and sometimes global contexts or even a combination of all those spaces (see the special issue on transregional actors from a spatial perspective, *European Review of History* 25/3–4, 2018). Global intellectual history develops its biggest potential for comparative studies of the secular when combined with social and political history (see the integrated analysis of anti-imperialism and migration in Goebel 2016; Wickberg, 2001). The travel and adaptation of intellectual discourses in an era of decolonisation was connected to concrete social circumstances, colonial hierarchies, political disruptions, and censorship, which all had a strong impact on intellectual work. In that sense, ideas and socio-political practice are inseparable factors in the global history of secularism, which I illustrate below with three different but complementary cases.

With the first two cases I seek to demonstrate two different forms of connectivity: the flow of (not always correct) information across large distances, which influenced the framing of secular reform in various locations across Asia and the Middle East; and connectivity in the form of people's mobility and face-to-face exchange during international conferences. More specifically, the first section discusses shared sources of inspiration for political secularism. The proclamation of the Turkish Republic and Atatürk's secular reforms were widely observed and discussed in various societies in the Middle East and in Asia. By some, these reforms were interpreted as an admirable prototype and role model, others indignantly rejected what they interpreted as cultural suicide. Whatever the precise framing was, the case of Turkey influenced reflections on secularism in various other societies to the east and south of Ankara.

The second section concentrates on people's connections and mobility. It takes a closer look at transregional women's networks in order to address the question how

women have co-determined political secularism in South and Southeast Asia. This case study seeks to illustrate how personal contacts and exchange across large distances and in opposition to imperial and national fragmentation facilitated the formation of secularism and social reform. At the same time, it tries to highlight the lack of attention for female agency, which I recognise as a larger deficit in globalising secularism studies.

The third case is not about connectivity but intends to illustrate parallel developments in various decolonising Asian societies as regards secularism as a strategy of spatial integration. These parallel processes were a reaction to common problems of postcolonial nation-building and territorial control and had strikingly similar consequences for how secular statehood was framed. My argument in this part is that political secularism globalised as the result of two processes: how early postcolonial states consolidated their control over a religiously diverse territory; and how these states substantiated their legitimacy after the transfer of power as the guarantors of peaceful coexistence and national cultural and spatial integration.

For the sake of concision, I can only sketch these three cases with the intention to prepare the grounds for more in-depth future research towards a transregional historiography of secularism. In the conclusions I wrap up once again the general argument for such a historiography and share a couple of more specific observations derived from my brief case studies. What I suggest is an approach that enables context-sensitive analysis of local variation while, at the same time, mobilises conceptual resources to combine historical comparison with research on connectivity.

Controversial sources of inspiration: Atatürk's Republic

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's notion and policy of secularism in Turkey in the 1920 and 1930 s lends itself to an exploration of cross-border secularism debates as they resulted from an evolving transregional public sphere, which came into existence at the end of the 19th and early 20th century. Technical innovations such as the oceanic underwater cable, connecting East and South Asia with the Middle East and Africa since the 1870s, improved travelling facilities, as well as rapidly expanding geographical coverage of modern news agencies, produced "discursive arenas" (Fraser, 2014, p. 8) that overflew both the bounds of nations as well as empires. News about Atatürk's "revolution" in Turkey, initiated with the proclamation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, became such a discursive arena for fierce debates about the purpose and possibility of secularism more generally and the role of Islam in modern Asian and African societies more specifically. Although a global reception history of Atatürk's reforms remains yet to be written (some clues provides Gingeras 2016), the traces of this reception in particular within the Dutch and the British Empires illustrate the controversial character of this strongly interventionist regime. Historically, however, these debates are significant because they already anticipate the major lines of conflicts in relation to secularism and the boundaries of religion in many Asian societies after independence.

The larger historical context of these discussions on Turkey across Asia and the Middle East was the turbulent years that followed the First World War. As many colo-

nies had contributed significantly to British and French war efforts without ever being consulted on this decision or its severe consequences (Pati, 1996; Koller, 2008), there existed rising expectations for more political participation in many Asian societies. As the colonial authorities by and large disappointed these expectations, anti-colonial movements experienced strong momentum and rapidly increased the number of their supporters. The perceptions of Atatürk's reforms were thus one aspect of an intense period of ideological conflict, political mobilisation, and intensifying controversies on collective identity in a postcolonial future.

Although contemporary scholars of Turkish history interpret the Republican policies on Islam and secularism more in continuity with reforms already implemented during Ottoman times (Azak, 2010; Zürcher, 2010), the abolition of the caliphate, indicated by Atatürk as early as November 1922, and the subsequent reforms in the fields of the judiciary, education, the administration of Islamic affairs, as well as daily life matters were largely recognised in all over Asia and the Middle East as truly revolutionary. What is more, the Ottoman Empire as well as the Turkish Republic had for long been an important reference point for the formation of anti-imperial attitudes in various colonised societies in Asia and particularly in British India.

A first concrete reaction of Muslim leaders in Great Britain, Palestine, Syria, and British India to Atatürk's reforms was the attempt to set up an international solidarity movement to exert pressure on the Turkish government not to abolish the Caliphate. In their functions as representatives of the Islamic Association of England, the Indian Muslim leaders Agha Khan and Sayyid Amir Ali published a letter in three leading daily newspapers in Istanbul urging Atatürk not to abolish but to reform this institution (quoted in Lewis 2002, p. 263). The British-Indian Khilafat movement (1920–1924), on the other hand, did establish some solid connections with like-minded peers in, for example, Egypt and Turkey (Naeem Qureshi, 1999), but nevertheless remained a largely Indian affair and could not generate solid transregional Muslim alliances (McPherson, 2004, pp. 6–7 & 13; Ahmad 2005).

In spite of these unsuccessful attempts to save the caliphate as a symbol of Islamic unity and power, Atatürk's reforms in the second half of the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s provided a rich source of inspiration for intellectuals and political activists with very different agendas. In the German Weimar Republic, Atatürk's authoritarian leadership style triggered what contemporary witnesses called "Turk fever" (*Türkenfieber*), an enthusiasm that quickly popularised and lasted far into the National Socialist era. Turkey was thereby represented as the prototype of a modern nationalist, interventionist, and totalitarian leadership that far-right protagonists wished to realise in Germany against established Christian authorities (Ihrig, 2014, Prologue). Italian feminists in the 1930s, meanwhile, referred to Turkey as a torchbearer of (state-led) women's emancipation and liberation from patriarchal constraints (Speelman, 2015).

An important Muslim society that shaped the perception of Turkey was Egypt, a key state in the Middle East with a remarkably free press in the 1920s. The Egyptian comments on Turkey were multi-facetted (Hattemer, 1999). On the one hand, the abolition of the caliphate triggered high emotions as there existed a strong attachment to this institution of Islamic tradition. Political observers were appreciative, on the other hand, of Turkey's successful steps towards equal rights between men

and women concerning divorce and inheritance and the banning of polygamy, all of which was achieved against the resistance of Islamic orthodoxy.

In colonised societies in Asia, Turkish secularism inspired in particular liberal-minded anti-imperialists. Muhammad Iqbāl, one of the leading (Muslim) intellectuals in British-India, provided an elaborate analysis of the occurrences in Turkey. Right after the reforms were initiated, Iqbāl had been critical about Atatürk's intentions. During the 1930s, though, Iqbāl drafted a more differentiated evaluation of the purpose and the impact of this form of secularism. Although he rejected the idea that Islam was per se a contradiction to modernisation, he interpreted Atatürk's programme as a manifestation of creative destruction, which paved the way for a future of Muslims different from the West (cf. quotes in Rahman 1984, p. 162). According to Iqbāl, a reformed Islam could still serve as a lever to foster the collective goals of a nation and function as a bulwark against industrialism but it must not stand in the way of real democracy (Hasan, 2009, p. 190). In this light, he praised Turkish secularism for having liberated state and society from "dogmatic slumber" and for having established a degree of intellectual freedom unseen in the rest of the (post)imperial world (Iqbāl, 1930, p. 79).

In British-Malaya, a majoritarian Muslim society, Atatürk's secularism and the complete integration of Islamic affairs into the state apparatus, was generally welcomed in many editorials of its leading newspapers (Milner, 1986). These public voices interpreted especially Turkey's independence, Atatürk's military achievements against Greece, and the overall agenda of "progress", which characterised particularly the early years of the Republic, in a positive light. Although orthodox Malayan Islamic circles accused Atatürk of having gone too far in his reforms of Islam, the younger generation of nationalist circles agreed with this form of modernisation through a secular state. Tunku Abdul Rahman and other leading members of the anti-imperial platform UMNO referred to Turkey as a model for post-independence Malaysia.

Atatürk's reforms were also a subject of debate among the highest political leadership of anti-colonial movements in South and Southeast Asia, which, after independence, implemented their own versions of secularism. Already in 1928, at the height Turkish Islamic reform, Sukarno, the leader of the Indonesian independence movement, called Atatürk an "advocate of Islam" and saw no contradictions between Atatürk's state secularism on the one hand and the expectation of Islam prospering under such policy on the other (quoted in Dahm 1969, p. 176). The Caliphate was in his view a product of variable historical circumstances and not an institution of Islam per se (quoted in Anshori 1994, p. 81).

Sukarno's more nuanced interpretation of Atatürk, which he set forth in a series of articles published in 1940, in part contradicted actual historical facts (Sukarno, 1966, Vol. 1). For Sukarno, the Turkish version of secularism was primarily a liberation of Islam from state control. In this view, secularism was a means to set religion free from any form of external control and thereby secure its maximum degree of autonomy, which is clearly not what Atatürk implemented and pursued. It is questionable, though, in how far Sukarno's reading of the Turkish secular revolution was indeed a "misunderstanding" (Formichi 2013, p. 114). There is indeed evidence that large parts of Indonesian anti-colonial milieus remained strikingly ignorant of the

details of Atatürk's programme and misjudged the situation in particular during the first years of the Turkish Republic (van Bruinessen, 1995, p. 130). But Sukarno was clearly better informed. His relatively late articles, written and published at a time when the impact of Atatürk's reforms in Turkish society was already clearly visible also from abroad, seem to be a deliberate re-interpretation of Turkish secularism Sukarno intended to propagate for post-independence Indonesia.

Sukarno saw a direct connection between secularism and religious reform, on the one hand, and socio-economic prosperity on the other hand. In the same series of articles he blamed the numerous "superstitions and corruptions of Islam" for Turkey's backward economic status (Sukarno, 1966, pp. 389 & 398). In contrast to earlier remarks, Sukarno now recognised state interventionism in religious affairs not only as a possibility but as a central requirement on the way to a modern and prosperous society. Other Muslim circles in Indonesia oscillated between uncompromising support for Atatürk's reform in the case of Muslim communists (van Bruinessen, 1995, pp. 127–128) and more orthodox milieus, which agreed with the Turkish strive for independence but were sceptical of the dissolution of the caliphate (cf. Laffan, 2002, pp. 210–214). Mohammed Natsir and Ahmad Hassan, for example, opposed not only Atatürk's version of a secular state but secular nationalism more generally and argued publicly against Sukarno's praise for what he saw as Turkish achievements.

In a similar fashion, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India, compared in the early 1950s the recent history of India and Turkey and concluded that both societies were "forerunners of secularism and progress" in Asia (Indian Daily News, Indian Information Services, Jakarta, 11 February 1952, p. 3). Although the forms of secularism in both states were at that time already quite different as far as interventions in religious affairs were concerned (Madra, 2015; cf. also Roy 2010), both made active use of secularism as a tool of socio-cultural engineering in order to create what the elites considered a modern nation.

In conclusion of this first case, it would be exaggerated to argue that Atatürk's Republic served as a blueprint for concepts and practices of secularism in other societies such as Egypt, British-Malaya, British-India, or the Dutch East Indies. However, the leading ideas as well as modes of implementation of Atatürk's reform programme triggered the formation of a transregional discursive arena across imperial borders, which accommodated and enhanced many controversial debates about how secular statehood might look like after decolonisation. The flow of (truthful as well as incorrect) information on Turkey between different Asian and Middle Eastern societies was a necessary structural requirement for this discursive arena, which was itself facilitated by imperial communication infrastructures.

The historical significance of this case goes beyond the (mis)perception of Turkey in other parts of the world. This example illustrates a form of connectivity that was part of a new public sphere which advanced significantly after the First World War and increasingly combined various layers of local, national, and transregional public spaces (similar Gänger & Lin Lewis 2013, p. 350–351). In these spaces people, motivated by large-scale imperial crises and deteriorating economic circumstances, re-negotiated and re-defined their changing individual and collective self-perceptions in view of a dawning postcolonial era (see also Mishra 2012, Prologue; Kaelble et al., 2002, p. 13). If we understand decolonisation not primarily as a transfer of politi-

cal power but instead as a complex and ambitious "project of reordering the world" (Getachew, 2019, p. 2), the transregional debates on the values, objectives, and strategies of a secular state and its agenda to administer religion in a modernising society become visible as essential parts of such a larger project. The perceptions of and disputes around Atatürk's Turkey are a historical indicator of how mutual learning and transregional awareness increasingly determined local historical processes of identity formation and anti-colonial agenda-making.

The role of women in the evolution of postcolonial secularism

An underdeveloped area of interest in the history of secularism is the contribution of women. As large parts of the bureaucratic and political elite in colonial as well as postcolonial societies were male, the question of a specific female agency in the formation of secularism is underrepresented in the existing literature. This trend corresponds with a similar pattern in (global) intellectual history, where scholars have only recently started to include female voices more prominently into their historical analysis (Smith, 2007).

From a comparative and a transregional perspective, though, 20th century Asian history provides some illuminating facets of female agency in the career of political secularism. The contribution of women was often more indirect, quieter, and more mediated than the agency of men. Nevertheless, female agency was important for (post)colonial secularism to take shape and adapt to rapidly changing socio-economic as well as political circumstances in particular during and after decolonisation. The forms these contributions acquired in South and Southeast Asia between WW1 and decolonisation included both transregional connectivity and some important parallel developments in various societies.

Social scientists and historians of the international women's movement have observed some global trends in the 20th century that seem an appropriate starting point for more gender-sensitive secularism studies. Looking at the development of women's political representation in Western as well as colonial and postcolonial societies since the 1890s, quantitative historical sociology has illustrated that the international women's movement as well as parallel national women's struggles for more political participation and co-decision have overall succeeded in generating pressures on nation-states to incorporate women into their institutions and decision-making procedures and help them in these ways to gradually increase their share in political power.

In particular international coordination efforts in the form of international non-governmental organisations, transregional women's movements, and international conferences had a historical impact on a discourse of women's equality. These debates advanced from the emphasis on the provision of political citizenship to women (the right to vote) in the first half of the twentieth century to more ambitious demands of comprehensive social reform after the Second World War (cf. Paxton et al., 2006). In particular the struggle for the universalisation of men's and women's suffrage in the West as well as in the colonies can be interpreted as a "single political process" (Ramirez 1997, p. 743), which evolved from a transregional mental space

that accommodated and enhanced women's effort to pressure the state towards social and political reform against the interests of religious orthodoxies and against patriarchal conservatism (cf. Roces, 2010).

As far as women in 20th century South and Southeast Asia are concerned, recent scholarship is increasingly blurring the formerly sharp distinct between Western and regional forms of feminism (Loomba & Lukose, 2012). However, historical patterns of women's movements in these regions illustrate several tendencies relevant for secularism studies more sensitive towards female agency in 20th century history.

In virtually all Asian societies including India, Indonesia, and Singapore, throughout the 20th century the local manifestations of feminism sustained an ambivalent as well as contradictory relationship with the nation. On the one hand, struggles for women's emancipation showed very early an inherent trend towards internationalisation as well as transregional coordination. In the colonial context, alliances between Western women and local female activists in the colonies usually reproduced colonial forms of racialised stereotyping, framing female alliances as a form of "maternal imperialism" (Chaudhuri & Strobel, 1992; Ramusack, 1992; cf. also Burton 1994), in which European women 'instructed' Asian women about how to escape from their 'traditional' lot. In addition, also inner-Asian coordination efforts amongst local women's organisations tried in principal to overcome national as well as imperial boundaries.

On the other hand, Asian women's emancipation struggles in the 20th century remained strongly national in their frameworks, strategies, as well as goals. In that sense, global feminism indeed left the nation largely undisturbed (Alarcón et al., 1999, p. 13). This ambivalence confirms the adequacy of the term transregional in relation to women's movements and secularism in the sense that women were pressing for their political, social and cultural rights primarily within the local confines by gradually transgressing the boundaries of the empire and the nation-state.

While the agenda as well as organisational reach of transregional women's movements is meanwhile well-documented for the decades after 1945 (cf. McGregor, 2012; de Haan, 2010; Pietilä & Vickers, 1996), the first half of the twentieth century usually receives significantly less attention. The argument is that before the Second World War in particular in South and Southeast Asia cross-border efforts remained marginal and the degree of internationalisation of local women's struggles was comparatively low (Martyn, 2005, p. 41; Locher-Scholten 1999). While it is true that the war as well as decolonisation reinforced the connections between women's movements in Indonesia, India, and Singapore, the inter-war period prepared the ground for this process in many respects. Among these colonies, British India enjoyed a particularly important role in this early history of women's activism. After the First World War women's struggles became increasingly prominent in charitable, philanthropic and social reform activities. Although feminism largely remained an ideology of wealthier and urban classes, it facilitated broader political demands for women's and girl's political, social, and economic rights within the expanding anti-colonial movement in India (Basu, 1995; Weber, 2008) observed a similar importance of the interwar years in the women's history of Middle Eastern societies. In such a comparative perspective, especially the years around the Great Depression of the late 1920s

and early 1930s appear as an important historical threshold largely unrecognised in its significance for local struggles around secularism and socio-political reform.

In Indonesia, the women's movement in the 1920s had largely been fragmented between progressive, secular-minded organisations and more conservative, primarily Islamic platforms. The first concrete effort towards united collective action for more women's rights materialised in December 1928 when the first national women's congress assembled more than 1,000 delegates from 30 different organisations (Martyn, 2005, p. 40). The foremost goal was to unite the numerous movements with very different ideological and programmatic backgrounds, which had evolved in the course of the 1920s. The exclusion of any political matters from the debate ensured the unity of the attendance for the time of the congress and even made a shared catalogue of demands from the (secular) colonial state possible including more schools for girls, a uniform marriage registration, support for widows and orphans and the combat of (female) illiteracy (The First Indonesian Women's Congress, 2008; Muttaqin, 2015). Although also the series of consecutive congresses in Surabaya (1930), Solo (1932), and Jakarta (1933) could not overcome the internal divisions of Indonesian the women's movement (Martyn, 2005, pp. 40–41), these events constituted important steps towards the establishment of a national women's movements as well as its increasing politicisation.

The Great Depression itself also enhanced women's mobilisation as well as the creation of a female pressure for reform. Indonesian charities, some of them explicit women's organisations such as *Isteri Sedar* (The Alert Woman), expanded rapidly in membership and organisational reach during these years of economic hardship and developed a strong social agenda. *Isteri Sedar* had been established in Bandung in 1930 by Suwarni Djojoseputro. During its first congress in 1931 in Jakarta, this organisation declared the fight against polygamy to its priority and hailed Atatürk as a shining example of social reform in favour of women (Vreede-de Stuers, 1960, p. 91). *Isteri Sedar* and other charities involved in social work ranged from women's auxiliaries of political parties, small local groups targeting women and their specific socio-economic problems, to much larger national organisations. They administered significant amounts of money and provided an important opportunity for middle-class women to exercise organisational leadership as well as managerial skills frequently denied to male-dominated labour unions and political parties (Ingleson, 2015, p. 211).

In 1937, the evolving female mental space in Indonesia mounted in a huge controversy about a marriage proposal of the Dutch colonial authorities. In the midst of rising conservatism, with which the Dutch reacted to the hardening socio-economic conditions and intensifying political unrest in the colony, this proposal for a unified civil marriage registration procedure intended to reduce polygamy. As such, it appealed explicitly to educated, secular-minded Indonesian middle-class women (Locher-Scholten, 2000, Chap. 6; Nasution 2003, p. 261; Blackburn 2004, pp. 18–19). The following controversy caught the government unprepared and sharpened the antagonism between liberal-secular women's groups and conservative Islamic organisation, which primarily wanted to preserve the status quo in matters of family life. The politicisation of the Indonesian women's movements, however, which

recognised the modern secular state as its key addressee, was an irreversible process towards the end of this decade.

In India, the 1920s and early 1930s experienced soaring participation of women in Gandhi's anti-colonial mass movements. Whereas this participation was dominated by better-educated and socially privileged women, also peasant women participated in the protests against the salt tax in 1930–1931. This early form of women's political engagement combined two seemingly contradictory trends, namely public appearance of women in the name of mothers fighting for their 'mother country' and women entitled to equal rights as men (Krishnaraj, 2012, p. 328; cf. also Jeffery 1999). In both cases, the addressee was the secular state, which women were hoping to mobilise in favour of social modernisation and against the conservatism of religious orthodoxies.

The early 1930s were also an important period in Asia in relation to transregional coordination efforts towards women's rights and socio-religious reform. The first All-Asian Women's Conference, which took place from 19 to 25 January 1931 in Lahore, British-India, was indeed more of a one-off event rather than a breakthrough in Asian cooperation. As such, this conference was much smaller and historically less significant than, for example, post-1945 women's conferences under the auspices of established, large-scale international women's organisations. However, a closer look at the details of this conference illuminates some historically important aspects that set the course for later developments of female agency for social reform and secular statehood. Hereby, it is important to keep the overall imperial context in mind. In this light, already the fact that the conference could be held in the first place appears as an astonishing achievement in itself.

The conference agenda put forward the same ambivalence towards the nation-state I mentioned above. Lakshmibhai Rajwade, one of the leading organisers, explained that it was time to transgress the boundaries of the nation and "carry patriotism beyond the narrow limits of the so-called 'National' borders" (Rajwade, Preface, in All-Asian Women's Conference 1931). The conference had been initiated by the Women's Indian Association of Madras after the Indian Statutory ("Simon") Commission had officially recognised a year earlier that the women's movement held the key of socio-economic and political progress on the subcontinent (report quoted in Caton 1930, p. 80).

Although significantly fewer delegates from abroad than originally hoped managed to come, the event was attended by some prominent representatives of other Asian women's organisations. The overall tone of the proceedings was characterised by a diffuse hope for Asian unity in the struggle against imperialism, a search for "the qualities of Oriental civilization" and the promotion of "the consciousness of unity amongst the women of Asia, as members of a common Oriental culture" (All-Asian Women's Conference 1931, p. 2). In the eyes of the conference organisers, this culture consisted of "quietness, simplicity, agriculture rather than industrialisation, arts and crafts rather than mass factory production (…) and an ever-present sense of a world of the spirit interpenetrating this world of the senses, poverty, pain, poise, patience, peace." (N.N. "The Need for an All-Asia Women's Conference", p. vii, in ibid). Similar to other Orientalist self-perceptions of that time, an oriental culture signified the central role of simplicity and spirituality in Asia in contrast to what was perceived as the material, rational-scientific worldviews of Europe (see Chatterjee

1994; critical van der Veer 2001, pp. 69–70). The women assembled in Lahore recognised the oneness of Asia in term of this culture, the centrality of the family, poverty, and the idea of a continental political renaissance. In their view, bringing women together was an important way to strengthen and preserve Asia's unity.

In practical terms, large parts of the conference were dedicated to the exchange of experience in order for the attendants to learn about women's struggles in other Asian societies, their strategies, achievements, and challenges. Among the various subjects discussed, the struggle against polygamy, equal rights for women over the guardianship of children and property, as well as equal rights of divorce, adult franchise and nationality ranked high on the agenda. Women representatives from Persia, different parts of British-India, Burma, Ceylon, or Indonesia, which for the first time had sent delegates abroad, entered into a lively debate about the foremost challenges for women and their possible solutions.

One aspect, which came forward time and again in this exchange, was the hopes women had in the active assistance of a secular state, which ought to combine a strategic distance to all religious communities with a strong commitment to social reform particularly against the economic and cultural interests of religious orthodoxies. This is not to be confused with a demand for an anti-religious state. On the contrary, women with Hindu, Muslim, and Christian background also put forward demands for religious instruction in schools as well as the protection of a flourishing religious life. But many of them saw the secular state as the best chance to advance social reform in favour of women, and as an instrument women could use to further their emancipation.

The conference contribution of Dr Muthulakshmi Reddi is an illustrative case in point. Reddi (1886–1969) was a medical practitioner and the first woman to be a member of any legislature in India (Santhi & Saravanakumar, 2020). As a member of the Madras Legislative Council she was responsible for the passing of an Act against temple prostitution, for which she successfully mobilised different women's conferences and associations in numerous meetings and conferences all over India. In her conference plea in Lahore, Reddi insisted on the importance of the state and its legislative powers for the struggle of women against the sexual exploitation of women under the pretenses of "religious customs" as well as in various other forms, for the struggle for women's and girls' "education and enlightenment", as well as against female poverty (All-Asian Women's Conference 1931, pp. 52–55). In all these areas, women's struggle was therefore primarily a contest over political participation, an adequate share in legislative power, secularism, and (often also) secularity in order to enhance a social reform agenda that selectively targeted religious customs and their representatives.

Delegates from Persia, Burma, Ceylon and Java reported significant differences in the advancement of their rights, social reform, and the support from secular state authorities (Ibid, pp. 128–141). Women from British-controlled Ceylon, for example, reported that female political activism was already strongly established in their society. This activism had led to an important degree of constitutional freedom and legal equality with men including the rights of owning and of acquiring property independent from their husbands. Women also participated in the political field and stood for State Council elections. By contrast, Shirin Fozdar (Persia) and Sunaryati (Java)

complained that they were still refused any active and passive voting rights. Particularly the Dutch authorities in Indonesia repressed any form of meaningful female emancipation, for which Sunaryati also blamed women themselves who would not develop more political activism.

What the women from these four societies had in common was a concern about staggering urban-rural differences and the persistence of "ignorance" and "ridiculous marriage customs" in their societies (Ibid, p. 137). They demanded from the state to address these problems through, for example, the provision of more and better education. Generally, though, they also recognised equal access to state structures, state affairs, and public posts as the single most important requirement for women's empowerment.

Decolonisation and the evolving Cold War in Asia after the communist victory in the Chinese civil war in 1949 reinforced the trend towards more cooperation among national and international women's movements. Several initiatives tried to facilitate women's interests in Asia through new forms of international support and coordination. The Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), established in 1945, worked towards a women's mass movement that addressed issues specifically emphasised by women in India, Indonesia and other Asian societies related to state-led social reforms (see, for example, WIDF 1948, 1954, and 1958). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) coordinated efforts of Asian women to exert pressure on their governments to implement more political rights, social reform, and professional training for women (ILO, 1958). In the early 1960s, Asian women's networks joined hands with African counterparts to demand more access to state structures to advance women's rights more effectively in all aspects of everyday life (Afro-Asian Women's Conference 1961, p. 15).

Apart from these international efforts, some parallel developments in late colonial as well as early postcolonial India and Indonesia contributed to a global intellectual history of secularism after the Second World War. In November 1952, Kongres Wanita Indonesia, an umbrella organisation of Islamic, Christian, secular-nationalist, and communist women's representatives, met in Bandung to discuss the foremost expectations of Indonesian women towards the postcolonial state. In spite of many ideological differences, the women agreed that gender inequality could only be addressed by strong state policies that put women and men on equal footing (Het Indonesische Vrouwencongress 1952, p. 689). On their side, the Indonesian authorities drafted a limited role for women in the development process, confining their responsibility mainly to family and household affairs (Gerke, 1992).

Christian and communist women's representatives agreed on the struggle against polygamy and the prohibition of child marriage (Antara, English edition, 13 October 1952, No. 286/B, p. 2; & 28 November 1952, No. 332/A, p. 6). The gradual reform of religious customary law, a homogenous marriage law, and better social safeguards for widows were demands put forward against, in particular, Islamic customs, which the state should help to change (Het Indonesische Vrouwencongress 1952, p. 690–691; Antara, English edition, 25 November 1952, No. 329/A, p. 1). In the context of other platforms such as the Indonesian Christian Women's Association (PWKI), which met in Sumatra in the same year of 1952, female representatives demanded the abolition of customary laws based on select Islamic teachings. In their view, these laws

deprived widows of their share in the husband's inheritance in case there were no children (Antara, English edition, 19 June 1952, No. 171/B, p. 2). After its foundation in June 1950, the leftist women's movement Gerwani experienced a rapid growth in membership comprising several hundred thousand members within the first few years of its existence (Report, IVth Congress of the Women's International Democratic Federation, p. 89; Wieringa 1993, p. 16–20). Gerwani also successfully networked internationally and advanced into an autonomous political factor in Indonesian domestic affairs, pressing for structural social reform and political secularism (Wieringa 2002, esp. Chapter 7).

At the same time in (British-controlled) Singapore, the local Council of Women (SCW) was founded as an umbrella organisation of more than 30 women's associations. Its foremost goal was to abolish polygamy as a symbol of gender-based injustice sustained by religious orthodoxies (Chew, 1994, p. 116; Lyons 2004, p. 25; Lyons 2010).

India's independence in the summer of 1947 accelerated and deepened the struggle for a more efficient implementation of women's rights. The All-India Women's Conference (AIWC) had since years lobbied in the National Planning Committee (1939–1940) as well as in the Constituent Assembly (initiated in 1946) for effective sex equality as well as a uniform civil code. These debates over a so-called Hindu Code Bill heightened after independence and resulted in a fierce controversy between leftist, reform-oriented women's movements, on the one hand, and conservative Hindu circles on the other. Although the Bill was passed in different parts between 1952 and 1956, women's associations were disappointed that the secular state had made no serious effort to also reform Muslim personal law, which allowed for some striking forms of discrimination against women (Chattopadhyay, 1944; Hasan, 1993, p. 6;).

The various national and transregional efforts of women in 20th century South and Southeast Asia to articulate and enforce their interests hold some important lessons for global secularism studies. First, they illustrate that selectively already before the First World War and especially in the interwar period women articulated their protest not only in the private sphere but also in public. Partha Chatterjee argued regarding the women's movement in India that the introduction of the distinction between a male-dominated public sphere and a female-dominated private sphere in the 19th century was the structural precondition for women to formulate their views in the domestic realm (Chatterjee 1994, Chaps. 6 & 7). But women not only soon began to publish their writings about their lifeworlds from within their domestic seclusion (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2008, p. 4), they also went public in their national as well as international conference as early as the times of the Great Depression. Hereby, the public turned into an arena in its own terms for their emancipation struggle. Secularism studies should dive deeper into how and with what consequences this was done and in how far women managed to pressure the colonial state, especially at the provincial level, in their own terms.

Second, although before 1945 the degree of international coordination and transregional communication was beyond question lower than after 1945, the initial efforts in this direction undertaken in various South and Southeast Asian societies should be interpreted as important preparatory steps towards a stronger contribution of women in this discursive arena during and after decolonisation.

Third, although decolonisation did not alter men's dominance in state institutions and legislative powers, women's associations as well as individual female politicians pressured the secular state to combine its strategic distance to religious communities with a resolute reform agenda in favour of women's rights. In this endeavour, women's organisations have never been one homogenous block. In India as well as in Indonesia, the divide did not always follow the religious-secular distinction but also allowed for temporary alliances for example between Christian and communist women's groups. Overall, though, religious-conservative women's organisations opposed many facets of social reform that targeted the interests of Hindu and Muslim orthodoxies. Nevertheless, reform-oriented women's associations were an at least indirect historical factor that pressured state organs for a more gender-sensitive legislature. Global secularism studies should consider this factor more centrally in their efforts to explain the evolution of secularisms in the 20th century.

Secularism as a globalising spatial strategy

A comparative perspective demonstrates in many ways that in the West as well as in (post)colonial societies a multiplicity of secularisms has evolved since the 19th century. This diversity stems from different colonial regimes, contrasting national political cultures, varying patterns of religious plurality within society, and multiple cultural textures to handle this plurality that evolved over generations. In contrast to sociological and historical approaches that interpret secularism in terms of constitutional as well as procedural differences, in this last section I propose a spatial reading. The focus thereby is not on connectivity but on parallel developments.

Societies such as India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore experienced their transition from colonial to postcolonial orders as a territorial shift including the collective experience of partition as well as violent attempts of territorial reintegration and dispute. Consequently, secularism was on the one hand a colonial inheritance of an established state apparatus and its modes of procedure. On the other hand, though, the practice of secularism was deeply influenced by these (in some cases traumatic) experiences related to nation, religion, ethnicity, and space. In this view, secularism was a spatial strategy to accommodate and, if necessary, contain religious differences connected to spatial claims within the confines of what was reframed after independence as 'national' territory. Through political secularism early postcolonial states established their control over a religiously diverse territory and supported their own legitimacy after the transfer of power as the guarantors of peaceful coexistence and national integration. In this way, the context of decolonisation transformed secularism into an essential power strategy for the new elites, who, in return, integrated secularism into their governmentality as an essential element of postcolonial territoriality. In this reading, the globalisation of political secularism in the twentieth century is (also) the result of territorial-political requirements triggered by the disintegration of European empires rather than simply an element of colonial inheritance. Again, there are important parallel developments during decolonisation between very different societies such as India, Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia.

The struggle over territorial integration, which demanded the highest number of victims in Asia during decolonisation, was the partition of British-India in the summer of 1947. The collective experience of Partition was the imminent historical context in which postcolonial ideas on secularism were drafted and negotiated. Confronted with large-scale inter-religious violence during months around political independence, the Indian government's "primary objects" had to be "to maintain the safety and integrity of the state, to build its strength to meet all contingencies, to rescue speedily all those (…) who stand in peril and look to India for relief" (SWJN 1986, p. 81). This quote from mid-September 1947 is telling for various reasons. It not only puts national integration as an absolute priority before the protection of human lives but also illustrates what was at stake when the Indian constitution was drafted. Secularism was a concept that rejected any form of community-based claims in favour of a multi-religious state, which could justifiably claim to stand above these communities and for that reason also outlaw sectarian and religiously based demands.

For Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India, the "first essential" in India after Partition was "the maintenance of the unity of the country (…), a unity of the mind and the heart, which precludes the narrow urges that make for disunity and which breaks down the barriers raised in the name of religion or between State and State or, for that matter, any other barrier" (Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches 1967, p. 93). A "secular state", which deserved its name, was first and foremost a state "not tied to any religion" (Hindustan Times, 4 June 1948, p. 1) but rather a state based on the Indian nation that was itself a "synthesis" product (Nehru, 1998, p. 519). This integration of the nation under the auspices of a secular state was not only figurative or metaphorical language. It was closely intertwined with material geographical as well as socio-cultural patterns of the population on the South Asian sub-continent. For Nehru and others, the disaster of Partition demonstrated that a secular state was a territorial prerequisite for the continuing existence of India as a spatial concept.

Secularism was thus a programme of territorial integration meant to accommodate various religious communities within the confines of a state that, for strategic reasons, refused to be identified with any of these communities. At the same time, this spatial logic of secularism also justified the repressive and frequently violent measures against communities with diverse religious backgrounds on the peripheries of the postcolonial territory. Secularism provided the state with the political and legal justification to not acknowledge any religious or other forms of cultural reservations towards the inclusion into this territory. The victims of this secular-territorial logic and its iron military fist lived, for example, in the Indian Northeast, the Himalayas, and some central Indian areas.

The secular-minded parts of the Indonesian postcolonial elite developed a similar reason to explain the historical necessity of secularism in the form of a state located above the different religious communities. As Western diplomatic sources reveal, US diplomats in the 1950s were often frustrated by president Sukarno's preoccupation with questions of national integration. His "obsession with national unity" (Ambassador Mathew's Telegram on Increased Economic Aid to Indonesia, 2 November 1956, p. 1, NARA, RG 59, LOT File No. 58D3, Box 1) was of course rooted in his experience with the anti-colonial struggle that could, in his view, only be successful on the basis of political as well as geographical unity.

Pancasila, Sukarno's five principles of national coexistence, which he drafted briefly after the declaration of independence in the summer of 1945, called for mutual respect between all (major) religious communities in Indonesia and, consequently, rejected the idea of an Islamic state. As such, Pancasila was not only a lofty ideological concept but a very concrete spatial strategy: "How could we possibly unite these groups, so diversified in religion and currents of thought, if we do not provide them with a basis, on which to stand together? The Pancasila is the answer to that question! (…) The Pancasila is like a belief, a mode of thinking, or a faith, not a religion, but an undefined faith for the people" (778/58, "Pidato PJM Presiden pada upatjara peringatan umang tahun Pantjasila pada tanggal 5 Djuni 1958 di istana negara, Djakarta", p. 4, ANRI, RA. 10, File No. 009). The imminent threat Sukarno, Muhammad Hatta, Sutan Sajrir, Ganis Harsono, and others wanted to meet with Pancasila was territorial separatism, which lingered during the 1950s and early 1960s in various parts of Indonesia. Similar to India, this form of spatial secularism justified firm political and, where deemed necessary, military action against religiously motivated aspirations in the peripheries of the archipelago towards independence or other forms of non-integration into the Indonesian nation-state. Once again in the words of Sukarno spoken in 1953: "If we build a state on the Islam, many non-Muslim regions will secede such as Maluku, Bali, Flores, Timor, Kay, and Celebes, while West Irian which has not yet entered the republic may not choose to do so" (Times of Indonesia (Jakarta), 13 February 1953, p. 8). By contrast, Pancasila as the Indonesian version of the coexistence of several religious communities within one single state seemed as an appropriate strategy to prevent the country from falling apart into numerous communities and 'their' socio-culturally or religiously defined territories (Het probleem van de nationale staat en de Islam-ideologie in Indonesie 1953).

Another region within Southeast Asia, which made extensive experience with territorial questions during decolonisation, were the successor states of British Malaya. In particular after the independence of the city-state Singapore from Malaysia in 1965, the political elites in both countries were struggling to assert their versions of national identity that was inclusive in ethnic, religious, and, ultimately, also in territorial terms.

The most determined policy of de-legitimising community-based claims was implemented in Singapore. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew declared in a speech held at the Ramakrishna Mission around independence what he meant by secularism. In spite of his (rhetorical) commitment to open exchange and dialogue, Lee emphasised that the limits of free speech were reached when it stifled "the other man's culture, his language, his religion, because that is the surest way to bring forth all the acute conflicts in which he is prepared to abandon reason and rationality and stand by his heritage" (Republic of Singapore 1965, p. 2). Any claim on one culture, one religion, one language, one ethnicity or one race would destroy "this fragile society which we all nurture and which nurture (sic) us" (Ibid.).

After independence, Singaporean secularism was designed as a spatial strategy to secure geographical loyalty to the new and fragile state and to create a society capable of accommodating its ethnic, racial, and religious diversity. In practice, this meant an elaborate system of checks and balances between the adherents of different religions

and ethnic identities connected to the micro-managed distribution of scarce resources such as education, housing space, and employment in public administration.

Malaysia after 1965 is a peculiar case in itself. Although Islam was declared the official religion and guaranteed a special status by the constitution, the political framing of the new state was more complicated. For the leader of the most prominent political platform UMNO, Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia was a state based on secular principles that allowed Islam to be the official, but not exclusive or all-dominating religion. After the Federation of Malaya had achieved independence from the British in 1957, he clarified: "I would like to make it clear that this country is not an Islamic state as it is generally understood, we merely provide that Islam shall be the official religion of the State" (quoted in Fernando 2006, p. 266). In practice, this meant that Islamic institutions such as Islamic courts continued to exist, but were deeply reformed, cut in their competencies, and subordinated to tight state control (Peletz, 2002, Chap. 1; Aziz & Shamsul 2004; Neo, 2006). The result was a state of mixed competencies between a secular state apparatus and select elements of Islamic jurisprudence. The large Christian and other non-Islamic groups in North Borneo, Sarawak, and Brunei also negotiated that, besides Malay, English remained a medium of school instruction, Christian missionary activities continued to be legal, and the state's official religion of Islam ought to be administered by secular state organs rather than Islamic authorities (*'ulama*) (Lee & Ackerman, 1997, p. 21; Watson Andaya & Andaya 2001, p. 285).

In all these cases, secularism remained an affair of constant negotiations, problem-solving, as well as trial and error. Securing territorial integration and supporting the political legitimacy of the new state and its elites, however, were among the foremost motivations for these multiple versions of secularism. In this interpretation, the career of political secularism in early postcolonial states was not simply an inheritance from the colonial era. By contrast, it was the result of structurally similar challenges postcolonial states were confronted with in their endeavour to establish alternative, i.e. non-colonial principles of territoriality and new forms of political legitimacy in a religiously diverse society. The means postcolonial elites deployed to achieve this aim were frequently similar to imperial tools of repression (see Streicher 2021). In that sense, political secularism constituted an important justification for forceful spatial integration of communities from various religious backgrounds and the control of religious pluralism as an essential target of social engineering.

Conceptually, these examples bring an important element to the project of a global intellectual history of secularism. The relevance of space has for long been under-acknowledged in intellectual history writings (Randolph, 2014). The debates around secularism and postcolonial territoriality illustrate how indigenous elites entangled their space-making in the context of declining imperial authorities with questions of political secularism, i.e. the location of the state above distinct religious communities and their belief systems. This was not an abstract or purely intellectual exercise. Space-making was a power strategy for the purpose of territorial integration, which, together with social engineering and the 'modernisation' of society, turned into the ultimate objective of the postcolonial state.

Conclusions

The search for traces of a transregional history of secularism undertaken above conveys important lessons on both the historical evolution of secularism in (post)colonial societies and the entanglement of global intellectual, social and political history. My starting point was the argument that scholars of globalising secularism studies do not need so much an altogether new vocabulary in order to analyse the historical diversity of state secularities. Rather, I suggested to focus our attention towards new forms of transregional connectivity and parallel developments. To conclude then, let me draft some more specific observations from the cases I discussed above.

First, one important feature of secularism in South and Southeast Asia is a dialectic relationship with colonialism. Scholars of religion, history, and political science have illustrated in many convincing studies how colonial bureaucratic apparatuses transformed religious beliefs, authorities, as well as organisations and networks (cf. Nicholas, 1994; Cohn, 1996; Masuzuka, 2005 etc.). Consequently, the formative impact of colonialism deeply influenced postcolonial manifestations of both secularism as well as religious administration and conduct. The second facet of this dialectic, however, is the many forms of deliberate discontinuity and contrast with the colonial way of doing things. As I tried to demonstrate with reference to the cases of women's networks in the interwar period and the reception of Atatürk's policy towards religion in Turkey, thinking about secularism for the times after colonialism had a strong anti-imperial underpinning and was meant to advance a cultural-religious and political agenda in opposition to colonial regimes and their civilizational grammar.

Second, to understand the evolution of anticolonial and postcolonial manifestations of secularism, personal exchange, mobility, and the travel of ideas across imperial and national borders were as important as colonial inheritance. Intellectual exchange over large distances, shared observations of other cases such as the Turkish Republic, or personal contacts among women struggling for their rights in their respective national contexts were manifestations of an evolving transregional public sphere, which co-determined local debates on secularism and social reform in many Asian and Middle Eastern societies.

Scholars of the history of modern scientific knowledge have argued that there is indeed "one history of knowledge" (Renn & Hyman, 2017, p. 15), particularly in the modern era. Similarly, imperialism provided the framework for one history of ideas, values and knowledge around political secularism. This does not mean that the evolution of secularism followed a universal logic. But it does mean that the various definitions, manifestations, and practices of political secularism emerged in contact with each other and within a contested but shared framework of ideas constituted by various philosophical and political knowledge systems. Empirically, this argument recommends to examine in how far can we see shared patterns of postcolonial secularism in Asia after 1945 that can be understood in terms of continuities, i.e. that we can connect with the heritage of an inter-imperiality of secularism, and at the same time in terms of discontinuity, which can, for example, be explained through specific circumstances after the Second World War.

Third, transregional secularism studies are most convincing when they build on the evolving field of global intellectual history and also integrate social and political

history. The reason for this is not only the relevance of cosmopolitan social milieus for secularism discourses but also the fact that the controversies about the location of religion in state and society were usually interwoven with questions of social reform, in particular gender relations. Women, as well as non-state groups more generally, had a larger role in the formation of postcolonial secularism than anticipated so far. Although both social structures and state institutions remained male-dominated after decolonisation, female pressure towards social reform was an important catalyst and support for reform-minded male milieus. In that light, transregional secularism studies that concentrate only on religion and the state in a narrow sense and largely ignore struggles over social change seem historically inadequate.

Finally, the focus on connectivity needs to be complemented with historical comparison of parallel developments not necessarily causally related with each other. As I tried to show with the example of postcolonial territoriality and the reform of polygamy, late colonial and early postcolonial India, Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia were confronted with analogical challenges, on which reform-minded as well as conservative groups developed strikingly similar approaches. Again, much of this is related to comparable colonial patterns but cannot be exhaustively explained by them.

Within the sociology of religion, secularism studies are meanwhile a well-established research field. As they go increasingly global, they are confronted with important theoretical and empirical questions including the pitfalls of Eurocentric concepts and the possibility of conceptual overstretch. The transregional historical approach suggested here allows for a context-sensitive analysis of secularism's diverse local manifestations while at the same time mobilising the rich potential of historical comparison and connectivity studies in order not to lose sight of the bigger, world-historical picture.

Abbreviations

ANRI	Indonesian National Archives (Jakarta). (Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia)
ILO	International Labour Organisation.
KIT	Royal Tropical Institute (Amsterdam). (Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen)
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration (Maryland, U.S.A.)
PWKI	Indonesian Christian Women's Association. (Persatuan Wanita Kristen Indonesia)
SWJN	Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru.
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation.
WIDF	Women's International Democratic Federation.

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