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Archaeology after Secularism

> Man constructs according to an archetype.
> —*Mircea Eliade,* The Myth of Eternal Return

Prognoses of religion's future are different today than they were just a few decades ago. In the early twenty-first century, still reeling from the eschatological swirl of anxieties and doubts that accompanied the turn of the millennium, one finds respected scholars writing that they were wrong about modernity and the decline in religiosity it was meant to entail. In 1929, Walter Lippmann famously wrote of modernity as an acid—one touch, it seemed, and our religious dispositions begin to corrode. Such a claim could hardly be made today. The acids of modernity, we are now told, are weaker than once thought and religion much more durable. Indeed, the contemporary moment appears to be one in which fear of an increasingly godless world by the godly has been replaced in many quarters by fear of an increasingly godly world by the godless. Secularization theory is giving way to talk of resurgent religion. And, astonished, scholarship blinks and rubs its eyes at the "*desecularization* of the world," at the new "*post-secular* world" (Asad 2003; Berger 1999). "Remember the good old days," mocks Bruno Latour (2004:154), "when university professors could look down on unsophisticated folks because those hillbillies naively believed in church, motherhood, and apple pie? Things have changed a lot."

The surprise is familiar. For as long as scholars have talked about secularization as an undeniable trend, they have also observed that secularization is, in fact, quite deniable, even in its European and Euro-American homelands (e.g., Greeley

1972; Smith 1978[1962]:3). Recall Durkheim's position at the start of the twentieth century. Despite two hundred years of philosophical argument that both condemned religion as mere illusion and prophesied the coming of an enlightened and fully secular world, Durkheim's discussion of the elementary forms of religious life sprang instead from the observation that religion has been far stronger than its critics and cultured despisers have been wont to acknowledge. If religion is mere illusion, he asked, if it is a grand disastrous fallacy, a flawed and ineffective science or the means of mass enslavement, how are we to explain its persistence once revealed for what it is? Why have so many chosen to keep their illusions? For that matter, why did pre-modern peoples not only develop but also commit themselves so fully to a mistake in the first place? If we begin by condemning religion as empty illusion or, worse yet, as a failed attempt at rationality, then "it is impossible to explain how it was able to survive the first attempts made, and the persistence with which it has maintained itself becomes unintelligible" (Durkheim 1965[1915]:98). "It is hard to understand," wrote Durkheim, "how men have continued to do certain things for centuries without any object" (101). "How could a vain fantasy have been able to fashion the human consciousness so strongly and so durably?…how has this extraordinary dupery been able to perpetuate itself all through the course of history?" (87). Set aside Durkheim's way out of this Enlightenment quandary: his influential thesis that religion, far from being flawed philosophy, is how a community sacralizes and thereby strengthens itself. The point is that Durkheim's question at the start of the twentieth century—if religion is illusory, obfuscating, and indeed "wrong," why does it persist?—is not all that different than the question being posed at the start of the twenty-first.

The tone and urgency of contemporary worries over religion's vitality, however, feel different. In place of the comparative detachment of Durkheim's sociological meditations, today's concerns echo an earlier moment at the birth of modernity when many social critics sought explicitly to drag society out from beneath the thumb of papal authority. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, scholarly concern in Europe was with the *political* power of religious institutions and ideologies, a power that was thought to corrupt fair and proper governance as well as religion's supposedly true nature as a private matter of salvation. Religion and the political had to be wrenched apart, and a major tactic in this violent bifurcation involved the construction of new universal categories of "religion" and "politics" that could be etched onto the past. As Asad (1993) has carefully argued, our current understanding of "religion" as a matter of belief rather than action is an inheritance of such early modern battles.

But the secularist struggle today is not so much to wrench religion and politics apart as it is to prevent the two from reuniting. This, at least, is how the struggle is frequently presented. Ominous signs are everywhere noted that religion, like a virus (a "virus of faith," as science warrior Richard Dawkins [2006] puts it), is once again penetrating political bodies, national and international alike. In England, much was made of Tony Blair's very un-British attendance at Catholic mass while prime minister (not to mention his alleged prayer sessions with George W. Bush). In France,

Nicolas Sarkozy's endorsement of the church as fundamental to European ethics and morality was viewed as more worrisome yet (Sciolino 2008). America's secularity has always been of a different sort; Americans have traditionally wanted their politicians to be strongly but privately religious. Nevertheless, following the 2004 presidential election, many American secular liberals stared in queasy disbelief at electoral maps in which the vast sea of Republican "red" states had been relabeled "Jesusland"—dark satire that played off the left's impression that a born-again president had been voted in primarily on religious grounds. Wringing their hands, they reiterated Durkheim's query with added emphasis: if religion is an illusion, why does it both persist *and seem to spread*? The desecularization of US politics is not merely commented upon; it is marked with a special opprobrium.

If Republican red is the color of secular concern at home, Islamic green is the color of fear abroad. From the reassertion of theocracy in Iran to the subsequent intensification of militant Islamic organizations more broadly, the melding of religious convictions and political action is considered to dangerously contaminate and radicalize both. Of course, much US political discourse uses the label of Islamic "extremism" to present entirely rational Middle Eastern struggles in an irrational—that is, an overly religious—framework, diverting attention from the larger motivations behind those struggles. Be that as it may, the "green" international worries of neoconservatives broadly mirror the "red" domestic worries of many American secular liberals. In each case, the desecularization of politics is regarded as a dangerous regression. Again, many onlookers ask: whatever happened to the Enlightenment?

This question reverberates not only in the northern Atlantic, but among those with a broadly secular orientation in the Middle East as well. Saba Mahmood reflects on the reaction by "progressive leftists" in the Arab world—she considered herself a member—to the late twentieth-century Islamic revival movements, noting her "profound dis-ease with the appearance of religion outside of the private space of individualized belief":

> For those with well-honed secular-liberal and progressive sensibilities, the slightest eruption of religion into the public domain is frequently experienced as a dangerous affront, one that threatens to subject us to a normative morality dictated by mullahs and priests. This fear is accompanied by a deep self-assurance about the truth of the progressive-secular imaginary, one that assumes that the life forms it offers are the best way out for these unenlightened souls, mired as they are in the spectral hopes that gods and prophets hold out to them. (Mahmood 2004:xi)

That this self-assurance has fallen apart is widely apparent. Now one reads that it is by becoming more intensely Islamic that Algerian women are able to make significant strides in modernizing their country (Slackman 2007). And that as South Korea reaches new heights of industrialization and technological sophistication, the popularity of shamanism seems also to be on the rise (Sang-Hun 2007). And that

businesspeople in China are turning to Christianity to become more effective capitalists on the global stage (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2009:8). Modernity and religiosity, once antithetical, now appear to be anything but.

To speak of postsecularism, then, is to speak of a palpable phenomenon, a widespread perception and subject of global debate. One might say, more precisely, that postsecularism, like postmodernism, is a condition, a falling away of one's bedrock belief in the progressive disenchantment of the world and its replacement by a growing concern over the world's reenchantment. Which is also to say that postsecularism marks yet another crisis of narratives, one that begins with the worry that contemporary social actors have simply forgotten their lines in the great drama of civilization's progress and ends with an unsettling realization that the world may actually be acting out the script of a very different play. If secularism was once understood to stand outside culture and history, if it was understood to rise above individual cultures by providing rational, universal standards by which individual cultures might be judged, if it was thought to transcend individual histories by standing at the end of history, then postsecularism marks a mounting denial of these claims. It represents a new appreciation of secularism's historical and cultural specificity—as well as, for secularism's apologists, its worrisome fragility.

I regard both secularism and postsecularism, then, as a set of claims about plotlines, rather than a set of social configurations per se. Whether or not the world is becoming more religious is a spurious question that cannot be addressed precisely because religion is an unstable category that does not translate from one historical moment to the next with fidelity. But this is not to say that the problem of postsecularism is a trivial matter, that it is merely a set of claims about plotlines. On the contrary, cultural understandings of the relationship between past, present, and future comprise the very ground from which we leap into action. Narratives are powerful, and secularization is perhaps the most potent narrative of the past half millennium.

A Postsecular Archaeology of Premodern Religion?

This book is an archaeological response to the challenge of postsecularism and to the growing literature that questions the secular orientation of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. It is motivated especially by conversations within anthropology that have used the continued prominence of world religions as a springboard for a new wave of critical reflection both on the secular as a specifically Western ontology and on the implicitly Protestant or post-Reformation assumptions underwriting the discipline's ostensibly universal analytical categories (Calhoun et al. 2011; Fitzgerald 2007; Scott and Hirschkind 2006). The most prominent participant in these conversations has been Talal Asad (1993, 2003), whose critique of anthropological figurations of religion as a matter of meaning and belief rather than discipline and power not only has led anthropologists to confront the historic specificity of religion as a discursive domain, but also has forced the discipline to unpack "religion" in non-Western and nonmodern societies generally. While the targets of

his critique differ from Asad's, Bruno Latour (1993) has developed a related analysis of what he refers to as the modernist project of purification in which an ideological commitment to separating religion, politics, science, economics, and so on obscures and, indeed, facilitates the increasing interweaving of these categories. For Latour, as for Asad, a rigid boundary simply cannot be drawn around "religion" except within a very specific secular modern imaginary.

As the broader implications of postsecular critiques are debated, the marked absence of archaeological voices has become increasingly curious. Archaeology, after all, would seem to be centrally implicated: its primary objects of study are the premodern and non-Western societies in which universalist notions of religion presumably face especially severe problems of translation. Ironically, though, at the precise intellectual moment when classic definitions of religion began to fall apart, the "archaeology of religion" emerged as a major project (e.g., Barrowclough and Malone 2007; Biehl and Bertemes 2001; Fogelin 2007, 2008; Glowacki and Van Keuren 2011; Hayden 2003; Hays-Gilpin and Whitley 2008; Hodder 2010; Insoll 2001; Renfrew and Morley 2009). Indeed, since the 1990s, a growing body of work has drawn on archaeological remains to explicitly model ancient religions, and nearly all of this work is founded upon secularist understandings of religion as a universal phenomenon centered on questions of meaning, symbolism, and belief in the supernatural. As one collection of archaeological essays begins, "Religion is universal in human societies.… [It] is unifying and pervasive" (VanPool et al. 2006:1).

Which is to say that archaeology has yet to meaningfully engage with the broader reevaluation of religion in the discipline, and I contend that this is a significant problem for more than just archaeologists. Indeed, it was precisely in its portrayals of the premodern that twentieth-century anthropology most directly contributed to modernist understandings of the natural or intended place of religion in social life. Early anthropologists devoted considerable energy to theorizing religion's putative origins—origins that often looked surprisingly secular. Primitive religion was frequently presented as having been born of private reflection on the meaning of life, death, and the soul, or it was said to have evolved out of an original stage of magic, reckoned as a kind of quasi-scientific study of cause-and-effect relationships in nature. Such models naturalized Enlightenment principles: because religion was originally a private matter, so must it be today; because religion was originally born of an effort (albeit a flawed effort) to explain cause-and-effect relationships in nature, so must modern science return us to a basic materialist orientation that centuries of corruption by priests and theologians have obscured. I will have more to say about the entangling of modernist futures with primitive origins in a moment. For now, I will merely underscore the observation that models of premodern religion have been and continue to be especially prominent as the space of secular ideology building, and archaeologists—as the only anthropologists who continue to study premodernity—must therefore participate in any meaningful revisionist effort in the discipline. Pruning weeds only goes so far; at some point, one must dig up the roots.

What is needed is a postsecular archaeology that sets its sights on unpacking the anthropological category of premodern religion. This is the challenge taken up in this book.

Such an undertaking is bound to encounter resistance on two fronts. First, there is the simple fact that contemporary sociocultural anthropologists have largely brushed aside the premodern—and along with it, their archaeological colleagues. Few are willing to entertain the possibility that those studying the stones and bones of hoary antiquity might have anything novel to say about secularism. I am under no illusions that this book will overcome such resistance, but a one-sided effort at disciplinary rapprochement is better than none at all. Second, there will surely be some in the archaeological community who will resist what they regard as an unproductive deconstructionist assault on one of their most promising analytical categories. After all, many are of the opinion that it is something of a big deal that we are now able to legitimately study ancient religion alongside ancient politics and economics. One is lectured repeatedly on the manner in which the archaeology of religion used to be marginalized on two grounds. First, it was thought that archaeology, with its materialist methods, lacked the tools to reconstruct past meaning and belief (infamously, Hawkes 1954); second, it was assumed that religion was a superstructure anyway, a "misty realm," as Marx (1990[1865]:65) put it, so why bother? Modern archaeologists have freed themselves of both these shackles, both the methodological and the theoretical attitudes that prevented serious inquiry into past religious experience. These days, most archaeologists willingly accept not only that we have the means to study ancient religions, but also that religion, insofar as it was a core motivation in the past, must be a core focus of inquiry among scholars in the present. And shouldn't we be grateful for these developments? Now that we've cleared space for an archaeology of religion, do we really want to undercut it by saying that "religion"—as defined by secular theorists—is a historically contingent product of the Reformation? Do we really want to say that religion, as such, didn't exist in premodern and non-Western times and places? Wouldn't it be embarrassing to discover that having just drawn the baby a bath, there's no longer any baby to bathe?

I can only respond by saying that whereas I once supported these new movements with enthusiasm, I now find it increasingly difficult to quiet the nagging feeling that the archaeology of religion has come to us as a stillbirth. Perhaps there is yet time to administer a cure. Perhaps the child can be saved by nuancing definitions or by further emphasizing that ancient religions were more matters of practice than belief. Perhaps we need only be more diligent in pointing out the close interpenetration of religion, politics, and economics in the premodern world. In the end, I suspect, such efforts are bound to fail. "Religion" has become a secular category through and through. The acids of modernity have done their work, not through corrosion, but through transfiguration, a transfiguration that makes translation entirely fraught.

Consider the incoherence of religion as an archaeological category when dealing with a premodern context in which, we are told, the spheres of religion, politics,

and economics were all fully interwoven. What does this really mean? What does it mean to interweave categories that, from the perspective of the modern analyst, have been defined in contrast to one another? Nearly all archaeological commentary on the subject implicitly builds from the position that they (the premoderns) like us (the moderns) did indeed have spheres of action called "religion," "politics," "economics," and the like. It is simply that these spheres bled into one another. They were "enmeshed" (Bertemes and Biehl 2001:15), "hopelessly intertwined" (Garwood et al. 1991:viii), fused into a "creative *amalgam*, a seamless conceptual fabric, of what Westerners see as 'sacred' and 'secular'" (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005:105). Premoderns lived in blurred worlds of mixed-up categories that we have only recently learned to separate. Back then, the actions of priest, president, and profiteer could hardly be distinguished.

Not surprisingly, the problem of legibility is an overwhelming preoccupation of archaeological writing on religion. What is ritual? What is not? When is a building a temple rather than an elite residence? How is one to pull from the tangled categories of premodernity some strands of behavior that can serve as the special subject matter of an archaeology of religion? "How," ask François Bertemes and Peter Biehl (2001:14), "can we discuss the functions and meanings of cult and religion within a society before we have any clear criteria for recognizing it at all or for documenting it archaeologically?" "How are researchers to identify what behaviors in the past were 'ritual,' as opposed to some other social or economic practices?" seconds Ian Kuijt (2002:81). Or as Colin Renfrew puts it:

> How…does one recognize the archaeological evidence of religious behavior, of cult practice, for what it is? On what grounds, for instance, is one pit, with animal bones and a few artifacts, dismissed as domestic refuse, while another is seen as a ritual deposit with evidence of sacrifice? In what circumstances shall we regard small terracotta representations of animals and men as figurines, intended as offerings to the deity, and when shall we view them as mere toys for the amusement for children? (1985:2)

The desire expressed here is for a coherent definition of ritual and religion that will sort out the tangle in all times and places—precisely the kind of universal definition that has undergone sustained critique within sociocultural anthropology.

None of the archaeological attempts to clarify these matters have been successful. The most common archaeological strategy is to hold fast to a Geertzian definition of religion that vaguely links religion to matters of symbolism: "It is the problem of symbolism and meaning which seems, above all, to distinguish prehistoric and historic approaches to [religious] ritual in archaeology," wrote Garwood et al. (1991:ix) in the early 1990s, and the situation has changed little since (e.g., Henshilwood 2009; J. Renfrew 2009). Colin Renfrew, arguably the archaeologist with the most sustained intellectual commitment to the issue, has reiterated this position,

proposing that religious ritual is distinct not just in being composed of invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances (in the sense of Rappaport 1999:24) but also because it involves distinctively *expressive* action. In this way, concludes Renfrew (2007:9), we should at least be able to say that work on an assembly line—however repetitive it may be—is not ritual, for there is nothing particularly expressive about it. But of course, there is no logic to this sort of statement. The worker always performs for the foreman; minimally, she always expresses her fulfillment of a contract, asserting that she has indeed earned her wages. How is this any less expressive than lighting candles in a church to ensure one's prayers are heard? Similar arguments can be made in prehistoric contexts. Were repetitive practices like flint knapping and field clearance any less expressive than prayer? What aspect of culture is not expressive, symbolic, and a matter of meaning?

Partly in response to such concerns, many archaeologists have fallen back upon even older anthropological definitions of religion as belief in the supernatural (e.g., Mithen 2009:123). In the introduction to another volume on the archaeology of religion, the editors opt to "define religion as systems of notions about the supernatural and the sacred, about life after death and related themes" with rituals being the practices that make these notions concrete (Malone et al. 2007:1). Such definitions are slippery not only because of the inclusion of unspecified "related themes" but also because they conflate the supernatural with the sacred, despite long-standing anthropological cautions against such a conflation. More significantly, the notion of the supernatural itself has been the target of repeated criticism over the past century. Put bluntly, the division between natural and supernatural realms is a loaded modernist notion, a product of the post-Reformation division between the this-worldly concerns of science and politics and the otherworldly concerns of religion. How could non-Western and nonmodern peoples believe in a worldly division with which they had no experience and of which they had no conception?

This is when archaeologists begin to throw up their hands in frustration. Here is where they begin to wish they could shift the conversation to questions of archaeological methods instead of definitional matters. "Fine," they will say, "if the notion of the supernatural has too much baggage, let us follow William James and simply define religion as belief in an unseen order." This is the approach taken by David Lewis-Williams and David Pearce in *Inside the Neolithic Mind*, one of the most important studies of prehistoric religion yet produced. "All religions have some orientation to unseen realms, beings and powers," they claim (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005:26). Their text deserves extended consideration, more than I can offer here. For now, it is enough to note that Lewis-Williams and Pearce consider religion to be a neurological phenomenon, grounded in the physiological experience of altered states of consciousness: "perceptions of [religion's] invisible realms," they argue, "derive from the electro-chemical functioning of the brain," which leads humans to see patterns, objects, people, and places that do not exist (285). The careful reader will have already noted a basic paradox at the heart of Lewis-Williams and Pearce's position. In

what sense can religion be construed as a belief in "unseen realms [and] beings" when the authors' own research into altered states reveals the impressive degree to which these things are, in fact, *seen*? Are not religion's realms and beings *regularly* seen in the course of shamanic journeys, dreams, vision quests, near-death experiences, and the like? Is it not self-evident that shamans believe in the existence of (what to them is) a visible and quite sensuously experienced realm? Isn't the fact that we might not see or experience this realm—that we might consider it an illusion—entirely beside the point?

This critique opens onto a room cluttered with subsidiary worries. If we define religion as belief in an unseen order, how is Western physics to be separated out? And how are we to find space within religion for all those devout Christians who claim to see God in every plant and animal? Moreover, are we really to conclude that Native Americans "see" Father Sun traveling across the heavens any less clearly than Anglo American scientists "see" a stationary mass of hydrogen and helium? Is Father Sun any less empirical than a nuclear fusion reaction perceived from a million kilometers away?

Those archaeologists who had not previously walked out on the conversation are now probably heading for the door. Perhaps there is one closet Dawkins fan left who is willing to argue that, in the end, archaeology must settle upon a definition of religion as belief in beings and powers that science has now shown to be complete illusions. Religion is the mystified component of past belief systems. Yes, this is where archaeology ends up when it is honest with itself. The unpleasant reality is that when we as archaeologists—particularly, prehistoric archaeologists—write about religion, we still tend to fall back on some core notion of the irrational. When an artifact or trace of an activity can be directly linked with the quest for food, bodily comfort, or safety then it passes as economic (which is to say, rational). But when an artifact defies a crudely materialist interpretation, when it seems bizarre or inexplicable or non-utilitarian, or—better yet—when it smacks of belief in gods, the afterlife, or some other fanciful sphere, only then does it enter into discussions of religious ritual. Needless to say, this is an overwhelmingly secular position, for it places all of religion in the past by stigmatizing it as a fallacy that humankind is gradually correcting.

The critique is obvious. No one has ever believed in illusions; everyone believes in the real world as they perceive it really to be. Moreover, no one acts irrationally; everyone's actions are performed for reasons that are, from the actor's perspective, entirely reasonable. Within archaeology, Joanna Brück (1999) provides an especially frank consideration of the implications of this critique, noting how the analytical division between secular and ritual spheres slips into a division between rationality and irrationality that has been mapped onto the division between Western and non-Western societies as part of the legitimizing discourse of European colonialism. The situation is irredeemable, she concludes. Rather than study ritual, Brück advises archaeologists to devote their energies to the study of alternative rationalities.

A few archaeologists are exploring a more radical escape strategy. Ben Alberti and colleagues (Alberti and Bray 2009; Alberti and Marshall 2009; Alberti et al.

2011) have proposed that we abandon epistemological questions of religious belief altogether and turn instead toward more fundamental matters of ontology. What might be gained, they ask, were we to seek out alternative worlds in the past as opposed to alternative worldviews? This is not a simple proposition. Alberti intends it as an explicit provocation aimed to uproot a paired set of premises that have always underwritten the secular modern project. First premise: there is one reality, a singular nature, defined by Western scientists. Second premise: there is a multiplicity of cultural perspectives on that single reality, a multiplicity of belief systems (i.e., religions) that inevitably cloak nature in illusions to a greater or lesser degree. Alberti rejects these premises; he rejects the use of Western understandings of causation, agency, personhood, and the like as the standards by which the relative irrationality of non-Westerners and premoderns is to be judged. His pluralization of ontology marks a purposeful effort to cut anchor and set us adrift, stripped of the secular modern rudders (prominently, the category of religion) that have always guided us back toward familiar waters.

Practically speaking, this approach effectively does away with religion as an analytical endpoint. Rather than seeking insight into Neolithic Levantine religion or Aztec religion or Mississippian religion, we are now encouraged to develop understandings of Neolithic or Aztec or Mississippian *worlds*, each with its own sorts of agents, powers, relations, and structures, each with its own understandings of what it means to act practically, rationally, and effectively. The archaeology of religion in this way becomes a project of registering the dissonance between the modernist category of religion and the nonmodern world into which it has been inserted. It becomes a project of successively moving away from "religion" toward some other, historically specific category that maps out the social relations between people and things in some other, overtly nonmodern and nonsecular fashion.

A postsecular archaeology of premodern religion, then, might be imagined as an entirely parochial endeavor that seeks, quite deliberately, to scrape and pick away at its own founding premise—religion's universality—by underscoring the nontranslatability of modernist categories, eventually arriving at a new, locally defined category made legible by the ways in which it is "not religion." Broadly speaking, this is the methodology followed in the present study. My goal, however, is neither particularism nor relativism nor local understanding. Nor is it a clearer portrayal of the past, per se. Each time we tamper with religion in premodern times, we intervene in modernist understandings of religion's future in the most general terms, which is to say that to unpack premodern religion as an archaeological category, even in individual case studies, is to help unpack secularism itself. I hope, in the end, to make a small contribution to this larger project.

Again, archaeologists have important—even essential—contributions to make to anthropology's critical analysis of secularism precisely because they are the only members of the discipline whose research continues to focus on premodernity. There was a time when sociocultural anthropologists spent a great deal of time talking

about the premodern, the traditional, and the primitive. They classified and compared premodernities, assigned evolutionary positions to non-Western peoples, and critically engaged Western grand narratives outlining the rise of civilization. In hindsight, it is easy to look down our noses at such work. Certainly, many early and mid-twentieth-century ethnographers were caught up in colonial logics to a degree they must not have appreciated at the time. But the subsequent critiques of this disciplinary heritage have resulted in a fresh crop of problems. Is it not the case, for instance, that the wholesale rejection of older evolutionary typologies—from Lewis Henry Morgan's savagery-barbarism-civilization scheme to the egalitarian-ranked-stratified-state model of Morton Fried—has led many sociocultural anthropologists to fall back upon an even cruder narrative of human social development? Having washed their hands of serious inquiry into the world as it was prior to European colonialism and the rise of global capitalism, many now seem fated to write and rewrite a much simplified book with only two chapters: chapter 1, the premodern; chapter 2, the modern. Once, all the world was premodern (precapitalist, precolonial, pre-nation-statist). Then, it became modern (capitalist, colonial, filled with nation-states). The two terms stand at arm's length just as ethnographers and archaeologists stand at arm's length in anthropology departments. Regardless of whether the rupture of modernization is presented in tragic or even dystopian terms, is this not its own blunt form of unilineal evolutionism? Are two evolutionary stages really better than four?

Unilineal evolutionism, ironically, is implicit in a great deal of contemporary anthropology, even among those who have been especially harsh critics of mid-twentieth-century evolutionary theory. Time and again I have heard anthropologists critique modernity through a vague comparison with the premodern world, as if premodernity were a kind of totality about which one could generalize, a totality that need not be interrogated beyond the simple conclusion that it is (or was) everything the modern is not. Even Asad, one of our most subtle critics of great divides and grand narratives, is not free from such statements. "Secularism," he has written,

> is not simply an intellectual answer to a question about enduring social peace and toleration. It is an enactment by which a *political medium* (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion. In contrast, the process of mediation enacted in "premodern" societies includes ways in which the state mediates local identities without aiming at transcendence. (Asad 2003:5)

I want to put to the side what Asad is claiming in positive terms about secularism as well as his larger critique of the rhetoric of religious tolerance and focus instead on what he sets up as secularism's foil. Secularism is defined, in part, through a negative comparison with premodern societies, a category Asad uses with visible discomfort. Premodern is put in scare quotes, and Asad hedges by observing that the process of

mediation in premodern societies merely includes ways of exerting state control without redefining and transcending difference. This is a strange statement. First, we are presented with an image of premodernity in the singular, insofar as Asad talks of a premodern "process of mediation" rather than an array of variable processes. Second, we are left wondering whether this premodern process, which is said to employ different strategies, also includes state modes of mediation that *do* aim at the transcendence of local identities. Presumably not, for this would introduce the possibility of a species of premodern secularism, an oxymoron for most commentators on the subject (but see chapter 3). One can only conclude, then, that Asad's hedging and ambiguity signal his discomfort at relying upon the very divide between modern and premodern that he elsewhere seeks to question.

It should go without saying that "modern" and "premodern," while ideologically linked, are not in the slightest way comparable categories on the ground. The modern may have diverse local manifestations, but it is still drawn into a kind of historical singularity through the insidious effects of colonialism, global capitalism, industrialization, nation-state building, and international warfare. The premodern is a radically heterogeneous congeries of historically unrelated phenomena. To compare modern and premodern is not to compare apples and oranges. It is to compare apples with vast orchards of oranges, plums, pomegranates, kiwis, strawberries, and any number of other fruits that no one alive today has ever seen or tasted. And it is this fact of radical premodern pluralism that sociocultural anthropology has generally ceased to consider in any depth. In Asad's work, for instance, the premodern often seems to be synonymous with medieval Christian and Islamic societies—these, at least, are his primary foils to the modern. However, it is at precisely this point that archaeologists need to raise their hands and remind the discipline not only that premodernity includes a great deal more than just the Abrahamic traditions, but also that the modernist discourse of the West has always, in practice, *relied upon* particular understandings of premodern heterogeneity to construct its master narratives of secularization.

The Myth of Eternal Return

Here is the crux of the problem as I see it: we have misrepresented the narrative structure of Western storytelling about the emergence of the modern world. We have wrongly concluded, first, that the modernist master narrative is linear, and second, that the narrative is premised upon a single great divide marking the emergence of the modern out of the premodern, of us out of them. As Webb Keane (2007:48) puts it, "[T]he idea of modernity commonly seems to include two distinctive features: rupture from a traditional past, and progress into a better future." One rupture (A → B), marking a great leap of human progress. Not surprisingly, this rupture is typically positioned somewhere during the early modern period: in the sixteenth-century religious reforms of the Protestants, in the rationalism of the seventeenth-century philosophers, or in the eighteenth-century humanism of Enlightenment

scholars. "The European history of ecclesiastical withdrawal from secular politics and from secular intellectual problems to specialised religious spheres is the history of this whole movement from primitive to modern," observes Mary Douglas (1988[1966]:92), expressing a common position.

For Douglas, as for so many others, the movement from premodern to modern involved a process of differentiation in which formerly unified societies became fragmented into a number of incommensurable realms. Modern societies, generally speaking, aspire toward a world in which religious authority is kept separate from political authority; political interests are kept out of the objective production of scientific knowledge; the economic marketplace is kept free from state intervention; and the renouncing of idolatry keeps the boundary between people and things sharply drawn. Thus has modernization become equated with specialization, compartmentalization, and the purification of categories to the point that modern individuals are said to regard thinking and knowing as a matter of pulling apart wholes into discrete elements (Douglas 1988[1966]:78). "Break it down for me," says the CEO to his team of analysts in an epistemological mode that has not changed significantly since the eighteenth-century efforts of Linnaeus to know nature by parsing it into ever-finer taxonomic divisions.

Latour (1993) offers the most ambitious critique of this narrative of modernization, not by challenging the intimate link between modernity and purification but by arguing that purification must be understood as ideology rather than practice. On the ground, he suggests, modernity has been characterized by the *intensified* blurring of categories. This is the great paradox of modern society in Latour's reading: the more we tell ourselves that religion, politics, and economics are discrete, the more we mix them with impunity. It is a brilliant analysis, but a brilliant analysis of only half the story for it directs all its critical attention toward the triumphalist account of modernity's emergence from premodernity.

What is missing is an appreciation of all the ideological work the notion of premodernity has traditionally performed. Indeed, if modernist narratives really were as clear-cut as many suggest, if they really were built upon notions of forward flight and the wholesale sloughing off of the illusions of the past, then it would be difficult to understand how these narratives became so potent. How has modernity come to appear natural and necessary if its links to the past have been severed? Upon what grounds have modernist narratives succeeded in countering alternative narratives asserting different sorts of futures? If modernists claim that history is a progression from A to B, how have they fended off altermodernists who have instead claimed A → C or A → D? Such questions highlight the limitations of a historical imaginary that truly is linear, that truly does privilege the new.

This is why modernist narratives, in practice, rarely are linear. On the contrary, most adhere to a tripartite structure characterized by *two* great divides in which an original condition, a deep past, anticipates a future condition to which society is now returning: $A^1 \rightarrow B \rightarrow A^2$ with A^1 representing the primitive or natural condition,

B a period of deviation, and A^2 the emerging present or future condition that has been made to appear legitimate insofar as it reinstates a supposedly natural order of things. There is always, in other words, a third chapter. Premodernity is necessarily divided in two. And it is through circularity and the logic of return—return to the primitive, albeit in updated or perfected form—that most modernist narratives have gained rhetorical purchase.

Consider one of anthropology's founding texts: Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society* (1974[1877]). Disdained by many anthropologists as a relic of the discipline's colonialist past, Morgan's account of humanity's development from savagery to barbarism to civilization is typically considered one more example of the Victorian infatuation with progress and linear evolutionary development. Those who take this position have their reasons. A great deal of *Ancient Society* is devoted to inventorying the gradual accumulation of technological and institutional know-how that led to the emergence of ever more civilized societies: stone tools, fire, dugout canoes, civil law, coinage, poetry, religious freedom, common schools, the use of coal, the electric telegraph, and on and on. Civilization, for Morgan, was an additive process, to be sure. Society advanced by building upon the achievements of the former age, and modern man was a giant because he stood on the shoulders of primitives.

But this is not what made *Ancient Society* into an instant classic. The linearity of Morgan's account was hardly the source of its appeal. Rather, it was the powerfully circular manner in which he framed his conclusions that caused such a stir. Indeed, Morgan was one of the key architects of the teleological position that liberal democracy was both humankind's original condition and its future destiny. "Democracy," he wrote in *Ancient Society*, "once universal in a rudimentary form and repressed in many civilized states, is destined to become again universal and supreme" (Morgan 1974[1877]:351).

> A mere property career is not the final destiny of mankind, if progress is to be the law of the future as it has been of the past. The time which has passed away since civilization began is but as a fragment of the past duration of man's existence; and but a fragment of the ages to come. The dissolution of society bids fair to become the termination of a career of which property is the end and aim, because such a career contains the elements of self-destruction. Democracy in government, brotherhood in society, equality in rights…and universal education, foreshadow the next higher plane of society to which experience, intelligence and knowledge are steadily tending. It will be a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient gentes. (Morgan 1974[1877]:562)

The deployment of circularity here is profound. As in the past, so too in the future; statements such as these resonated with many nineteenth-century intellectuals. Engels, for example, concluded *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* by quoting the same passage: "It will be a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty,

equality and fraternity of the ancient gentes. The End" (Engels 1902[1884]:217). It was a kind of "amen" endorsement that others were quick to second. Morgan, in short, was considered to be completing Marxist thought by providing an image of primitive communism that pre-echoed the anticipated future ($A^1 \rightarrow B \rightarrow A^2$).

Morgan and his followers were hardly unique in their reliance upon circular histories to advance a progressive politics. Any number of other chroniclers of modernity's emergence out of premodernity could be used to illustrate the same point, from the philosophes of the eighteenth century to the posthumanists of the present. There is a more important observation to be made, though. While the logic of return is common to many modernist narratives, its earliest and most profound expression appeared in accounts of the history of religion. Beginning with the initial Protestant critiques of the papacy, many theologians and scholars have promoted particular visions of "true religion" both through a contrast with the "false religion" of the recent past (the logic of rupture) *and* through an exposition on the purity, innocence, and naturalness of religion as it was in the deep past (the logic of return). Indeed, the very structure of $A^1 \rightarrow B \rightarrow A^2$ might be regarded as having been modeled on much older Abrahamic notions of human transgression followed by a renewed covenant with God. Be that as it may, one can hardly overestimate the insidious influence of the simple claim that a true and original religion, long since corrupted, must now be reestablished.

To appreciate the impact of this claim, we must know something about its history. Wilfred Cantwell Smith has traced the genealogy of the Western concept of "true religion" with care, documenting the key shift during the seventeenth century from an earlier understanding of religion (*religio*) as Christian piety to a subsequent pluralization of religion in which there were many different systems of belief, directed toward different deities, that could be critically compared. "The plural arises," argues Smith (1978[1962]:40), "when one contemplates from the outside, and abstracts, depersonalizes, and reifies, the various systems of other people of which one does not oneself see the meaning or appreciate the point." To pluralize religion is to externalize the world itself and to assume the position of the objective outside observer with the transcendent authority to evaluate the relative truth or falsity of other peoples' ways of life. Thus did the pluralization of religion—particularly within the Protestant tradition—play a key role in the emergence of a distinctively secular worldview (Smith 1978[1962]:44; see also Asad 1993; Masuzawa 2005).

Assessments of the truth or falsity of other peoples' religions were never based on conviction alone, however, but also on particular constructions of religion's original nature. "Since at least the Reformation," notes David Haycock (2002:140), "religious practice at its most ancient was widely considered by Protestant theologians and apologists to have been 'more' true—or at least less corrupt—than modern religious practice, and that by examining ancient texts and chronologies, this true state of worship could be rediscovered, modern corruptions and adhesions removed, and true Christian worship re-established." Again, there is nothing linear about this strategy.

To break with the medieval past and inaugurate a reformed or enlightened present ($\ldots$B $\rightarrow$ A^2), one depended on conceptions of a prior rupture between an original inviolate religion and the corrupted forms that succeeded it (A^1 $\rightarrow$ B$\ldots$).

For Protestants, deists, and other anti-clerical critics of the early modern period, the protagonists in this first great historical rupture were, without question, the priests. "I suppose none will deny but that Priests have introduced Superstition and Idolatry, as well as sown Quarrels and Dissentions where-ever they came," wrote Lord Cherbury in 1663 (quoted in Haycock 2002:144). Born in the perfect light of God's revelation, humanity fell into idolatrous corruption only at a later stage, through priestcraft, and this must be undone to return society to the divine fold.

The narrative of corruption did more than simply build a compelling case for clerical reform. It also served as an ideological space where Western intellectuals hammered out the tenets of secularism itself. It was here that Locke built his argument for the necessary separation of church and commonwealth, arguing that state governance is one thing, but "the business of true religion is quite another thing." True religion, he argued, is an entirely private matter that individuals come to only through persuasion and inward reflection, never by force, and the true church should therefore be understood as a voluntary association of freely choosing believers focused on heaven, not on earthly influence and power. "Who sees not how frequently the name of the Church, which was venerable in [the] time of the apostles, has been made use of to throw dust in the people's eyes in the following ages?" (Locke 2003[1685]:408). Such statements operated on multiple levels. First, they drew a sharp conceptual line between religion and politics. Second, they further parsed religion into true and false variants: true religion looked inward and heavenward, unsullied by power struggles on earth; false religion was in bed with politics. Third, and for my purposes most important, both distinctions were mapped onto a tripartite historical narrative: in the beginning, religion and politics were distinct, each attending to its own concerns; in the middle period, both were corrupted by their dangerous miscegenation; today, in the modern era, religion and politics are again returning to their true and discrete positions as a result of Protestant reforms and the spread of liberal democracy.

By the latter half of the eighteenth century, the modernist account of religious history had gained considerable clarity. In 1779, Thomas Jefferson wrote Locke's ideas on tolerance and church-state separation into law, establishing the United States as a model for the new age of secular governance. Powerful arguments in both Enlightenment philosophy and Christian theology added intellectual gravity. Kant's portrayal of religion "within the limits of reason alone" was, of course, particularly influential, but related positions were soon developed in Christian theology itself, notably in the writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher, who wedded the Enlightenment emphasis on individual autonomy with the emotive thrust of German Romanticism. Schleiermacher's *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1996[1799]) was a strange but important defense of religion in which he argued that Christianity was in its truest form in early times before it attained a rigid structure. "Thus it was religion when

the ancients…regarded every unique type of life throughout the whole world as the work and reign of an omnipresent being.… It was religion when they rose above the brittle iron age of the world, full of fissures and unevenness, and again sought the golden age on Olympus among the happy life of the gods" (1996[1799]:25). But when the church emerged and instituted orthodox ways of believing and acting, it was, in Schleiermacher's estimation, "a complete departure from its [religion's] characteristic ground" (ibid.). He concluded: "the systematizers have caused all this. Modern Rome, godless but consistent, hurls anathemas and excommunicates heretics; ancient Rome, truly pious and religious in a lofty style, was hospitable to every god and so it became full of gods" (28). In Schleiermacher's theology, ancient polytheism was, ironically, more genuinely Christian than contemporary Catholicism—a response, perhaps, to Hume (1976[1757]), one of the most prominent "cultured despisers" of religion, who had previously offered a much less flattering portrayal of ancient polytheism as the beginning of a long dark history of religious irrationality. But Schleiermacher's praise of a primitive world that was "hospitable to every god" must also be read as part of the evolving Enlightenment discourse on religious tolerance. Indeed, Schleiermacher legitimized the modern struggle for tolerance by claiming that it marked a return to an original state of tolerance, a natural condition of open-armed polytheism prior to the fall into monotheistic dogma.[1]

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, modernist accounts of religion's history gained further clarity, largely through the tremendous impact of Darwinism and the rush to use an evolutionary approach, broadly conceived, to organize the rapidly expanding archive of world peoples. Major texts by Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim, Malinowski, and others became part of an influential anthropological project to explore the historical implications of ethnographic diversity. As Tylor (1913[1871]:2:408) put it, the anthropological ambition was to replace an older theological speculation on religious origins with a new "ethnographic method in theology" involving empirical observations of the living representatives of ages long past.

However novel its methodology, however expanded its data set, the anthropology of religion nevertheless continued to address long-standing Protestant concerns. Earlier debates over the nature of "true religion" resurfaced as anthropological debates over the essential or fundamental qualities of "primitive religion." In part, this took the form of a great preoccupation with definitions: What, at its heart, is religion? How does it differ from magic? And how do both differ from science? What was religion's original relationship to politics and to the running of society? These were not just academic questions. Early anthropology quite explicitly looked to the primitive to build support for particular claims about the proper course of society in the future. "The science of culture is essentially a reformer's science," wrote Tylor (1913[1871]:2:410). "A return to older starting-points may enable [the anthropologist] to find new paths, where the modern track seems stopped by impassable barriers" (2:402).

Early anthropologists thus struck a delicate balance between praise and condemnation of the primitive world, a reflection of the complex discursive role that

primitivity was required to play in the effort to find these new paths. Tylor might write:

> The onward movement from barbarism has dropped behind more than one quality of barbaric character, which cultured modern men look back on with regret, and will even strive to regain by futile attempts to stop the course of history, and restore the past in the midst of the present. So it is with social institutions. The slavery recognized by savage and barbarous races is preferable in kind to that which existed for centuries in late European colonies. The relation of the sexes among many savage tribes is more healthy than among the richer classes of the Mohammedan world. As a supreme authority of government, the savage councils of chiefs and elders compare favourably with the unbridled despotism under which so many cultured races have groaned. The Creek Indians, asked concerning their religion, replied that where agreement was not to be had, it was best to "let every man paddle his canoe his own way"; and after long ages of theological strife and persecution, the modern world seems coming to think these savages not far wrong. (Tylor 1913[1871]:1:26)

But he also was quick to reassure the reader that this was not to say that the primitive world was as moral or enlightened as the modern world. On one hand, then, Tylor's reassertion of the superiority of modernity might be read as buying into the post-Darwinian ideology of inexorable human advance in which the unfolding present is regarded as an inevitable improvement on the past. On the other hand, it is clear that however much the modern stood above the primitive, the primitive somehow still stood above the medieval world. Indeed, the apparent civility of the primitive only arose in comparison to "late European colonies," to the "Mohammedan world," and to the "long ages of theological strife" Europe had just left behind. There is no straight and simple arrow of progress in such statements. Far from it. Tylor was drawing on a familiar trope of historical return: the modern, once again, was presented as breaking with the recent past through a restoration of and improvement upon primitive principles of gender equality, democratic governance, and religious tolerance that had been forsaken.[2]

Needless to say, such claims were subject to ongoing debate. A few decades later, Durkheim offered his own critiques of those who, like Tylor and Morgan, drew unwarranted comparisons between primitive and modern contexts. Durkheim saw no grounds for conceptually equating, for instance, "primitive democracy and that of to-day, the collectivism of inferior societies and actual socialistic tendencies, the monogamy which is frequent in Australian tribes and that sanctioned by our laws, etc." (1965[1915]:114). And yet, when it suited his purposes, Durkheim was entirely willing to make his own circular equations between past and present, notably in his repeated mention of the affinity between the religious aspects of revolutionary populism in France and the totemism of Australian Aborigines. For Durkheim, both were examples of the same effervescent wellspring of religion, sui generis. Note that

Durkheim was not simply making a claim about the universality of the urge toward religion. His claim was more specific and had to do with the comparable "nudity" (Durkheim's term) of the primitive Aborigines and modern political revolutionaries, both of whom were shorn of the "luxuriant vegetation" (presumably, a reference to priestly excesses) that had grown up around and obscured religion's essence in the recent past (1965[1915]:17).

In other contexts, early twentieth-century anthropologists critiqued their predecessors' tendency to discuss primitives as if they were ancient savage philosophers soberly mulling over the metaphysical implications of death and dreams. "Belief in immortality," wrote Malinowski (1948[1925]:51), "is the result of a deep emotional revelation, standardized by religion, rather than a primitive philosophic doctrine." Here, too, we might imagine that Malinowski was registering his opposition to the unwarranted conflation of present and past and to the imposition of modern modes of intellectual thought on a world that had no such traditions. But if Malinowski did away with the image of the primitive philosopher, he was altogether willing to people humanity's origins with a range of other modern professionals. The savage community, he argued elsewhere, contained "both the antiquarian mind" and the "naturalist." Malinowski even claimed that every savage community had its "sociologists" as well—and not just any sort of sociologists, but *functionalists* (like Malinowski) who analyzed and could explain the underlying structure of their tribe's institutions (1948[1925]:35). What was the point of these statements? On the surface, Malinowski clearly sought, in good anthropological fashion, to encourage a sympathetic attitude toward non-Western tribal peoples by translating the unfamiliar into familiar terms. At a deeper level, however, he was participating in the naturalization of historically specific modes of modern intellectual inquiry by presenting them as human enterprises that were present at the very beginning.

Of all the modern professions Malinowski found in the primitive world, the most notable was that of the scientist. "Every primitive community is in possession of a considerable store of knowledge, based on experience and fashioned by reason," he observed (1948[1925]:16). From this, Malinowski concluded that all human communities, past and present, have engaged in scientific inquiry of one sort or another. But Malinowski took this observation a step further by portraying magic—the sine qua non of life "among the Stone Age savages"—as having an especially close kinship with science. Magic, he argued, is "a body of purely practical acts" that draws upon theories, systems of principles, and specific methodologies in a means-ends fashion (1948[1925]:70). It is, as he put it, a sort of pseudo-science, guided by an entirely rational orientation to the world that simply builds from false premises. This was a position Malinowski had inherited from Sir James Frazer, who was more explicit on the subject and had argued at length that primitive magic was "next of kin to science" (or, less flatteringly, "the bastard sister of science") (Frazer 1955[1911–1915]:57).

In pointing to the affinity between magic and science, Malinowski and Frazer simultaneously underscored the difference between magic and religion. For

Malinowski, while magic and religion were both responses to certain life stresses, they operated in very distinct registers. Magic filled technical gaps in knowledge by creating new methods to accomplish entirely straightforward goals, such as hunting or sea travel, whereas religion responded to life crises by positing the presence of supernatural spirits and realms. Magic looked to immanent cause-and-effect relationships, whereas religion posited the existence of another, transcendent world. Hence, Malinowski praised the evolutionary contributions of magic, "which has yet been the best school of man's character" (1948[1925]:90). He offered no comparable praise for religion.

Frazer also privileged magic over religion due to the former's greater similarity to science. In disambiguating magic, religion, and science, he wrote:

> If religion involves, first, a belief in superhuman beings who rule the world, and, second, an attempt to win their favour, it clearly assumes that the course of nature is to some extent elastic or variable, and that we can persuade or induce the mighty beings who control it to deflect, for our benefit, the current of events from the channel in which they would otherwise flow. Now this implied elasticity or variability of nature is directly opposed to the principles of magic as well as of science, both of which assume that the processes of nature are rigid and invariable in their operation…both of which take for granted that the course of nature is determined, not by the passions or caprice of personal beings, but by the operation of immutable laws acting mechanically. (Frazer 1955[1911–1915]:58–59)

Thus when Frazer (65–66) wrote of a progression from an original age of magic to a subsequent age of religion that is now giving way to an age of modern rationality, he charted a complicated back-and-forth motion: from quasi-science to anti-science to true science, from materialism to spirituality to materialism, from the rational to the irrational to the rational.

Such arguments had an air of prophecy about them that drew upon deep Christian themes of original innocence, transgression/corruption, and rebirth/reform. Nowhere is this clearer than in the work of Durkheim, whose implicit anti-clericalism was coupled with a studied respect for religion's contributions to social life generally. Durkheim lamented the fact that religion rang false for modern society and that religious abuses had led many critics toward an empty atheism. Christianity's failings must not be taken as an indictment of religion as a general phenomenon, he argued, for to indict religion is to indict society itself. Rather, we must await religion's rebirth in new form: "In a word, the old gods are growing old or already dead, and others are not yet born…. [But this situation] cannot last forever. A day will come when our societies will know again those hours of creative effervescence, in the course of which new ideas and new formulae are found which serve for a while as a guide to humanity" (Durkheim 1965[1915]:475).

Suffice it to say that the basic notions defining secular modernity—democracy,

universal human rights, gender equality, materialism, scientific rationality, and especially the privatization and depoliticization of religion—were all crafted through a particular historical discourse that was much more than the simple unidirectional story of liberation and successive enlightenment. The modern world was rendered natural and legitimate through a more complicated narrative involving the corruption of an original, quasi-modern project that must now be reestablished and perfected. The individual plotlines have varied: eighteenth-century Protestants may have claimed to be purging religion of its recent corruptions in an effort to reestablish a pure and original form of Christianity, while nineteenth-century anthropologists may have claimed that modern science was shedding religious illusions altogether and returning humanity to its original quasi-scientific, quasi-secular agenda. Either way, a common underlying structure prevailed. By and large, modernist narratives saw history as a progression from true to false to true, $A^1 \rightarrow B \rightarrow A^2$.

Let me leap now to the issue that perplexes me in all this. Where, I find myself asking, is the supposed linearity of the modernist historical imaginary? Where is the myth of progress? Where are the "mainline narratives of simple, cost-free supersession" that are commonly said to have dominated storytelling since the Enlightenment (Taylor 2007:772)? In the examples just considered, we are clearly not looking at a Hegelian model of history with its relentless movement forward toward an unprecedented future (divinely ordained or not). The tripartite division of history into a primitive origin, a corrupted middle period, and a reformed present is not a classic dialectical process. We might even describe it as a movement from thesis to antithesis to *anti-antithesis*—a movement forward that is simultaneously a movement backward. Why has this patently circular narrative structure not been given greater attention?

Part of the answer may have to do with the tendency in contemporary criticism to lump premodernity into a single category and to focus exclusively on claims of an early modern rupture that has liberated us from the shackles of the premoderns. More often than not, the critic attempts to undercut certain perceived dualisms in modernist narratives—past versus present, enchantment versus disenchantment, intolerance versus tolerance, tyranny versus democracy—by asserting either that these dualisms do not exist or that, if they do, it would be wrong to read them as a triumphal progression from a lesser to a more enlightened condition. Either the division between premodern and modern is challenged or the historical movement from one to the other is recoded as an undesirable and alienating fall from grace. Regardless, the critique is typically directed at a stereotyped Whig history.

When the logic of return *is* acknowledged, it tends to be presented as an antimodern gesture rather than one that is fundamentally modern. There is, of course, a significant literature discussing the manner in which constructed images of enlightened primitives or noble savages have been used to critique Western society or to express cynicism regarding its trajectory (Ellingson 2001; Pagden 1982). But I am arguing something different. It was not just the anti-moderns who turned their

gaze backward toward the primitive, the pagan, and the primordial. The past was not merely a source of romantic nostalgia. And neo-paganism or neo-tribalism cannot be reduced to a simple case of the return of the repressed, as Charles Taylor (2007:612–613) has made it out to be. On the contrary, the logic of return lies at the heart of the logic of progress. Primitivists go backward to go backward. Modernists go backward to go forward.

Ironically, we are left with an understanding of the modern historical imagination that is strikingly close to that of the natives in so many early twentieth-century assessments. Consider Mircea Eliade's (1974) classic description of the "archaic man" who rejects history, devalues the passage of time, and lives his life as an endless reenactment of mythical archetypes. He does so, Eliade tells us, to overcome the existential terror of history, to overcome the fear of losing himself in the endless cascade of new moments and altered essences. To acknowledge history, in other words, is to accept constant change and to risk undermining being itself, insofar as history robs the individual of stable forms and a stable self. This is why the primitive indulged in rituals of cosmic rebirth and why he repressed memories of the past as a series of unique events. "Archaic humanity…defended itself, to the utmost of its powers, against all the novelty and irreversibility which history entails" (1974:48). Primitives were people without history by design, deploying eternal archetypes as a strategy to preserve the self (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1966:233–234). "Hence we are justified," argues Eliade (1974:91–92), "in speaking of an archaic ontology, and it is only by taking this ontology into consideration that we can succeed in understanding—and hence in not scornfully dismissing—even the most extravagant behavior on the part of the primitive world; in fact, this behavior corresponds to a desperate effort not to lose contact with *being*."

Exactly who is Eliade talking about in such statements, "archaic man" or "twentieth-century man"? Who stands trembling before the terror of history, the primitive or the modern intellectual writing in the wake of two devastating world wars and the first apocalyptic deployment of nuclear weaponry? Who is consumed with archetypes, the savage or the anthropologist who pores over travelers' reports like tea leaves, searching for that which is elemental, natural, or original in the human experience?

There is a core paradox here. We regularly assume that the modernist conception of history is progressive and linear. We may mark the beginnings of this conception differently: with Judaism's reinterpretation of history as God's progressive intervention in the world, with Enlightenment renderings of universal history as a process of successive liberation, or with Darwin's radically non-teleological account of the origin of the species. Regardless, the claim that the modernist temporality is linear goes unquestioned. And yet, as we have seen, there is nothing linear about many of the specific historical narratives that this intellectual tradition has produced. Quite the contrary. Modernist histories promote an ideology of progress by providing us with ironic accounts of a future return to human origins in which something natural— that is, something essential and unchanging—is recovered.

The incongruity is not between the ideology of progress and the real, on-the-ground history it claims to represent, however incongruous these two things may be. The incongruity plays itself out *within the ideology of progress itself.* Primitives, we are told, suffer historical events in a linear, irreversible fashion and yet they seek to deny this irreversibility through myths of eternal return. But the modernist alternative does not present us with a temporality in which real and imagined histories have become any more aligned. Instead, we seem to be presented with a picture of a modern world that experiences history in a circular fashion and yet struggles to deny this circularity by promoting its own myths of progress. Our history is circular, but we somehow manage to convince ourselves it is linear; their history is linear, but they tell themselves, again and again, it is circular.

For the time being, it is enough to emphasize that there have always been two great divides in the modernist master narrative, and the emergence of modern secular society has always been presented as a return to an original, quasi-secular, quasi-modern project. We are not faced with a linear progressivist evolution, then, but with a classic myth of eternal return, reliant on tropes of reformation and renewed covenants that are obscured when, in a critical mode, we focus solely on the latter half of the story. Dazzled by the violent lunge of the tiger (the logic of rupture), we blind ourselves to the fact that the tiger is chasing its own tail (the logic of return) (figure 1.1).

Primitive Religion and the Burden of Archaeology

Let us turn to consider archaeology's participation in all of this. If much is at stake in accounts of deep antiquity, if this has always been the space where the modern secular project grounded and naturalized its visions of the future, what happened when curiosity drove scholars to put spade in soil and sift through the actual material remains of the ancient world?

To adequately address this question we must go back to archaeology's antiquarian beginnings in England and its links to the larger Enlightenment project.[3] In a superb study, David Haycock (2002) has outlined not only the extent to which Protestant scholarship in seventeenth-century England was invested in writing a religious history of Britain that was independent of Roman Catholic ties, but also the notable role played by antiquarians such as William Stukeley in this project. It was they, notes Haycock, who sought to lend archaeological support to Protestant notions of a true and original Christianity that had existed prior to its corruption by the Catholic Church—a true and original Christianity that was indigenous, not to Israel or Rome, but to the British Isles. Thus arose a deep English fascination with ancient Druidic religion at sites like Stonehenge and Avebury that has persisted into the present.

For many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century antiquarians, ancient Druidic religion stood as an exemplar of the pure and original form of Christianity to which Protestants were now returning. Their thinly veiled agenda was to solidify the critique of papal authority by demonstrating that the ancient Britons had known the

The narrative of rupture

Premodern ⇒	Modern
Religious ontology	Scientific ontology
Religion as public theater	Religion as private belief
Politicized religion	De-politicized religion
Religious intolerance	Religious tolerance
Theocratic despotism	Secular democracy

The narrative of return

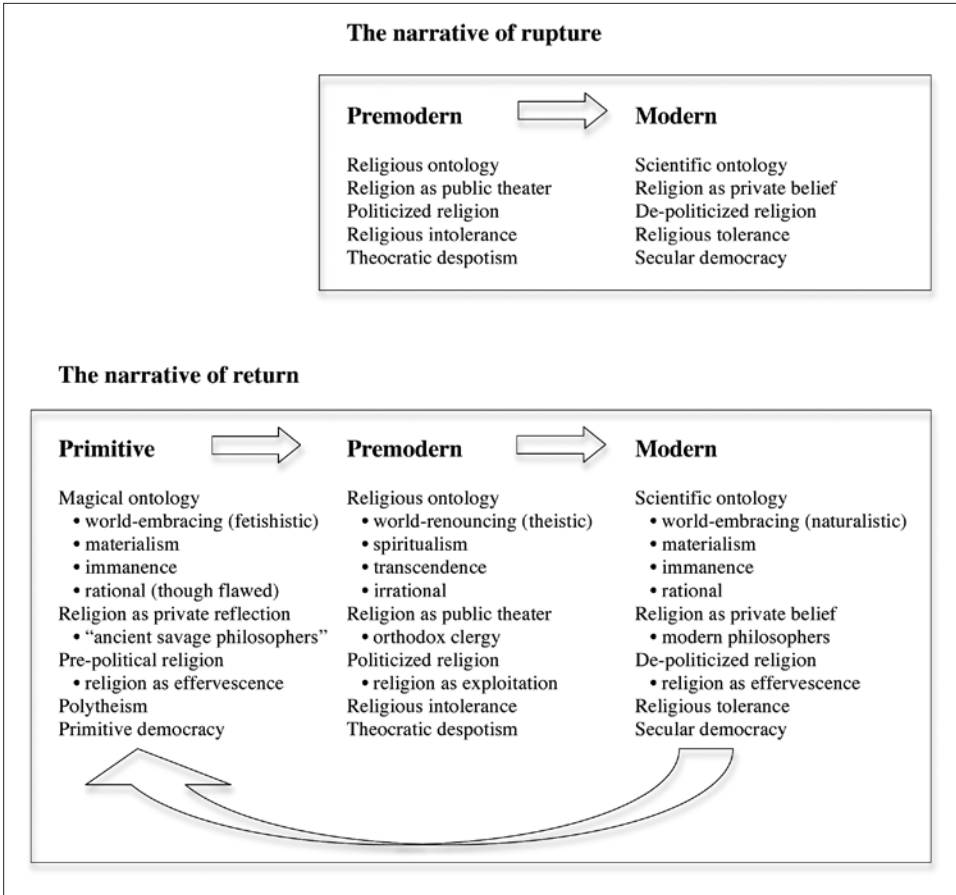| Primitive ⇒	Premodern ⇒	Modern
Magical ontology	Religious ontology	Scientific ontology
• world-embracing (fetishistic)	• world-renouncing (theistic)	• world-embracing (naturalistic)
• materialism	• spiritualism	• materialism
• immanence	• transcendence	• immanence
• rational (though flawed)	• irrational	• rational
Religion as private reflection	Religion as public theater	Religion as private belief
• "ancient savage philosophers"	• orthodox clergy	• modern philosophers
Pre-political religion	Politicized religion	De-politicized religion
• religion as effervescence	• religion as exploitation	• religion as effervescence
Polytheism	Religious intolerance	Religious tolerance
Primitive democracy	Theocratic despotism	Secular democracy

Figure 1.1. Two metanarratives of modernization and secularization. The first, emphasizing rupture, is linear. The second, emphasizing return, is circular.

gospel, as Henry Rowlands put it in 1723, "in the earliest Years of Christianity, even before *Rome* itself," and this task was to be accomplished through, among other methods, investigation into "Erections, Monuments, and Ruins; Idifices and Inscriptions" (quoted in Haycock 2002:113, 135). In this way, Protestantism, nationalism, and an emergent study of archaeology all became intimately linked. "The study of British history," observes Haycock (114), "was significant in the early modern period on at least two grounds: it served to prove and defend the independence and antiquity of the Church of England, and it returned true Christian (i.e., Protestant) worship to the original dictates of Christianity at its very earliest date."

The antiquarians kept good company. No less a figure than Sir Isaac Newton mused over the significance of archaeological sites as evidence of a lost Eden of sorts in which spirituality and scientific knowledge flourished in true and pure forms. "It's certain that ye old religion of the Egyptians," he wrote, "was ye true [Noachian]

religion tho corrupted before the age of Moses by the mixture of fals Gods with that of ye true one" (quoted in Gaukroger 1991:192). Newton, quite clearly, did not hold a linear conception of historical progress; in no way did he regard the ancient remains of Egypt and other parts of the world as primitive relics underscoring the theological and scientific advances made by the modern age. Rather, Newton looked to archaeological sites as evidence of a past sophistication, long since degraded, that he and his colleagues were struggling to reestablish. He was convinced, for instance, that the heliocentric understanding of the universe—that most jarring of scientific revelations during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—must have been known to the earliest civilizations, and he claimed to find evidence of this in ancient sites like Stonehenge and Solomon's Temple (Haycock 2002:154–156).

It was Stukeley, however, who pioneered the study of British monuments and used this research to promote a circular view of history in which pre-Roman and post-Reformation Britain were conceptually equated. The Druids, in Stukeley's analysis, were Phoenician colonists who brought the "true, patriarchal religion," as originally revealed by God, to England during the time of Abraham: "Therefore they brought along with them the patriarchal religion, which was so extremely like Christianity, that in effect it differ'd from it only in this; they believed in a Messiah who was to come into the world, as we believe in him that is come…the Druids were of *Abraham's* religion intirely, at least in the earliest times, and worshipp'd the supreme Being in the same manner as he did" (Stukeley 1740:2). Elsewhere, Stukeley (1763:8) even went so far as to refer to Abraham as a Druid—indeed, as the "first Druid."

There are two important points to make in regard to Stukeley's thesis. First, he was among the first to collect archaeological data in response to pointed research questions. Stukeley excavated and took careful measurements of Stonehenge, for instance, to demonstrate that it was laid out using an Egyptian cubit measuring system, and this explicit deployment of material evidence permits us to speak of him as among the world's first archaeologists in the modern sense. Second, Stukeley's research conformed very closely to the modernist narrative structure in which, as we have seen, the intended reforms of the present are cast as a grand return to the purity of origins. Stukeley's archaeological model of patriarchal religion, in this sense, was very much in keeping with the writings of anti-papal critics such as Voltaire, who outlined the history of religion in bolder (and more acerbic) terms:

> Men are surely blind and singularly unfortunate to prefer an absurd and bloody religion, supported by hangmen and surrounded with pyres; a religion that can only be approved by those to whom it gives power and riches; a restricted religion that is received in only a part of the world, to a simple and universal religion, that the *christicoles* themselves confess was the religion of mankind in the time of Seth, Enoch, and Noah. *If the religion of the first patriarchs is true, then the religion of Jesus is false.* (Voltaire 1974:213, emphasis added)

Voltaire, like Stukeley, was a deist and a Freemason, and both were wedded to the tripartite vision of history that dominated eighteenth-century thought in Europe. Both, in other words, took for granted that there were two great divides that structured the evolution of religion and society. As Stukeley put it in his monograph on Avebury: "in all accounts of the first beginnings of nations, they had the first religion: 'till as every where, time, richness, politeness and prosperity bring on corruption in church and state" (quoted in Haycock 2002:184). A fall into corruption, then, marked the first divide. The second divide involved a more recent—indeed, an emergent—return to the fold, a return to a true religion, purged of political machinations.

Needless to say, Stukeley's archaeological research into the history of religion cannot be divorced from its British context. In the United States, where modern Euro-Americans and the region's ancient inhabitants were historically separated by a gulf of colonialism, the nationalistic interest in archaeological remains necessarily led in different directions. And yet, there too the logic of return repeatedly structured commentary on the archaeological past. Thus it was repeatedly insisted that ancestral Native Americans originally descended from the lost tribes of Israel, that they had since degenerated, and that they must now return to the true faith through European and Euro-American guidance. By the early nineteenth century, speculation about actual archaeological sites gave rise to a more insidious narrative in which the monumental earthen mounds of the Ohio and Mississippi valleys were interpreted as the remains of a glorious original civilization (more often than not an originally white civilization) that had, at some point in the late pre-Columbian period, fallen before the savage ancestors of the modern Native Americans (Silverberg 1986). Indian removal policies and expanding Euro-American colonialism were thereby justified as a return to white, Christian control of the continent.

As Anglophone archaeology became increasingly empirical during the middle and late nineteenth century, these sorts of arguments came under repeated attack. Well distanced from the bloody religious battles of the seventeenth century, still unaware of the world wars that would create an existential crisis in the twentieth century, dazzled by the scientific and economic gains of industrialization and colonialism, Victorian scholarship reached new heights of confidence in the inevitable march of human progress. If ever there was a time when modernist narratives actually were linear, it was during this period, particularly following the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. Countering early modern models of human degeneration briefly became a major charge for both anthropologists and archaeologists. Among the latter, Sir John Lubbock offered one of the most influential critiques. First published in 1865 and reprinted many times, his *Pre-Historic Times* wove together ethnographic and archaeological evidence to argue—more in the style of Herbert Spencer than Darwin—that humanity has consistently progressed and will continue to progress toward not only more sophisticated technology but also greater happiness and moral virtue (Lubbock 1892[1865]:599–601). (Not incidentally, Lubbock was a banker by profession during an extended period of economic growth and prosperity in Britain.)

Lubbock's argument for linear and uniform human progress shone brightest when he discussed technology and the age-by-age growth of knowledge regarding materials and techniques. It was he who first introduced terms like "Paleolithic," "Mesolithic," and "Neolithic" into archaeological discourse. When it came to the history of religion, however, his faith in the inexorability of progress wavered. Lubbock's position on the history of religion was clearly modeled on Comte's (1880[1830]) positive philosophy, and Lubbock made the same convoluted effort to fit the entire history of religion into a single uniform movement toward an ever more transcendent conception of the divine. For Lubbock, as for Comte, the most primitive Paleolithic societies lived in a world of pure immanence; every object was naively imagined to be its own god or spirit and to be coercible as such (Lubbock 1892[1865]:206). The evolution of religion, then, was understood as the process by which these fetishistic object-gods gradually became more abstract, more powerful, and more withdrawn from the physical world, ultimately becoming the arbiters of morality and the afterlife rather than agents who interfered with the mechanical and scientifically predictable running of things on earth. Comte had argued that religion and science are two sides of a common evolutionary coin: it is only as God becomes truly supernatural that the natural world is liberated of fetishism and becomes available to true scientific study (cf. Gauchet 1999). Lubbock concurred (cf. Lubbock 1892[1865]:373).

And yet, the old Protestant story of corruption and reform lived on in the margins, showing its face in Lubbock's occasional references to striking deviations from the ideal progression of events. Pre-Columbian Mexico and Peru—in short, all of the New World's indigenous state societies—had strayed from the path, leading them instead "to a religion of terror, which finally became a terrible scourge of humanity" (Lubbock 1892[1865]:385). So too had medieval Europe lapsed back into "the dark belief in witchcraft, which led to thousands of executions, and hung like a black pall over the Christianity of the middle ages" (386–387). Such statements remind us that much of the talk of linear progress during the late nineteenth century was simultaneously haunted by an imperial nightmare of the inevitable cycle of civilization's growth, spiritual corruption, and collapse. This is especially apparent in the morbid fascination with ancient ruins that was widespread among both Europeans and Euro-Americans of the period. In the shadow of the crumbling facade of a Mayan temple or a Mississippian mound, white colonial societies found both mysterious civilizations of the past as well as gloomy harbingers of a future in which another collapse into barbarism seemed unavoidable (Miller 1994). Even when it was not embraced, the logic of return clung to the modernist imaginary as ruins cling to the land.

Compared with the largely speculative and romantic musings of the preceding two centuries, twentieth-century archaeology might reasonably be described as an altogether novel scholarly pursuit. This, of course, was the period of archaeology's professionalization in academic departments and, later, in cultural resource management firms. It was also, more significantly, the heady period when a great many methodological advances led to the collection of a vast array of new types of data.

While remarkable in and of itself, the expansion of archaeological data sets becomes all the more so when compared with simultaneous trends in sociocultural anthropology, which could be said to have *lost* its evolutionary data sets over this same period as critiques of ethnology's primitivist underpinning led many scholars to question whether contemporary non-Western peoples could really provide any insight at all into humanity's prior evolutionary stages (see Fabian 1983). Indeed, by the 1980s, archaeologists had fully replaced ethnographers as the anthropological specialists of the premodern, and their claims were increasingly bolstered by an ever-expanding arsenal of analytical techniques.

What effect did this have on the way archaeologists theorized religion? Ironically, the rise of a truly scientific archaeology and the amassing of new data did little to alter the well-worn anti-clerical story line in which an originally pure religious life came to be progressively corrupted by priests seeking political gain. And it did little to change the overall message of the history of religion: first, that modern society has been right to depoliticize the church and return religion to a matter of private belief, and second, that secularization is the natural fulfillment of a primitive—that is, an originary—agenda.

The idiom, however, was increasingly Marxist rather than Protestant. This is most clearly seen in the widely read work of V. Gordon Childe, whose sweeping early to mid-twentieth-century accounts of Old World prehistory and history firmly established terms like superstructure, ideology, contradiction, and revolution in the archaeological vernacular. Childe did not foreground the history of religion in his work—that position was reserved for the history of technology and economic organization—but his position on the matter was hardly hidden. Childe's understanding of religion's origins combined insights from Frazer and Durkheim. Paleolithic peoples, he argued, deployed principles of sympathetic magic as a pragmatic means of intervening in natural processes, and they also developed the first "germs of religion" (e.g., "sacrifice," "totemic ceremonies and abstinences," and the like) as a means of promoting solidarity among society's members (Childe 1964[1942]:54). Only later, following the development of agriculture, did such "useful illusions" become the monopolies of secret societies and priesthoods, which unleashed their latent potential as tools of economic and political exploitation. Thus did "nebulous and fluid superstitions" come to be transformed into "more rigid forms of theological dogmas, backed up by organized 'churches' and supporting the vested interests of priesthoods, their royal patrons and divine kings" (145).

Like his Victorian predecessors, Childe (1944) wrote of unidirectional human progress as an inevitable reality. Nevertheless, the logic of return remained foundational to his historical reconstructions. Take, for instance, the symmetry in Childe's emphasis on the two great emancipatory struggles in human history, the first of which was undertaken during Paleolithic and early Neolithic times as individuals sought to liberate themselves from subservience to their natural environment. This first struggle sought to separate humanity from animality, a feat that was accomplished partly

through technological innovations (stone tools, fire, clothing, domesticated plants) and partly through illusions of spiritual power (principally, sympathetic magic), both of which gave humans control over that which had previously enslaved them: nature. The "Neolithic revolution," in Childe's account, marked the consummation of this emancipatory project (1948[1936]:49, 56). But in good Marxist fashion, Childe also regarded each historical solution as the source of new contradictions. Hence, the very strategies that had liberated human beings from the natural environment ended up enslaving them in the ensuing social environment. On the heels of the Neolithic revolution, technological innovations revealed their vulnerability to monopolization, and religion, for its part, soon slipped from an innocuous source of social solidarity and individual empowerment into a grand ideology legitimizing the elites' control of the masses. In this way, the state became its own hostile and oppressive environment with which the individual was forced to contend. As Paleolithic peoples sought liberation from the processes of nature, so must modern peoples seek liberation from the ideologies and structures of the state.[4]

A similar position was simultaneously developed within American anthropology by Leslie White, also a card-carrying Marxist. Though White primarily drew upon ethnographic rather than archaeological data, his portrayal of the history of religion was, for all intents and purposes, identical to Childe's. Again we are presented with a story in three acts. The history of religion, we are told, began with an initial "tribal" period during which religion offered illusions of control over nature for individuals and promoted social solidarity within human groups. Significantly, the most primitive religions stayed out of politics altogether: "primitive peoples felt for the most part that they could manage [their social affairs] themselves without the interference or the help of the gods" (White 1959:218). All this changed after the agricultural revolution, however, which for White, as for Childe, is the key fulcrum on which human history has teetered. As agricultural communities produced increasing surpluses to be fought over, the community members who had previously served as mere intermediaries between humans and the spirit world gradually asserted themselves as demigods. Shaman became priest and then divine king as religious beliefs released their hidden potential to serve as an ideological tool for political and economic oppression. This dangerous miscegenation of religion and politics—this "marked intrusion of the deities into the social affairs of mankind" (White 1959:218)—is what White referred to as the "state-church," humanity's great transgression that the modern age is finally learning to overthrow.

Most now regard Leslie White as a marginal figure in the intellectual history of sociocultural anthropology, but his influence on American archaeology has been profound, both directly, in the case of key archaeologists, such as Lewis Binford, who studied under him, and indirectly via anthropologists, such as Marshall Sahlins, Elman Service, and Roy Rappaport, who extended aspects of White's evolutionary project and continue to be common reference points for contemporary archaeological theory. Regardless, the important point is that the combined writings of Childe and

White effectively repackaged the old Protestant narrative of religion's historical progression, updating its terminology but not fundamentally altering its overall structure. Rather than speaking in theological terms about an original "true religion" that became corrupted or "false" and that must, through reformation, be returned to its true form, anthropologists were now able to speak more scientifically about "adaptive" early religions that became "maladaptive" and that must, in some sense, become adaptive again. Or they could speak of early religions focused on private matters of concern (shamanism) that became institutionalized and politicized over time by a priestly class (theocracy) and that now, in the modern age, are returning to their private forms once again. Or they could speak of early religions as having been a means of social "integration" that evolved to become a means of elite "legitimization" and that are now returning to the innocuous matter of cultural "integration" (in the sense, for instance, that Christianity is often said to form a common and unifying cultural background for an otherwise secular Europe).

This is not to say that subsequent anthropologists have always discussed the history of religion in precisely these terms. On the contrary, since the 1970s, the discipline has more or less eschewed the very genre of the grand narrative, religious or otherwise. Still, as we have seen, such narratives continue to quietly propagate in the shadows, receiving little or no comment precisely because anthropology's overall account of the history of religion has become fragmented: archaeologists are charged with explaining the evolutionary progression from human origins to the rise of theocratic regimes (i.e., the rise of the archaic state); sociocultural anthropologists are given the task of writing the genealogy of modernity's emergence out of the medieval (i.e., the rise of the liberal democratic state). To the extent that these two histories are kept separate—to the extent, for instance, that archaeologists and sociocultural anthropologists do not contribute to each other's edited volumes—the discipline as a whole is able to replicate the overarching story line without ever confronting it.

But the situation is more complicated yet, because the archaeology of religion has itself become internally specialized and subdivided. Renfrew (1994:50) hinted as much in the early 1990s, observing that during the latter half of the twentieth century, two divergent views of religion emerged within archaeology: a functionalist view that "saw religion as useful in ensuring the smooth functioning of society by ensuring some considerable degree of community of belief, some acceptance of the social system, and hence some general social solidarity among members of the community," and a "Marxist" view that took religion to be "a means, developed by the elite, for the manipulation of the masses." The archaeology of religion has broadened somewhat since then, but the division still captures the lion's share of contemporary research. What Renfrew failed to mention, however, is that these two positions clearly map onto an evolutionary division as well. There is no question that functionalist or Durkheimian theories of religion are far more frequently drawn upon in the study of small-scale band and early village societies while Marxist approaches, loosely conceived, almost always characterize the study of chiefdoms and archaic

states. Social scale and complexity, in other words, largely determine the sort of theory archaeologists draw upon to think about religion.

Why is this so? Why are Marxist analyses of hunter-gatherer religions so rare in twentieth-century archaeology? And why are Durkheimian analyses of state religions unheard of?

The answer leads us back to the deep fraternity between archaeology, secularism, and modernity's dominant myth of eternal return. In its portrayal of religious experiences among small-scale prehistoric societies, archaeology continues to produce visions of an original, natural condition—visions upon which secularist narratives have always depended, as we have seen. This is where the discipline has kept alive nineteenth-century discussions of sympathetic magic as a matter of cause-and-effect relations in nature (a proto-science) and of religious ritual as a kind of benign communalism (a proto-nationalism) that integrates the group while staying well clear of the political machinations of individuals (e.g., Coulam and Schroedl 2004; Lipe and Hegmon, ed. 1989). Not surprisingly, discussions of power and ideology rarely occur in the archaeology of simple hunter-gatherers or early agriculturalists. Such matters are reserved for the archaeology of more complex polities, where an extensive literature examines the growth of ancestor cults, ritual violence, the restriction of access to sacred objects and spaces, the transformation of the shaman into a religious elite, and the like (e.g., Bauer 1996; Brumfiel 1998; DeMarrais et al. 1996; Emerson 1996; Knapp 1988; Miller and Tilley 1984).

There are two observations to make regarding the archaeological texts just cited. First, all of them accept without examination the premise that religion is a universal category, an aspect of the human experience with certain fundamental, if difficult to specify, qualities and concerns that can be found in all societies, past and present. Second, they assume that the process of social evolution has not entailed substantial changes to religion's fundamental qualities and concerns (they are, after all, fundamental). "Religion," from this perspective, does not truly evolve; rather, it is religion's relationship with other aspects of the human experience—notably, with politics and economics—that changes. This is how it becomes possible for archaeologists to say, over and over again, that something called religion came to be "intertwined" with something called politics with the rise of complex society.

In the following chapters, I develop a general critique of these assumptions. Here, it will suffice to highlight one text that stands out among archaeological offerings insofar as it explicitly reengages the grand narrative. Brian Hayden's *Shamans, Sorcerers, and Saints: A Prehistory of Religion* (2003) is an ambitious book, designed for a wide readership, that draws upon an ecological approach to chart the history of religion over the past half million years. Hayden's analysis builds from the premise that religion is a strategy used by individuals to promote their self-interest as they seek access to food, shelter, defense, reproduction, comfort, political power, and so on: whatever else it might also be, religion is an effort to derive personal benefits from the world, the study of which Hayden refers to as a "political ecology" of religion.

To be sure, Hayden's approach to religion cannot be used to represent contemporary archaeological research writ large; its materialism is clearly at odds with certain currents of idealism within European archaeological circles, for instance. But those casting stones at ecological approaches such as Hayden's often do so hypocritically, the vehemence of their critiques stemming from an unwillingness to own up to the materialist premises that quietly underwrite their own work. Hayden's special crime, if it can be considered such, is that he is explicit. Regardless, he is perhaps the only modern anthropologist to tackle the full sweep of human religious history and so deserves special attention.

Here are the brief outlines of Hayden's argument. We are told that religious ritual originally evolved during the Middle Paleolithic (if not before) as an adaptation to a dangerous and uncertain natural environment in which there would have been strong selective pressure for practices that enhanced mutual aid. The ecstatic experiences of collective religious ritual, reasons Hayden, would have promoted social bonding, and this would have given evolving human societies a competitive edge early on (see also Hayden 1987). "People that pray together, stay together," he argues in a basically Durkheimian mode (Hayden 2003:32). Alongside the collectivism of early religion, however, were the more individualistic practices of shamans. Early shamans, he suggests, were many things, but their primary function was to serve as "technicians of ecstasy" who managed vital forces that were "much like electricity" and helped sustain the community at large (2003:50–57). There is a familiar comparison between shamanism and modern science—"at the extremes, science and traditional religions that view the world as full of sacred forces seem to have many points in common" (401)—but it is especially interesting that Hayden also draws a comparison between early shamans and modern businessmen. Shamanic rituals, we learn, are pragmatic and goal-oriented; they "sometimes even take on the flavor of business contracts" (10). Echoing descriptions of the entrepreneurial energy of free-market systems, Hayden claims that "shamanism is always about the release of one's wild genius." Of course, he is also careful to distinguish shamanism "from the priestly attempts to control economics and politics that characterize hierarchical religions" (57).

During the Upper Paleolithic, hunter-gatherers in a few regions became more sedentary and hierarchical, and it is at this evolutionary point—at the transition from generalized to complex hunter-gatherers, also known as the rise of "transegalitarian" societies—that Hayden first finds evidence of aspiring elites seeking to monopolize religious experience in an effort to build and legitimize political power:

> What seems to occur as transegalitarian societies become more complex is that shamans begin to specialize and create hierarchies; only those at the top are authorized to conduct the most important initiations or other ceremonies and thus collect the most lucrative fees or favors. In all this, we can see the dilution or subordination of the original ecstatic spiritual nature of the shaman in order to accommodate political

goals of the families or groups that sponsor their own shamans and underwrite their training. (2003:151)

These processes continued into the Neolithic, when, Hayden claims, "religion took a decisive turn." As "communities gradually evolved toward chiefdom-level societies, aspiring elites undoubtedly attempted to extend the influence of their own lineage ancestral cults to veneration by the entire community" (209). Enter the priest. Enter public cults and temple economies. Enter the ideological fount of oppression that would plague the masses for thousands of years to come.

The details of Hayden's account become predictable after this point. We are told that European megaliths like Stonehenge were orchestrated by priests who "were only using religion and their ancestors as a means to express their wealth and success while simultaneously pumping up their claim to ancestral sources of preternatural power" (2003:235). From there, it was a short journey to the emergence of priest-kings. With the rise of archaic states, "the king became god" and sought to eliminate all means of accessing the spiritual realm that were not under official state control (378). While originating in populist movements in opposition to state hierarchies, the Abrahamic religions nevertheless proved to be equally detrimental to the masses, ultimately giving rise to religiously motivated wars and newly expanded forms of imperialism (384–385). By medieval times, by the end of Hayden's account, Western religions had grown radically intolerant, a far cry from humanity's earliest Paleolithic communities, which had embraced religious diversity and were even accepting of relatively high levels of atheism and agnosticism (10–11).

The dominant arc of Hayden's prehistory of religion, as in much Protestant scholarship since the sixteenth century, is a bleak one. Primordial religion sits upon a kind of moral pedestal as having been practical, tolerant, democratic, ecologically adaptive, and supportive of both the individual and the community. Since the Neolithic, however, things seem to have generally worsened rather than improved: religion has become increasingly political, destructive, ideological, and oppressive. But if the old narrative of corruption is strongly present in Hayden's account, so too is the Protestant vision of a modern world that is throwing off clerical corruption, returning to the fold, and reinstating a pure form of original spirituality. The difference is that Hayden sees this return to the past as having been inaugurated by the Industrial Revolution rather than the Protestant Reformation and by capitalists rather than theologians. Modern economics, liberal democracy, and the empowerment of the individual, he argues, have undercut older religions, setting them adrift. And this has cleared space for a return to the individually satisfying and ecologically responsible spirituality that characterized Paleolithic shamanism millennia ago. It has cleared space, as Hayden (2003:413) puts it, for the "rediscovery" of "the ancient roots of traditional religion...long-suppressed."

Perhaps after a long detour of some 30,000 years during which aspiring elites sought

to monopolize control of the supernatural, religion is finally returning to its popular and more universal roots. Just as industrialization freed the slaves, eliminated crushing workloads for many workers, and made politics more democratic, so it seems to be reconstituting religious life. I would predict that religious control, too, is returning to the hands of people in general, but only time will tell how far this trend will go and what forms it will take. (414)

Herewith ends modern archaeology's most sustained examination of the evolution of religion, but not before Hayden offers up a sixteen-point checklist designed to help students decide which neo-pagan cult might be right for them!

Hayden is hardly alone in looking kindly upon the shaman. Shamanic ritual and the experience of altered states are by far the most intensely studied phenomena within the archaeology of religion at the moment (e.g., Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005; Price 2001; VanPool 2003; Whitley 2000), and many of the scholars involved in this research seem to regard shamanism with special admiration, particularly when compared with their negative portrayals of the bloody priestcraft of state religions. Some have gone further and explicitly argued that we have much to learn from modern neo-shamans and neo-pagans who, like archaeologists, visit prehistoric sites in search of communion with the ancients (see Rountree 2002, 2007; Wallis 2003).

Be that as it may, I suspect the large majority of European and American archaeologists would agree that *organized* religions—that is, religions with priesthoods, orthodox teachings, inflexible codes of behavior, and political aspirations—are anachronistic relics that have little role to play in a modernizing world. Most would probably also agree that the "long detour of some 30,000 years" has finally run its course. Just as some political economists claim that Western liberal democracy has ushered in the end of history, many archaeologists accept that modern science is presiding over the end of belief. "There is probably no way to turn back, no matter how fiercely reactionary some believers may be," argue Lewis-Williams and Pearce in one of the few monograph-length studies of prehistoric religion that rivals Hayden's in scope. They continue: "True, the rise of fundamentalism with its desire to control scientific research in some parts of the West must give us pause, but it seems unlikely that, in the long run, scientific advance with its rejection of supernatural agency can be stopped. Attempts to achieve a rapprochement between science and religion are today common, but they inevitably end in adjustments to religious belief, not to scientific findings" (2005:290). Such unblinking faith in secularization, rare though it may be in other humanities and social sciences, is common among archaeologists. In the opening chapter of yet another volume dedicated to the subject, David Whitley and Kelley Hays-Gilpin (2008:20) argue that earlier archaeologists generally avoided discussions of prehistoric religion "because, initially at least, science and religion were competing modes of thought." But the situation has now changed, they contend: "it now seems safe to say that in the West we are freed from the shackles of religious thought and authority" (Whitley 2008:86). "Science is now sufficiently

mature as a mode of thought to turn its gaze towards its former rival, in order to understand religion as one of the universals of human social life" (Whitley and Hays-Gilpin 2008:20). There is a distinctly secular irony in such statements: now that we in the West are no longer religious, we are free to examine religion as a "universal" human endeavor. This is what Haraway (1988:582) acerbically referred to as the "god trick," whereby the scientist somehow convinces his audience that he stands fully outside the world and so is able to examine it in an unsituated, politically neutral, ahistorical, and entirely authoritative fashion.

The Challenge of Postsecularism

Needless to say, one never does stand outside the world, and god tricks are only able to expose the illusions of others by hiding the illusions of one's own. The more deeply invested we become in the logic of rupture and in modernity's distinction vis-à-vis the recent past, the more we paradoxically rely on narratives of return to an ancient past with which we have some essential, if long dormant, affinity. Secular futures, in other words, have always been fashioned out of quasi-secular pasts in which magic was like science, shamans were like surgeons, religion was private, society was tolerant, and spirituality had nothing at all to do with politics. In the mythos of secular scholarship, modernity has always been a second coming.

But secularism's myth of eternal return, in its outlines at least, has been borrowed from a Christian tradition that still has uses for it. Indeed, reformation continues to be a pressing concern for many Protestants in the United States, although the target of reform has now become secularism itself, and the "true religion" they seek to reinstate, ironically, is an earlier Christianity that had much more direct control over the state. History must be made again; fresh pasts must be created to accommodate hoped-for futures. After studying the new historiography of the Christian right, Jeff Sharlet observed that while the "theocentric" governance they dream of is a long way off, the creation of a Christian origin story for America is already well under way. It is not to be found in the standard American histories, of course—which the fundamentalists claim have all been whitewashed by liberal, secular scholarship—"but in another story, one more biblical, one more mythic and more true. Secularism hides this story, killed the Christian nation, and tried to dispose of the body. Fundamentalism wants to resurrect it, and doing so requires revision: fundamentalists, looking backward, see a different history" (Sharlet 2006:34). They see a different history in which the separation of church and state was never the intent of the founding fathers. America, the new religious historians emphasize, was established as a necessarily Christian nation; secularization was a perversion of this original mandate; and the future, therefore, must seek to reunite church and state, religion and politics, Christianity and national identity once again. $A^1 \rightarrow B \rightarrow A^2$. Sharlet keenly observes that this fundamentalist narrative is proving especially potent because, while making its truth claims like all histories, it never denies its mythic structure. On the contrary, it embraces it.

There is something to be learned from this, particularly for a discipline like anthropology whose reconstructions of human social development have always been much more than a cold parade of facts. Mythic structures are easily obscured when history is written by specialists one piece at a time. When archaeologists study the progressive politicization of "religion" from Paleolithic to medieval times ($A^1 \rightarrow B$), when sociocultural anthropologists examine the alleged depoliticization or privatization of "religion" from medieval to modern times ($B \rightarrow A^2$), and when both ignore the work of their subdisciplinary colleagues just down the hall, it is easy to slip into the mistaken conclusion that the Western historical imaginary is linear and progressive. It is easy to reify the claim that we are unique in this regard, that we are revolutionary in our focus on revolutionary breaks with the past. This is a strange species of purification in which anthropology—recent anthropology—has been especially complicit. We have internalized the logic of rupture through a rupture of our own within the discipline, through the erection of a great divide between archaeology and sociocultural anthropology, between the study of premodernity and the study of modernity. But the more the West tells itself it has broken with the past, the more invested it becomes in narratives of a return to the past. Like the bodies of the undead in a B-grade horror film, the chopped-up fragments of our cultural myths pull themselves together whether we like it or not, which is undoubtedly why the culture wars have come to focus so intensely on which historical details are or are not to be included in classroom textbooks (see Shorto 2010), those remaining (undead) bastions of the grand narrative within a contemporary intellectual scene that is otherwise hostile toward such things.

This is what postsecularism exposes. And this is why it presents such important challenges for both sociocultural anthropology and archaeology. My interests are primarily in the latter, so I will not push further my plea that sociocultural anthropologists seriously unpack their reliance on "premodernity" as an analytical category, which is silently implied, of course, whenever conversations about secular modernity are on the table. Pointing to the history of Islam as a counter to the overly Christian moorings of most Western accounts of the emergence of the secular age (see Warner et al. 2010) does not sufficiently address the problem. The premodern always maps out a far vaster ideological terrain, one that sociocultural anthropologists will only be able to navigate once they have at least a passing familiarity with contemporary archaeological scholarship.

As archaeologists, we must take on a symmetrical task. We must be willing to undertake a critical evaluation of how our individual research projects—restricted in time and space though they may be—articulate with the broader cultural vision of secularization as a historical process. To what extent does our use of "religion" as an analytical category in the study of premodernity smuggle in an implicit set of oppositions (between church and state, belief and action, rationality and irrationality, immanence and transcendence, religion and the secular) that makes the secular modern appear natural and inevitable? Once we have addressed this issue, once

we have gained perspective on the persistent interpenetration of reconstructed pasts and desired futures, once we have come to terms with the mythic current flowing through our research, the challenge then expands. If our secularization narratives are breaking down, if we are becoming resigned to a future that will be as enchanted as ever, how will this alter our understandings of premodern worlds? Will we dig in our heels and continue to promote secularism through our portrayals of the ancient past? Will we search out alternative narratives that clear spaces for alternative futures? Or might we work toward archaeological accounts that escape the dual logic of rupture and return altogether?