Authorizing the Human Person in a Cosmopolitan Age: Science, Society, and Identity

A thematic synthesis
Rome, June 3-6, 2015

A project of
Contending Modernities
From June 3-6, 2015, an interdisciplinary and international cohort of scholars, journalists, and public intellectuals gathered in Rome, Italy to grapple with pressing questions related to the moral and political status of the human person, the possibilities of collaboration across discursive traditions, and the formulation of new patterns of belonging within diverse and contentious modernities. The conference “Authorizing the Human Person in a Cosmopolitan Age: Science, Society, and Identity,” gave scholars affiliated with the Contending Modernities working groups Science and the Human Person (SHP) and Global Migration and the New Cosmopolitanism (GM) an opportunity to share their research findings for feedback and critical responses. It also was the occasion for formally launching two new working groups organized around the topics of Authority, Community, and Identity (ACI) with geographical foci in Sub-Saharan Africa and Indonesia. The plenary conference marked the completion of the first phase of the ambitious research agenda of Contending Modernities (CM).

Debate and discussions focused on the encounter of Catholic and Muslim religious thought and practice with various forms of secular modernity. This report will, among other things, investigate the multiple meanings of “the secular” in the modern context. These range from “the worldly and non-religious,” to a comprehensive way of imagining the world and human endeavor grounded in an “exclusive humanism” or “self-sufficing humanism”—“a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing,” as the philosopher Charles Taylor puts it. While noting the differences between secular and religious ways of knowing, evaluating, and engaging the world and society, we also acknowledge the intermingling of religious and secular sensibilities, assumptions, and commitments in many—most?—modern individuals. This point will be elaborated in what follows.

The conference deliberations ranged from bioethical dilemmas born out of the disparate ways religious and secular traditions have authorized the human person, to political challenges and opportunities that modernity has presented for creative coexistence in the pluralistic urban centers of Europe and North America.

Decentering Euro-American narratives about secular modernity and religiosity, the ACI Working Groups explored issues related to religious minorities, ethnic violence, and conflict over land and education in Africa and Southeast Asia, and how such debates are framed in the context of contested notions of authority, community, and identity.

Rather than producing a detailed summary of these rich conversations, this report offers a synthetic and thematic account of the debates that unfolded in Rome, reflecting both the kind of research CM has accomplished thus far and the kind of research which is necessary for the next phase of the initiative. Highlighting the potential of this ambitious re-
search agenda, we put the conference proceedings in conversation with other scholarship in the fields of normative political theory and religious studies. The next phase of Contending Modernities will intervene in broader debates about multiple modernities and the phenomenology of the secular, addressing both scholarly and public discourse by translating theory into tangible policy recommendations, educational initiatives, and on-the-ground inter-traditional community organizing.

Accordingly, the conceptual frame through which we have synthesized the conference proceedings below, foregrounds “modernity” and the “secular” as open questions. This enables us to identify and explicate the underlying assumptions which our diverse interlocutors bring to the conversation—assumptions informed by particular scientific, historicist, socio-anthropological, theological and humanistic perspectives. And, we should add, assumptions shaped by a lack of trust or even a profound “suspicion” of the other.

This framing allows us to identify what it means for diverse interpretations and constructions of “the modern”—modernities in their plurality—to contend with one another, and it allows us, further, to understand the specific and complex ideas, practices, and relationships that they contend with (and against).

Participants espoused a variety of strategies for making sense of the way religious discourses and practices interact with the complex forces of modernity. Some scholars were critical of the hegemonic discourses of modernity, and frequently lamented society’s uncritical embrace of secular models of reasoning and practice. Others found the secular to be a valuable discursive tradition in the search for meaning, and pivotal to grasping the value of religion today. For them, the secular mediated and made more “palatable” some of the claims made by religion. And, from a practical perspective, secularism made pluralism possible by authorizing a multiplicity of public approaches to fundamental questions of meaning.

In discussing the human person, some interlocutors interrogated the assumptions of the secular, stressing worries about the implications of secularist science to human dignity and integrity. A secular approach, they complained, was potentially reductive in its tendency to identify only certain selected aspects of the human person. In this account, aggressive secularism endeavors to erase religious conceptions of the human person, leaving the person’s societal value defined only by their economic productivity.

---

1 The scholar Talal Asad has underlined the relevance of the concept of tradition, as a “discursive tradition,” to the study of Islam. To Asad “[a] tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. These discourses relate conceptually to a past (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and a future (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a present (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions). An Islamic discursive tradition [for example] is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present.” Quoted in Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).
The specter of an aggressive secularist exclusion of religion has a long and convoluted history. In one version of this story, modernity entails the “migration of the holy” to the periphery of society, a consequence of a conscious effort to marginalize, domesticate and finally eliminate religion. This effort, so the story goes, was born out of the European Wars of Religion and the reactions to them on the part of newly “sovereign” nations. The “Peace of Westphalia” (1648), which codified this view, formed the template for the subsequent rearrangement of power in modern secular European societies. Under this political regime, a kind of secularist myopia aimed to excise “religion” from the analysis of social and political spaces.

This secularist project had ironic consequences. The discipline of sociology, for instance, relied on epistemic assumptions that denied religion equality in the production of knowledge. Yet, in so doing the discipline assumed Protestant interpretations of religion, suggesting, for example, that religion could be reduced to belief and community. Sociology thus manufactured its own notion of religion in order to find coherence with the emergence of the modern “buffered self” or the “unencumbered self.” No longer a “porous” self vulnerable to the interventions of spirits and the supernatural, the secular, buffered self aimed to gain control over external forces by understanding their causes and manipulating their outcomes. By eliminating from rational analysis the enchanted world of spirits, demons, and cosmic forces, sociology aimed to explain societal dynamics within what Taylor calls an “immanent frame.” This disenchanted secularized world, however, German sociologist Max Weber famously described as an “iron cage” that traps modern individuals in systems based on purely teleological efficiency, rational calculation, and control.

The suspicious approach to secular modernity can nevertheless adopt this conception of the “buffered self” as an empirical fact describing life in the modern world, while seeking both to contest it with metaphysical arguments and to engage respectfully with other religious traditions’ comparable critiques of secular modernity. Many religious traditions scorn secularism’s supposed triumphal scientific and utilitarian modalities of reasoning.

The dialogical approach to secular modernity, by contrast, shares a critique of the reductive secularist drive to exclude all types of knowledge not grounded in empirical science, but finds the secular discursive traditions to be of moral weight worthy of mutual and transformative engagement.

Each of these approaches, and many more, were represented in what unfolded in the conference.

Suspicious contention with the secular

Charles Camosy of Fordham University exemplified a suspicious approach to secular modernity. Relying on William Cavanaugh’s *The Myth of Religious Violence* and, by extension, the sensibilities of “radical orthodoxy,” Camosy argued that any account of the human person is reliant on some metaphysics, explicit or covert. “If one gives an account of human personhood, and not just what it means to be Homo sapiens, and is not speaking about persons as merely a matter of law or policy,” he remarked, “then what one is doing is giving a metaphysical account.” In doing so, Camosy underscored the inevitability of metaphysical foundations for the human person, even for those operating within the secular as a post-metaphysical discursive space. “Science,” Camosy contested, “really has nothing to say about

---


the human person—which it understands as merely physical material—until one has already given an account of the person by some other means.” It is only by recognizing the “metaphysical underpinnings of the person” that the false dualism of secularity and religiosity can be exposed, and with it the inauthenticity of the “buffered self.” There really is no such thing as a ‘secular/scientific’ account of the human person, Camosy continued, if by that we mean an account that is not based on metaphysics, not grounded in a normative tradition, and not based on first principles.

According to Camosy, in spite of the fact that ‘secular/scientific’ accounts of the person operate as if this is not the case, explicitly theological accounts of the person are more authentic and honest participants in the public sphere.

In his view, inauthentic secular/scientific accounts—not least, accounts that depend on an excessive and exclusive reliance on scientific knowledge and techniques to comprehend the human person (scientism)—misinterpret the person as “autonomous, rational, self-aware, productive—and individual.” By bracketing “metaphysical understandings of the person,” Camosy argued, we reduce the worth of human persons to “their productivity.”

Worrying about the pervasive logic of market capitalism (including its impact upon the practice of Christian theology), Camosy set forth a narrative of modernity in the key of loss, lament, and nostalgia. Secular modernity, he lamented, uses a utilitarian and capitalist logic to authorize the human person. Such an approach reduces the human person to their cognitive capabilities and choices, and leaves nothing else. For Camosy, reclaiming the metaphysical foundations and contending with the ills of modernity’s misconceptions of the person are crucial for advancing the normative worth of disadvantaged and marginalized populations and other victims of utilitarian, capitalist, and instrumental views of the person-qua-individual. He therefore urged his Muslim interlocutors in the SHP Working Group to resist the traps of “the moral anthropology of the West” and, in their effort to cultivate a robust account of Muslim bioethics, to focus on developing “a genuinely theological Muslim account of the person.”

Damian Howard, SJ, from Heythrop College (University of London), deployed the theological category of imago Dei in order to challenge and puncture some of the axiomatic underpinnings of a modern (secular) moral anthropology that tends to foster the mechanization, commodification, and instrumentalization of the human person. Drawing upon exegesis of Christian scriptural accounts of what it means to be persons created in the image of God, Howard argued that personhood is ultimately defined by relationships rather than by an isolated individuality. This relationality means that personhood is always bound up with a subject that engages with it—a relationship that entails both freedom and responsibility and always evokes mystery. Thus, he argued, interreligious conversations, especially between Catholics and Muslims, may be enriched by “Catholics attending to the many ways in which Muslims themselves come at reality as personal.” These insights may not be primarily in texts, he added, but in Muslims’ lived presence and habits of the heart. It is there, in Muslim witness, that we may find the self-disclosure of the personal God.

Both Camosy and Howard employed theological resources in depicting the person as a “porous” self, to use Taylor’s language. In contrast to the instrumentalized human person produced by the technologies of modernity, they urged Catholics and Muslims to pursue a strategy of reclaiming certain metaphysical foundations in order to authorize and dignify the human person. 

In contrast to the instrumentalized human person produced by the technologies of modernity, they urged Catholics and Muslims to pursue a strategy of reclaiming certain metaphysical foundations in order to authorize and dignify the human person.

Along this general line, Thomas Eich, of the Uni-
University of Hamburg, scrutinized the connections between ancient texts on embryology from Islamic, Greek, and other sources in order to underscore their shared conceptual heritage in a vibrant humanism. In doing so, he envisaged ways to overcome the supposed divide between scientific and religious ways of knowing and of creating knowledge (epistemologies).

Whereas Camosy and Howard identified ways to resist the modern secular conceptions of the human person and to address secular disenchantment through conversations across traditions, Christian ethicist Maura Ryan from the University of Notre Dame took a different tack, one intersecting with Eich’s historicist approach to epistemology. While Ryan echoed Camosy and Howard’s concerns about the deleterious impact of market forces in late capitalism, she configured science as an ally in the re-inscription of the human person with dignity. Ryan highlighted the countercultural role Muslims and Catholics both could play in order to resist materialist and reductive accounts of the human body. Such views of the human body result in the commodification and marketing of body parts, of which commercial surrogacy is a common example. At stake here were conceptions of ownership over one’s body. If the human body were to be interpreted as a divine gift, Ryan stressed, then it could not be so readily commodified. It is important to recognize, she urged the audience, that a conception of being (ontology) which opens the way for an interpretation of the person as object or commodity, restricts thescope of freedom and the choices one exercises over one’s body. Further, if human life is directed towards, and accountable to, certain moral ends (as both Muslims and Christians believe), then the question of euthanasia takes on a certain valence. Assisted suicide is neither freedom nor mercy, Ryan continued, for human integrity is not grounded in the body’s capacity to function but in its divine source and destiny. Ryan also argued that it is necessary to recognize that the prolongation of suffering is destructive to human integrity as well. Moving beyond the critical posture of Camosy and Howard, Ryan argued that such discussions concerning human agency and personhood in Catholic-Muslim dialogue must draw their conclusions not only from religious sources, but from “a robust (scientifically literate) theology of nature and a critical theological anthropology.”

This complex engagement with the questions of bodily integrity and the sanctity of human personhood exemplifies the deep ethical intra- and inter-traditional work of Contending Modernities.

Ryan, Camosy, and Howard, in sum, viewed religious communities as championing the human person against a hegemonic, market-driven disregard for human dignity. They also underscored the ethical and theological resources available for challenging threats to human dignity.

Echoing this approach, Robert Tappan (Towson University) explored the case of third-party assisted reproductive technologies [ART] in Shi’ite Iran. Tappan argued that religiously grounded ethics offer a countervailing force against the marketized and utilitarian approach to human bodies. While ARTs are not acceptable to most Iranians (on a religious-legal as well as sociological basis), these technologies are promoted by doctors and other professionals. Tappan expressed concern about the disregard for the dignity of the children born out of these arrangements as well as for their human incubators. In mounting arguments with respect to ARTs, he urged, consideration for class and gender must become paramount, as poor women’s bodies are those being commodified and rented out. He suggested that any further Islamic bioethical discussion should centralize those variables of gender and class (as well the human dignity of children) in articulating its opposition to ARTs.

Tappan’s worries about the pressures of market capitalism and technological efficiency crowding out concerns for the dignity of individual persons suggest opportunities for future CM research and debate. For instance, feminist humanism’s advocacy of sovereignty over one’s body and modes of thinking is yet another discursive tradition that could be engaged in order to deepen a consensus around the centrality of human dignity. Feminist humanism authorizes women as more than just their instrumental reproductive function. We might find in such emancipatory efforts, designed to take fully into account the dignity of women and marginalized minorities,
thick moral discursive traditions worth engaging, especially when they are articulated explicitly from within the social imaginations and moral anthropologies of religious traditions.

Similarly, not everyone in Europe experienced the emergence of the legal and political category of the “citizen” as a loss or as a narrowing of metaphysical stability. The emergence of secular “citizenship” was emancipatory for the historical domestic “other” of Europe, the Jews. Jewish participation in the Enlightenment tradition cannot be denied, and historically many antagonists reacted against their participation in enlightenment discourses. As philosopher Leora Batnitzky argues, being granted formal rights of citizenship marked the onset of modernity for the Jews of Europe. Secular rights recognized and protected the dignity of Jews and did not subtract from it. It was precisely at this point that Judaism was invented as a religion, in order to fit into the Protestant framing of the correct place and structure of religion—which is a contested and ongoing process of contending with modernity. Various modes of religious innovation were generated, from the Jewish Reform movement to Hasidism, and including Zionism and Reconstructionism. These were all responses to modernity that exemplified what Taylor meant by the “immanent frame”—a framework that provided closure (the “buffered self”) but at the same time also provided opportunities for new openings, innovations, and disruptions (the “nova effect”) in the realms of belief and unbelief, practice, and rituals. To highlight what was omitted from the secular narrative of modernity in the quest for a better language for human dignity is only part of the story to be explored; to account for some of the beneficial aspects of secular discourses is the other half.

Othering religion

The skeptical narrative of secular modernity leads to an analysis of religious actors as constituting a countercultural force. But Paul Lichterman suggests that this places religion in the position of serving as the “default model” for the anti-modern. According to this model, religious people act consistently religious, rather than acknowledging the ways that people construct multiple and overlapping identities in concert (or conflict) with reigning social imaginaries. In other words, Lichterman questioned assigning the qualifiers “religious” or “secular” to actors as if such qualifications can neatly be distinguished from one another. This complicates the inclination to speak of “religious actors” as if they offer a distinct modality of action that is consistent with a religious worldview. This classification of religious actors as distinct from non-religious actors, or the suggestion that religious actors operate only in accordance with the impulses of their religiosity, is just another form of “other-ing” religion as a pre-modern relic. This is emblematic of an antiquated version of modern social science, especially pernicious in increasingly discarded notions of sociology. In other words, positing the religious as opposed to the forces of the secular inverts the emancipatory narrative associated with secular modernity; it does not give religion its due as part of the emancipatory trend.

Such a mistaken view overlooks the many ways in which religion is enmeshed with sociocultural forces and political boundaries, all of which also structure the self and the citizen. Some of the interlocutors in SHP explicitly resisted the modernist logic of “other-ing” religion, which assigns religion to apolitical spaces and interprets religious agency as fundamentally extra-ordinary kinds of action that are somehow not to be taken as seriously other practices and modes of thought and expression. Religion, such an approach implies, operates according to “other” registers and “other” social imaginaries.

While this critique of the above modernist logic is compelling, however, it may go too far in the direction of reducing “the secular” in general to merely the mouthpiece of market forces, or in the direction of denying the discourse and dynamics of secularism

---


their own authenticity. Other members of the SHP group (Ryan, for instance) operate deeply within one ethical tradition and yet adjust to the need to adjudicate on a case-by-case basis among divergent and intersecting discursive traditions, including the “secular.” Likewise, Ryan stressed the need to open up traditions themselves to the scrutinizing tools of critical theory, thereby enabling fluidity and cross-fertilization in the encounters of religious and secular discourses.

Secularist dystopia?

The decrying of secular dystopia was curiously echoed in self-described “secular” philosopher Bernard Stiegler’s keynote address. He offered a sustained lament of the loss of Geist, or the de-spiritualization of society, which he, too, sees as the result of the ever-increasing technicization and marketization of the global economy.

Owen Flanagan, from Duke University, contextualized Stiegler’s account within a broader disenchantment genre dating back to Max Weber. Most provocatively, Flanagan’s articulation of “neuro-existentialism” captured the anxiety associated with the apparent vanishing of the exceptional nature of human existence. This term refers to an anxiety reinforced recently by technological developments in neuroscience that demystified human psychology and ethics by dispelling any mystery attributed to the realm of the “soul.” Compounded by an empirical metaphysical naturalism, or scientism, and by a methodological naturalism, this mode of disenchantment erupts from the assumption of a physicalist reduction of the human person and the loss of theological confidence. Flanagan concluded his multilayered analysis of the contours of disenchantment by asking whether we can still think of humans as amounting to something more than an evolution of their genes and their tribal ethics, which can be supported only through their own claims to authority.

Are humans wired to cooperate?

Sarah Coakley, from the University of Cambridge, linked developments in evolutionary theory of cooperation to foundational or proto-ethics in her keynote address. Her remarks served as a partial response to Flanagan’s query. Coakley challenged utilitarian genetic reductionism. Her scientific inquiry (born out of her collaborative work with Martin A. Nowak, a mathematical biologist) supplied mathematical proofs that the very basic “animal” condition was already encoded within humans by an inborn or original ethics of cooperation and altruism rather than utilitarianism and selfishness. To reinforce the upshot of her argument, Coakley turned to the work of moral theologian Jean Porter at the University of Notre Dame. Porter has attempted to recover an innate connection between nature and norm, a move that cohered with a revised Aristotelian teleology. This neo-Aristotelianism has opened up ways of thinking about meta-ethics. With Porter, Coakley wondered how “normative virtue may actually be nestled into natural laws that emerged out of the patterns of evolution.”

The immediate implications of Coakley’s mathematical proofs of proto-ethics and how cooperation might be hardwired into the human-qua-human in social settings requires further exploration within the framework of Contending Modernities. Affirm-

9 Coakley’s remarks were adapted from her Gifford Lectures, see Sarah Coakley, Sacrifice Regained: Evolution, Cooperation and God (the 2012 Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen University), at http://www.abdn.ac.uk/gifford/about/


ing the possibility of a meta-ethics, however, partly placed Coakley in a Kantian tradition. Coakley seemed to be working with a generic model of religion, which bore profound resemblances to Christian sensibilities. Such universalist definitions of religion, however, run the risk of discounting other meta-narratives and their attendant truth claims as well as the ways of knowing specific to other discursive traditions (including other religions).

These concerns aside, Coakley helpfully provided a counter-argument to a declension narrative of disenchantment. Her embrace of scientific methods did not amount to an embrace of scientism. On the contrary, it empowered her, for example, to reassess (rather than defend) gender norms and the gendered allocation of altruism and sacrifice in religious traditions. She accomplished this reassessing critique without rejecting the valuable inheritance of religious traditions in their totality. The notion of proto-ethics likewise provided an alternative to the lament associated with the modern turn to empirical epistemology. Empirical approaches which undergird modern science also provide resources to analyze the exploitative and selfish practices that are emblematic of late capitalism. And they also allow for an understanding that it is possible to foster different kinds of counter-narratives to scientism and empiricism, via cooperation across many cultural divides. Such cooperation could ultimately advance human flourishing.

The Vatican has exemplified this approach in its preparation and dissemination of Pope Francis’ major encyclical on the planet and the poor, *Laudato Si*.12 Cardinal Peter Turkson, for example, invited the Jewish secularist social activist Naomi Klein, a leading critic of late capitalism and environmental violence, to participate in a conference in the Vatican in June 2015.13 The conference brought together religious leaders along with scientists and environmental activists in order to gain clarity on the kind of action and coordination which are required to combat global warming. All participants, regardless of their ontological and epistemic orientations, identified incontestable links between neoliberalism and deregulated capitalism in hastening global warming. The relevant point to highlight here is this: those operating with a skeptical disposition toward secular modernity are, at best, liable to miss the humanist foundations of Klein’s moral outrage and, at worst, liable to interpret those foundations as amounting to a defective moral anthropology. Why did both Klein (and many scientists) and Pope Francis reach similar conclusions and analyses about the connections between economic systems and global warming? One explanation is that they did not rely on a limited moral narrative. It appears that they did not equate secularity with scientism, or modernity with utilitarian, nihilistic, and commodifying means of authorizing the human person. The Vatican’s work on the global issue of climate change is exemplary of a willingness to reach across boundaries, and corresponds to CM’s goal of examining the “secular,” too, as a complex discursive tradition intersecting with other normative foundations.

The narrative of lament shares an affinity with the “subtraction stories” of modern secularity that Taylor refutes in *A Secular Age*. Subtraction stories, Taylor explains, narrate human beings as “having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge.” Taylor counters these subtraction stories of decline by arguing that Western modernity, “including its secularity, is the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices, and can’t be explained in terms of perennial features of human life.”14

But there is more that can be said about the “secular.” The interlocutors in the SHP Working Group gestured toward a different mode of engagement with this question. For example, Nouzha Guesous, from the University of Casablanca, responded to Eich by questioning how it is possible to have

---


a contemporary scientific discussion with religious scholars who base their knowledge on texts that are, in some cases, millennia old. Perhaps, she pondered, a dialogue would benefit not only from a recognition of shared linguistic sources, but from a revival of reason in scientific-religious dialogue. Similarly, Mariachiara Tallacchini from Catholic University of Piacenza asked whether a religious tradition can pro-actively open itself up to a more democratic process of knowledge production. The responses from Gues-
sous and Tallacchini suggest two critical issues con-
cerning the theme of secular modernity as it relates to the discussions of the SHP Working Group. First, Guessous questioned the prioritizing of ancient texts as well as their applicability and authority as guide-
lines for addressing contemporary debates. Second, Tallacchini challenged the elitist and expert mode of the discussion.

This line of interrogation leads us back to analyzing the way that the concept of the modern secular is employed in the discussion of the tension between science and religious traditions.

To narrate the modern secular as a story of subtrac-
tion, and the role of religious interlocutors as one dedicated to recovering and uncovering metaphys-
ical scaffoldings, is indeed one approach for con-
testing modernity. In its willingness to engage other normative traditions’ own critique and resources, that approach also reflects the conditions of mod-
ern pluralism. But there is perhaps an unintended consequence that arises from importing social imag-
inaries—that is, ways of envisioning, say, human nature—from another historical era to bear upon modern debates, and of describing these older tradi-
tions and outlooks as, necessarily, more “authentic” expressions of the tradition. This move could cast reli-
igion as “other,” as non-modern or anti-modern—
and thus not qualified to enter the modern debate. Ironically this is exactly what a secularist presenta-
tion of religion seeks to accomplish; that is, it seeks to “other” religion.

To constructively engage the secular as a complex and elastic discursive tradition one must question the idea that the meaning-making practices of religious actors are highly distinct and pure, and hence, totally different from action informed by other modes of meaning-making. Once we introduce humanism into the picture, the characterization of the secular as a nihilistic and deterministic force becomes a caricature. It glosses over secular humanism’s own concern with human dignity and its critique of the ills of late capitalism; the kind of critique that a secularist like Klein articulates powerfully.

To constructively engage the secular as a complex and elastic discursive tradition one must question the idea that the meaning-making practices of religious actors are highly distinct and pure, and hence, totally different from action informed by other modes of meaning-making.
Beyond parochialism in the cosmopolitan city

At times the discourse of the SHP Working Group conceptualized inter-religious engagement as the needed antidote to “secular” modalities, offering a counter-ontology of the human person. The Global Migration and the New Cosmopolitanism (GM) Working Group, by contrast, celebrated the plurality of the cosmopolitan city as an opportunity to transcend ethnic, religious, cultural, and other forms of parochialism. The research team in East London, directed by Vincent Rougeau from Boston College and Angus Ritchie from the Centre for Theology & Community in London, identified patterns of broad-based community organizing. Research from these locales generated useful resources to critique the tradition of political liberalism and some theories of multiculturalism.

The GM Working Group’s critique of liberalism, however, echoed elements of some SHP members’ suspicious orientation toward secular modernity. Equating political liberalism with John Rawls and Robert Nozick’s articulations of this tradition\(^\text{15}\) precluded influential revisions to liberal discourses of citizenship. Tariq Modood’s work offers an example of such revisions.\(^\text{16}\) Modood, from the University of Bristol, who attended the conference as an external interlocutor to Contending Modernities, developed a typology of civic modes of integration. He offered revisions and challenges to liberal political theory, but ones that were still beholden to principles of equality (without the erasure of difference) and democracy as a set of social practices. In his remarks, he argued for his preferred mode of civic integration, cosmopolitanism, which he understands as a model that focuses on the everyday experience of people mixing and interacting with each other in workplaces, schools, industries, churches, and any other public spheres. These interactions in effect change all of those involved through the experience of living together. Further, this model, he underscored, does not permit individuals to be defined by their origins, by their own community, or by the majority population. Nor does it permit intra-community and extra-community ascription of identity. Individuals embody multiple identities that are also the product of new forms of cohabiting and interacting.

The challenge that Modood posed for those who embrace diversity through cosmopolitanism and/or multiculturalism was that they should also embrace a national imagination. The endurance of the national is a necessary component of the practice of citizenship. One inhabits citizenship, not only as a set of claims (rights) and responsibilities, but also via a narrative of belonging that is socio-culturally embedded. In other words, national identity intersects in complex ways with religious imaginations, memories, texts, and symbols.

Robert Hefner, from Boston University, who convened the second research team studying global migration, affirmed Modood’s challenge to the cosmopolitan frame. Focusing on Catholic, Muslim, and secular actors specifically, the cumulative sense of the research team was that observing on-the-ground initiatives “could provide a useful perch from which to observe ongoing ethical debates over how to live together in the new Western plurality, at a time when many citizens regard multicultural variations on lib-


eral citizenship with unease, uncertainty, or outright skepticism,” as indeed was the case with the general tenor of the group working in East London.

Ahmet Selim Tekelioglu, from Boston University, focused his analysis on how the establishment of Zaytuna College, the first Muslim liberal arts college in the U.S. (located in Berkeley, CA), illumines constructive grassroots efforts to imagine American Muslim identities as they intersect with American religiosity and secularity. Ahmet Yukleyen, from the University of Mississippi, discussed how the protest mobilized by Dutch citizens of Caribbean ancestry against the Dutch tradition of “Black Pete” as being racist, foregrounded the need to renegotiate the mode in which religion intersects with Dutch national tradition in light of diversity. This is but one instance of a broader process of renegotiating the meanings of Dutch citizenship. Yukleyen described the many patterns of Catholic-Muslim intergroup and interfaith dialogues that have transpired recently, as well as the refocusing of transnational Islamic organizations such as Jamaat-i Islami and the Muslim Brotherhood on promoting “moderate” Muslim identity in the public life of the Netherlands. This is not to discount antagonistic and radical actors, but simply to suggest that many initiatives on the ground gesture toward an incremental and pragmatic process in the direction of building a pluralist citizenship discourse.

Carol Ann Ferrara, from Boston University, painted a complex picture of the religiously plural landscape and tensions that exist in Paris. She highlighted the decline of the Catholic population from 80% in 1986 to 56% in 2012, noting the complex ways in which Catholic designations intersect with cultural, political, and social markers of French identity. Polls suggest that three quarters of French Catholics consider religion insignificant in their lives, compared with three quarters of French Muslims who declared that Islam occupies moderate to high importance in their lives. Ferrara nonetheless stressed the role of the Catholic church as an important catalyst for interreligious work in France, citing the case of interreligious mobilization in the 2013 same-sex marriage debate as well as the work of a church sponsored organization, the National Service for Relations with Islam (established in 1973), and the Association Coexister, a grassroots interfaith organization led by youth. French society’s normative secularist framing is challenged every day in contestations and efforts to negotiate, diversity. Critically, the “secular” laic identity of France is deeply rooted in French Catholic history and Catholicism plays complex ways in the process of renegotiating the boundaries of Frenchness, especially through the encounter with Muslim citizens and migrants.

Azeddine Hnimssa, from the Universite de Montreal, observed similar dynamics in Quebec, especially surrounding the pluralistic alliances formed to resist the 2013 bill, “The Charter of Quebec Values.” The government party behind the bill sought to use anxiety about Muslim migration to Quebec to re-position itself as a supporter of “Quebec values” and to advance secularization, by prohibiting the wearing of “ostentatious religious symbols” in publicly funded institutions. The proposed charter, which echoed similar bans in France and other European contexts, generated an intense and cross-sectional public debate. Most Catholic clergy in Quebec denounced the bill, while ironically many politicians and intellectuals tried to position themselves as defenders of Catholicism. “Many alliances,” Hnimssa said, “have been initiated to counter the proposal with a large diversity including Catholics, Muslims and secularists.”

These initial findings from fieldwork in France, the ...the only way to build a working and deeply pluralist citizenship is to intentionally cultivate a “virtuous circle of serious normative work,” both horizontally at the level of community organizing and vertically in terms of state agencies that collaborate in forging a new pluralist citizenship.
U.S., Canada, and the Netherlands corroborate the need to scrutinize whether and how alliances as well as broad-based and inter-traditional organizing all participate in reimagining sociocultural interpretations of national identity. This focus brings into view the tension between cosmopolitan models of civic integration and the task of negotiating and renegotiating a national discourse. Overcoming an unhelpful segregation of religion will facilitate religious people’s reinvigorated participation in cultivating democratic social practices and virtues. Similarly, Hefner argued that the only way to build a working and deeply pluralist citizenship is to intentionally cultivate a “virtuous circle of serious normative work,” both horizontally at the level of community organizing and vertically in terms of state agencies that collaborate in forging a new pluralist citizenship. This research built on the conviction that institutions are not sufficient to “make democracy work,” as Robert Putnam has argued, and that not even a vibrant “civil society” is enough to guarantee a tolerant or inclusive citizenry.

Thus, a series of questions emerged: Who is to say what values will undergird a new plural citizenship? What kind of engagements and interactions in a society can foster them? What should we do with those who choose not to engage in “political friendship”? These are all questions that point to the need for sufficiently nuanced and complex narratives about secular modernity and the cultivation of democratic practices and virtues deemed pivotal for the conditions of deep pluralism. It further requires taking seriously the legacy of colonialism and its meanings and long-term implications for contending and contesting the practice and discourse of multicultural citizenship in Euro-America.

Community organizing

Motivated by the aspiration to make multiculturalism work on the ground through interpersonal and intercommunal collaboration, the CM researchers based in London—including Angus Ritchie, David Barclay (author of the CM-sponsored publication, *Making Multiculturalism Work*),18 and Caitlin Burbridge—embraced Saul Alinsky’s methodology of broad-based community organizing. The London group viewed Alinsky’s method as an antagonistic but creative space that allowed for cross-cutting cooperation on winnable issues. At the same time, it allowed groups to cultivate cultural capital that went contrary to dominant trends by building inter-communal trust. This research affirms Danielle Allen’s representation of such grassroots relationships as necessary forms of “political friendships.”

Jeffrey Stout’s argument in *Blessed Are the Organized* takes this insight further.19 This book looks at the relations between social practice and social norms. Stout examines how these relations play out in community organizing in the U.S. He examines the role of religion in organizational processes that cultivate grassroots democracy. He challenges those who exile religious convictions from the work and construction of democratic politics. Stout, in an interview with journalist Nathan Schneider, remarked, that “if we can get beyond the misleading choice between secularism and religious resentment of the secular, it should be possible to get back to the hard work of building coalitions to fight [economic and political] domination.”20 This remark exemplifies Stout’s sustained intervention in the aforementioned debates, where he contests the varieties of unrecon-


structed liberal secularisms that find their mirror images in various forms of theologically-grounded reactions and challenges to secular democracy and liberalism. Stout would therefore partly agree with the East-London based researchers' preference for community organizing over abstract theories about multiculturalism. This amounts to prioritizing democratic social practice as the engine that generates and explains the ethics of engagement in a pluralistic context. However, Stout also sees broad-based organizing as constituting a democratic and moral counterforce to undemocratic groups of political and economic elites. The latter rely on selfish cooperation, which is hardwired to vulgar versions of liberalism turned neo-liberalism. By placing the emphasis on democratic virtues and practices in community organizing, the East London-based group can more clearly move away from having to make a false choice between liberalism, on the one hand, and meaningful religiosity in public life and collective action, on the other.

Discursivity of tradition

Scholars of Islam in the SHP Working Group emphasized the historicity and discursivity of tradition, an understandable approach given increased levels of Islamophobia and religious extremism trafficking in essentialist and ahistorical representations of Islam. Ebrahim Moosa of the University of Notre Dame underscored human fallibility in terms of our ability to gain a full conception of the human person. Epistemological humility, he noted, is too often missing from both secular and religious accounts of the human person. Access to "correct" interpretations of tradition is always mediated through worldviews and "social imaginaries," to employ Taylor’s concept for the ways people imagine their social life.21

This attention to the constructed and time-bound, contingent nature of religious (as well as secular) discourses stressed the variety within traditions as lived both historically and practically. These lived traditions are often in tension with elite and official articulations of norms at any given moment in time. Discursive approaches converge with Ryan's emphasis on critical theory, attention to gender, and the multi-perspectival lens necessary for a religiously-grounded bioethics. Together, these lenses enable actors to negotiate competing values and influences and show how extra-traditional resources (such as human rights sensitivities) decisively influence processes of self-interrogation and innovation within particular traditions. Rather than merely retrieving past authorities and their social imaginaries, the discursive approach attempts to negotiate such a priority by way of historicizing and re-reading the tradition.

Moosa's call for epistemological humility challenged secular scientism while dispelling any supposed binary or dualistic relation between the religious and secular modalities. The discursive approach resists the inclination on the part of religiously inspired thinkers to contend with scientism and other forms of secular hubris solely by way of retrieving and reifying past authorities and their social imaginaries. Rather, this line of engagement opens up the possibility for self-interrogation of the religious traditions. Accordingly, the operative mode of contention with modernity would not be suspicion, but rather a dialogical embrace that is mu-

tually transformative for both religious and secular traditions.

This mutually transformative angle likewise facilitates the possibility of interrogating religious resources as more than simply a countercultural force for the good. Religion does not have to stand on the margins as an adversary to an ever-increasing rate of autonomy and mechanization heaped on the human person within a hegemonic, economically-driven model for modern social interaction. A transformative approach to contending with modernity requires a non-reactionary posture informed by a historically contextualized hermeneutical analysis of both religious and secular traditions. This is especially true when analyzing the ways in which religious traditions engage supposedly modern and secular norms such as pluralism and human rights. Coakley opened up the possibility of interrogating the gendered expectations of religious tradition concerning altruism. Yet, the authority of such scrutiny cannot merely rely on the findings of evolutionary cooperative theory. Her scrutiny also drew on the normativity of secularist humanism and its interpretations of human flourishing and self-fulfillment. The kind of discursivity that Moosa gestured toward also engaged this humanist and secular normativity in substantive ways.

Abdulaziz Sachedina, from George Mason University, echoed and reinforced this argument in his understanding of Islam as wrestling with its relation to morality and ethics. In his presentation, Sachedina stressed the need to cultivate a more robust theological ethics in order to contend with modern problems. He argued that “it is in the human experience of living where ethics is prominent—where ethics interacts with the reality of human existence and where norms are engaged not as fixed but as culturally inductive and open to reinterpretation to make them applicable to the current situation.”

Like Moosa, therefore, Sachedina stressed that changed social imaginaries present an opportunity to renegotiate, not subordinate, the tradition in relation to novel competing normative visions of the world and of the human person. He stressed that such fluidity is an essential component of life and of the lived realities of religious traditions. This mode of contending with secular modernity is not skeptical or suspicious, but rather historicist without being reductionist. That is, it takes the history of religious traditions seriously, in recognition of the ways in which the language and symbol-systems of a tradition evolve over time, but it does not therefore trivialize the commitments of believers or reduce their commitments and practices to the nostalgic and irrelevant expression of a bygone era.

Both Sachedina and Moosa’s interpretative, historical, and discursive negotiations between tradition, social imaginaries, and lived human experiences suggests, therefore, a transformative encounter with secular modernity. But in order for such an encounter to be truly transformative of the dialogue partners, secular modernity must be given its proper due, that is, understood as normatively substantive rather than merely utilitarian and nihilistic, on the one hand, or as simply a post-religious variant on meta-ethical conceptions such as Christian natural law, on the other. Like Ryan, Moosa and Sachedina strive to identify and build upon the creative potential in religious-secular tensions and contentions.

In her contribution to the panel on bioethics, Sherine Hamdy of Brown University further underscored the fluid nature of the relations between competing norms through an anthropological and sociological examination of eye banks in Egypt. Like Sachedina, Hamdy stressed not only the fluidity or plasticity of the religious heritage, but also a willingness to let social justice inform her hermeneutical engagement of religious traditions. Hence, she argued for the need to reexamine certain religiously informed legal restrictions in medical bioethics. She did so by demonstrating the many ways of redressing the overwhelming need in contemporary Egypt for cornea transplants. Her account as to how grassroots mobilization challenged fatwas spoke to the arguments raised by the SHP and the GM Working Groups, by showing how grassroots activism could serve as a force to push for revisions of traditional religious norms.

The discursive mode, therefore, opens up possibilities for change and self-interrogation. It takes into account the lived realities of people and their various patterns of political friendships. Whether they are in a Western cosmopolitan city or in a Middle
Eastern city like Cairo, the mutually transformative outcomes of cohabitation and the practice of community organizing does indeed challenge reductive narratives of modern secularity. It avoids the modernist “other-ing” and distancing of religion that turns religion into an adversarial counter-culture on the margins. Instead, the discursive approach embraces religion as an equal within sociocultural and political formations.

Dietrich Jung, from the University of Southern Denmark, therefore responded to the cumulative conclusions of the SHP and GM research teams by noting his discomfort with their conceptualization of the “secular” as “a residual category of everything that is not religious.” He consequently encouraged the interlocutors to grapple with the phenomenology of multiple secularisms and claimed that secular cultures are intelligible through scrutiny of their relationships with particular religious traditions and historical developments. He argued that Flanagan’s discussion of the disenchantment associated with the loss of social binding does not account for the re-articulation of religion’s relation to social binding. Many forces contribute to contemporary dynamics of social binding, including modern nationalism.

The two threads of the GM Working Group underscored how citizenship discourses structure intersections and contentions that are integral to the cacophonous plurality of the cosmopolitan city. They also underscored the pragmatic logic of community organizing at the neighborhood level in order to advance mutually beneficial goals and enhance political and social agency collaboratively. Likewise, they underscored the potentially constructive roles religious leaders and institutions can play in community organizing and in enabling the cultivation of a more robust presence of diverse religious articulations in public debates supposedly structured according to secularist norms.

Finally, two interlocutors who were not directly party to the GM Working Group introduced (1) the need to cultivate an ethics of hospitality in order to mediate and transform the socio-economic and cultural marginalization of Muslims in Europe, and the roots of such marginalization in the legacy of the Enlightenment (Meyda Yegenoglu, from Istanbul Bilgi University) and (2) the need to articulate a substantive national imagination to embolden cosmopolitan discourse of citizenship in contemporary European contexts (Modood).

The conference then took participants from the Euro-American contexts of diversity and specific historicity of modernity to Indonesia and Africa where the questions of pluralist coexistence take different forms.
Authority, community, and identity

Mun’im Sirry (University of Notre Dame), convener of the Authority, Community, and Identity Working Group focused on Indonesia, captured the objectives of the group by announcing that the Indonesia team will document and analyze “the ways in which Christian, Muslim, and secular forces interact, collaborate, adapt, negotiate, and contend against one another for pluralist coexistence, and how these three discursive communities (Muslim, Catholic, and Secular) respond to the changing dynamic of authority, community, and identity.”

As the third largest democratic country and the largest Muslim-majority country in the world, Indonesia is a laboratory for research on the changing dynamic of authority, community, and identity. Currently home to more than 200 million Muslims, along with a significant number of Christians—including Catholics—Indonesia is a newly consolidated democracy in which new models of pluralist coexistence are being constantly reformulated, promoted, and contested. The group aims to generate and energize a broader public discourse on intercultural and interreligious issues, as well as develop policy implications for peaceful coexistence.

Nicholas Adams from the University of Edinburgh and Eckhard Zemmrich from Humboldt University proposed research, for instance, that will ask what forces are at work in changing how young Indonesians approach each others’ traditions. The proposed research will focus especially on those cases in which young Indonesians use religious terms to describe each other, and will examine how institutions themselves constitute expressions of competing forms of authority, multiple identities, and varied responses to modernity.

Similarly, Zainal Abidin Bagir of Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta and Robert Hefner will examine efforts in Indonesia to “scale-up” societal and state supports for civic-pluralist co-existence. The project is premised on the conviction that no single institution, activity, or public ethical formula alone can guarantee civic-pluralist peace. As Hefner also argued, the key to making pluralist coexistence work is to cultivate a “virtuous circle” of actors and institutions in state and society (essentially a counter-discourse), which will interact to generate and uphold the varied public media, social-welfare organizations, legal structures, and public ethics required for a discourse and practice of civic-pluralist citizenship. The project hypothesizes that in societies like Indonesia, a sustainable pluralism requires a “package deal” of inclusive normativity and institutional scaling. Jonathan VanAntwerpen of the Henry Luce Foundation further underscored the need to focus on media for the cultivation of a “virtuous circle.”

Likewise pursuing the question of discursive formation, James Hoesterey of Emory University proposed a project that bridges recent scholarly developments in the study of religion and international affairs with Indonesia’s soft power strategies to project itself as the home of religious tolerance and “moderate Islam.” Hoesterey plans to carefully attend to the people-to-people, Track II forms of diplomacy that connect states with civil society.

Heading the Africa research team, Emmanuel Katongole from the University of Notre Dame introduced the initiative as offering a unique opportunity for a scholarly focus on Africa through the lens of CM. The continent reveals many fluid intersections that congeal in issues of authority, community, and identity. There are changes taking place within Africa that are both refreshing and promising, Katongole said, but there are also great challenges. How are we to understand the complex forms of negotiation that occur at these intersections of power in Africa? The rapid movement from traditional forms of politics to colonial states and through post-colonial governments has led to a newly evolving hybrid of regional and global politics. Yet these various stages are not successive, but rather coexist in some form simultaneously. Within the population, many households are composed of several family generations that practice both traditional and colonial religions, hold varying degrees of education, and speak multiple languages. “What does it look like to live at these intersections?” Katongole asked. “How are we to un-
understand the multiple ways in which these negotiations are shaping life? What does it mean to say that there is a post-colonial, secular Africa?"

One member of the team, Elias Bongmba from Rice University, shared his plans to examine how land disputes raise questions about modernity, identity, and the authority of both secular and religious institutions. Using Cameroon as a case study, Bongmba explained how the institutions of leadership—from the presidency down to church leaders, village chiefs, sub-chiefs, and traditional authority figures—have a significant impact on the lives of everyday citizens. Many of these leaders are involved in land contestation, a modern practice of resolving conflict related to land ownership. In a previous era, chiefs were in charge of land boundary disputes; today, such contestations are handled by the judicial courts, which employ British colonial law in adjudication. Identity contestation is another issue that arises from land disputes as foreigners purchase land from the government and settle within a village. Native villagers who attempt to associate or intermarry with outsiders struggle to understand where their loyalties and obligations should lie.

Choosing sentiments expressed by both Bongmba and Katongole, Cecelia Lynch of the University of California, Irvine, reaffirmed the group's conceptualization of Africa as a part of, rather than outside of, modernity. Lynch's proposed project, which is also centered in Cameroon, will study how religious women in women's advancement groups construct modernity. Lynch's primary research question asks: "How do religious women consolidate community and reinforce or challenge authority in settings in which they are employing tools of their faith to assert rights, grow spiritually, and empower themselves economically and politically vis-à-vis structures of authority promulgated by modern humanitarian practices, the state, and religious hierarchies of order?"

Shifting focus to Côte d’Ivoire, Ludovic Lado (Centre de Recherche et d’Action pour la Paix, Abidjan) intends to research Catholic and Islamic relations as they pertain to issues of gender and sexuality. In 2013 the legal adoption of a new definition for “family” changed the power dynamics within an Ivorian marriage, authorizing equality between a husband and a wife. Although it met with great controversy and resistance, the bill that sanctioned this transformation was passed by the government to honor an international commitment to equality. It was also a necessary condition to access funding held by foreign donor governments. Additionally, the government recently attempted to normalize homosexuality and gay marriage. “In most sub-Saharan countries, with maybe the exception of South Africa, homosexual expression is illegal and severely punishable,” Lado described. The international pressure to accept gay marriage and gender equality is widely seen as a threat to morality and traditional African values. Public perceptions of this coercion are embedded within ambivalent images of the West, which is presumed to be both technologically advanced and also morally decrepit. This research project, Lado summarized, is interested in capturing the terms of these debates as they emerge, both at the level of leadership and at the grassroots level.

Carrying out his research in Nigeria and Ghana, Ebenezer Obadare, from the University of Kansas, will investigate the power and authority of the Pentecostal church. By focusing on this religious movement and its leaders, Obadare will pose critical questions about local shifts in patterns of authori-
ty, including gender dimensions, trust issues, state capacity, and leadership. “In these two countries, a court of charismatic religious leaders is, in varying degrees, exercising influence and sway over theological, personal, economical, and political affairs,” Obadare explained. As a phenomenon that is partly driven by the personal magnetism of its leaders, Pentecostalism is a state religion with the capacity to challenge authorities, which makes his research both timely and important.

Since women are both pathologized and made to bear the brunt of oppressive authority, Obadare will also bring to his work a critical focus on gender and sexuality within African Pentecostal churches and society at large. More broadly, Obadare hopes to address the intersection of religious and secular political authority with the aim of understanding the role and influence of Pentecostal leaders. He reported that his study is guided by three sets of sociological questions. First, Obadare is asking how pastoral authority is initiated and exercised between Pentecostal pastors and their immediate congregations. Second, he wonders how Pentecostal leaders have gained authority to pronounce on all aspects of social life, even outside of the religious sphere. Finally, Obadare will investigate where legitimate power in post-colonial Africa is truly located. Who is it that citizens trust, and how does this relate to the emerging Pentecostal movement? These questions will help to generate a conversation on the role of authority, community, and identity as it relates to the Pentecostal movement in Africa.

The brief overview of what we anticipate will emerge from the work of the ACI Working Groups in Africa and Indonesia illumines how community, authority, and religious and/or traditional identity are contested and reshaped in these extraordinarily diverse contexts. Many of the research proposals for both the African and Indonesian contexts grapple with cultural, religious, and communal conflict zones associated with post-colonial realities: land disputes and the meanings of ownership; contested gender issues such as the changing nature of the family, homosexuality, and women’s agency; and the ethics of civic engagement and pluralism, as small intercommunal and interreligious grassroots efforts seek to “scale up.” Also contested are religious freedoms (e.g., defamation laws), and forms of orientalism (e.g., internalizing “moderate Islam” as self-representation); and shifts in authority structures (to Pentecostal churches, to judicial courts, etc.).

Pursuing these lines of research will reveal how Africa and Indonesia are at the heart of modernity, while nuancing what that means through interpretive analyses that account both for modernity as a hegemonic socio-political project and modernities as the embodiment of complex negotiations of multiple sources of authority and social imaginaries. The turn to Africa and Indonesia provincializes Taylor’s powerful but limited narrative of secularization (which is largely confined to North America and Europe) as well as more vulgar Christian and Eurocentric subtraction stories, while exposing other modalities of disenchantment and innovation.
Communicating findings to the wider world

At the end of the conference, Nadia El-Awady, Lisa Miller, and Nathan Schneider—the three journalists who had been in attendance—were asked to share with the audience their perspectives on what material would be of public interest and how the media could more effectively be incorporated into communicating these findings for public consumption. El-Awady thought that many of the presentations needed a bridge between the deep theoretical insights of the material and the relatable, everyday significance for the public. If the idea is to disseminate thoughts beyond the walls of the conference and of academic discourse, scholars need to ask themselves what components of their work might be valuable to a “common person.” El-Awady spoke on behalf of “many different sorts of common person”: as a science journalist, a Muslim, and an Egyptian immigrant to the UK. “I want to see logical arguments that I can understand that help me make informed decisions about my life,” she explained. Questions about what it means to be human, moral, and cooperative are universally meaningful, but people need to be given the tools to journey along with scholars in their abstract and complex discussions of these notions.

For Schneider, the most attention-grabbing discussions focused on the application of technological metaphors to the human person, especially in cases where the metaphors were supplanting personhood to the point of effacement. The experiences of technicization emphasize the urgency of the CM project for addressing the critical question of what it means to be a person in today’s world. In particular, the idea of the common good that has seeped into technology through forms such as creative commons and open-source software has its parallels with Coakley’s discussion on cooperation. The intersection of these themes can be seen in the Nobel laureate Eleanor Ostrom’s definition of the common good as “a mode by which people manage resources and negotiate value with one another.” Negotiation and dialogue is called for worldwide today. Schneider envisioned these discussions as opportunities not just to critique modernity, but to contribute to it as well.

New York magazine reporter Lisa Miller listened to the various presentations in the conference while asking herself, “What could I pitch from this conference for publication in a magazine?” The most successful stories would be those that grab attention and start conversations. To model what type of material could work for publication to a wider audience, Miller offered a few examples that stood out to her over the course of the three days:

1. Coakley’s keynote could make a feature story, perhaps with the headline “Are We Wired to Cooperate?” The seduction of the title is the word “wired,” since current trends throw genetics and social science into the daily lives of readers. It also twists the contemporary story about genetic selfishness and reveals it to be false. “Readers love ‘optimistic’ stories,” Miller said.

2. Hamdy’s talk on the blinded revolutionaries of the Egyptian uprising could be a dramatic photo essay. The photos that Hamdy showed during her presentation were haunting and moving. The story about the eye bank itself would be a brief written accompaniment to the images.

3. During a lunch conversation, bioethics panel respondent Guessous made the comment, “We used to talk about human rights. Now we talk about the rights of people to have children.” This remark itself could make a mainstream op-ed style piece. Is there social science to bear out this thought? Have Western societies turned child-bearing and rearing into a “right”?

4. Flanagan’s phrase “neuroexistentialism,” the dawning realization that “I am an animal,” could be written about in a short, light piece about the difference between this anxiety and public anxiety over the apocalypse, or over getting a child into the best school. Miller stated that “readers love to read about anxiety almost as much as they love to read about optimism.”

5. Similarly, the lively debate about whether “hos-
“Radical hospitality” is a good metaphor for solving the immigration problem could work for publication. The idea of radical hospitality could be unpacked in a blog post on a popular philosophy outlet. Even if the idea itself is not fully developed, such a forum is a great place for starting discussion.

6. The idea about community organizing as a force for good as well as for evil, especially in terms of ISIS and Al Qaeda as possible master community organizers, is interesting. As a project, it could be taken up by a sympathetic reporter to show how different organizers are working with the same population in different ways, to demonstrate the virtues of an organizing effort and also to illustrate in three dimensions the very different kinds of people it brings together. This could be developed into a long feature about what community organizing does to encourage both identity and familiarity.

One question that El-Awady continued to struggle with at the end of the conference was how to break through the psychological barriers that cause many people to find religious thought inaccessible. Speaking from a Muslim perspective, El-Awady suggested that greater effort needs to be made to break down the taboos inherent in communication with a Muslim audience. Critical thinking needs to be encouraged and an audience with “silent” Muslims, or those who do not associate with a specific mosque, needs to be established. “We need the tools to understand not just the religions of others, but our own religions,” El-Awady explained. “Just because there is an abundance of books does not mean they are available.” Scholars who are addressing the public about the intersection of science and religion need to ask themselves questions about how to make the public feel at ease learning about various religious traditions and their intersection with the secular.

El-Awady’s articulation of the anxiety of the “silent” Muslim, Miller’s sellable and engaging stories, and Schneider’s drawing of important connections between the commodification and technicization of personhood and the sociological and political questions concerning the “common good” rearticulate in tangible ways the themes of the conference. These themes, refracted through our engagement with modernity as a historical complex and modernities as lived, negotiated, intersectional, and contentious, included:

- hyper-plurality and cosmopolitanism as well as its paradoxical reliance on a national imagination that binds;
- biological but non-reductive proofs of cooperative and altruistic practices as a form of proto-ethics;
- neuroexistentialism;
- broad-based community organizing;
- the ethics of hospitality and its challenge to ontological stability of identities;
- antagonistic and reductive accounts of secular modernity;
- subtraction narratives and lament;
- religious innovations through hermeneutical discursivity and social movement activism;
- the legacies of power, domination, and displacement along with the intellectual and religio-cultural resources that authorized them.

We thus conclude the first phase of CM with a deeper grasp of the complex and intersecting moral grounds that authorize the human person within and without the discourse of citizenship. This synthesis of the conference’s themes sheds light on future research trajectories and avenues to pursue in order to disseminate our findings and intervene in broader debates in the literature.

CREDITS: Report written and prepared by Atalia Omer with Kyle Lambelet (June 2016). The authors wish to thank Garrett FitzGerald and Dania Straughan for their editing support as well as Leo Guardado and Michelle Marvin for their notes which aided in the preparation of this report. Finally, we wish to thank James Adams for his hard work organizing the conference.