It has been said that the present public concern with secularism is largely the result of the challenge posed by religion in the contemporary world, most especially by political Islam brought to Euro-America by Muslim immigrants from Africa and Asia. The religious right in America tends to be viewed by its opponents as an internal revolt against modernity; religious Muslims, on the other hand, tend to be seen as belonging to an alien civilization, many of whom have intruded into “Western space.” “The return of religion” as a political force is regarded as a dangerous challenge to the modern way of life that is usually equated with “the Western way of life.” In this course we will try to understand what it means to say that secularism is central to “the Western way of life” now under threat. We will try to trace “secularism” as a complex process that is not always clearly identifiable, and we will draw on historical as well as anthropological material in doing so.

Secularism has often been contested and in the process the lineaments of both politics and religion have changed. It is an evolving political doctrine and practice, as well as changing processes for the production of legitimate knowledge (the natural and social sciences, the humanities) that have helped not only to define “the secular” but also to re-define the proper role of “religion.” We will look at some attitudes and assumptions that underlie shifts in sensibilities that are valued as secular.

Try to purchase the starred items or borrow them from the library. Articles will be made available as photocopies. Please bring the assigned text each week to class with you. This will be an intensive reading and writing course.
Reading

Introductory
Talal Asad, “Ideology, Class and the Origin of the Islamic State”
Talal Asad, “Rereading a Modern Classic: W.C.Smith’s The Meaning and End of Religion”

Secularism as the historical emptying out of Christianity
*Marcel Gauchet, The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion

Secularism as modern politics and law
•William Connolly, Why I am Not a Secularist
Winnifred Sullivan, The Impossibility of Religious Freedom
E. Mendieta and J. VanAntwerpen (eds.), The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere (essays by Jürgen Habermas and Judith Butler)
Talal Asad, “Trying to Understand French Secularism,” in Hent de Vries (ed.) Political Theologies
Talal Asad, “Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism” in Talal Asad, Judith Butler, Wendy Brown, Saba Mahmood, Is Critique Secular? (See also the Response by Butler and Asad’s Reply to Response.)

The secular as a domain of sensibilities and behavior
*Talal Asad, Formations of the Secular
Charles Hirschkind, “Is There a Secular Body?” Immanent Frame, SSRC web site
Matthew Scherer, “Five questions that follow from re-reading Formations of the Secular and Why I am not a Secularist” Immanent Frame, SSRC web site
Talal Asad, “Thinking about the Secular Body, Pain, and Liberal Politics” in Asja Szafraniec, Ernst van den Hemel (eds.), Words: Situating Religion in Language