

Today's Issues July 15

For this Sunday, July 15, the Today's Issues group will discuss two articles from the June 28 issue of the New York Review of Books:

P. 22, Kaya Genç, "Sex Changes in Turkey" a discussion of transgender identities in Turkey and in the Ottoman past.

P. 59, Michael Ignatieff, "Making Room for God," a review of three books about liberal religion, one of them from an atheist's point of view

The group meets at 9:30 in the parlor of the Religious Education building next to the Church. Please do the readings and join our lively discussion.

A copy of the readings follows:

Sex Changes in Turkey  
Kaya Genç JUNE 28, 2018 ISSUE

A cross-dressing male dancer, or köçek, in the Ottoman Empire, nineteenth century  
On the night of September 27, 2017, Derin Oylum, a twenty-year-old Turkish graphic design student who is in the early stages of transitioning from female to male, met with his girlfriend, Emine, in the small Aegean town in Turkey where they both live. The couple climbed a hill, enjoyed the views of green fields, and talked about their relationship. Fifteen minutes later Emine's brother appeared on a motorcycle. Derin says the boy punched him to the ground and kicked him several times in the face. He was head-butted twice; his right cheekbone was fractured.

"Are you lovers?" the attacker asked as he choked Derin, called him a lesbian, and telephoned Emine's father for assistance. Half an hour later the father arrived. He began punching Derin in the face, threatened him with rape, and pushed him toward the edge of a cliff. Luckily, shrubs on the cliff prevented Derin's fall. The attack was brutal but by no means isolated. In a country where men and women are often relegated to strict gender roles, those who have a gender identity that is the opposite of their assigned sex or who are transitioning from one gender to another can find that their lives are in great peril.

Turkey, according to the organization Transgender Europe, has the highest rate of murders of transgender people in Europe. Since 2008 forty-four have been reported. There is also widespread discrimination: in the past three years transgender people have been denied entry to a hotel on suspicion of prostitution and to a university dormitory, refused service at a notary in Ankara and at a teahouse, and not been allowed to board a public bus in Istanbul. Landlords often charge transgender tenants twice the normal rent. Seventy-one percent of trans interviewees had been arrested at least once, a study from 2015–2016 found. Another alarming

trend is suicides among Turkish people who are transitioning from one gender to another. The recent deaths of a seventeen-year-old trans kickboxer and a twenty-three-year-old trans sex worker—both killed themselves after posting social messages about their impending suicides—have unsettled Turkey. Many Turks became aware of the plight of trans people after seeing posts on Twitter and Facebook; some held protests in solidarity.

A certain ambiguity has defined Turkish attitudes toward gays, cross-dressers, and people who have a fluctuating gender identity since long before the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. The Ottomans tolerated homosexuality in public spaces, despite the Koran's commandment: "How can you lust for males, of all creatures in the world, and leave those whom God has created for you as your mates. You are really going beyond all limits" (26:165–6). In Aleppo under Ottoman rule, only one man was brought to the sharia court for sodomy. He was forced to leave his neighborhood but was otherwise unpunished. In the nineteenth century, a secularized version of sharia law became the civil code, and in 1858 the Ottomans decriminalized sodomy.

The Turkish language doesn't have gender pronouns. When the luminaries of Ottoman poetry wrote verses about beautiful boys, readers were left in the dark about the genders of their poems' subjects, and so deciphering references to male beloveds itself became a feature of Ottoman poetry. In the sixteenth century, poems called *şehrengiz* (city thrillers) chronicled handsome boys in different towns. Class distinctions were unimportant—sons of butchers, halvah makers, muezzins, and others were all depicted in homoerotic verse. Bathhouses and Islamic lodges were popular homosexual destinations.

Meanwhile the Ottoman court, which prohibited women from dancing onstage, was enlivened by cross-dressing males known as *köçeks* who were raised to perform in feminine attire until they lost their youthful beauty. Sultans supported them. Troupes spread the tradition to other cities and among the less privileged. In the early 1800s cross-dressing dancers were an attraction in Istanbul taverns. According to Reşat Ekrem Koçu, a popular historian of Istanbul, every tavern in the city had its own *köçek*: "Some *köçeks* came from Greek islands, especially Chios; others were gypsy boys raised at Istanbul lodges. Names of those boys are forgotten today, but their nicknames survived." Among the most famous of them was a gypsy boy, İsmail, known in Istanbul as "Freckled." Other famed *köçeks* included "Egyptian Beauty," "Canary," and "Moonlight." *Köçeks*, according to the historian Metin And, "wore skirts and imitated girls in both appearance and demeanor, but sometimes performed as men, wearing trousers and conical caps." Janissaries, elite infantrymen of the sultan's household troops, enjoyed watching *köçeks* at coffeehouses and at times fought among themselves over their sexual favors.

Ottoman law made a clear distinction between sexes, but among histories of Istanbul one also comes across references to rough men, well built and masculine, being penetrated by less virile men. Sexual orientations could alter for a few hours of pleasure, and gender fluidity was not uncommon. But in the late nineteenth century, the Westernization of Ottoman culture accelerated, and homosexuality and gender fluidity among Turkish men became a problem for

modernizers. Westernization, in its nationalistic, muscular, Germanic form, filtered into Turkey through the Ottoman military, not unlike Japan's militarist modernization. *Volk in Waffen* (Nation in Arms), a treatise advocating increased military involvement in public life, became popular at the Imperial Military Academy after its author, Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz, trained Ottoman officers there between 1883 and 1895. It influenced the thinking of young career soldiers, including Enver Pasha, a leader of the Young Turk revolution in 1908 that laid the foundations of the Turkish Republic.<sup>1</sup> Under European influence, Turks came to believe that they were allowing degenerate, even criminal acts in their dominions, and homophobia began to take root.

The founders of modern Turkey and their modernizing leader, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, disliked the Ottomans' permissiveness about sexuality, which they found regressive and non-European. In *New Desires, New Selves*, Gul Ozyegin, an associate professor of sociology and gender at the College of William and Mary, explores the change in Turkish attitudes toward sex in the early twentieth century and quotes a Kemalist historian who described the Ottoman Empire as "governed by pleasure and perversity, a world that recognized no moral boundaries...a perverse space where the voracious and debauched sultans committed all kinds of abominable acts, including homosexuality."<sup>2</sup>

Turkish modernizers designed the Republic as a place where gender identities were strict and unambiguous: the powerful woman who devotes her life to family and the athletic man who works for the good of the nation. The editors of *Gendered Identities*, a collection of articles on gender and sexualities in Turkey, contend that patriarchy and sharply defined genders have shaped modern Turkey and defined its founding principles. They write that Turkey's "gendered citizenship regime" is responsible for putting "transsexuals at the bottom of the societal structure in the context of the social Darwinistic mentality."<sup>3</sup>

In their account, Turkey's republican ideologues considered cross-dressing a remnant of a dead culture, and in the early twentieth century *köçeks* went into hiding. They were threatened less by the idealized Turkish family, which was nuclear, nationalist, and heterosexual, than by the Republic's decision to turn its back on traditional Ottoman culture. Throughout the twentieth century, *köçek* dancers continued to perform privately for small audiences in apartments in eastern Turkish cities.

The public-private duality in sexualities in modern Turkey, Ozyegin argues in *New Desires, New Selves*, was introduced by early republican ideologues who asked women to be enlightened mothers at home but masculinized defenders of the Turkish state and its patriarchal institutions in public; meanwhile men had to be model citizens, with Westernized garments and European manners. Only by rooting out effeminacy and degeneration could Turks become masculine, independent, and Western. Under these circumstances, signs of gender fluidity had to be suppressed for the good of the nation. Over the twentieth century, Turkish patriarchy, fused with paternalism, has solidified into a "gender consensus."

Transgender and gay identities have gone through three stages in Turkish history. Under the Ottomans, gender distinctions were fluid; under the militaristic nationalists, genders had to be strictly defined following the modern Western model; under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, prime minister from 2003 to 2014 and now president, a combination of conservatism and neo-Ottoman tolerance for gender fluidity became widespread.

In what Erdoğan often refers to as “the New Turkey,” trans and gay people have become more visible—LGBTI News Turkey, a website that provides English translations and sources on LGBTI Turks, lists forty-eight organizations dedicated to them; Time Out Istanbul has a bustling LGBTI section that lists weekly events—and consequently they feel more vulnerable. Trans and gay Turks are at times directly demonized by politicians, as in Putin’s Russia: the former minister of women and family affairs Aliye Kavaf called homosexuality a “disease” in 2010; the former prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said in 2015 that homosexuals “caused the destruction of the tribe of Lot.”

Monique Jacques/Corbis/Getty Images

A mock wedding of a transgender couple on Gay Pride Day, Istanbul, June 2010

Meanwhile Erdoğan’s attitude toward trans and gay Turks has been curiously ambiguous. Before he came to power, he promised liberalism and gender equality, and he pledged to stop discrimination against LGBTI Turks. Indeed, the Erdoğan era began promisingly in 2003. During his first years in office, he was a vocal critic of the earlier Turkish modernization. He pledged to overturn the country’s nationalistic foundations, and many Turkish liberals believed and supported him. In their view, Erdoğan was a change from the modern militarists: he could potentially transform the patriarchal republican identity that did not allow gender fluidity and a nonbinary sexual identity, among other values viewed by early republican ideologues as threats to the Turkish national character.

In 2003, Erdoğan permitted a gay pride march in Istanbul, which was first attempted but suppressed in 1993. Thirty people attended the march in 2003, but the number then grew: 5,000 in 2010, 10,000 in 2011, 20,000 in 2012, 50,000 in 2013, and 90,000 in 2014.

Using the rhetoric of fighting a homogeneous Turkish identity, Erdoğan also softened some of the patriarchal character of the Turkish Republic. He abolished the oath ceremonies in which primary and middle school students were forced to proclaim themselves “honest, hard-working Turks.” He did away with bans on the Kurdish language and started a peace process with armed Kurdish rebels.

But three and a half million Turks, a significant number of whom accused Erdoğan of betraying republican ideals, participated in antigovernment protests in the summer of 2013, and he realized that his critique of modern Turkey’s national identity was costing him votes. That fall, the Turkish state cracked down on public marches, and Erdoğan began to slowly change his policies. In speeches, he put forth a newly formulated Turkish nationalism, and this helped him

regain the votes of nationalists who were annoyed by his attempts to change Turkish identity. Turks on both sides of the republican–Islamist divide are often socially conservative, and Erdoğan's new paternalistic tone helped to greatly increase popular support for his policies.

This new politics had alarming consequences for transgender people living in Turkey. On June 19, 2015, the Trans Pride march was banned, and riot police attacked LGBTI activists with pepper spray. On June 28 of that year, Istanbul's mayor used the Islamic month of Ramadan as an excuse to cancel Gay Pride. In Ankara and Izmir (one of Turkey's most liberal cities), blanket bans were imposed on pride parades.

I live in central Istanbul, where pride parades are held, and I noticed that their suppression was part of a pattern. When May Day celebrations were outlawed over the past two years, police blocked entry to Taksim Square, armored vehicles patrolled it, and every street was guarded by a dozen riot police. On June 26, 2016, the government again banned pride parades. Nineteen days later, elements of the Turkish military staged an unsuccessful coup against Erdoğan, and with the announcement of a state of emergency on July 21, 2016, the Turkish government gained additional powers to suppress not only the pride parades, but all public marches.

Until 2014, sex reassignment operations were a privilege only wealthy Turks could afford. Turkey's most famous transgender celebrity, Bülent Ersoy, had her operation at the age of twenty-eight, after becoming the superstar of Turkish classical music as well as a film actor. Born in 1952, she started hormone replacement therapy in the 1970s. In 1980 she was arrested and locked up for forty-five days after having breast augmentation surgery and baring her chest during a performance. Once released, Ersoy underwent sex reassignment surgery, from male to female, in London.

Nine months after the 1980 military coup, the junta banned all transgender people from appearing at entertainment venues and on television, but Ersoy argued that the ban didn't apply to her as a woman. When a court denied her petition, Ersoy took the case to the Supreme Court, which rejected her appeal. She exiled herself to Germany, consorted with Kurdish and Communist victims of the junta, starred in Turkish-German films, and became a celebrated rebel. In the aftermath of the Ersoy case most transgender Turks, but especially those in entertainment, lost their jobs; many were forced into prostitution to make a living; torture and rape of transgender people at police stations became everyday news.

In 1988, Turgut Özal's neoliberal Motherland Party amended Turkey's Civil Code to allow Turks who had undergone sex reassignment surgery to legally change the gender on their birth certificate.<sup>4</sup> Transgender people celebrated the news, and Ersoy came home. Throughout the 1990s, her fame grew and her surgery became common knowledge.

In February 2014, Turkey's Social Security Institution sent a letter to all state hospitals ordering them to offer sex reassignment surgeries free of charge. Psychotherapy and hormone replacement therapy are also offered for free, but there are still problems. One trans woman

interviewed in “Transsexuals in Turkey,” an article in *Gendered Identities*, complains, “The doors of public institutions and the private sector are closed to us.” On January 25, 2018, Diren Coşkun, a Turkish trans woman detained on a charge of “terrorist organization propaganda,” started a hunger strike for her right to laser hair removal treatment in prison. The European Parliament, in a resolution passed on February 5, 2018, said it was “deeply worried” by the case and called “on the competent institutions to ensure her health and wellbeing.” The same month two Turkish trans activists joined her hunger strike in support, and #LetDirenLive became a trending topic on Twitter in Turkey.

Kaos GL, which offers many transgender Turks free legal aid, is Turkey’s oldest LGBTI organization. Umut Güner, one of its founders, says he is proud of the movement’s visibility, especially compared to 1994, when Kaos GL was born, and when gay and trans Turks had no access to legal aid. Güner is a cheerful man, bearded, pudgy, and often smiling. And yet he is worried about the future, given what he terms “the new politics of repression” that began in 2015, the first year pride parades were recriminalized. “I am worried not only for LGBTI rights in Turkey but for Turkish human rights in general,” Güner says.

A report by Amnesty International lists government indifference toward preventing gender discrimination, a lack of legal protections for housing, and employment discrimination as the main obstacles faced by LGBTI Turks. Murders of transgender people, like that of Hande Kader, a twenty-three-year-old trans activist who was found raped, mutilated, and burned on a roadside in August 2016, continue to cause public outrage.<sup>5</sup> Restrictions on public gatherings and protest marches are now the rule rather than the exception. In November 2017 a governor banned Turkey’s queer film festival; the ban was then extended to all LGBTI events in Turkey—film screenings, exhibitions, forums, panels, meetings—for an indefinite period. The Turkish government says that it is concerned with the security and safety of LGBTI activists, and that the bans are not homophobic.

Yet there are also reasons for optimism. In Istanbul, there is an increasing presence of transgender employees in entry-level retail jobs, such as at beauty salons and boutiques. The government’s suppression of pride parades has increased solidarity and unity among trans and gay Turks, and their resilience has inspired environmentalists, feminists, political dissidents, and others who see themselves on the margins of Turkish society. In the past three years opposition parties have nominated openly gay candidates, and the main opposition party established a quota for neighborhood committee elections requiring that one in five candidates be gay. Bülent Ersoy is a frequent guest at the Presidential Palace in Ankara; there is even a pro-Erdoğan LGBTI organization named AKLGBTI (after his AK party). And on November 29, 2017, Erdoğan’s government removed forced sterilization requirements from sex reassignment surgeries. Turkey could imaginably become a destination for medical tourists looking to undergo sex reassignment in the near future.

Life remains difficult, however, for Turks who have not yet changed their sex but hope to. People who are gender-fluid or at the early stages of transitioning from one sex to another seem

particularly threatening to established notions of gender. “The Turkish government is willing to assist people who want to change gender; what it doesn’t like is the in-betweenness,” a Turkish activist told me.<sup>6</sup>

In the weeks following his attack, Derin Oylum was expelled from the dormitory of his college. His mother lost her babysitting job. His scholarship was cut. He had to terminate his college education and once again had to face his attacker—his girlfriend’s brother—who followed him on his motorbike to intimidate and frighten him.

Derin still hopes to have sex reassignment surgery and settle down with Emine, who now lives in a distant town, but until his transition is complete, his in-betweenness will continue to put him in a perilous position. Understandably, he seemed tense as we walked on the main avenue of his Aegean town. Around a huge statute of Atatürk young men smoked cigarettes and watched passersby. I, too, realized the weight of their gaze: perhaps they meant no harm, or maybe they did. Derin walked me to the bus station, and I hesitated to leave him behind. As the bus left the terminal, I saw him disappear into the crowd.

1

The influence spread further among Turkish officials after German General Karl Liman von Sanders arrived at the Imperial Military Academy to reform the Ottoman military in 1913. ↵

2

Gul Ozyegin, *New Desires, New Selves: Sex, Love, and Piety among Turkish Youth* (New York University Press, 2015), p. 246. ↵

3

*Gendered Identities: Criticizing Patriarchy in Turkey*, edited by Rasim Özgür Dönmez and Fazilet Ahu Özmen (Lexington, 2013), p. 74. ↵

4

Özal was an aficionado of classical Ottoman music, and he loved Ersoy’s performances. This, rather than his support for LGBTI politics, was why the Motherland Party legalized sex reassignment. ↵

5

Crimes like Kader’s murder inspired a six-volume novel, *Turkish Delight* (published in the US by Penguin), whose protagonist is a transvestite banker obsessed with solving murders of trans people in Istanbul. ↵

6

In contrast to India, where the Supreme Court recognized hijra (transgender and intersex) and other transgender people as a third gender in 2014 (though homosexuality is still a crime), Turkish law recognizes only two genders among citizens. ↵

Making Room for God

Michael Ignatieff JUNE 28, 2018 ISSUE

Liberalism's Religion

by Cécile Laborde

Harvard University Press, 337 pp., \$35.00

Secularism: Politics, Religion, and Freedom

by Andrew Copson

Oxford University Press, 153 pp., \$18.95

The Meaning of Belief: Religion from an Atheist's Point of View

by Tim Crane

Harvard University Press, 207 pp., \$24.95

Private Collection/Christie's/Bridgeman Images/© 2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SABAM, Brussels

James Ensor: The Vile Vivisectors, 1925

The standard story that liberalism has told about religion since the Enlightenment is that they are sibling rivals—frères ennemis—battling each other for control of the modern world. In this view, liberalism's central ideas—the freedom of the individual, the sovereignty of conscience, and the need to create a space for secular politics—were all forged in the crucible of implacable opposition from religious faith. The religious have battled to keep God in politics while liberals have fought to take Him out, convinced that religion makes citizens superstitious and fanatical and that relegating faith to the private sphere is the key to keeping politics peaceful. The faithful have never been happy with this solution. Some denominations—including Episcopalianism and Reform Judaism—have made peace with liberal secularism, while others—conservative Catholicism and Islamic fundamentalism, for example—do not want to be relegated to the private sphere and are reluctant to surrender their position as arbiters of public questions.

The standard account of liberalism and religion as sibling rivals is not wrong, Cécile Laborde argues in *Liberalism's Religion*, her important and illuminating though difficult book, but it needs substantial revision. Laborde is a professor of political theory at Oxford, and what she means by her title is “the conception of religion that liberal theory relies on.” Her book concentrates mainly on the conceptual world of liberal political theory since John Rawls, while Andrew Copson's *Secularism* presents a concise and usefully nonpolemical summary of the wide variety of liberal secularisms around the world.

Both Laborde and Copson agree that liberalism has never had a consistent relation to religion. There are liberal states that disestablish religion altogether, others that allow an established church, and some, like France, that enforce a Jacobin version of secularism known as *laïcité*. Liberalism and religion are rivals, but liberal states have defined their accommodation with religion in very different ways. Some aspire to neutrality, while others use public funds to support a range of religions. In some democracies, like Israel, the battle between secularism and religion is constant, waged, for instance, over marriage laws and public holidays. Within

religions themselves, most evidently within Islam, there are violent disagreements about what accommodation to seek from liberal constitutions.

Laborde's most interesting argument is that liberals make a mistake, ironically, by according religion too much respect. They view religion as shaping a person's entire life and thus as a particularly important test of the liberal belief that the political order exists to shelter and protect many different, even opposed ways of life. Laborde contends, against this view, that religious commitments are not intrinsically different from secular ones, like environmentalism or veganism, which likewise direct a person's attitudes and conduct as a whole. A free society should respect all "integrity-protecting commitments" in the same way, she argues, rather than privilege religious ones as uniquely worthy of respect.

Laborde also contests the common claim that liberalism is a "secular fundamentalism" or, as Carl Schmitt would have said, a political theology. According to such a view, liberals only pretend to respect and defer to the plurality of beliefs within a liberal society when in fact they view their own institutions and their doctrine of freedom as beyond argument. This attack has come at liberalism from both ends of the political spectrum. Back in the 1960s, Herbert Marcuse accused liberal America of "repressive tolerance." Today it is conservatives who accuse liberalism of intolerant dogmatism whenever students shout down a conservative speaker.

Against the conception of liberalism as "the sectarian, comprehensive ideology of Western progressives," Laborde wants to reframe its relation to doctrines other than its own, especially religious doctrines, as a story of inclusive accommodation. One wishes she had said more about the history of liberalism's accommodating attitude toward religion—which developed in the 1960s as part of a broad adjustment to the newly multiethnic, multicultural demography of modern society. Instead she concentrates her philosophical acumen exclusively on the secular, cosmopolitan liberalism we have right now, one that seeks to turn ethnic, religious, gender, and cultural differences from facts we accept into values we embrace. Despite challenges from recent conservative, populist counterrevolutions, liberal accommodation is still intact, because it keeps the peace within today's diverse societies.

Liberal states in search of civil peace, Laborde shows, are constantly making "reasonable accommodations" for the religious beliefs of their citizens. She follows the philosopher Charles Taylor in arguing that liberal states accommodate religious beliefs not because these beliefs happen to be true or because there is something intrinsic to religion that is entitled to respect, but because liberal society wants to enable individuals to shape their moral lives as they choose. Religions of all kinds shape moral integrity in a fundamental way, and liberal societies have a duty to protect the "integrity-protecting commitments" of their members. Should a Sikh be able to claim an exemption from health and safety rules that require workers to wear a helmet on a construction site? Laborde says yes, because wearing a turban is "an integrity-protecting commitment." It is so essential to being a Sikh that an exemption is justified. The same Sikh should not be exempted from the obligation to wear a helmet when riding a motorcycle, however, because riding a bike is not integral to a Sikh life project, while holding down a

construction job may be. So exemptions are justified when both religious integrity and vital life projects are on the line.

Reasonable accommodations can also be granted when a liberal state is able to respect religious traditions without sacrificing its interests. “It would be unfair,” Laborde argues, “to compel Orthodox Jews to endure an invasive postmortem autopsy in case of nonsuspicious death, if they consider this a desecration of the body.” According to Laborde, if no foul play is suspected, the coroner should leave the body of an Orthodox Jew alone and establish cause of death by noninvasive means like an MRI scan. If the case involved a homicide, however, the state interest in solving a crime might prevail over respect for Orthodox belief. Liberal societies allow Catholic doctors to refuse to perform lawful abortions and tolerate Muslim women who refuse to shake hands with men; some allow Muslim women to wear a full burqa in public, while others do not. Accommodation has its limits. Many liberal societies do not allow Jehovah’s Witnesses to deny blood transfusions to their children if the child’s life is at stake. Some municipalities erect a Christmas crèche, while others do not out of respect for religious pluralism.

Laborde is less convincing about why all integrity-protecting commitments deserve a presumption of good faith. Conservative Muslim or evangelical Christian fathers often invoke their faith to deny their daughters the right to marry whom they choose or to pursue a career. Why should liberal society assume that this proceeds from the father’s claims of religious integrity and not just a desire to perpetuate his paternal domination? And why should religiously grounded misogyny, just because it is an integrity-based commitment, be more acceptable than nonreligious misogyny? It is as if religion has backed liberalism into a corner: once liberals believe, as they must, in the value of a life lived according to authentic moral commitments articulated in the vernacular of faith, then they are compelled to accept any claim made in such terms. But doesn’t this give integrity and authenticity a trump card they don’t deserve? As Tim Crane points out in *The Meaning of Belief*, a lucid critique of the many ways in which atheists have misunderstood religion, religious opinions or beliefs are not entitled to respect just because they are religious. “What is closer to the truth,” Crane writes, “is that all people, rather than their opinions, are worthy of respect.”

Laborde’s discussion of religion as an integrity-protecting commitment also fails to take account of religion as a system of legal commands. Inclusiveness meets its limits when a religion claims to be a form of law. Where sharia law is concerned, for instance, most Western liberal societies assert the supremacy of their law and deny jurisdiction to sharia, while in Islamic democracies, sharia’s writ is confined to family and religious matters. Even if we accept Laborde’s thesis that liberal societies ought to accommodate religious commitments, it will still be necessary for them to push back against religion as law, on the reasonable supposition that there has to be one set of laws for everyone.

A second instance when liberal pushback might be justified—not discussed in Laborde’s book—occurs when those raised in a fundamentalist faith are prevented from leaving it. A

woman who chooses to wear a veil or full-body covering in public should be able to do so, no matter how much this offends Western feminist sensibilities, provided that this “integrity-protecting commitment” is chosen or assented to, but not if it’s enforced or imposed by guardians of the faith, brothers, or husbands. It’s always hard to know, even from the inside, whether a religious life is freely chosen or not. A liberal society ought to protect the right to exit a religious way of life, but equally it ought to let the believer make the choice, rather than presume, as some feminists have done, that no women could ever freely choose confining religious commitments.

Public authorities should not try to determine whether private religious beliefs are freely chosen, but they do have the right to determine what children should be taught at public expense. Public schools should be able to teach evolution, whatever creationists may say, and even private confessional schools that do teach creationism should also teach enough Darwin to enable their students to pass state exams. Teaching Darwin, Laborde argues, does not disparage creationist myths; it exposes children to things they need to know. “The problem with teaching creationism,” she writes, “is not a disparagement problem: it is not that it demeans nonbelievers, but rather that it teaches bad science.” A liberal society can respect religious belief without allowing its children to be inculcated with “incorrect factual beliefs.”

Using examples like this, Laborde insists that liberal states need not be neutral in adjudicating between scientific and religious claims. Anyone who enters public debate, including the religious, has the right to make arguments, but a liberal state can only create and enforce laws on the basis of what liberal theorists call public reasons, which are public in the sense that they are intelligible and accessible to fellow citizens. The religious claim that abortion is an offense against God’s law has every right to be heard in public debate, but it fails Laborde’s test of being accessible, because such an argument cannot be proved: What evidence could be adduced to convince someone of different convictions?

And yet, as Laborde concedes, it is an illusion to suppose that secular arguments are always more accessible, and therefore more fit to serve as public reasons, than religious ones. There are plenty of people in the abortion debate, for example, who make the strictly secular argument that a fetus is a person and that abortion is murder. Their arguments meet the test of public reason. They are accessible and intelligible. Both sides in the debate meet on the same public ground, and yet the argument is irresolvable.

Going still further, secular people may also disagree as to whether the state ought to have sovereign authority over a personal moral question like abortion at all. We are back where we started—as we should be—in the rueful recognition that the best liberal societies can do is manage disagreements like this through free institutions: legislatures, courts, media, where decisions are never final but always contested, revisited, and sometimes revoked.

On matters relating to integrity-protecting commitments, there may be no evidence or argument that ends dispute or produces anything better than reluctant mutual acquiescence for the sake

of civil peace. Laborde wants her book to clarify the right relationship between secular principles of justice and religious commitments, but religious and secular citizens coexist not on the basis of any argument about who deserves to prevail or be respected, but instead on the basis of a shared desire to avoid conflict. They both realize they need closure—the imperfect agreements enacted by liberal institutions—more than they need victory.

The frontier of reluctant mutual accommodation is always shifting. If liberal states are constantly adjusting to identity claims based in religion, religions too are constantly adjusting to the demands and pressures of liberal society. Immigrants accustomed to sharia law in their home countries have adjusted to the reality that sharia has no final legal authority in Western societies. Some members of liberal faiths like Reform Judaism or Anglicanism have become more accommodating to society's expanding plurality of moral choices (the legalization of gay marriage, for example); these religions themselves may gradually become less dogmatic and judgmental as liberal societies become more accepting.

Members of other faiths, however—evangelicals, conservative Catholics, Islamic fundamentalists—have defined themselves by their passionate repudiation of what they consider the hedonist, individualist liberal order. This ought to make liberals rethink some of their historical assumptions. Since the Enlightenment, liberalism has believed in its inevitable victory over faith—that secular arguments, since they are based on science, evidence, and facts, are bound to prevail over religious claims, which, over time, will be confined to an ever-smaller private sphere. This story of secularization may be one of the most enduring and influential of all our historical narratives, but it is less and less convincing. Liberal societies themselves have retreated from grand self-justifying narratives claiming that history, in Benedetto Croce's words, is the story of liberty, or, in Voltaire's words, the story of the slow defeat of superstition. These stories don't line up with reality anymore. Liberal societies are not running on iron rails toward liberty: they can jump the tracks.

Max Weber's pessimistic version—that history represents the slow but inexorable “disenchantment of the world” and the gradual consolidation of the “iron cage” of Western science and reason—is faring no better. The Weberian story overstates the irreversibility of secular narratives and understates the irrationality of liberal society. For these societies have proved to be just as plagued by myths, fake news, enthusiasm, and the madness of crowds as more religious and supposedly more credulous regimes of the past.

Furthermore, globalization is not making the world more secular. In *Secularism*, his clear and useful survey, Andrew Copson points out “the precarious nature of secularism as a meaningful category in today's world,” observing that while some societies are moving in a more secular direction, many more are moving toward state support for religion. As long as they cling to the myth that history is—or ought to be—a story of the inexorable rise of secular freedom, liberals risk being perpetually surprised and disillusioned by the times they live in.

Finally, a cardinal fact about liberal society is that it disappoints. It offers no radiant tomorrows, no redemption, no salvation. The most that the social democratic variants of liberalism have promised is a welfare state that seeks the slow reduction of unmerited suffering, the gradual diminution of injustice, and the increase of prosperity and individual flourishing. These public goals are what Western liberalism at its best has had to offer since Franklin Roosevelt, but they leave many people yearning for deeper collective belonging and stronger ties to tradition and community. This dissatisfaction leaves a void, which is constantly being filled by nonliberal doctrines.

Instead of seeing religion as a vestigial tradition inexorably fated to fade away, it makes more sense to see it as an eternally vital response to the problems of human experience. Since some of these problems—suffering and death, for example—cannot be cured by politics, we all stand in need of consolation, and here religion finds its ongoing role in providing believers with words and rituals that address these existential questions. In Crane's words, "faith is not certainty but something more like a committed struggle to understand in the face of the palpable mystery of the world." Liberalism thought it had won the political battle by forcing religion out of the public sphere and relegating questions about the meaning and mystery of life to the private sphere; but while this may have pacified politics, it has left a hunger for shared public conceptions about the purpose of life. For this religion offers a consolation that even some liberals find themselves turning back to as they stare into the endlessly receding horizon of liberal democracy.