

## Subaltern Speaks Episode 4 Transcript

Manvinder:

Hi everyone, thanks for tuning into subaltern speaks. I'm Manvinder Gill the host for this episode. In this episode I'm joined by Doctor Carlos Colorado, an associate professor at the University of Winnipeg, whose work focuses on secularism, colonialism, race and the politics of identity. In this episode we chat about what secularity means in the Canadian context. How Indigenous spiritualities are engaged in this framework and what depolarizing secularism? And more broadly, what do Canadian conceptions of religion mean? So we'll just hop right into it. I'd love if you could briefly introduce yourself to our listeners.

Dr. Colorado:

Yeah hi, my name is Carlos, Colorado am Assistant Professor at University of Winnipeg in Manitoba. I work around the issues of religion and politics, focusing increasingly on secularism and issues of race. My own background it's good to know, given that we're talking about issues that are largely related to Indigenous people who are part of a nation. But insofar as you know I'm doing this work, I do really see myself as an ally, but non-Indigenous, just important I think for listeners to know that.

Manvinder:

One of the first classes in the Religion and Culture Department that I took was one of the things we called them, like the one week intensive and it was around secularity in the Canadian context and that was kind of the first time I was introduced to this concept of secularity. Maybe we can spend some time now thinking or thinking about definition of what secularism meaning particularly in the Canadian context. I think sometimes it gets completed with the American context with overtly the separation of church and state, actually could chat a little bit about that.

Dr. Colorado:

Yeah, no sure and I remember that that course. Well, I think it was a spring Institute called 'is Canada secular' and ended with a question mark and I think that hopefully still remains as we can think about the way that we organize our society in Canada. So I mean, the word secular is often associated I think with a broad set of views that are, you know, talking about the declining importance of religion. Maybe that's more about a process referred to as secularization, which is a little bit different from secularism, right? That ISM means that we're talking about an idea, logical view, or normative. You write how things ought to be, how we ought to organize their societies. So really, when we're talking about secularism, I think the most common ways that people think about it even though they may not use these words. So you just mentioned the United States and so the American model secularism is what's called

the disestablishment. So that's essentially separation of church and state. That's one way you can think about it. So government is to be separate. Bring the influences of religion and if we think about the history of the United States where you know you have people coming from context where nation states were not only at war in Europe, but were also often dominated by either Catholic or Protestant churches, really ruling the states and so what happened is that people that were being persecuted., in those contexts in Europe, move to the United States and they set up a different kind of Republic right where people wanted their government to not be ruled by religion. But of course that doesn't mean that there's no place for religion in society, right? That's a different kind of vision, and so that takes one to a different understanding of secularism, which is privatization and so privatization is it can overlap, of course, with this establishment. But that really refers to the existence of two separate spheres. Or I mean at least two public and private and in that sort of understanding religion is relegated to the private sphere. And it's done so because it's understood that the public sphere should be neutral, right? That there should be this neutrality as it refers to religion. So you know, those are, I think the most kind of common understandings, but certainly there's some more. I guess progressive ways of thinking about seculars amount of you had anything you wanted to ask or add there, or I can just move into talking about some of those other models.

Manvinder:

Yeah, I think my question was just leading up until what I think you're about to hop into, which is a little bit of Charles Taylor and some open close secularism, which is also a concept I still think about. Like notes, I still refer back to when thinking about neutrality and is being religion being removed from the private sphere, or sorry from the public sphere. Yeah, is that neutrality? How is that neutrality then reached?

Dr. Colorado:

For those that don't know about Charles Taylor, he's a fairly prolific philosopher who's done a lot of work on secularism. The work on opening close secularism that Manvinder that you were talking about. And I mean, as far as I see it, I think that it's the most convincing and defensible understanding of kind of secular society that I've read. Whether it's the best model for structuring societies is slightly different question, but I think if we were trying to think about society that secular, you know it raises some important questions and critiques of other models of secularism and so you know really what Taylor is trying to do is talk about dominant modes of secularism, such as we find, say in France or even sometimes emerging in Quebec, which is closed model of secularism and this is a kind of secularism that is quite restrictive. It allows for significant restrictions on public expressions of religiosity. Those restrictions are usually done in the name of neutrality, or sometimes maybe in a very narrow pursuit of a very narrow understanding of what the separation of church and state implies, right? So that it's not actually. Well, we talked about a moment ago where you know folks coming from a context where they were persecuted want to go to a nation or create a nation where that persecution doesn't appear, but instead it's the evacuation of religion from the public sphere. That's the goal of closed seculars, so over and against this. What open secularism demands or advocates

for is. I mean, it acknowledges the importance of neutrality, but it points out that neutrality is only a means to ensure the ends of secularism, right? So what are the actual goals of secularism? And so for Taylor and McClure those goals are religious, liberty and freedom of conscience rights and the ability to be religious to choose your religion to enact that and to be able to have freedom of conscience and so it's only insofar as those two goals are protected that neutrality is an important means, right? It's the way. It's one of the main ways to ensure that religious freedom and freedom conscience are protected. So, so that's sort of, I think, the you know the crux of open and close secularism, but I think it's also worth talking about a different perspective. 'cause I think it's actually one that I'm increasingly interested in, and I know that you are also interested in this perspective, and it it's thinking about secularism as a structure of discipline, right? A very non neutral structure, discipline and so that's sort of approach to secularism that's been developed by people like Judith Butler, Wendy Brown and others and collectively what this group of scholars or theorist try to do is to help us see how secularism can be in fact construed as a mechanism, colonialism, right? So on that perspective secularism should really be seen as something that disciplines religions. It sets the parameters for how and where it can appear in society and therefore how and where religious people can appear in society. But a key piece of this kind of body of theory or scholarship is the way in which that this kind of regulation of religion doesn't tend to be neutral, and we can see, for example, how in Canada it's minority religions or we could put it a different way. Religions at the margins that often tend to be more regulated, so you can think of cases involving Muslim women who wear a veil, or Sikhs who wear turban or kirpan for reasons of religious obligation and you know why is it that these are the cases that come to mind when we're thinking of religious accommodation? It's rarely say for example white Protestants that are running up against secular discipline. And so would it be helpful for me to maybe give you a bit of an example of what they're talking about?

Manvinder:

Yeah for sure. Yeah, I think an example would be great.

Dr. Colorado:

So this is an example that so you know again, for the listeners Manvinder and I have participated in the production of a film together and these are some examples that actually that are raised in that film to talk about the inconsistent way in which secular power is exercised. And so the two examples have to do with Muslim women. Muslim women specifically who wear a veil. And so I think these examples expose very clearly how non neutral secular power can be in Canada and how it serves as this sort of disciplinary structure. You know the first case involves a woman named Zunera Ishaq, and so this is a woman who was told that she could not wear her veil during a citizenship ceremony. This about a lot of attention around the time that the Trudeau government was elected the first time, and in fact there been many analysts that have said that it's actually largely because of this controversy, that the Liberals won because of the way in which the responses from various leaders really divided the country. But it's so far is this. You know this woman was told she couldn't wear the veil. It's

worth thinking about, you know, what the arguments for that were? And so one of the most high profile came from the Prime Minister himself, Prime Minister Stephen Harper, and he said that the covering of one's face at a citizenship ceremony was contrary to Canadian values. He said it was non transparent and he also said that wearing the veil is rooted in the culture that's anti women. That's a quote, and that basic position was echoed by the Minister of Immigration, this time, Jason Kenney, who is now the Premier of Alberta, of course. But he went a little bit further. And what was sort of crucial I think in the conversation today about Kenny's perspective is that he said not only that it was a cultural practice, but he also said it wasn't a religious obligation, right? And so we can kind of think about why he's making that point right. If wearing the veil is cultural and that religious, presumably we can surmise that it's not protected by charter rights related to freedom of religion. So let's compare this with the second case involving a woman named Rania El Alloul who is a Muslim woman who around the same time period is around 2015, if I recall correctly, who appeared before Quebec judge, and so she was there because her son had driven her car, he's been caught driving with suspended license and her vehicle was impounded. So she appears before Quebec judge to try to get her vehicle back. And so when she appeared before the judge she's wearing her veil as she always does and the judge tells her that the courtroom is a secular space and she refuses to hear the case if El Alloul is wearing her religious garment wearing this veil. So in this case, right El Alloul is told she can't appear because the veil is religious. In the case of Ishaq, she's told she can't appear in public because the veil is not religious and so really what is consistent is the way in which Muslim women who veil are being disciplined. What's inconsistent is a sort of argumentation that's taking place to justify it, and I think this is a good example that shows that we're really not dealing with the kind of non neutral structure at all. But in fact, you know these sort of subtle mechanisms that actually underpin kind of discriminatory practices that also, I think, just as I mentioned, with Sikhs being a group that are often singled out, right were also talking about religious people who are very visible, right? That can be visibly identified and so they often tend to be the targets of a certain kind of secularism. It's really about regulating religion, right? Regulating where it can appear, and insofar as we're talking about those people being more visible, it ends up being mostly, but the regulation of minority religion, right? Muslims, Sikhs? And so on, and so obviously when we talk about Indigenous spirituality, we're talking about a minority tradition too. But of course that is, you know, of a different sort of variety than Islam or Sikhism.

**Manvinder:**

I think the examples are very helpful. 'Cause I think in Canada sometimes we operate under this like guise of neutrality and we do it by comparing by comparison to the United States where we argue that perhaps secularity is conceived differently there, and it's not the same here because we have, like we again, function under I would say the guise of multiculturalism where we say everyone is welcome to practice their faith, their culture, and I think it obscurs like the act like what is actually occurring today. So I think those examples are extremely helpful in illuminating what secularity means in a Canadian context. So you started talking about it about Indigenous worldviews and spirituality's and how secularism plays into those or how? How do secularity

and Indigenous spiritualities interact? If you want to say a little bit more about that, I think that would be helpful.

Dr. Colorado:

So you know, I think there's lots of things we can discuss and were only gonna really scratch surface. But you know, some things come to mind. I think you know. First of all, you know secular as a concept goes along with the concept religion right there, often referred to as a dyad, right? Or two sides of the same coin. But I think we don't realize how much religion is a concept, right? It's not just a word, it's a concept. It's a way of thinking about culture or organizing groups or individuals. But it's nevertheless a concept, and my understanding from the interviews that you know that Manvinder we carried out in the project that we did together is that many, if not most Indigenous people, and this is at least we heard in our interviews that many, if not most Indigenous people who practice traditional spirituality, reject the category of religion. They say this is not the way to describe traditional worldviews and spiritual practices, and a further point is often made that religion is used as a major justification for residential schools, right? So religion is really seen as kind of external phenomenon to traditional Indigenous worldviews. So insofar as religion may be a term that doesn't apply to traditional Indigenous worldview, then it's very difficult to see how secularism as the concept applies to traditional Indigenous worldly. So I think that's sort of one, you know to kind of keep up in the areas where as we're talking about these things. Second, going back to what we just discussed before return to Indigenous perspectives, right? If you're going to describe secularism as a mechanism of colonialism, then I think we should be concerned about how you know what is seen by many as a tool of the colonizer. How it may be completely misaligned with Indigenous spirituality, right? That sort of suggest to us right off the hop that secularism as an ideology or way of organizing society may be misaligned with Indigenous worldviews. So that's I think the one side of it. At the same time in our interviews, some Indigenous leaders suggested that the category of religion can in fact be empowering right in certain contexts. So for example, that by talking about Indigenous spirituality as religion, it's a way of talking about how it should be respected just like Christianity should be respected, just like Islam should be respected and that it also should be protected just like other religions that we're talking about. That it should actually be construed in the same sort of way that that you know other, say that world religions are understood. So I think it would follow from this that that secularism could be seen as a protection for Indigenous spirituality, but I think that's where to go back to the discussion of open and closed secularism. You have to be very careful about the kind of secularism that you want to advocate for. I think it's also important to say that you know secularism is imperfect even in its best forms, but I do think that even in its imperfection, it can be used as a sort of structure to help institutions to rethink their policies that might otherwise limit traditional Indigenous practices like smudging and prayer, but that I think requires clarifying what secularism actually is right? Is it something that is closed? That is about restricting and restricting religious people in public life? Is it about sort of segregation, public and private, or is in fact a kind of way of trying to ensure neutrality that maximizes the way in which people are able to exercise their freedom of religion and exercise their freedom of conscience. In a way that that Charles Taylor advocates for 'cause I think it's the 2nd that does actually potentially

move us forward in a way that I think is envisioned through say the Truth and Reconciliation Commission the TRC. Insofar as it advocates for Indigenous spiritual body.

Manvinder:

So in thinking about decolonization, Canada's steps towards reconciliation, and I think we've already kind of touched upon it a little bit. I guess I'm thinking about what secularism would look like if we were to take like our best attempts at reconciliation into consideration, if that makes sense?

Dr. Colorado:

Yeah, I think it does. I mean I'm not sure if I can answer well, but I'll take a shot. It's a great question. So I mean, I think there's no question that if we're going to try to lean on secularism as a way, advocating for the goals of the TRC, then it has to be an open secularism. And on the closed one right it can end be a sort of secularism that shuns spiritual practices from public life. Because if we look at the calls to action that came out of that year to see, you know many of them revolve around creating space for indigenous spirituality say in education and healthcare That's very much against the grain of what it is. The TRC is advocating for I think that's sort of the first thing I would say but I do want to say a second thing and I think that it is that this can only get us to achieve a sort of neutrality and also a sort of equality and I think we need to stop and ask as Canadians ask ourselves whether those are necessarily the right ways to achieve reconciliation right to just say well we need to be neutral because when we talked about and at the hands of government at the hands of churches and so I think there is an argument to be made that perhaps indigenous spiritual practices should have a sort of privileged place in the public sphere, and so. Say for example, you know inviting an elder into to pray at that certain ceremonies you know, should that be then used as an argument for bringing in, you know a Catholic priest to pray. Problematic. I think that you know to certain degree we can use the model of open secularism to try to open up spaces to carve out spaces again to ensure freedom of religion and freedom of conscience. But it only gets us so far and I think that at the end of the day there are probably models, a public life that we confined within indigenous traditional knowledge that are going to be better. The TRC has called for but of course this is a process and I think right now that open secularism model is the one that is more achievable in the short term, but you know when I see certain cases that have happened across the country where we're saying, for example, people have taken issue with smudging in a classroom, I do wonder whether open secularism actually gets us where we need to go because you know, I think that at some point it's really, really good for our children to be exposed to these traditional ways as a way of trying to reconcile the way of trying to overcome and. And I also very aware that many Indigenous activists have moved away from language of reconciliation and you know some are talking, for example about Indigenization as a sort of different kind of approach to it. And again I think you know that is perhaps something that has to rely on a privileged place for Indigenous spiritual practices. So even though I myself would identify as an avid secularists that maybe even have it open, secularists, I also recognize that it has pretty serious limits when we take into account the impact of colonization. And if I can actually, you know, turn back to Taylor for a

second. Charles Taylor, who you introduced earlier. So I've been writing a book for some time on his work on his work on secularism in Catholicism. And then when I interviewed him for that book. I talked a little bit about the sort of critique from people like to al-Assad, right that wanted to sort of do away with secularism because it is the sort of extension of colonialism and so you know, maybe we should be looking in another direction. And Taylor's response to me I think was actually one that resonated because he said I totally understand where they're coming from. You know, in terms of theoretical perspective, but Taylor himself has been very engaged in practical politics, right? He actually ran for government a few times, including against current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's father. He lost the course but he's been engaged in public life. You know, trying to help develop policies running, you know, various public fora, and his response was, well, you know there's a lot of bad things happening and we need to try to find ways to protect those people that are being persecuted. And so you know, in his view, secularism is the means that we have right now to sort of serve as a bulwark against some of that discrimination, and so whether it's perfect form is a very different sort of question, and so I think you know to kind of just say again what I said a moment ago. It's something that's a bit more, it's achievable, right? It's not pie-in-the-sky I've seen how it can be used to sort of correct institutional practices that are deeply discriminatory and colonialists, but that doesn't that doesn't necessarily mean that is secularism isn't itself still colonial is the nature, and so you know. I think that's where the language of decolonizing the secular is. A provocative way to think about it. Right to say that that is a concept that is itself colonialist. But you know, maybe it can be there. Just sort of active retrieval that can happen to sort of return us to that protection of freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and at least as a sort of first step to protect Indigenous spirituality.

Manvinder:

A lovely place to end and you've given us a lot to think about. I definitely yeah, I understand that steady and slow. Maybe rethinking and restructuring and active retrieval that will occur from that rethinking and restructuring and decolonizing. And these are readings that I definitely come back to all the time. I was actually just talking to Doctor Carter and I had recommended I like Saba, Mahmood, reading for her like first year world religions are actually don't think it's called world religions. She made a point that it's not called world religions. So yeah, I said by Mahmoud reading for that class. So I think. A conversation, something I think about. Thank thank you. Doctor Colorado.

Dr. Colorado:

One last thing, actually, if that's OK, 'cause you know it's interesting that there was a study done maybe about two years ago that looked at racism in Canada and it actually showed that the two groups that suffer the most discrimination in Canada, at least according to the study were Indigenous people and Muslims and so I think it's unsurprising that even in the discussion we had today, that allowed there's a lot of places of overlap. I think in terms of ways of kind of resisting colonialism. And I think you know, we can look to people like Mahmood, Muslim scholars who are putting forward this important work but also look into Indigenous scholars

and actors who maybe they have completely different lexicons, different vocabularies for talking about what you and I are talking about today, but you know that we you know those are the places we can really learn from to kind of be allies, I think it is work towards reconciliation.

**Manvinder:**

I think that's a great and important point. Thank you for spending some time with me on this Saturday afternoon.

Thanks so much for tuning into this episode of Subaltern Speaks. We hope you enjoyed it. Tune into our next episode where host yes, mean Jameis will be in conversation with Emilie Jo Born about growing up Christian as a Black woman thinking about how Christianity has failed many Black women and how some are returning and reinventing their indigenous spirituality.