What is a mentality, and when does it become a fundamentality? Technically speaking, these two words may not be etymologically linked, but their overlap is instructive for those pondering the meanings and effects of the ‘secular’. A language of mentalities and imaginaries infuses writing about both fundamentalism and the secular. While scholars have often characterized a fundamentalist ‘mindset’ as one lacking in self-reflexivity or openness to democratic deliberation, so, too, have they turned to a language of mentality and related concepts – sensibilities, imaginaries, world views – as the dominant frame for explaining what the secular is, and how its power works (Marty, 1994; Derrida and Habermas, 2004; Taylor, 2007). Susan Harding, writing specifically of mid-twentieth-century US ‘secularity’ in its relation to ‘fundamentalism’, described the ‘modern secular imaginary’ as a ‘hegemonic social mentality, a sensibility and code of etiquette’ (Harding, 2009: 1283). Sociologist Jose Casanova offers a more precise definition, distinguishing the secular as a ‘modern, epistemic category’ from secularization as a social and historical process that worked to define and set apart ‘religion’ within civic and political institutions. Secularism, in turn, he described as a world view or ideology that can be both a principle of statecraft and a broader, taken-for-granted, modern doxa (Casanova, 2009).

This recent analysis of the secular has insisted that scholars ask hard questions about their own norms – their own ‘social imaginaries’, ‘mentali- ties’, and ‘sensibilities’– including those that designate fundamentalism as rigidly dogmatic while celebrating secularism as a commitment to open critique (Derrida and Habermas, 2004; Asad, 2009). These debates about the secular, or what some now call the postsecular, are thus
posing the question of when a mentality becomes a fundamentality, or when a group’s implicitly shared way of thinking becomes articulated as an exclusive way of thinking to which others must accede, often with both their minds and their bodies (Scott, 2007).

By considering a different layer of etymology resident within the English-language concepts of fundamental and secular, we can set another illuminating frame onto the question, one that brings into relief not only mentalities and imaginaries but also matter and property. Fundamental, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) attests, can be defined as the ‘foundation’ of a building or the ‘base on which something is built’ (OED, 1989b). Fundament, in turn, has a historical and geophysical definition of ‘any landscape before colonization by man in general or by any particular group of men’ (OED, 1989a). The gendered language may be accidental on the part of the OED, and the reference to colonization may not be meant to evoke the politics of imperialism; nevertheless, this definition marks the fundament as a land not yet spoken for by men who claim it and build upon it. In other words, the fundament is a ‘wilderness’ about to be ‘civilized’. The word secular also has OED definitions that mark off matter in place and time. In its medieval meanings, the secular referred to what was worldly, neither ‘spiritual’ nor of the ‘Church’. In later meanings, secular also denoted a long-term geophysical process ‘having a period of enormous length; continuing through long ages’ (OED, 1989c). Historically speaking, then, secular may refer to places not claimed by the Christian Church as well as to material processes that proceed according to the clock of science, not scripture.

In the twentieth century, fundamentalism and the secular took on new meanings as mutually constituting terms orbiting around the third concept of religion, a term not exactly denoting Christianity but largely dominated by it (Wenger, 2009; Asad, 1993). At least at a popular level, the secular largely came to be defined as that which is not based in religious authority, with fundamentalism as its most extreme, and religiously undergirded, opposite (Jakobsen and Pellegrini, 2008: 2). As feminist and other scholars have demonstrated, however, the fundamental and the secular, though both with Christian etymologies, do not have solely Christian genealogies and embodiments (Jakobsen and Pellegrini, 2008: 13). In this essay, I attend to one particular context in which the secular encompassed not only norms of democratic governance and legal recourse, but also the concepts of real estate or property as they emerged within a contested process of Christianization and colonialism. I show how Christianity has been one implicit and