If the marginalization of belief in history is constitutively linked to the lack of an adequate vocabulary to deal with its worldliness, I suggest that by recovering this history one may also begin the search for corrective ways of talking and writing about belief in terms other than “fundamentalist,” “premodern,” or “prehistory.”

Modernity was never itself the object of a nonteleological investigation, a nonteleological criticism. This is what the post-colonial present demands.

At the close of the nineteenth century, W. E. B. DuBois put the world on notice that “the color line” would be the defining issue of the twentieth century. It may not be too early to prophecy that issues of “religion” and “faith” will be critical issues for the twenty-first century. In his proposal for new approaches to studies of the colonial past, David Scott argues that if our task at present is to understand “the conceptual and institutional dimensions of our modernity,” then we ought also to bear in mind “a fundamental crisis in the Third World in which the very coherence of the secular-modern project . . . can no longer be taken for
How does this affect our view of colonialism? What shape should colonial studies take in order to understand the history of our present? The crisis of secularism provides both the urgency and the conceptual space for studies that push the limits of current postcolonial criticism that has been stopped dead in its tracks at the specter of questions of religion and faith.

In this context, I suggest that the religious roots of “the modern self” is an aspect of colonial history that postcolonial theorists have largely ignored. Captivated by modernity’s self-conception as having made a radical break with the past, postcolonial critics rely upon an overdrawn distinction between “modern” and “premodern,” and are thus unable to see their own critique of modernity through to an end. The last decade of colonial scholarship has called our attention to an overreliance upon binary oppositions, yet the simplistic story of a rupture between “medieval” and “Enlightenment” practices remains the last binary to be shattered into more complex and interesting pieces. Just as “east–west,” or “colonizer–colonized” do not accurately represent the complex history of colonialism, so too do the categories “medieval” and “modern” oversimplify a history that is both contingent and continuous.

Drawing upon the work of Michel Foucault and David Scott, the first part of this essay addresses the use of concepts of “governmentality” and “practices of the self” in colonial and postcolonial literature. I argue that the centrality of Foucault to both the genesis of and subsequent shifts in postcolonial theory explains the omnipresence of “the modern self” as a question in colonial studies, but has also resulted in a faulty periodization and a skewed account overemphasizing the Enlightenment as “rupture” and subsequently overemphasizing a break between “premodern” and “modern” colonial experiences.

This essay then takes as its case study the Jesuit Spiritual Exercises to show one example of the making of “modern selves” in a Catholic and colonial context. I discuss them in three settings. The first is Ignatius of Loyola’s intentions when writing the Exercises in the early sixteenth century. The second is the way that the Exercises informed Jesuit evangelization practices in European cities and countrysides. The third is the way Jesuits used the Exercises in their missions in Iberian colonies abroad, primarily in India and New Spain. These case studies differentiate the practice as utilized by clergy, colonizers, and the colonized, and elucidate connections between European colonialism, reform, and governmentality that predate the Enlightenment. In particular, I argue that the Exercises and the general confession should be understood as modern “practices of the self,” showing how both were powerful means of