The notion of secularization is a freighted and a contested one, and particularly so in Jewish contexts. As is the case with related terms such as modernization, the disputed nature of the question of secularization has opened up immensely rich discussions in a wide range of fields. Recent attention to the nature of “secular Judaism”—Jewishness without religiosity—has in some ways deflected Jewish Studies from these discussions by narrowing the notion of the secular to questions of identity, ethnicity, and culture. Other contemporary debates about secularization focus on the increasing irrelevance or, contrastingly, the persistence of faith in increasingly rationalized societies, leading to a rigid and linear conception of richly complex and dynamic processes. The theme of the Frankel Institute will therefore focus on the complexity and dynamism of processes of making objects, acts, and relationships holy and marking off others as worldly and apart from spiritual life.

What processes are actually at play in the apparent disaggregation of faith from everyday life, or, conversely, in the processes of imbuing or reimbuing material life with spiritual content? “Secularization/Sacralization” may best be conceived as a problem cluster that signals moments of self-consciousness of shifting relations of interior faith and faith communities to civic life, inter-group relations, and the everyday. This implicitly comparative project invites participants who explore contacts among Jewish, Christian, and Islamic secular and sacral processes within an array of disciplinary discussions.

“Secular” and all of its linguistic variants have their origin in Christian eschatology, troubling their applicability to other faith systems, including Judaism. The dichotomy of sacred and secular is a Christian one that does not map unto Jewish binaries of kadosh and chol, tahor and tamay, or other terms that may relate to the ritual and common world, or denote purity and impurity, but not worlds defined by time and eschatology. Historic Judaism was, many argue, a system where the boundaries between spiritual experience and daily life were porous or even nonexistent: for example, the Temple in Jerusalem was a civic as well as a sacred space. In this sense, a dynamic tension between the spiritual and material in Jewish life can be discussed outside of the metanarratives of modernization, Westernization, rationalization, and so on. This complex dynamic can usefully be brought to bear on a variety of periods and cultures, and discussed in widely divergent and yet mutually instructive ways.

Turning away from the notion of “secular Judaism” to the problem complex of secularization/sacralization promises relief from some of the repetitions of discussions of Jewish secular identity, but opens up other issues inherent in the broader secularization debate in intellectual history. The term “secularization” has been ambiguous in that it may refer to contradictory things. On one account, it describes the transition of societies (Western ones in particular) from a worldview based on faith to one based in science and reason. This is the first version of the much discredited “secularization thesis.” Obversely, a more sophisticated edition of the secularization thesis posits the persistence of a sacral system through various worldly equivalents. Western thinking about the sacred and secular since the Enlightenment has thus been bound up in the troubled assessment of the status (or legitimacy) of the modern era itself. “Sacralization,” in turn, may refer to myriad moments when subjects or communities invested worldly objects, routines, or practices with otherworldly
content. Paired with “secularization,” the term may imply various ways in which modern subjects have sought to recover spiritual meaning presumed lost to secularization.

Yet in spite of these dissonances within the blending of Judaism and the secular, Jewish minorities were oddly as prominent in the emergence and debates around the supposed secular turn in European history as they were in its theological self-identity in the Middle Ages. The emergence of the notion of secularization with all its paradoxes is usually traced to the process of Enlightenment. From assessments of Baruch/Benedict Spinoza as not only the first “secular Jew”, but the first secular person, to the first use of the term in relation to the expropriation of church lands in the French Revolution, secularization emerged as part and parcel of a set of presumed radical shifts in identity, faith, and socio-political order associated with the modern age. The political emancipation of European Jewish communities and debates surrounding the integration of Jews haunted discussions of European Enlightenment, and has often been seen to represent a similar ambivalence about modernity. Hence, while the whole notion of the secular emerges out of Christian theology, its manifestations could not avoid constant reference to Christianity’s monotheistic others.

The processes of secularization and sacralization are key to inquiries into the changes within Judaism and in the ways in which Jews interacted with non-Jews. These shifts and relations are not limited to the modern period. Asking questions about the sacred and the secular in Judaism needs to involve the places where and ways in which personal faith, communal relations, and daily life practices coincided, and the ways in which spiritual and worldly have been interwoven. The Frankel Institute deliberately focuses on the processes of secularization and sacralization rather than the static dichotomy of the sacred and secular, or presumed states of holiness and secularity, and rejects assumptions that these processes are identical in different times and places, or lead to a common and determined endpoint. Where and when has the separation of the spiritual from the material become salient, and how has this raised consciousness of separation manifested itself? “Sacralization” is as important to include in this inquiry as secularization, to wit: at what points and how have the perceived segregation of sanctified, spiritual, interior or transcendental experience from the temporal everyday been resisted? When have the rise of canons, codes, revaluations of values and so on constituted unwitting sacralizations in spite of the secular impulse of their proponents and participants? The exploration of these processes at the Frankel Institute should incorporate popular experience as well as products of high culture, dynamic practices as well as theories, and multiplicities of experiences subsumed under the names of such processes.

The Frankel Institute therefore welcomes research into the place of religion in contemporary politics, the study of religious cultures within nominally secular societies as well as secular ideologies within nominally religious states, religious organs as surrogates for secular political ones in contemporary power struggles, and so on. If one of the root meanings of the secular was pluralism, how is it that pluralism and/or the marketplace have become objects of orthodoxy? This problem seems equally relevant to nineteenth-century “secularizing” states in Europe as it does to the twenty-first-century global context. The universalizing claims of the sacred cloak its often exclusionary impulses: consider the ongoing and increasingly explicit competition among global confessions on the one hand, or the confessional processes masking themselves as secular on the other.
The theme invites scholars working from distinct disciplinary perspectives. The “secularization thesis” and its critiques have been considered the province of social history, whereas intellectual history and the history of philosophy have engaged deeply in the question of how shifts in the sacred and the secular are keys to human self-understanding in modernity. A philosophical discourse on secularization is particularly pronounced in the twentieth-century German-language tradition. Echoes of this theoretical debate run through French- and English-language historiography. Categories like the sacred and the profane and processes like secularization/Westernization/modernization have been important in multiple traditions of Anthropology on the one hand and Sociology on the other. Religious Studies in particular has concerned itself with questions of the secular and the sacred from the standpoint of its own resources, exploring esoteric and exoteric elements of religions, recurring forms of Gnosticism, and processes of religious change. The connection of the theme to political theory is manifest.

“Secularization,” in other words, is as much a phenomenon of the various disciplines that defined and deployed it as it was of their putative objects. What kind of knowledge is knowledge about the sacred and the secular? The Frankel Institute invites applications from diverse scholars for a theme year that will help lay the ground for thinking differently about these processes as well as our study of them.