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II.7 Secularization: Transformations of Religion and Politics in Western Europe (and the US)

Secularization[1] refers to the transformation of religion as the result of historical processes associated with modernization.[2] How we understand this transformation depends upon which aspect of religion is our focus. This chapter presents an overview of some of the most important historical changes and scholarly debates associated with secularization. Although there is still no clear agreement regarding what secularization entailed, we can observe the crystallization of a series of related issues around which the scholarship on religion has focused:

1. Secularization understood as the (relative) decline of religion, measured either by a decline in church membership and religious participation (Pollack 2009), or by a loss of cultural authority on the part of religious institutions and their retreat from the public sphere.
2. Secularization understood as the rise of religious toleration, and of the separation between church and state, or between religion and politics (Gabriel et al. 2012).
3. Secularization understood in the theoretical sense as the transfer or translation of originally Christian theological categories, structures, and habits of thought and practice, into apparently non-Christian or religiously neutral versions of the same (Löwith 1953).

In a work that arguably launched the most recent set of scholarly debates over secularization, Charles Taylor (2007, 3) began by noting that, in contrast to five hundred years previously, the majority of people living in liberal democracies in the West are free to decide which religion to affirm, including none at all. Taylor's focus was on the individual religious subject, and on the changes in subjectivity that were enabled by the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and subse-

1 In German, the English word "secularization" is represented by two words, "Säkularisierung" and "Säkularisation", that bear different meanings. "Säkularisierung" refers to the longue durée historical process described in this chapter, whereas "Säkularisation" refers to a specific aspect of this process, namely the dispossession of monasteries by Napoleon in continental Europe and the transfer of lands and monies into the state treasury. For further discussion of these terms see Wohlrab-Sahr 2021, 152–153.

2 For a recent sourcebook, see Frey, Hebekus, Martyn 2020.

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quent historical movements. Unlike many who recounted the history of these developments as an inevitable loss of religiosity, Taylor (2007, 26–29) eschewed such "subtraction stories" and focused instead on the new structures of religious thought that articulated with modernization, structures he referred to as the "immanent frame." Following Taylor, other scholars have focused attention on the modes of individual religious experience, belief, or affect that characterize contemporary life.

1 The Reformation as Historical Context

To some extent, the focus on religion as primarily an individual phenomenon is a consequence of earlier historical events, a symptom rather than a diagnosis of secularization. Lucien Febvre ([1942] 1985) argued that unbelief, meaning atheism or the rejection of Christianity, was practically unthinkable in 16th century France. Whether or not this is true, it certainly must have been vastly more difficult prior to the Protestant Reformation for individuals to think or act outside of the norms established by the Roman Catholic Church. As a result of the loss of institutional prestige and political power by the Church[3] that occurred as a consequence of the Reformation and Enlightenment, religion became subdivided and was gradually privatized. With the Reformation came the mandate for individual Christians to read the Bible and consider for themselves what it meant. This was enabled by the arrival of the printing press in the 15th century, which contributed initially to the dissemination of scripture and theology, beginning with Johannes Gutenberg's Bible (see Eisenstein 1980). Translations of the Bible into vernacular languages – into German by Martin Luther (1522, 1534), into English by William Tyndale (1526) and later by the English Protestants who fled to continental Europe, the so-called Marian exiles, who authored the Geneva Bible (1560) – combined with increasing literacy, opened the floodgates of interpretation. And with variety of interpretation came greater diversity of belief. Brad Gregory (2012, 74–75) has derisively referred to this diversity as "hyperpluralism," an incoherence in Christian doctrine that he regards as a chief consequence of the "unintended Reformation": unintended because the goal of Luther and other Reformers was originally, not to fracture the Church, but instead to restore it to purity, and harmony.

3 In this chapter the capitalized singular "Church" is used to refer to the Roman Catholic Church unless context suggests a different meaning, such as the "Church of England".

Differences over religion, in combination with other factors, led to conflicts such as the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) in continental Europe and the English Civil War and subsequent Interregnum (1640–1660). Eventually, with the establishment of the modern system of nation states, the majority of states formed national churches that were either Catholic or Protestant. Only gradually was room made for religious minorities, and it took longer still – sometimes much longer – for these to be granted more or less equal rights.[4] Still, in Britain by the end of the 17th century, dissenting Protestants experienced greater liberty to form congregations independent from the established church. Accordingly, Georg Jellinek (1895) argued that it was among such dissenting Protestants, and not among the anti-clerical *philosophes* of the French Revolution, that religious toleration was first advocated, before eventually being enshrined in such documents as the French *Déclaration des Droits du l'Homme et du Citoyen* (1789) and the U. S. Constitution (1789) with its First Amendment (1791) guarantees of freedom of speech and religious exercise.

Another factor that contributed to religious liberty was the critique of the sacramental and liturgical practices of the Catholic Church that began already with Luther's attack on the sale of indulgences in his *95 Thesen* (1517), followed by his *Die Babylonische Gefangenschaft der Kirche* (1520), which pared back the number of sacraments, argued that the Mass was not (even **metaphorically**) a sacrifice, and rejected the doctrine that rituals are effective *ex opere operato*, i. e. automatically. The devaluation of ritual, as Max Weber ([1904–05/ 2nd ed. 1920] 2016, 200) argued a century ago, was a decisive step toward disenchantment (*Entzauberung*), because it placed relatively greater value on worldly activity, for example by allowing more time and space to everyday life and business matters. This was one aspect of Weber's famous argument that the "Protestant ethic" encouraged the growth of capitalism in certain parts of Europe, such as Britain and the Netherlands.

Absent the developments outlined above, the conditions for individual freedom of choice in matters of religion would not have existed. Accordingly, we should recognize that the privatization of religion, which Taylor took as the point of departure for his analysis, was a concomitant of broader social and cultural developments in Europe after the Reformation. Without the loss by the Papacy of the ability to enforce Catholic orthodoxy, nothing resembling secularization would have occurred. This loss of political power was due to the rise of strong nation states, such as England, where the Reformation began officially with Henry VIII's

4 Although the equation of Catholicism with disloyalty began to attenuate after the Glorious Revolution (1688–1689) in Britain, it was not until the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829 that Catholics were allowed to hold high offices. The Universities Tests Act of 1871 granted freedom to Catholics to become fellows and tutors at Oxford and Cambridge. Until today, the monarch of Great Britain serves as head of the Church of England and must also obviously be a member of that church.

declaration of the Act of Supremacy (1534), asserting the monarchy's control over the English church. In the territory of the Holy Roman Empire, where the Catholic Church retained greater control, state formation came relatively late: both Germany and Italy became sovereign nations only late in the 19th century.

2 The Question of Decline

The historical outline given above is the relevant context for understanding what secularization might mean today. As noted already, one understanding of secularization is that this process has entailed the decline or even disappearance of religion. Earlier accounts of secularization focused on the expropriation of church properties, including vast tracts of land and immense wealth, that occurred in England already in the 16th century, in France beginning with the Revolution, and in other parts of Europe, including Germany, as a result of the Napoleonic wars. The loss of other cultural prerogatives by the Catholic Church in Germany was central to the so-called *Kulturkampf* (1871–1879) and also had an influence on the consciousness of secularization as a historical process (Borutta 2010). The Risorgimento culminated in the unification of Italy in 1870, and the loss by the Church of the Papal States, which meant that the Pope now holds only Vatican City.

Apart from land or territory, another quantitative measure of the vitality of religion is church membership. For some time, the majority of sociologists concerned with secularization focused on rates of church membership, attendance, and religious belief, as measured by surveys. Although the data are somewhat equivocal, most surveys tend to show accelerating declines in church membership in the developed world (for the USA see Chaves 2017; see also Neumaier and Klinkhammer in this volume). In Germany, for example, barely more than one quarter of the population now number as Roman Catholics, and fewer still as Protestants. (Roughly one third have no religious affiliation, and the rest belong to minority traditions.) In the United States, self-reported rates of religious belief and participation remain somewhat higher than in northern Europe. The lower rates of religious affiliation in Germany may be due in part to the requirement that members pay church tax (*Kirchensteuer*). Conversely, the fact that, in the United States, there is a relatively free market in religion – there is no established church, and no religion enjoys monopoly status – has been seen as a possible reason for the relative vitality of religion in that country. Notably, different groups have experienced divergent trajectories, with mainline denominations such as Methodists and Episcopalians losing members to Pentecostalism and other strict religions. Globally, in such places as Africa and Latin America, various forms of charismatic Christianity are making inroads.

Whereas the evidence for a decline of religion even in secularized countries may be equivocal, there is evidence for a resurgence of religion in some other parts of the world. A special case of such resurgence, it could be argued, is the rise of political Islam. During the decades of the Cold War, a number of regional or even tribal conflicts were repressed by virtue of being subordinated to the overall global struggle between the Communism of the Soviet Union and China, on the one hand, and liberal Western democratic and capitalist states led by the US and NATO, on the other. Even before the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, various regional conflicts emerged, including some that were influenced by religious differences. Examples of such a shift would be the Iranian Revolution (1978–79), the rise of Al Qaeda after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan (1988), and the gradual replacement of Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization by other nationalist movements based on forms of Islamic fundamentalism, such as Hamas. The "return" of religion, or at least the increasing assertiveness of religious groups and claims, in the civil and political spheres also in Western, secularized democracies such as the United States has caused some to refer to our age as "post-secular" (Habermas 2003). All of this has led some scholars of religion (see Casanova 1994) to reject the older version of the secularization thesis: namely, that with the onward progress of science and modernization, religion would necessarily disappear.

3 Political Secularism and the Separation of Church and State

In the first section of this article, it was suggested that freedom of religion, which we identify as a central aspect of secularization, arose only gradually in the centuries after the Reformation, in coordination with the process of modern state formation. Even if religion as a whole did not decline, the Church as an institution lost much of its hegemony over religious belief and practice. Yet this development was secondary to the nation state's acquisition of a monopoly over coercive force and positive law. Already at the end of the 19th century, Otto von Gierke (1868–1913) in Germany, and John Neville Figgis (1914) in Britain, described clearly how the rise of sovereign states, first in the form of absolute monarchies, came at the expense of the authority of all subordinate associations and institutions, starting with the Church or national churches. Ironically, the theories of absolutism that underlay the eventual monopolization of power by secular states were articulated in imitation of, and in response to, claims of absolute authority first articulated by the Papacy (Figgis 1914; Kantorowicz 1957).

Although political secularism is commonly defined as requiring the separation of church and state (Hamburger 2004), the idea of separation itself reflects something of a misunderstanding of these developments. Separation, meaning the differentiation or division of spheres of authority, can take many forms. According to an older, theological model of separation, known as the Two Kingdoms or Two Swords, the Pope and his worldly counterpart – either the Holy Roman Emperor, or another monarch – enjoyed separate and complementary spheres of authority (see Neil and Allen 2014, 73–80). In practice, such models were invoked by either power to claim all sovereignty for itself, as happened for example with Pope Boniface VIII's *Unam sanctam* (1302), which characterized the temporal power as subordinate to, and contained within, the spiritual authority of the Church. Such claims contributed to conflict between the Papacy and secular rulers, and to instability, so that eventually, after the Reformation, absolute authority was assumed by nation states, initially by monarchs and then, with the turn to democracy, in the name of the people.

Early modern political theorists such as Jean Bodin (1576) and Thomas Hobbes (1651) argued that sovereignty must be unitary and undivided, or there could occur division and conflict within a polity. In *Leviathan* (1651, chap. 39), Hobbes even argued that church and commonwealth were identical, as they consisted of the same members, which was technically more or less correct.[5] Hobbes was echoing, in part, the undoubtedly orthodox Elizabethan Bishop Richard Hooker, who in his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* had used similar arguments to defend the English monarch's headship of both church and commonwealth. Hobbes went further, attacking the Two Kingdoms idea, and placing ultimate control over even religious matters in the hands of the secular sovereign. Writing in the wake of Hobbes (Collins 2020), and against the kind of religious conformity required by a Hobbesian state church, John Locke (1689) defended a version of the idea that church and commonwealth are and must remain separate, as they seek distinct ends: respectively, salvation and worldly flourishing. However, Locke accepted that the magistrate, or civil authority, held a monopoly on coercive force and punishment. Churches were, in his view, voluntary associations, which we are free to join or leave, and which retain the authority to excommunicate recalcitrant members, but lack any further power to punish. From such formulations as Locke's we have inherited the liberal doctrine of toleration, and of separation.[6] Yet such separation was, as we see, secondary to the secular state's monopoly over punishment and positive law.

5 In Hobbes's and Hooker's time, there was only one official Church of England, Catholics and other heretics being officially prohibited, and Jews having been expelled long before.

6 For Americans, another reference is Thomas Jefferson's *Letter to the Danbury Baptists* 1802, which expressly referred to a "wall of separation" between church and state. For France, an example is Voltaire 1765; for Germany, Mendelssohn 1783.

The definition of secularism as requiring a separation between church and state, or between religion and politics, as defended by Locke and others, has enjoyed tremendous influence. This definition continues to structure many contemporary debates regarding secularism, for example when it comes to defining the boundary in modern jurisprudence between civil matters in which the state is supreme, and religious matters in which the state must not interfere. An uncritical acceptance of the separationist model would ignore the indebtedness of this model to older Christian doctrines, such as that of the Two Kingdoms (see Falk 1981, 13), which also influenced Locke (De Roover 2016: 139–61). Such indebtedness calls into question the religious neutrality of the separationist model and its applicability beyond Western cultures.

Certain theoretical accounts of secularization (e.g., Casanova 1994) nevertheless defend the core of this development as consisting in a differentiation, if not a strict separation, between religion and other spheres. Along similar lines, Christoph Kleine and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr have used a form of differentiation theory to extend the application of the categories of both religion and secularism beyond the confines of modern, Western societies (see also Kleine 2012 and Dreßler in this volume). Invoking, inter alia, the Two Kingdoms doctrine, they have argued (2021: 63) that "in pre-modern societies a binary distinction between 'religion' and 'the secular' is meaningful and relevant for 'religious' institutions in the first place." Indeed, it does seem that the differentiation of religion, especially from politics, is characteristic of a number of traditional cultures, including medieval Christianity (Needham 1980; Strenski 2010). Precisely for this reason, such a structural differentiation may not characterize adequately whatever is distinctive about contemporary societies, where the Leviathan of the secular state has assumed a monopoly on power, and the separate domain of authority occupied by the church exists mainly in the vestigial form that Locke and others allowed to it.

Summing up this section, we reiterate the following points:

1. Although the definition of secularization as entailing or requiring a separation of religion from politics remains a commonplace, it appears indisputable that a central characteristic of secularization was, conversely, the state's monopolization of coercive power, which actually eroded independent authority for the Church or churches.
2. Many traditional societies, including Catholic Europe prior to secularization, already exhibited a variety of forms of differentiation or pluralism, including those defined by ecclesiastical laws, norms, and institutions.
3. The fact that the separationist model of secularization (or secularism) is, at least in part, a legacy of Christian theological doctrines such as the Two Kingdoms calls into question the religious neutrality of this model.

4 Secularization as the Translation of Theological Categories

We now turn to a more theoretical understanding of secularization that is relevant mainly for understanding certain scholarly discourses in religious studies and adjacent disciplines, and which has been a focus of my own research (see Yelle 2013; Yelle 2021). The third meaning of secularization noted at the beginning of this chapter, is the translation of originally Christian theological ideas and practices into ostensibly secular or non-religious versions. This approach understands secularization in **genealogical terms**[7], as a hidden continuity between religious (in this case, Christian) and non-religious categories, a continuity that it is the proper business of scholarship to investigate and disclose. As we have already seen, the common self-understanding of secularism as requiring a separation between religion and politics is partly indebted to the Two Kingdoms doctrine. Weber's (2016) argument for a relationship between the Protestant ethic and capitalism is another, famous example of such a genealogical approach: supposedly, the capitalist drive to ceaseless labor and the accumulation of profit, without the enjoyment thereof, represented a transformation of older Protestant modes of asceticism. Carl Schmitt (1922) formulated a similar critique when he argued that modern political concepts reflect theological positions, or what he called a "political theology". According to Schmitt, the modern, liberal state's subordination of sovereignty to law reflected Protestant and Deist rejections of an omnipotent, interventionist deity, as represented by the Catholic understanding of the miracle. Despite their pretensions to scientific objectivity and religious neutrality, modern liberal polities actually took sides in a theological debate, and embraced a form of "disenchantment" that owed as much to the Reformation as to the Enlightenment (see Yelle 2019, 37–73).

Another, related continuity is indicated by Weber's argument that the biblical tradition had contributed to the "disenchantment of the world" (*die Entzauberung der Welt*) (Weber 2016, 200). Ironically, the very idea of "disenchantment" had antecedents in Christian claims of supersession, meaning the manner in which the Gospel supposedly succeeded and replaced older forms of paganism and Judaism

7 "Genealogy" or "genealogy critique" is a mode of inquiry related to the history of ideas or *Begriffsgeschichte* that models itself on Friedrich Nietzsche's *Zur Genealogie der Moral* 1887, or on the work of Michel Foucault (1926–1984). In religious studies, Talal Asad 1993 has pursued an explicitly Foucauldian approach. A hallmark of the genealogical approach is the effort to show transformations in cultural categories in such a way as to undermine the utility of such categories for a positive and universal science.

(Yelle 2021). From early in the Reformation, many Protestants claimed that the pagan oracles had been silenced, miracles had ceased, and religion, which under the Mosaic law had been ritualistic and legalistic, under the Gospel had become spiritual and apolitical. The idea that our modern age has broken with a superstitious past represents, in part, an inheritance from Christianity. The relation between secularism and the religion that preceded it is as much one of continuity as of rupture, calling into question the extent to which we have actually transcended our theological past.

Such genealogical accounts have not gone unanswered. During an earlier phase of scholarly debate, Hans Blumenberg (1966) criticized theories of secularization, such as those of Weber and Schmitt, as efforts to undermine the independence and even "legitimacy" of modernity, by making this dependent on a theological past from which it can never truly escape (see Sheehan 2010; Atwood this volume). More recently, Monika Wohlrab-Sahr (2021) has characterized certain genealogical accounts as "counter-narratives" that are no more objective than the theological and enlightened **narratives** that preceded them; while Lorenz Trein (2023) has contributed a sophisticated theoretical meditation on the problems associated with our understanding of the secular as a temporal category. Clearly, more work – both empirical and theoretical – needs to be undertaken by scholars of religion before we will have an adequate account of the process of secularization, and with this, of the transformation of religion in recent centuries.[8]

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