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# The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms

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Rethinking secularism requires that we keep in mind the basic analytical distinction between "the secular" as a central modern epistemic category, "secularization" as an analytical conceptualization of modern world-historical processes, and "secularism" as a worldview and ideology. All three concepts are obviously related but are used very differently in various academic-disciplinary and sociopolitical and cultural contexts. I propose to differentiate the three concepts simply as a way of distinguishing analytically in an exploratory manner among three different phenomena, without any attempt to reify them as separate realities.[1]

The secular has become a central modern category—theological-philosophical, legal-political, and cultural-anthropological—to construct, codify, grasp, and experience a realm or reality differentiated from "the religious." Phenomenologically, one can explore the different types of "secularities" as they are codified, institutionalized, and experienced in various modern contexts and the parallel and correlated transformations of modern "religiosities" and "spiritualities." It should be obvious that "the religious" and "the secular" are always and everywhere mutually constituted. Yet while the social sciences have dedicated much effort to the scientific study of religion, the task of developing a reflexive anthropology and sociology of the secular is only now beginning.

Secularization, by contrast, usually refers to actual or alleged empirical-historical patterns of transformation and differentiation of "the religious" (ecclesiastical institutions and churches) and "the secular" (state, economy, science, art, entertainment, health and welfare, etc.) institutional spheres from early-modern to contemporary societies. Within the social sciences, particularly within sociology, a general theory of secularization was developed that conceptualized these at first modern European and later increasingly globalized historical transformations as part and parcel of a general teleological and

progressive human and societal development from the primitive "sacred" to the modern "secular." The thesis of the "decline" and the "privatization" of religion in the modern world became central components of the theory of secularization. Both the decline and the privatization theses have undergone numerous critiques and revisions in the last fifteen years. But the core of the theory—the understanding of secularization as a single process of differentiation of the various institutional spheres or subsystems of modern societies, understood as the paradigmatic and defining characteristic of processes of modernization—remains relatively uncontested in the social sciences, particularly within sociology.

Secularism refers more broadly to a whole range of modern secular worldviews and ideologies which may be consciously held and explicitly elaborated into philosophies of history and normative-ideological state projects, into projects of modernity and cultural programs, or, alternatively, it may be viewed as an epistemic knowledge regime that may be held unreflexively or be assumed phenomenologically as the taken-for-granted normal structure of modern reality, as a modern *doxa* or an "unthought." Moreover, modern secularism also comes in multiple historical forms, in terms of different normative models of legal-constitutional separation of the secular state and religion; or in terms of the different types of cognitive differentiation among science, philosophy, and theology; or in terms of the different models of practical differentiation among law, morality, and religion, and so on.

This chapter presents an analytical elaboration of each of these concepts and some of the phenomenological experiences, institutional arrangements, historical processes, constitutional frameworks, and normative-ideological projects to which they refer.

## The Secular

The secular is often assumed to be simply the other of the religious, that which is nonreligious. In this respect, it functions simply as a residual category. But paradoxically, in our modern secular age and in our modern secular world, the secular has come to encompass increasingly the whole of reality, in a sense replacing the religious. Consequently, the secular has come to be increasingly perceived as a natural reality devoid of religion, as the natural social and anthropological substratum that remains when the religious is lifted or disappears. This is the conception or epistemic attitude that Charles Taylor has critically characterized as "subtraction theories."[2]

The paradox resides in the fact that rather than being a residual category, as was originally the case, the secular appears now as reality *tout court,* while the religious is increasingly perceived not only as the residual category, the other of the secular, but also as a superstructural and superfluous additive, which both humans and societies can do without.

Theories of secularization have emerged as explanatory conceptions of this process of differentiation and liberation of the secular from the religious, understood as a universal world-historical process, while secularist worldviews function as justificatory explanations of the paradoxical inversion in the dyadic relation of the religious and the secular, vindicating not only the primacy of the secular over the religious but also the superseding of the religious by the secular. Both function as uncritical and unreflexive ideologies insofar as they disregard, indeed mask, the particular and contingent historicity of the process, projecting it onto the level of universal human development. Moreover, by postulating the secular as the natural and universal substratum that emerges once the superstructural religious addition is lifted, theories of secularization, as well as secularist social science, have avoided the task of analyzing, studying, and explaining the secular, or the varieties of secular experience, as if it is only the religious, but not the secular, that is in need of interpretation and analytical explanation.

Any discussion of the secular has to begin with the recognition that it emerged first as a theological category of Western Christendom that has no equivalent in other religious traditions or even in Eastern Christianity. Originally, the Latin world *saeculum*, as in *per saecula saeculorum,* only meant an indefinite period of time. But eventually, it became one of the terms of a dyad, religious/secular, that served to structure the entire spatial and temporal reality of medieval Christendom into a binary system of classification separating two worlds, the religious-spiritual-sacred world of salvation and the secular-temporal-profane world. Hence the distinction between the "religious" or regular clergy, who withdrew from the world into the monasteries to lead a life of Christian perfection, and the "secular" clergy, who lived in the world along with the laity.

In its original theological meaning, to secularize meant to "make worldly," to convert religious persons or things into secular ones, as when a religious person abandoned the monastic rule to live in the *saeculum* or when monastic property was secularized following the Protestant Reformation. This is the original Christian theological meaning of the term "secularization" that may serve, however, as the basic metaphor of the historical process of Western secularization. In fact, the historical process of secularization needs to be understood as a particular reaction to the structuring dualism of medieval Christendom, as an attempt to bridge, eliminate, or transcend the dualism between the religious and the secular world. In this respect, the very existence of the binary system of classification served to determine the dynamics of the process of secularization. Even within the Christian West, however, this process of secularization follows two different dynamics.

One is the dynamic of internal Christian secularization that aims to spiritualize the temporal and to bring the religious life of perfection out of the monasteries into the secular world, so that everybody may become "a secular ascetic monk," a perfect Christian in the *saeculum*. Such a dynamic tends to transcend

the dualism by blurring the boundaries between the religious and the secular, by making the religious secular and the secular religious through mutual reciprocal infusion. This was the path initiated by the various medieval movements of Christian reform of the *saeculum,* which was radicalized by the Protestant Reformation and has attained its paradigmatic expression in the Anglo-Saxon Calvinist cultural area, particularly in the United States.

The other different, indeed almost opposite, dynamic of secularization takes the form of laicization. It aims to emancipate all secular spheres from clerical-ecclesiastical control, and in this respect, it is marked by a laic/clerical antagonism. Unlike in the Protestant path, however, here the boundaries between the religious and the secular are rigidly maintained, but those boundaries are pushed into the margins, aiming to contain, privatize, and marginalize everything religious, while excluding it from any visible presence in the secular public sphere. When the secularization of monasteries took place in Catholic countries, first during the French Revolution and later in subsequent liberal revolutions, the explicit purpose of breaking the monastery walls was not to bring the religious life of perfection into the secular world, as had been the case with the Protestant Reformation, but rather to laicize those religious places, dissolving and emptying their religious content and making the religious persons, monks and nuns, civil and laic before forcing them into the world, now conceived as merely a secular place emptied of religious symbols and religious meanings. This is precisely the realm of *laïcité,* a sociopolitical sphere freed from religious symbols and clerical control. Such a path of laicization, which is paradigmatic of the French-Latin-Catholic cultural area, although it found diverse manifestations throughout continental Europe, could well serve as the basic metaphor of all subtraction narratives of secular modernity, which tend to understand the secular as merely the space left behind when this-worldly reality is freed from religion.

With many variations, these are the two main dynamics of secularization that culminate in our secular age. In different ways, both paths lead to an overcoming of the medieval Christian dualism through a positive affirmation and revaluation of the *saeculum*, that is, of the secular age and the secular world, imbuing the immanent secular world with a quasi-transcendent meaning as the place for human flourishing. In this broad sense of the term "secular," that of "living in the secular world and within the secular age," we are all secular, and all modern societies are secular and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, one could almost say *per saecula saeculorum*.

There is a second, narrower meaning of the term "secular," that of self-sufficient and exclusive secularity, when people are simply "irreligious," that is, devoid of religion and closed to any form of transcendence beyond the purely secular immanent frame. Here, secular is no longer one of the units of a dyadic pair but is constituted as a self-enclosed reality. To a certain extent, this constitutes one possible end result of the process of secularization, of the attempt to

overcome the dualism between religious and secular, by freeing oneself of the religious component altogether.

In his recent work *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor has reconstructed the process through which the phenomenological experience of what he calls "the immanent frame" becomes constituted as an interlocking constellation of the modern differentiated cosmic, social, and moral orders. All three orders—the cosmic, the social, and the moral—are understood as purely immanent secular orders, devoid of transcendence and thus functioning *etsi Deus non daretur,* "as if God would not exist." It is this phenomenological experience that, according to Taylor, constitutes our age paradigmatically as a secular one, irrespective of the extent to which people living in this age may still hold religious or theistic beliefs.[3]

The question is whether the phenomenological experience of living within such an immanent frame is such that people within it will also tend to function *etsi Deus non daretur.* Taylor is inclined to answer this question in the affirmative. Indeed, his phenomenological account of the secular "conditions" of belief is meant to explain the change from a Christian society around 1500 CE in which belief in God was unchallenged and unproblematic, indeed "naïve" and taken for granted, to a post-Christian society today in which belief in God not only is no longer axiomatic but also becomes increasingly problematic, so that even those who adopt an "engaged" standpoint as believers tend to experience reflexively their own belief as an option among many others, one moreover requiring an explicit justification. Secularity, being without religion, by contrast tends to become increasingly the default option, which can be naïvely experienced as natural and, thus, no longer in need of justification.

This naturalization of "unbelief" or "nonreligion" as the normal human condition in modern societies corresponds to the assumptions of the dominant theories of secularization, which have postulated a progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices with increasing modernization, so that the more modern a society is, the more secular, the less "religious," it is supposed to become. That the decline of religious beliefs and practices is a relatively recent meaning of the term "secularization" is indicated by the fact that it does not yet appear in the dictionaries of most modern European languages.

The fact that there are some modern non-European societies, such as the United States or South Korea, that are fully secular in the sense that they function within the same immanent frame and yet their populations are also at the same time conspicuously religious, or the fact that the modernization of so many non-Western societies is accompanied by processes of religious revival, should put into question the premise that the decline of religious beliefs and practices is a quasi-natural consequence of processes of modernization. If modernization per se does not produce necessarily the progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices, then we need a better explanation for the radical and widespread secularity one finds among the populations of most western

European societies. Secularization in this second meaning of the term "secular," that of being "devoid of religion," does not happen automatically as a result of processes of modernization or even as the result of the social construction of a self-enclosed immanent frame, but it needs to be mediated phenomenologically by some other particular historical experience.

Self-sufficient secularity, that is, the absence of religion, has a better chance of becoming the normal taken-for-granted position if it is experienced not as an unreflexively naïve condition, as just a fact, but actually as the meaningful result of a quasi-natural process of development. As Taylor has pointed out, modern unbelief is not simply a condition of absence of belief or merely indifference. It is a historical condition that requires the perfect tense, "a condition of 'having overcome' the irrationality of belief."[4] Intrinsic to this phenomenological experience is a modern "stadial consciousness," inherited from the Enlightenment, which understands this anthropocentric change in the conditions of belief as a process of maturation and growth, as a "coming of age," and as progressive emancipation. For Taylor, this stadial phenomenological experience serves, in turn, to ground the phenomenological experience of exclusive humanism as the positive self-sufficient and self-limiting affirmation of human flourishing and as the critical rejection of transcendence beyond human flourishing as self-denial and self-defeating.

In this respect, the historical self-understanding of secularism has the function of confirming the superiority of our present modern secular outlook over other supposedly earlier and therefore more primitive religious forms of understanding. To be secular means to be modern, and therefore, by implication, to be religious means to be somehow not yet fully modern. This is the ratchet effect of a modern historical stadial consciousness, which turns the very idea of going back to a surpassed condition into an unthinkable intellectual regression.

The function of secularism as a philosophy of history, and thus as ideology, is to turn the particular Western Christian historical process of secularization into a universal teleological process of human development from belief to unbelief, from primitive irrational or metaphysical religion to modern rational postmetaphysical secular consciousness. Even when the particular role of internal Christian developments in the general process of secularization is acknowledged, it is in order to stress the universal significance of the uniqueness of Christianity as, in Marcel Gauchet's expressive formulation, "the religion to exit from religion."[5]

I would like to propose that this secularist stadial consciousness is a crucial factor in the widespread secularization that has accompanied the modernization of western European societies. Europeans tend to experience their own secularization, that is, the widespread decline of religious beliefs and practices in their midst, as a natural consequence of their modernization. To be secular is experienced not as an existential choice that modern individuals

or modern societies make but, rather, as a natural outcome of becoming modern. In this respect, the theory of secularization mediated through this historical stadial consciousness tends to function as a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is, in my view, the presence or absence of this secularist historical stadial consciousness that explains when and where processes of modernization are accompanied by radical secularization. In places where such secularist historical stadial consciousness is absent or less dominant, as in the United States or in most non-Western postcolonial societies, processes of modernization are unlikely to be accompanied by processes of religious decline. On the contrary, they may be accompanied by processes of religious revival.

Following this reconstruction one may distinguish three different ways of being secular: (a) that of *mere secularity,* that is, the phenomenological experience of living in a secular world and in a secular age, where being religious may be a normal viable option; (b) that of *self-sufficient and exclusive secularity,* that is, the phenomenological experience of living without religion as a normal, quasi-natural, taken-for-granted condition; and (c) that of *secularist secularity,* that is, the phenomenological experience not only of being passively free but also actually of having been liberated from "religion" as a condition for human autonomy and human flourishing.

## Secularizations

In the book *Public Religions in the Modern World,* I proposed to disaggregate analytically what was usually taken to be one single theory of secularization into three disparate and not necessarily interrelated components or subtheses, namely, (a) the theory of the institutional differentiation of the so-called secular spheres, such as state, economy, and science, from religious institutions and norms; (b) the theory of the progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices as a concomitant of levels of modernization; and (c) the theory of privatization of religion as a precondition of modern secular and democratic politics.[6] Such an analytical distinction makes possible the testing of each of the three subtheses separately as different empirically falsifiable propositions.

Since in Europe the three processes of secular differentiation, privatization of religion, and religious decline have been historically interconnected, there has been the tendency to view all three processes as intrinsically interrelated components of a single general teleological process of secularization and modernization, rather than as particular and contingent developments. In the United States, by contrast, one finds a paradigmatic process of secular differentiation, which is not accompanied, however, either by a process of religious decline or by the confinement of religion to the private sphere. Processes of modernization and democratization in American society have often been accompanied by religious revivals, and the wall of separation between church