

## SECULARIZATION

Secularization refers to the historical process in which religion loses social and cultural significance. As a result of secularization the role of religion in modern societies becomes restricted. In secularized societies faith lacks cultural authority, religious organizations have little social power, and public life proceeds without reference to the supernatural. Secularization captures a long-term societal change, but it has consequences for religion itself. In Western countries, where it has been most pronounced, it has made the connection to their Christian heritage more tenuous. Yet secularization is important beyond the formerly Christian West, given that many of the forces that first sustained it there affect other societies as well.

Before 1648 the term *secularis* had been used to denote one side of Christian distinctions between sacred and mundane. In the Catholic Church secular priests were those serving society at large rather than a religious order; secularization had referred to the dispensation of priests from their vows. After the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia ended the European wars of religion, secularization was used to describe the transfer of territories held by the church to the control of political authorities. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, it had come to refer to the shifting place of religion in society many scholars associated with modernization. Used in this way the very notion of secularization has provoked contention for more than a century. Once at the center of conflict between traditional advocates of strong public religion and secularist intellectuals striving to reduce its role, it has more recently become the subject of scholarly controversy. Although since the 1960s prominent sociologists of religion have charted the course of secularization, partly guided by the work of MAX WEBER (1864–1920), others have questioned the validity of their interpretations.

This article first conveys what secularization means and why it happened. It then addresses the reservations of scholars. It shows how critiques have enriched our understanding of secularization without refuting the best accounts of the process. These continue to capture convincingly a significant historical transformation in and of society. This transformation still reverberates across the world stage, not least because the value and viability of secular society remains the subject of global debate.

### Meaning

In Paris, Sainte-Chapelle, a sanctuary built by a Catholic monarch to house Christ's crown of thorns, stands empty, its aesthetic appeal substituting for its old religious function. Across the Netherlands church

buildings no longer needed to serve shrinking congregations have been razed or converted into community centers. In England majestic cathedrals that manifest in stone and glass the splendor of an old faith now often attract more tourists than believers. Where once a sense of the sacred marked the landscape itself, where social order used to be visibly embedded in sacred order, architectural relics attest to a profound change: the vanishing of the supernatural from the affairs of the world, the waning power of religion to shape society at large. In landscapes and architecture, secularization has become visible.

Secularization describes the world the West has lost. In that world faith in the supernatural was pervasive and important, indeed taken for granted. A Christian version of that faith commanded unique authority, shaping collective understanding of the world. Its influence extended to art and architecture, music, and literature. Worldviews that denied the validity of Christian doctrine, let alone the existence of the supernatural, were taboo. Religious elites maintained clear standards of transcendent belief and applied them to all spheres of cultural activity. In that world every community was also a community of faith. To be a member meant identifying with that faith. Overt unbelief constituted dangerous deviance, hence cause for exclusion. Community life, its rhythm shaped by religious ceremonies and events, was tinged with the transcendent. Political authority required religious legitimation; rulers in turn were expected to sustain the cause of religion. In principle, at least, state and Church had a common mission. Precisely because religion mattered greatly in public affairs, it also contributed at times to war or civil strife. Organized religion commanded major resources, such as valuable land, buildings, and trained staff. Supported by such resources the church long played a key role in providing education and social services. Its worldly influence reinforced a shared sense of overarching order, in which human affairs were subject to higher forces. This world had a tangible connection with God. It was a society suffused by the sacred.

Secularization also describes the world the West has gained. In this world, culture is marked by pluralism: religious faith takes many forms, and meaning has many nonreligious sources. The specifically Christian message is one among others, only one way to make sense of the world. It is there, available for individuals to choose, although turned into a preference, religion has no binding force. Conceptions of the supernatural, Christian or otherwise, carry little authority in science, art, and literature. No church can determine society's standards of knowledge, beauty, and morality. Even when they make their way into popular culture, supernatural notions thereby lose any

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sacred aura. In this world citizenship requires no religious attachment, and society sets no rules for religious conformity. Secular events shape the rhythm of public life; publicly significant religious occasions tend to lose their transcendent content. Political authority derives its legitimacy from legal procedures and public support. State institutions execute policy with scant consideration of religious purposes. In modern media, education, or business, religious institutions exercise greatly diminished influence. Their resources are dwarfed by those of secular institutions. Because religious strife is less likely to spill over into the public domain, it diminishes as a cause of domestic and international conflict. Operating within such a secular environment, the nature of religion itself changes as well. Churches are organized as the voluntary effort of citizens who choose to belong; they come to terms with pluralism by giving up claims to exclusive truth; they comfort individuals more than they shape society. In this world an encompassing sacred order turns into a specialized spiritual sphere. Modern society has no sacred canopy. It makes room for religion, but operates on human terms.

This simplified before-and-after description conveys in broad strokes what happened. Secularization theories have sought to explain how and why this epochal change took place in the West.

### Explanation

Secularization theories explain the process as a conjunction of cultural conditions, structural changes, and specific historical events.

The Christian tradition provided an impetus toward secularization by making a secular world conceivable. The Judaic conception of a single high God stripped the natural world of magical elements; pervasive supernatural intervention was replaced by a tradition in which ethical and legal precepts governed human affairs. The Christian church added to this incipient separation of sacred and secular by setting itself up as a distinct corporate body that was not identified with a people or community. Protestant reformers further shrank the scope of the sacred in the world by treating God as removed from ordinary life, not accessible through mediation, and by specifying only faith and grace, rather than good works, as the path to salvation. Protestant thought legitimated the autonomy of the secular world. Weber's classic but controversial argument supported this point by suggesting that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination produced in believers existential questions that could be resolved only by successful, methodical work in a calling. It thus put a religious premium on worldly activity, which in turn helped to set capitalist development in motion, leading

to an economic system that could dispense with its originally religious underpinnings.

Christianity also contributed to secularization by breaking up as a single tradition in its European heartland. The aftermath of the REFORMATION undermined throughout Europe the broad authority of a universal church, the unquestioned truth of a single faith, and the possibility of maintaining one sacred order. Christian conscience began to make Europe secular by allowing many religions or no religion in a state. In principle, at least, no one henceforth would be pressured into accepting society's religious axioms; in principle, again, it became possible to think of society cohering despite religious difference. Emerging religious pluralism fostered decline in religious authority. In Protestant lands, the emphasis on the Bible as the source of truth, displacing church tradition, gave rise to textual disputes that in turn furthered dissent and schism. When the faith came in many versions, the authority any single one could command gradually diminished. Civil conflicts precipitated by religious difference ultimately led to settlements, such as the "separation" of church and state in the American Constitution, that formally limited the public role of religion.

Secularization stems above all from societal rationalization. The key element in most sociological accounts of secularization is the idea that, over the last several centuries, institutions in the West have become differentiated. First state, law, market, and science, then education, media, and other institutions, increasingly operated according to formal procedures, methodically carried out by specialists, for purposes inherent to those institutions. Institutional function dispensed with transcendent faith. Secular means sufficed to reach secular ends. In modernizing societies differentiation or rationalization eroded any lingering sense of organic unity anchored in a shared conception of the transcendent. Secularization, then, came to represent the way differentiation "played out" in the religious sphere. Religion became one institution among others, operating in its own specific arena.

In many societies particular social struggles also contribute to secularization. The nature of such struggles depends mainly on the "frame," the overall structure of the religious system, with which a society enters periods of modernizing change. For example, as in the case of France, countries that long retained a religious monopoly are likely to experience more violent opposition between defenders of tradition and advocates of secular change, with religion becoming more marginalized where the latter are successful. A starker case is that of the Russian revolution, in which a deliberately secularizing elite intended to secularize the new Soviet society by extinguishing its once-

organic religious tradition. By contrast, in religiously pluralistic societies conflict is less likely to pit religious against secular forces; instead, public institutions will tend to accommodate religion in its own sphere, and conflict among elites over the direction of such institutions, as was the case around 1900 in the United States, is more likely to be piecemeal and peaceful.

Secularization can take on a life of its own. Once society is broadly defined as a secular enterprise, religious culture becomes pluralized and rationalization takes hold—the process feeds on itself. In many instances, secularization receives increasing institutional support, for example in the form of legal provisions separating church and state, as well as cultural support, for instance in the form of liberal theological currents. The secular principle of religious freedom, construed as a fundamental human right, legitimates pluralism. In debates about the future of particular societies, the burden of proof increasingly rests on those arguing for restoration of some organic order.

In sum, secularization theories account for the process by arguing that it occurred in societies where the religious culture fostered separation of the world from the transcendent, religious tradition fragmented in a manner that undermined its former authority, social institutions underwent rationalization that reduced the social role of organized religion, contingent conflicts further undermined its authority, and over time a secular societal framework became self-sustaining. This explanation entails variation because it presents secularization as the unintended consequence of the conjunction of multiple factors in particular contexts. No single country shows the way. To analyze the course of the process in any particular case, one must first ask which religion, if any, was historically dominant, how deeply the society was affected by the Reformation aftermath, how thorough has been the experience of societal rationalization, whether religion has been involved in key conflicts, and how entrenched, if at all, in law and theology the model of a pluralistic, secular society has become.

## Discussion

Secularization theory is in dispute. Scholarly controversy has focused on the issues examined below.

*Historical Premises.* Did secularization happen? Secularization accounts assert a shift: once religion did *x*, now only *y*. Historians have objected, first, that the timing is left fuzzy: precisely when did the process start? Any date is problematic. For example, neither the Reformation nor the European settlement of 1648 alone ushered in clear-cut secularization. Its propo-

nents would acknowledge that they rarely supply precise dates, although this is no great problem. Watershed events such as the American and FRENCH REVOLUTIONS clearly do mark advances in secularization in those societies. Precise dates also can be misleading, insofar as the timing of secularization is in fact bound to vary from case to case. Broad comparisons over many centuries, although insufficient for fine-grained historical analysis, are themselves useful to show the depth of change. A second historical criticism is aimed at an apparent assumption behind the notion of a shift: there once existed a religious golden age, in which belief was commonly held and publicly affirmed. The evidence does not seem to support such a romantic vision because even in the heyday of medieval Catholicism heterodoxy was prevalent, commitment to the church tenuous, and conflict between church and secular authority common. However, secularization accounts need not assume general ORTHODOXY, deep commitment, or a triumphant church on the part of medieval Europeans; nor do they depend exclusively on decline in Christian influence. Their key claim, more difficult to measure but supported by evidence, is about decline in significance. This claim appears valid, although the historical criticism has shown that it is also a deliberate simplification. Societies that in fact varied in the role, meaning, and practice of faith underwent a process that had common elements and a common direction, but did not produce a single result.

*Role of Christian Tradition.* Did Christianity serve as its own gravedigger? To the idea that elements of Christian belief contributed to the decline in its influence, one might object that leaders never contemplated such an outcome. Reformers who in retrospect appear to have played a role in secularization themselves focused on rebuilding confessional states. Cases in point are various German states, where enforcing religious discipline became a public task. Similarly, JOHN CALVIN's Geneva and William Bradford's Massachusetts attest to the concerted efforts of several Protestant communities to keep their faith whole, public, and pure. Catholic reaction to Protestant growth in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries further tightened the bonds of church and state. Even as Europe was divided along religious lines in 1648, the cultural and social significance of the dominant local faith was rarely in question. Secularization proponents would acknowledge that only in hindsight did the Reformation set the stage for future decline. Attributing some causal force to the content of Christian, specifically Protestant, belief is not to argue that history proceeded as the unfolding of a Christian script. In fact Christianity could not simply cause its relative decline, for

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secularization only came about as the unforeseen conjunction of Christian ideas with broader cultural and social change. Secularization accounts make plausible that secularization as understood today first occurred in the Christian West, although they stress that what appears as the “natural” consequence of Christian thought from the perspective of the twenty-first century is the contingent effect of complex processes.

*Rationalization as Continuous.* Is rationalization as relentless as the Weberian account suggests? To the idea of rationalization as a juggernaut moving in one direction, one might object that this is implausible as a historical scenario. Change is conflictual, resistance likely, reversal possible. Case in point is the experience of Dutch Calvinists in the late-nineteenth century. Led by ABRAHAM KUYPER, they resisted secularizing trends in society and government. To advance their “anti-revolutionary” cause, they built new institutions (such as a party, university, and newspaper), imbuing modern forms with faithful content. Together with Catholics, they ultimately gained public funding for religious schools. Kuyper provided a platform for such desecularizing activity with a doctrine justifying a Christian sphere within modern society. Because Catholics built a parallel “pillar” of institutions, the Netherlands in some respects was less secular in 1950 than it had been in 1850; however, secularization proponents can respond that nothing in their accounts rules out reversals. The key question is whether reversals can take hold. The case of Dutch pillarization, for example, was one of defensive action in which religious communities adopted existing rationalized institutions and accepted the legitimacy of a secular public sphere. Church control and specifically supernatural symbolism, for instance in schools, gradually dissipated. Pillarization made the religious modern rather than the modern religious. The process complete, rapid secularization within the religious communities themselves ensued. Rationalization, so secularization proponents infer, is neither smooth nor continuous, but once in motion cannot easily be turned back.

*Religion as Defense.* Does religion remain socially significant where it is the core of a culture under threat? On the empirical importance of this point, there is little argument. For example, throughout the twentieth century Ireland and Poland remained overwhelmingly Catholic. People and nation identified with the church. This was a way to preserve some autonomy, to keep a national community intact, against a stronger foe. Secularization accounts treat this as a prime instance of external conflict that heightens the social significance of religion. Critics submit,

however, that stressing the causal role of such conflict becomes a large loophole in the theory. If secularization theory allows such apparently major exceptions, then it is difficult to refute. Secularization proponents in turn counter that no immunization is intended. Arguments about religion as collective cultural defense can be recast in refutable form. For instance, if the conditions, specifically the primary external conflict, that triggered such defense disappear, then ordinary secularization should occur, leading to measurably diminished collective identification with the formerly dominant religion. Surrounded by friendly neighbors, Poland should become less Catholic. Overall, secularization accounts emphasize that contingent societal conflict affects the pace and form of secularization.

*Secularization as Self-sustaining.* The claim that a secular framework can become embedded in culture and law, and therefore self-sustaining, is vulnerable for two reasons. First, secularization could be self-limiting: if it supplies a product in a market, and if the latent demand of consumers is constant, then any decline in the market share of old producers will create opportunity for new ones. Competition will lead to revived religious growth over time. However, such a market argument does not address key secularization claims because it says little about the social significance of growing churches. It assumes incorrectly that demand for supernatural meaning is constant, and it actually depends on the validity of secularization accounts: to “market” religion is to operate by secular standards. A second criticism would hold that secularization is reversible, as the rise of fundamentalist movements in seemingly secularized countries demonstrates. As indicated, secularization proponents agree that reversals are possible in principle, although they also argue that bringing institutions under a previously torn canopy is always difficult, that fundamentalists in modern societies are bound to take on features of their environment, that entering the fray of social conflict often entails co-optation into secular society, and that the burden of proof is not easily shifted back to secularizing opponents. The historical record shows few, if any, instances of full-fledged reversal.

*Secularization as Privatization.* What happens to individual religiosity in modern society? Secularization accounts argue that modernity means choice. Individuals may believe as they see fit. One interpretation suggests that secularization trickles down into the private sphere, and hence produces less belief, commitment, and attendance. This scenario may apply to certain European countries, and it is not surprising that

British scholars have made this case, although as a general rule it is questionable. In the United States a large majority of people retain some core religious beliefs and a large minority regularly attends church. In parts of LATIN AMERICA neo-Pentecostal growth has raised commitment and attendance among converts. This does not rule out private decline over the long haul, but the record does not support such an expectation. Another interpretation posits that secularization carves out a viable sphere for individual religious practice, guided by private spiritual choices. In principle, faith can flourish and churches proselytize. This view therefore does not claim that modernity spells the demise of religion. Neither the conventional description of secularization in before-and-after terms nor the factors commonly cited in secularization theories foretell the “death of God.” Yet in many instances secularization produces profound effects even in the private sphere. The place of faith is bound to change. In the case of Latin America, for example, Pentecostal growth has meant the dismantling of an older organic model of church and society, replicating the secularizing effects of earlier, similarly vibrant Protestant movements. As it turns into private choice rather than public fate, religion casts no halo throughout peoples’ lives. Less collectively affirmed, it is less easily accepted. Exposed to alternative interpretations of human problems and natural events, it becomes less plausible. Even private belief is likely to lose some supernatural content. To vary a classic phrase, although individuals may still hold transcendent belief, they can no longer be held by it. On this point, however, critics insist that privatization underestimates the public consequences of private choice, as in the case of the communities and politics of Latin-American evangelicals. Made by millions, private choices cease to be private.

### Exceptions

*The American Exception.* Does the American experience fit any secularization scenario? Many American scholars would reply that whereas secularization may be useful to describe the Western European course of societal change, it does not apply to the United States. Far from creating a secular republic, the “separation” of church and state in the late eighteenth century created opportunities for proselytizing churches to “Christianize” America. By the early twentieth century America had become far more “churched.” Throughout the twentieth century Americans continued to profess faith in God and to fill the pews more than people in other industrialized countries. Their religiosity has public significance. Across the American South the landscape itself offers evidence in the

variety of prominent church buildings, physical evidence of a living faith. Church influence is especially prominent in places such as Utah, home of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (see MORMONISM). Novels with a prophetic and supernatural cast often outsell the secular competition. Many congregations provide services beyond the spiritual, not least for minorities; belonging shapes the lives of the faithful in numerous ways. For immigrants religion often constitutes the core of their communities, bridging old and new societies. At times religion becomes a focal point of political activity, as illustrated by the conservative evangelicals of the so-called CHRISTIAN RIGHT in the 1980s and 1990s. Nor has the religious inspiration that gave a powerful impetus to major reform movements of the past, such as the TEMPERANCE and CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENTS, disappeared. Religion serves as a resource in defining some public issues, from ABORTION to peace. Religious perspectives on natural phenomena still contend in the public sphere, as recurrent opposition to the teaching of evolution shows. In public life, references to God and religious tradition are common and legitimate; the United States remains a “nation under God.”

In some respects, such examples show, the United States is not a fully secularized country, although proponents of secularization would insist that it has undergone secularization. America’s religious pluralism and competition constitute the form secularization has taken there. Its religious vitality is that of voluntary organizations minding their business within a secular republic. Christianization and secularization went hand in hand. Even though religion retained some and gained other public functions, for example as the key element in various subcultures, its relative significance in all sectors of society diminished over time. The most overt attempts to reassert a religiously inspired agenda in the public sphere, such as that of the Christian Right, had little effect on policy. In debates about evolution, defenders of creationism are at a legal and intellectual disadvantage. In conflicts that involve religion, the specifically supernatural elements tend to diminish over time. The way in which religion becomes a resource among others actually shows its diminished authority. In the life of the churches themselves, secular ideas, techniques, and expectations gain influence. On balance, America is not so much an exception as a variation on a theme. It has secularized without becoming fully secular.

*The Islamic Exception.* Does the experience of Islamic countries show that secularization is an ethnocentric Western idea? In spite of the enormous variety among Muslim countries, all treat Islam as part of their collective identity, assign some public role to

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precepts of the faith, and allow little religious competition. Islam is not a “private” choice, given that it helps to shape family and community life. Nor can it be merely private, for in principle its key doctrines do not recognize any basic distinction among the spheres of society, no “church” to be separated from the political realm. Even where rulers do not appeal to Islam directly for legitimation, they must work to uphold the faith. In many places Islamist movements strive to restore faith to power by reimposing Islamic law. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 actually reversed prior secularization by instituting an Islamic republic. Only in Turkey has a secular republic been imposed with success, but this was done by force, according to foreign example, and at the cost of continued strife over the place of Islam in society. Its record seems only to confirm that Islam is an exception to the presumed rule of secularization. The exception is gaining ground, as mosques dotting the urban landscape in Europe suggest.

Described in these terms, Islam does not pose a problem for secularization theories. They do not claim that any society must become secular, but rather argue that the process is contingent on several factors. Many of these do not prevail in Muslim lands. Typically, no tradition separates sacred from secular realms, little pluralism has flourished, rationalization has made few inroads as yet, defining conflicts with outside powers have reinforced the collective significance of religion, and resources to make a secular framework legitimate on its own terms are few. Under such conditions, secularization is unlikely; at the same time, these conditions are not immutable. Pluralism can grow, rationalization spread, old conflicts recede, thus making some secularization more likely. Overall it has not been shown that societies that were once pervasively religious can become “modern” without reducing the broad significance of religion. Here, though, secularization theory runs up against its limits because it assumes that secularization is a natural process, a set of events that follow from objective conditions in particular societies. In the Islamic context, however, secularization is also a political issue, a target of criticism, a model to be feared. Secularization has a reflexive quality. Islam is therefore not an exception by virtue of not being secular; rather, it provides a counterpoint by showing that becoming secular is more contentious than conventional accounts have recognized.

Neither of the exceptions refutes secularization theory, although each supplements it. The Islamic case, in particular, calls into question an old, tacit assumption: secularization was something that happened to coherent, independent societies, specifically nation-states. Instead, once secularization occurred for the

first time, dramatically, in the formerly Christian orbit, it could then be incorporated elsewhere as desirable model or dangerous precedent, to be locally adapted. As a rule social change occurs not simply as a natural process within separate units. People and institutions compare their experiences; change in one society often occurs as a semiconscious response to the example set by another; some historical events or experiments are turned into models for others to follow. In modernity reflexive comparison becomes more common in world society. With regard to secularization, this means that, attuned to the way particular groups construe its meaning and respond to precedent, we must view it as a relational process. Put another way, secularization has become a societal possibility, a course to be debated. Whether, and if so, how, to become secular is part of the ongoing struggle over how to be modern. In some societies this old issue has been settled; in many others, it has not. Secularization therefore remains subject to contestation in the real world, a phenomenon that has yet to be fully incorporated into secularization accounts.

### Conclusion

As a thesis asserting the demise of religion, secularization has been discredited; in this form it points, at best, to the now-ineradicable tension between conceptions of the transcendent and ever more assertive forms of worldly human reason, conscience, and desire. As description, secularization effectively captures the long-term decline in religious (especially, but not only, Christian) influence over culture and society. As academic theory, it explains both the common pattern in the process and the different ways in which religious tradition refracts under local conditions of modernizing change. As a contested concept, it reflects scholarly dispute over the interpretation of historical change and ongoing struggle over the place of religion in world society. Secularization therefore remains vital as an idea about the past and a problem for the future.

*See also* Abortion; Calvin, John; Christian Right; Church and State, Overview; Civil Rights Movement; French Revolution; Kuyper, Abraham; Latin America; Mormonism; Orthodoxy; Pentecostalism; Reformation; Temperance; Weber, Max

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