

SECULARISM: RELIGIOUS, IRRELIGIOUS, AND ARELIGIOUS

W. Clark Gilpin

Margaret E. Burton Professor of the History of Christianity and Theology
The University of Chicago Divinity School

A decade ago, a survey analysis of American religious historians conducted by Harry S. Stout and Robert M. Taylor piqued my interest. Employing two surveys, one conducted in 1974 and the other in 1993, Stout and Taylor appraised the general state of American religious history in the 1990s and, especially, its relationship to the wider field of American history. Stout and Taylor attracted my attention with one sentence in particular: “secularization is the most persistent of all theories involving religion and American society.”¹ Their assertion led me to pull from my shelves forty-three books from the 1990s that dealt with longer periods and larger themes in American religious history. *Secularization* and related terms appeared in the indexes of only twelve of the books, and in only one case did a theory of the secular serve to organize a major subsection of a book.

The anomaly of a persistent, but virtually unused theory has prompted this essay’s inquest into the apparent demise and current resurrection of an interconnected set of “keywords” for the interpretation of religion in the United States: secularization, the secular, and secularism. I propose that the utility of notions of secularization collapsed in the 1990s because the most vigorously debated questions about the function of religion in American society had shifted, not only among academics but also among journalists,

many religious leaders, and the general public. Older perspectives on secularization that had dominated discussion from the 1950s through the 1970s proved ill suited to address the newer questions. But at the end of the 1990s a new governing metaphor emerged in discussions of the secular and has dramatically reinvigorated this cluster of “keywords.” This new governing metaphor has significant implications for our interpretation of American religious history, both as scholars and as citizens.

In speaking of secularization, secular, and secularism as “keywords,” I simply mean, in the first instance, that these words are widely used in universities, the media, religious congregations, and popular speech. Beyond sheer frequency, moreover, these words have multiple—sometimes contradictory—meanings in the various settings in which they are employed. They are keywords because their different connotations call attention to the descriptive premises commonly used to interpret the workings of modern society; premises, in this case, about the function of religions in modern societies.² By following the shifting academic uses of these keywords, I hope to illuminate the wider cultural implications of talk about the religious and the secular.

Two Ways of Thinking about the Secular

Academic employment of *secular* and related terms has gone through two phases. The first phase predominated in the middle decades of the twentieth century, and the second began in the late 1990s and gathered energy around Talal Asad’s book of 2003, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. In neither phase has the terminology been fully consistent—secularization, secularism, the secular—but most scholars have distinguished between secularization as a social process and secularism as a social or political philosophy. Both phases have focused on the secular as a major,

perhaps *the* major, feature of modernity. In what follows, I contrast the broad narratives developed in these two phases of academic attention to secularization and the secular and then explore the consequences of that contrast for secularism as a social philosophy.

In the 1950s and 1960s the dominant narrative of secularization built on the early modern transfer of control of church property to the state, for example, in the confiscation of monastic lands by Henry VIII in sixteenth-century England. Peter L. Berger propounded the best-known version of this narrative in *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967). By secularization, Berger meant the “process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.” This process, said Berger, extended far beyond institutional changes, such as the separation of church and state, to affect “the totality of cultural life,” and he observed it “in the decline of religious contents in the arts, in philosophy, in literature and, most important of all, in the rise of science as an autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective on the world.” Moreover, the process of secularization also had a subjective dimension, and there was “a secularization of consciousness” that accompanied the secularization of society and culture. “Put simply,” Berger concluded, “this means that the modern West has produced an increasing number of individuals who look upon the world and their own lives without the benefit of religious interpretations.”³ In the mid-century decades, numerous interpreters thought that this transfer of institutions and ideas from a religious worldview to a secular one was likely to continue unabated in the modern West.

Berger wrote in 1967, and in the ensuing decades, not simply in the United States but across the world, the resurgence of religion has confounded any notion that the

process Berger narrated is leading toward the general atrophy of religion's public presence and influence.⁴ The sociologist of religion Martin Riesebrodt has aptly summarized the challenge that religion as a public force has posed to customary thinking about secularization.

In recent decades the dramatic global resurgence of religious movements—many of them fundamentalist—has caught many people by surprise. Most of us believed that such a resurgence of religion was not possible, since, according to our modernization myth, we were to expect a continuous universal trend toward the secularization and privatization of religion.⁵

The Stout and Taylor analysis of American religious historians, I would suggest, provides a “snapshot,” recording this transition in customary thinking about secularization. In the mid-1990s, historians continued to regard secularization as quite important, but the usual understandings of it no longer squared with all they were reading about religion in the newspapers or watching on television. In its older form, secularization theory had ceased to offer a convincing interpretation of the everyday world, and, when historians wrote about American religion, secularization fell to the bottom of their toolbox.

The global resurgence of religion has prompted fresh thinking about secularization and new models for understanding it. In the current renewal of interest in theories of the secular, I find that the emphasis falls not on the transference of authority but on the creation of a space. On this spatial reading, modern forms of secularism arose in close connection to the rise of the European nation-states and the efforts of these states to establish a stable polity that would bring an end to the catastrophic wars of religion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Early modern social philosophies accommodated the presence of conflicting religious groups by establishing a “secular space” that provided “a ground of coexistence.” According to an influential essay by the philosopher

Charles Taylor, “Modes of Secularism” (1998), this process of “defining a space of the secular” initially took two forms. The first emphasized the space created by the overlap of what differing religious groups held in common, in order to create an arena for cooperation. The second attempted “to define a political ethic independent of religious convictions altogether,” in order to insulate politics from sectarian violence and to protect religious minorities from political coercion. These two strategies became the basis of “two rather different ways of understanding the grounds of peaceful and equitable coexistence between people of different faiths, or different fundamental commitments.”⁶

In *Formations of the Secular*, Talal Asad’s critical meditation on Taylor’s essay is in general agreement with Taylor’s characterization of secularism but deeply skeptical about Taylor’s proposal that “liberal democracy ushers in a direct-access society” that accentuates citizen participation. Neither Taylor nor Asad regards the secular space as neutral or uninfluenced by the dynamics of power inequities, but Asad is the more insistent of the two on the power of the nation-state in establishing the secular as a political goal. Most importantly for my purposes, Asad emphasizes that secularism is not only an intellectual answer to questions about social peace in situations of religious diversity and dispute but also a set of practices, behaviors, and sensibilities. As a set of practices, secularism redefines and transcends “particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion.”⁷ Consequently, Asad is particularly interested in “the attempt to construct categories of the secular and the religious in terms of which modern living is required to take place” and which “mediate people’s identities, help shape their sensibilities, and guarantee their experiences.”⁸ In

short, the social spaces of the secular promote forms of secularism that are at once a philosophy of life and a way of life, both ideas and practices.

Both of these narratives—the one represented by Peter Berger and the other by Talal Asad and Charles Taylor—have useful points to make; neither represents a comprehensive theory of the place of the secular in modernity. In drawing a contrast between them, my principal aim is not to evaluate the merits of either interpretation but instead to call attention to the quite different ways in which the earlier and the more current narratives describe *the problem of the secular*. In the transfer of authority model, the secular represents a framing worldview that challenges the religious worldview and, in the modern West at least, supplants religion as the comprehensive interpretive framework. In the spatial model, the central difficulty of modernity is violence sanctioned by differing religious convictions or ideologies, and the secular establishes spaces within which these differences can be negotiated. The earlier model asks about the continuance of religion in the modern world. The more current model is all too aware of religion's continuance and asks how different forms of religion interact with one another and operate within the modern polity.

Three Modes of Secularism

In my view, the general approach to the secular taken by Asad and Taylor is more productive for thinking about American history than the earlier approach that I have, in an admittedly oversimplified way, represented through Peter Berger. In what follows, I employ a spatial model of the secular, arising from my reflections on the writings of Asad and Taylor, to point to three “modes of secularism” in American history that I designate

religious, irreligious, and areligious. I illustrate each mode of secularism with a single historical example that describes its function in a secular space.

Religious Secularism

In his celebrated tract for the times, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (1965), Harvard theologian Harvey Cox announced that “the rise of urban civilization and the collapse of traditional religion are the two main hallmarks of our era and are closely related movements.” In his view, urbanization constituted “a massive change in the way men live together, and became possible in its contemporary form only with the scientific and technological advances which sprang from the wreckage of traditional world views.” The equally transformative process of secularization “occurred only when the cosmopolitan confrontations of city living exposed the relativity of the myths men once thought were unquestionable.” Through these interconnected processes, “the secular metropolis” had arisen as both “the pattern of our life together” and “the loosing of the world from religious and quasi-religious understandings of itself, the dispelling of all closed worldviews, the breaking of all supernatural myths and symbols.”⁹

For Cox, the secular city as spatial symbol displayed two convictions heavily freighted with implications for human behavior. It was pragmatic in its concern to apply “human energy and intelligence” to the concrete problems of society. It was profane in its “wholly terrestrial horizon, the disappearance of any supramundane reality” that sets the terms for understanding the meaning and purpose of life in this world. In his view, the process of secularization liberated humans from “religious and metaphysical tutelage,” by turning their attention “away from other worlds and toward this one.” This did not,

however, mark the end of Jewish and Christian faith. On the contrary, according to Cox, secularization was the “authentic consequence” of the historical impact of “three pivotal elements in biblical faith”: “the disenchantment of nature begins with the Creation, the desacralization of politics with the Exodus, and the deconsecration of values with the Sinai Covenant, especially with its prohibition of idols.” Secularization was “basically a liberating movement,” at odds with any “closed ism,” religious or non-religious. “The idea of the secular city” thus represented not the end of religion but the possibility for its fulfillment: “the most promising image by which both to understand what the New Testament writers called ‘the Kingdom of God’ and the name under which contemporary faith might “develop a viable theology of revolutionary social change.”¹⁰ In Cox’s reading, the space of the secular city held promise for the practice of religious secularism as a pragmatic, this-worldly philosophy of social transformation.

Irreligious Secularism

In the aftermath of the Civil War, leading American intellectuals and policy makers focused on public education as the principal instrument for producing loyal citizens. Building their educational theories on their Protestant heritage, educators of the era assumed that Protestantism had a natural affinity with democracy but greatly doubted that the same could be said for the religion of newly arriving immigrants. In *Catholicism and American Freedom* (2003), Notre Dame historian John T. McGreevy has argued that this religiously tinged civic agenda for public education “tended to carry an anti-Catholic animus, and leading educators often expressed their gratitude that public schools were ‘unfavorable to dogmatic religion,’” as it was put by a speaker before the National Teachers’ Association in 1866. McGreevy demonstrates that in the latter decades of the

nineteenth century “the clash between liberals viewing education as central to national cohesion and Catholics committed to education as a parental prerogative guaranteed, ironically, the secularization of the public schools.” Earlier in the century, Horace Mann had reasoned that Bible readings and hymns could be at once religious and nonsectarian, but “by the early 1870s, for the first time, most American intellectuals conceded that the United States could not use public institutions to foster Christianity, a task made impossibly divisive by the massive increase in the Catholic population, along with growing numbers of Jews and nonbelievers.”¹¹ In New York, Cincinnati, and St. Louis, school boards ended use of the classic English Protestant Bible, the King James Version, in public schools.

Perhaps the most incisive statement of the nineteenth-century public school as a secular space came from William T. Harris, superintendent of schools in St. Louis, who defined theological and moral instruction as distinct enterprises and argued that neither the reading of the Bible nor the teaching of “religious dogmas” should occur in American public schools. McGreevy cites Superintendent Harris’s argument that teaching religious doctrines in public schools would instill narrow and authoritarian habits of mind that would frustrate the mathematics or science instructors guiding the same pupils. According to Harris, indoctrination in religion threatened to eliminate “critical acuteness and independent thinking from the mind of the pupil.”¹² On my reading, the secular space of the public school was created out of nineteenth-century nativist prejudices against Catholics, an inheritance from Anglo-American Protestantism redeployed in the advocacy of “nonsectarian” education. Irreligious secularism thus created behavioral norms for the public school by transposing venerable Protestant stereotypes of Roman

Catholicism into a contrast between the authoritarian and dogmatic personality cultivated by religion and the critical and independent thinking to which democratic schooling aspired.

Areligious Secularism

Over the past twenty years, Dan P. McAdams, professor psychology and human development at Northwestern University, has engaged in a massive project that studies the ways in which Americans narrate their own lives. In his most recent book, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By*, he focuses on a group of highly “generative” people and asks what the common features are in the way they tell their stories.

Generativity is a term McAdams adapts from the work of Erik Erikson, and by it McAdams means “the adult’s concern for and commitment to promoting the welfare and development of future generations.”¹³ Through interview research, McAdams finds a pattern that distinguishes “the life stories told by highly generative American adults from those told by less generative American adults.” Through many obstacles, the generative self becomes aware of having received a special blessing or gift and, at the same time, is troubled by the misfortunes of others, prompting a life work of promoting the well-being of future generations and leaving a positive legacy of the self.¹⁴ As the title of his book implies, McAdams is well aware of the religious narratives—especially conversion narratives—that stand behind the stories of chosenness, destiny, and vocation that he hears in his interviews. The respondents themselves, however, frequently do not offer explicitly religious interpretations of their life stories. They tell secular stories of their lives that incorporate elements derived religious of traditions into narratives that neither favor nor disfavor a religious reading of the self; theirs is an areligious secularism.

In the United States today, the pluralistic presence of diverse religions and their relative freedom of practice in American society establish a space in which cultural adaptation, borrowing, and synthesis characterize the life stories of many individuals. Tremendous religious energies are coursing through society. These energies are largely eclectic, adaptive, and acculturating, actively appropriating practices not only from other religions but also from business, politics, communication media, and popular culture. This vibrant cultural exchange of ideas and practices is sometimes deliberate, but frequently it is unrecognized, unacknowledged, or masked behind appeals to tradition. Consequently, both religious practitioners and religious scholars are finding that familiar boundaries between faith traditions or between the religious and the secular are no longer so easy to draw. Can it be that Buddhist meditation is the most authentic expression of one's Jewish identity?¹⁵ Are yoga and dieting health practices, or are they evangelical Protestant practices?¹⁶ In the cases that McAdams describes, a Christian narrative of the redeemed self has come unmoored from its traditional location in Christian life practice and begins to function independently in the secular spaces of the wider culture, combining with other religious practices, philosophies of life, and cultural forms. Secularism in its areligious form operates within this dynamic space to pursue a whole range of adaptive or syncretistic projects, which may or may not acknowledge or recognize their explicitly religious sources.

Conclusion

In these three ways, religious, irreligious, and areligious, religions have historically functioned to establish and influence secular spaces in American society and promoted an ethic and a way of life appropriate to those spaces, that is, secularism as a

social philosophy. In some cases, illustrated by Harvey Cox, the secular space represents the fulfillment—or at least the possibility for fulfillment—of a positive religious project. In other cases, as with nativist influences in the history of public education, religious parties assert the independence of a social domain in order to thwart the public influence of other religious groups. Finally, religious convictions shape social spaces in unacknowledged or even unrecognized ways by suggesting ways of life that—unmoored from their traditional religious setting—function effectively in modern democratic polities.

One might well imagine other modes of secularism in which religion acts a prominent part. Fragments from the cultural past, for example, frequently lend prestige to contemporary ideological debates through their appeal to nostalgia, vicarious social identity, or a sense of custodianship for traditional mores. Religions offer a wide range of emblems that may function to promote projects ranging from consumer economics to patriotism, and the annual December “Christmas wars” are merely the most visible example of the deployment of religious fragments to define and contest the space of the secular. In these spaces, the authority of religious nostalgia is, perhaps, shaping a post-religious secularism.

In these and other possible “modes of secularism,” the spatial model of the secular adapted from Taylor and Asad directs primary attention not to religion’s diminished social authority in comparison to alternative sources of authority, whether scientific, political, or educational. Instead, this model responds primarily to the issue of how religions relate to one another in the religiously indeterminate spaces of the secular, spaces that the religions have themselves partially shaped.

As the Princeton ethicist Jeffrey Stout has argued, this does not silence the public voice of religion but it does dramatically alter the rhetorical form of religious speech for use in secular spaces. “What makes a form of discourse secularized,” according to Stout’s account, “is not the tendency of the people participating in it to relinquish their religious beliefs or to refrain from employing them as reasons. The mark of secularization, as I use the term, is rather the fact that participants in a given discursive practice are not in a position to take for granted that their interlocutors are making the same religious assumptions they are. This is the sense in which public discourse in modern democracies tends to be secularized.”¹⁷ Stout’s diagnosis of the secular is, of course, also a prescription. His work suggests a form of public religious reasoning that both acknowledges the diverse assumptions operating in modern democracies and actively seeks points of overlapping consensus. My three historical examples are intended to suggest that Stout is correct in his diagnosis. I am inclined to think that his prescription also represents good medicine for religion in contemporary America.

¹ Harry S. Stout and Robert M. Taylor, Jr., “Studies of Religion in American Society: The State of the Art,” in *New Directions in American Religious History*, ed. Harry S. Stout and D. G. Hart (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 25.

² The idea of keywords is borrowed, of course, from the fascinating work of Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, revised ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

³ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967, 1969).

⁴ An important call for reconstruction of the secularization paradigm came from José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁵ Martin Riesebrodt, “Religion in Global Perspective,” in *Global Religions: An Introduction*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 95.

⁶ The citations in this paragraph come from Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 2, 27; and Charles Taylor, “Modes of Secularism,” in *Secularism and Its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 32-34.

⁷ Asad, 5, 25.

⁸ Asad, 14.

⁹ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1965, 1966), 1-2.

¹⁰ Cox, 3-4, 52, 15, 18, 95. Unlike my own use of the term, Cox treated secularism as one of the “closed isms” that stands in opposition to the secular fulfillment of religious faith.

¹¹ John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: Norton, 2003), 113, 115.

¹² McGreevy, 118.

¹³ Dan P. McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.

¹⁴ McAdams, 7, 11.

¹⁵ See, for example, Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

¹⁶ See, for example, R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

¹⁷ Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 97.