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## Religion and Secularism

Edited by Patrick Murray and Ronald A. Simkins

### Introduction

Patrick Murray, Creighton University

The papers published in this volume were first presented at a symposium at Creighton University on “Religion and Secularism.” The occasion that led to organizing a symposium under the joint sponsorship of the Kripke Center for the Study of Religion and Society and the John C. Kenefick Faculty Chair in the Humanities was a year-long faculty-staff reading group (academic year 2015-2016) on Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*. In organizing the symposium, we chose to take a multi-disciplinary approach and to keep the topic broad. As the articles in this issue indicate, the “Religion and Secularism” symposium attracted scholars from diverse disciplines, and they addressed a wide range of topics of historical and contemporary interest.

The title of the Kripke-Kenefick symposium, “Religion and Secularism,” could suggest treating the religious and the secular as opposed categories: the religious is not the secular, and the secular is not the religious. However, nothing is so simple in this terrain. Is the United States a secular nation or a religious one? Religion is the first topic addressed in the Bill of Rights. The first amendment to the U.S. Constitution begins: “Congress shall make no law

respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”<sup>1</sup> This statement is usually analyzed into the establishment clause and the free exercise clause, respectively. The establishment clause states that no religion may be established in the United States. In that important sense, the United States is a secular state, not a religious one. Yet, in the free exercise clause of the same sentence, the First Amendment enshrines religious liberty, making it clear that this secular state defends the practice of religion. Religion has long played a prominent role in American life. So, in another sense, we speak of the United States as a religious nation.

Both religion and secularism are challenging terms to define. The fact that the Bill of Rights begins with those two famous clauses underscores the significance of religion and religious freedom, but it leaves the question of what counts as religion up to judicial discretion, ultimately to the judgment of the Supreme Court. Of course, there are many contested matters concerning the establishment clause and the free exercise clause” that focus on what counts as the “establishment” of a religion and how much freedom is granted by the phrase “free exercise.” *Defining* religion, a task left implicit in the religion clauses, is fraught with theoretical, political, and juridical intricacies and implications. On the other hand, terms such as the secular, secularism, and secularization need to be untangled and clarified as well.

### Defining Religion

In his article “Defining Religion in the First Amendment: A Functional Approach,” Ben Clements writes, “Although the Supreme Court has discussed the concept of ‘religion’ in several cases, it has not provided a specific definition to govern cases arising under the religion clauses” (532). Clements rejects the extreme, and self-refuting, view that to define what religion means would violate both religion clauses (for a defense of that extreme view, see Weiss). Without some definition of religion, the establishment and free exercise clauses are not about anything. As Clements points out, “The First Amendment’s command that the government ‘make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof’ requires an interpretation of religion that will allow the courts to distinguish between religious and nonreligious belief” (557-58). But the tension remains. “On the other hand,” writes Clements, “the purpose of the religion clauses – to ensure religious liberty for all – requires an interpretation that will encompass the religious impulses in persons, whether these impulses are expressed in the form of a traditional religion, or in the form of a unique, unstructured, personal religion” (558). Most courts have approached the question with caution, Clements observes, for a rigid judicial definition of religion would infringe on the religious liberty envisioned in the religion clauses. Clements sifts through several definitions of religion proposed for interpreting the religion clauses. He concludes that religion “can be defined as a comprehensive belief system that addresses the fundamental questions of human existence, such as the meaning of life and death, man’s role in the universe, and the nature of good and evil, and that gives rise to duties of conscience” (553). That liberal definition appears

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<sup>1</sup> The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution reads in full: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

to erase the line that some would draw between religion and a comprehensive philosophy or worldview. Questions nevertheless remain.

Can a secular state, one where no religion is established, espouse a civil religion? Jean-Jacques Rousseau anticipates both the establishment clause and the free exercise clause: “Now that there can be no longer an exclusive national religion, tolerance should be given to all religions that tolerate others, so long as their dogmas contain nothing contrary to the duties of citizenship” (277). But civil religion is another matter. Rousseau introduces the term “civil religion” with the title of chapter 8, book 4, of *The Social Contract* (1762) to characterize certain expectations of what would be largely regarded as a modern secular state, secular in the sense of having no established conventional religion. Rousseau concludes *The Social Contract* with a call for “civil religion” since “no State has ever been founded without a religious basis” (272). Rousseau describes the articles of the civil religion, “not exactly as religious dogmas, but as social sentiments without which a man cannot be a good citizen or a faithful subject” (276). The few dogmas of civil religion push, if not violate, the boundaries of contemporary conceptions of the “civil”: they include: “the existence of a mighty, intelligent, and beneficent Divinity, possessed of foresight and providence, the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked, [and] the sanctity of the social contract and the laws” (276).

Rousseau itemizes the “purely civil profession of faith” (though it appears to be a scaled-back Christian catechism) suited to civil religion in an age of tolerance, where “there can be no longer an exclusive national religion.” But American civil religion, as discussed by writers such as the religious historian Martin Marty and the sociologist Robert Bellah, while its content can be teased out, is not codified. Nonetheless, having a “civil religion” would be a further way that the United States might be both secular and religious.

Rousseau’s civil religion was theistic, but there are explicitly atheistic movements that declare themselves to be religions. An atheistic “Cult of Reason” was established in France in the period of the French Revolution. Several decades later, the French philosopher and early sociologist Auguste Comte, the advocate of “positive philosophy,” which he saw as superseding theology and metaphysics, founded a “Religion of Humanity,” for which some temples were constructed. Marxist-Leninist states, especially Stalinist ones, present themselves with the trappings of an atheistic religious cult. Various forms of religious humanism and secular humanism take inspiration from Comte.

For a belief system to count as religion, must it involve transcendence? What counts as transcendence? Presumably, belief in God, the immortality of the person, or miracles would qualify, but what of a godless belief in an objective morality or even an objective purpose to life? Such beliefs transcend what natural science tells us about the world, but do they count as religious? Does a tepid deism that puts no moral demands on us count as religious belief? Even what counts as belief in God is contested: Baruch Spinoza, who argued that there is only one substance, “God or nature,” is both reviled as a virulent atheist and praised as the most God-drenched thinker.

Charles Taylor invokes Peggy Lee’s lyric “Is That all There Is?” to question whether secularism can satisfy the human spirit’s desire for fulness (311). Likewise, the theologian Dorothee Sölle is dismayed by what she sees as the banality of a strictly secular order, especially consumer society:

A totally secular culture, which once seemed so desirable to many thinkers, has come to be experienced by millions as something essentially shallow if not completely bankrupt. Where once people practiced religion, about the only thing many of them now engage in “religiously” is consuming (148).

Does religion monopolize transcendence or are there secular forms of transcendence? Perhaps, in the arts? Do Andy Warhol’s Campbell’s Soup serigraphs transcend Campbell’s soups and the banality repugnant to Sölle? There are secular causes for which people are willing to sacrifice their lives. Is that evidence of secular transcendence?

Does religion require, if not priests or a hierarchy, at least some organizational or institutional form? Does religion require some dogma or defining set of beliefs, even if a small set? Must religion place moral demands on believers? Must religious dogma or belief be recognizably different from a strictly ethical creed? If so, how different? Does religion require some form of worship or ritual?

Questions concerning what counts as religion and what does not may arise as a recognized religion goes through changes that make its status less obvious. When does a religion change into something that no longer counts as religion? Is Unitarian Universalism a religion? Unitarian Universalism was founded in 1961 as the union of two groups that began as Christian denominations but had progressively moved away from orthodox Christian beliefs: the Unitarians (the American Unitarian Association) and the Universalists (the Universalist Church of America). The newly formed Unitarian Universalist Association is neither Christian, at least not in the traditional or confessional sense, nor theist. It supports “the free and responsible search for truth and meaning” but claims to have no shared creed. The Seven Principles that make up its shared covenant have no content that would clearly distinguish them from ethical principles. Is Unitarian Universalism a religion but the Ethical Culture Movement not a religion? The contemporary American Ethical Union traces its roots to the Ethical Culture Movement, which was founded with Felix Adler’s break with Reform Judaism in 1872.

Some humanists declare themselves religious humanists; for example, Charles Francis Potter and Clara Cook Potter published *Humanism: A New Religion* in 1930. Other humanists think of themselves as non-religious “secular humanists.” In some cases, it is hard to say. The American Humanist Association, whose motto is “Good without God,” is not keen on religion, yet it sponsors “humanist celebrants” who play “a role similar to that of a traditional clergyperson with one difference: humanist ceremonies express our positive, nontheistic philosophy of humanism instead of traditional faith.” However that may be, in a footnote to the 1961 Supreme Court case *Torcaso v. Watkins*, Justice Hugo Black listed “secular humanism” among other non-theistic religions. Ironically, some critics of evolution insist that secular humanism *is* a religion, so they can wield the establishment clause against such ideas turning up in public schools. Here we have come full circle: secularism is religion.

### Regarding the Secular, Secularism, and Secularization

Charles Taylor begins *A Secular Age* by qualifying his observation that “we live in a secular age.” He states, “I mean the ‘we’ who live in the West, or perhaps Northwest, or otherwise put, the North Atlantic world – although secularity extends also partially, and in different ways,

beyond this world.” If it is not evident what religion is, Taylor likewise observes, “it’s not so clear in what this secularity consists” (1). He identifies two popular answers and goes on to propose a third, which orients his genealogy of the present secular age.

The first meaning of secularity targets the separation of church and state. Thus, we consider the United States to be a secular state because of the establishment clause that begins the First Amendment. Taylor observes that in those modern Western states where there still is an established religion, e.g., Great Britain and some Scandinavian countries, the political role of religion is vestigial.<sup>2</sup> This first conception of secularity applies to a society where religion is largely kept out of the political sphere. Conversely, we could speak here of secularity as the condition in which religion has been privatized.

The second popular understanding of secularity is that of a social condition where religious belief and practice have substantially declined. As Taylor notes, with special reference to the United States, a society may be secular in the first sense but not in the second: “One of the earliest societies to separate Church and State, it [the United States] is also the Western society with the highest statistics for religious belief and practice” (2). In his 1843 article “On the Jewish Question,” Karl Marx observes that the United States is both the most politically emancipated (secular in the first sense) and the most religious (least secular in the second sense) state in the Western world. We find in the United States, Marx writes, “a country with full political emancipation” where “religion not only *exists* but is *fresh* and *vital*” (6). He turns that pair of facts against Bruno Bauer, a Young Hegelian theologian who asserted that secularism in the first sense ushers in secularism in the second sense: when religion loses state sponsorship, a sharp drop-off in religious belief and practice will follow. The experience of the United States belies Bauer’s claim.

The third meaning of secularity is the one that provides the guiding thread for Taylor’s account of the emergence of “a secular age.” In this third sense, secularity is a matter of the *conditions of belief*. The conditions of belief are diverse and wide-ranging:

Secularity in this sense is a matter of the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place. By “context of understanding” here, I mean both matters that will probably have been explicitly formulated by almost everyone, such as the plurality of options, and some which form the implicit, largely unfocussed background of this experience and search (3).

Secular conditions of belief prevail where belief in God “is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace” (3). Why, wonders Taylor, is it so hard for many today to believe in God, when in 1500 in the West it was hard not to believe? For Taylor, the rise of a secular age is the consequence of key shifts in the conditions of belief, “it is this shift in background, in the whole context in which we experience and search for fullness, that I am calling the coming of a secular age, in my third sense” (14).

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<sup>2</sup> Harriet Sherwood cites research by the Pew Research Center that 43 countries in the world have an “official religion,” nine of them (all Christian) are in Europe, while there are 27 countries in which Islam is the official religion.

Among those shifts that have brought about a secular age are *disenchantment*, “the dissolution of the ‘enchanted’ world, the world of spirits and meaningful causal forces, of wood sprites and relics” (553); a triple *disembedding* from society, the cosmos, and ordinary conceptions of the human good and human flourishing (147-50); and a *desacralizing* of time, as “clock-time” becomes dominant. These transformations result in an individualism for which society is there only to serve the individual and instrumental rationality: “the dominance of instrumental rationality in our world, and the pervasiveness of secular time go together” (541-42).

What Taylor calls *subtraction stories* gain currency in our secular age. Subtraction stories explain modernity and secularity

by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process – modernity or secularity – is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside (22).

Taylor argues against a subtraction narrative of secularization. Rather, Western modernity and secularity “is the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices, and can’t be explained in terms of perennial features of human life” (22). Modern secularity is a contingent historical development; it does not close the book on transcendence and religious belief.

The *immanent frame*, which is less a set of beliefs than “the sensed context in which we develop our beliefs,” can lead to rejecting transcendence (549). But Taylor strenuously argues that it need not: “it is something which permits closure, without demanding it” (544). To keep the open immanent frame a live option, Taylor contends that “the arguments from natural science to Godlessness are not all that convincing” (567) and that, though “morality without God may be no longer inconceivable,” it is “still not fully credible for us” (545). Consequently, “a very common experience of living here is that of being cross-pressured between the open and closed perspectives” (2007: 555).

One of the most important conditions of belief that make ours a secular age is what Taylor calls *exclusive humanism*:

I would like to claim that the coming of modern secularity in my sense has been coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing. Of no previous society was this true (18).

Exclusive humanism promotes the “tremendously widespread narrative” of “self-authorization”: we are the authors of meaning and morals (588). However, Taylor counters, “the narratives of self-authorization, when examined more closely, are far from self-evident” (589). Taylor argues that, in our secular age, exclusive humanism and the closed version of the immanent frame are widely available options – but not the only options. Taylor’s conception

of our secular age is that people find themselves cross-pressured, not that exclusive humanism and closed versions of the immanent frame have eliminated all alternatives.

José Casanova distinguishes among the secular, secularization, and secularism:

I would like to begin, first, by introducing a 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 (2009: 1049).

By *the secular* as an epistemic category, Casanova means that the secular is a category counterposed to the religious and used in various spheres of human life: “The secular has become a central modern category – theologico-philosophical, legal-political, and cultural-anthropological – to construct, codify, grasp, and experience a realm or reality differentiated from ‘the religious’” (2009: 1049). Casanova comments on the gap between the social scientific inquiry into the secular as opposed to the religious:

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 (2011: 55).

*Secularization*, for Casanova, “refers to actual or alleged empirical-historical patterns of transformation and differentiation of the institutional spheres of ‘the religious’ (ecclesiastical institutions and churches) and ‘the secular’ (state, economy, science, art, entertainment, health and welfare, etc.)” (2009: 1050). Secularization is, as we will see, often linked with modernization.

Thirdly, *secularism* refers to a range of modern secular worldviews and ideologies. Of these, Casanova observes:

they 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 (2011: 56).

As we will see, what Casanova calls a stadial consciousness is a powerful secular philosophy of history.

The *secularization thesis* that has been popular in social scientific accounts of secularization holds that modernization brings secularization in its trail. But this thesis leads us to wonder what conception of modernity and modernization is in play here. The answer, for the most part, seems to be a Weberian account of modernity as a disenchanted world dominated by instrumental reason and action. We may also wonder whether modernization and secularization can be conceived of independently. Casanova observes that this secularization thesis has come into question:

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 privatization theses have undergone numerous critiques and revisions in the last fifteen years (2011: 55-56).

The challenges to the secularization thesis that have arisen as the anticipated decline and privatization of religion has not uniformly tracked modernization raise this question: “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” (Casanova 2011: 58-59). Casanova offers an answer based on his concept of a *stadial consciousness*, 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” (2011: 59). You might say that stadiad consciousness is a secularist revision of St. Paul’s reference to putting aside childish things: humanity has finally grown out of religion. August Comte and Young Hegelians such as Bruno Bauer would be examples of thinkers who embrace a stadiad consciousness.

How is this notion of a stadiad consciousness related to what Taylor calls subtraction stories? To accept a subtraction story is to have a stadiad consciousness, but only of a sort. One who has a stadiad consciousness can accept or reject subtraction stories. To reject subtraction stories would be to make some religious phenomena integral to the developmental stages. For example, both Hegel and Marx may have a stadiad consciousness, but they reject a subtraction story of secularization because they see Christianity (and modern commercial society as the secular realization of Christianity) as integral to the stages of development. The modernization process is not a matter of shedding the encumbrances of centuries of religious belief and practice to get to underlying features of human nature.

With this concept of stadiad consciousness in hand, Casanova returns to the question of why secularization does not always keep step with modernization. As we have seen, the United States is a secular nation in the sense of having no established religion but one where religious belief and practice are strong. Casanova proposes an explanation:

this secularist stadiad 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 among their midst, as a natural consequence of their modernization. To be secular is not experienced as an existential choice 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 stadiad consciousness tends to function as a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is, in my view, the presence or absence of this secularist historical stadiad consciousness that explains when

and where processes of modernization are accompanied by radical secularization. In places where such secularist historical stadial consciousness is absent, 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 (2009: 1055).

If Casanova is right, we can expect the study of religion and secularism to be with us long into the future.

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