

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Secularity and Secularism

Barry A. Kosmin

Secularism and its variants are terms much bandied about today, paradoxically, as a consequence of religion seeming to have become more pervasive and influential in public life and society worldwide. This situation poses a number of questions.

First, a definitional question: What are the spheres of secularity and secularism today? According to our understanding in this volume, secularity refers to individuals and their social and psychological characteristics while secularism refers to the realm of social institutions.

Then some sociological questions: Who is secular today? How much of the American or other national population is secular? What do those people who are secular believe? How is a secular preference manifested on the personal level by individuals in their ways of belonging, their personal beliefs, and their social behaviors?

These are the questions the authors in this volume attempt in different ways to answer for a number of diverse, contemporary societies.

Since *Secularity*, the first category in the binary typology, involves individual actors' personal behavior and identification with secular ideas and traditions as a mode of consciousness, it lends itself to empirical analysis. Secularity's manifestations in terms of general trends can be measured and compared, as our authors demonstrate in the first half of this volume, with regard to the larger English-speaking nations—Britain, Canada, Australia and the U.S.

Secularism, the second category, involves organizations and legal constructs that reflect the institutional expressions of the secular in a nation's political realm and public life. By their nature, these variables are much harder to quantify, especially when viewed globally. Forms of secularism can be expected to vary with the religious configuration in which they develop. This volume's authors, and consequently its readers, face the difficult task of qualitatively evaluating

the symbolic and cultural encoding of the religious legacies of Hinduism (India), Judaism (Israel), Islam (Iran), Catholicism (France), and Protestantism (Denmark, U.S. and British Commonwealth countries) in national public institutions and mentalities.

Another distinction must be offered, between “hard” and “soft” forms of secularity and secularism. This relates to attitudes towards modes of separation of the secular from the religious and the resulting relationship between them. In what follows, a typology is presented (*Figure 1*) that combines these two sets of distinctions. This typology may be used for analysis and policy formulation.

The Secular Tradition

The terms “secular,” “secularism,” and “secularization” have a range of meanings. The words derive from the Latin, *saeculum*, which means both this age and this world, and combines a spatial sense and a temporal sense. In the Middle Ages, secular referred to priests who worked out in the world of local parishes, as opposed to priests who took vows of poverty and secluded themselves in monastic communities. These latter priests were called “religious.” During the Reformation, secularization denoted the seizure of Catholic ecclesiastical properties by the state and their conversion to non-religious use. In all of these instances, the secular indicates a distancing from the sacred, the eternal, and the otherworldly.

In the centuries that followed the secular began to separate itself from religious authority. But has the world now gone further in creating an autonomous existence for the secular? Since the 1780s, on the reverse of the U.S. national seal, and since the 1930s, on the reverse of the one-dollar bill, the phrase *Novus Ordo Seclorum* has appeared. My interpretation of the adoption of that Latin phrase is that the founders of the American Republic viewed the “new order of the ages” quite deliberately as a new era in which the old order of King and Church was to be displaced from authority over public life by a secular republican order.

The two revolutions of the 18th century, the American and the French, produced two intellectual and constitutional traditions of secularism. One, associated with the French Jacobin tradition, was unreservedly antagonistic to religion, and promoted atheism. This situation arose from the historical reality of the revolutionary experience, which involved a joint struggle against despotism and religion, the monarchy, and the Roman Catholic Church. This essentially political construction continues under the regime of *laïcité* bound up with *La Loi de 1905* (see chapter 9). This tradition has only a marginal place in

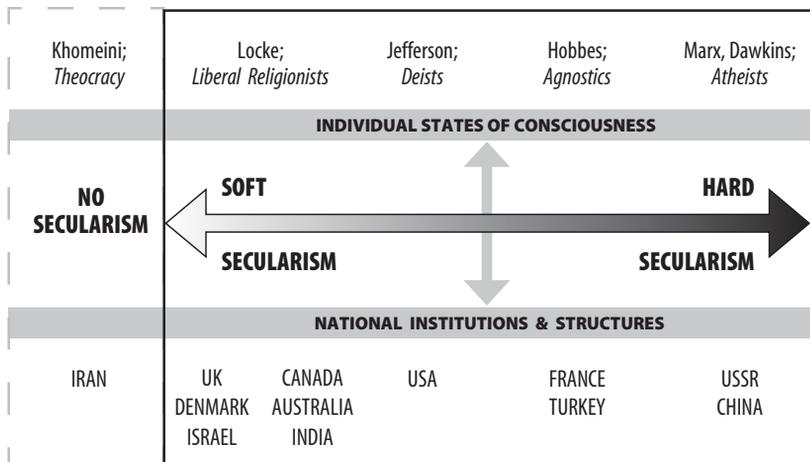
American public life. The reason, of course, is that the United States was heir to the Protestant heritage of the Reformation, whereby religious individualism and autonomy predated any concept of political autonomy. The result was that the Americans adopted a more moderate approach, characterized by indifference towards religion or encouragement of religious pluralism as promoted by the Deists and Liberal Protestants of the early republic.

A Typology

In light of this sketch of the historical background it is possible to devise a typology based on a binary model of hard and soft secularism. Bifurcation of secular perspectives on religion comprises only one dimension of this typology. The second dimension is based on the distinction between individuals and institutions. Here the individual aspect primarily pertains to states of consciousness while the institutional aspect relates to social structures and their cultural systems.

The typology based on these two dimensions is presented in *Figure 1*. In actual fact these are not closed cells but ranges stretched between the polarities of the dimensions. There can exist between soft-soft and hard-hard secularism a range of intermediate positions.

Figure 1
A Typology of Secularism



Various thinkers and their associated ideologies are listed in the top row to illustrate these gradations. In the bottom row, countries are listed in a hierarchy that relates to their approximate degree of constitutional or institutional secularism.

In addition, the boundary between the individual and the institutions is not firm in real life. There is an interplay that involves social expectations and constraints originating from institutions on the one hand and extreme subjective mental states that are individually based on the other. For example, the sociological concept of role refers to both structural constraints and personal sentiments and beliefs.

With *Figure 1* as a model or guide, it is possible to classify and examine whether and how the various secular traditions operate in different realms of life—society, economics, politics, education, and culture. Who are today's proponents of the two different traditions stemming from the revolutions of the 18th century? Where do they have influence in the contemporary world? How should such questions be investigated in the 21st century, in a much more integrated and compacted world? A contemporary cross-cultural analysis of secularism poses particular challenges, as the essays on India, Israel, and Iran illustrate, since Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam vary not only in their theologies and traditions with respect to the state, but also in their approaches to how they perceive the role of the individual in society.

Secularization

In modern sociological theory, secularization is associated with *differentiation*. Differentiation describes the growing division of labor in modern society as life goes through a process of fragmentation into numerous spheres, each operating according to its own laws and principles. As a result, there is no master, integrating principle or narrative that holds social life, institutions, ideas, and ideals together.

Since the end of the 19th century, there has been a growing recognition among students of religion that the theologies and institutions embodying religion have been transformed by the process of secularization. Max Weber described secularization as the “disenchantment of the world”¹—a characterization of the process of rationalization he adopted from the poet Friedrich Schiller. By this process, Weber sought to capture the psychic and cultural transformation in which magical elements of thought and symbolism are progressively displaced by empiricism and rationality. Harvey Cox described secularization as the “deliverance of man ‘first from religious and then from metaphysical control over his reasons and his language’... the dispelling of all closed worldviews, the breaking of all supernatural myths and sacred symbols.”² On the wider societal

level, Peter Berger defined secularization as “the process by which sectors of society are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.”³

It is now widely recognized that the process of secularization is dialectic: the more that hearts and minds become “disenchanted,” the more institutions that have specialized in the promotion of the “enchantment” process lose plausibility and authority. The more such institutions lose plausibility and authority, the less the psycho-emotional processes of “enchantment” are inculcated in the hearts and minds of individuals. How far the process of secularization has progressed in different societies since the end of the 19th century, whether the process is unidirectional or not, and what its consequences are for social and political organization and human welfare, is the subject of ongoing debate among sociologists and theologians, as well as politicians and social planners. In fact, the current state of the debate for the nations of the English-speaking world is well represented in this volume.

Soft and Hard Secularism

Modernity has been the trigger for differentiation, with its attendant process of secularization. It freed the spheres of cultural life, such as art, law, politics, learning, science, and commerce, from their embeddedness in a comprehensive Christian culture and allowed them to pursue their own paths of development. Thus, the U.S. Constitution set politics on a new course by wisely prohibiting a “religious test for public office.” This is an example of a political initiative to establish soft secularism at the societal level of institutions that leaves matters of conscience to individual choice.

Politics, in the modern secular understanding, now had its own immanent principles and values. Religious principles and values were to be more or less differentiated from political ones. This does not imply that religious principles and values can have no role in politics and public life in American democracy. It only implies that, in terms of the perspective of the constitution and the law, religious institutions and governmental institutions are differentiated. The philosophical term for this condition of differentiation is pluralism. Its opposite is monism (i.e. theocracy and totalitarianism).

Most Americans, regardless of whether they are liberal or conservative, Christian or Jew or other, adhere to epistemological fallibilism and so are pluralists and, hence, soft secularists. They accept at a fundamental level that law, politics, art, and learning should not be controlled by religious institutions or clergy but have their own traditions, spheres, and dynamics. In the social-structural sense, although there are evident strains, America has been and remains a soft secular republic.

Reinhold Niebuhr, one of 20th-century America’s leading Protestant theo-

logians, observed almost half a century ago that Americans are “at once the most religious and the most secular of nations. How shall we explain this paradox? Could it be that [Americans] are most religious partly in consequence of being the most secular culture?”⁴

In his book *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, Will Herberg wrote about the paradox of “pervasive secularism and mounting religiosity,”⁵ a mind-set involving thinking and living within a broad framework of reality that is far from one’s professed religious beliefs. This apparent paradox still exists today because it is part of the American cultural tradition.

As soft secularists, most Americans want government to accommodate religious behavior, even within the domain of government itself. For example, they accept that institutionalized persons or military personnel should have access to religious services, guidance, or leadership and that these may be paid for, as in the case of military and prison chaplains, with taxpayer dollars. They did not balk when the law allowed for religious pacifists, such as Quakers or Mennonites, to be conscientious objectors. The mainstream consensus is that it is crucial to a free society to respect the religious convictions of its citizens; it is crucial to a pluralistic, differentiated, secular political order to carve out a sphere for freedom of religion and to let that sphere be autonomous, to the greatest extent possible, of pressures emanating from government.

The existence of religion within its proper sphere, alongside the other differentiated spheres of a modern pluralistic society, is an exemplification of differentiation, not a rejection of it. This is why America can be said to subscribe to a soft secularism. Interestingly, that other great democracy, India (see chapter 12), also has an official ideology of political secularism that is similarly interpreted as pluralism and tolerance of religious differences.

Hard secularism is a term that can be associated with Weber’s transformation of consciousness. It is usually more purely intellectual and personal than social or political. A precursor can be found in the writings of Hobbes, who claimed that those who followed the light of reason are bound to discard faith as intellectually unreliable and therefore morally dangerous. Following Hobbes and other like-minded philosophers, Marx suggested that faith was an ideology in contradistinction to knowledge, which was used by regimes for the purpose of political control. Weber saw the process of secularization as the culmination of the process of rationalization and as the ultimate *disenchantment* of the world by modern science.

In this sense, secular refers to a worldview, a system of beliefs, or a modality of sense-making that is determinedly non-religious. A disenchanted universe is a purely physical and material one. It gives no support to either moral ideals—

which are the result of evolutionary processes—or to religious beliefs—which are the perversely lingering products of more naïve ages, eventually to be swept away by the triumph of a properly scientific outlook.

Disenchantment refers to an emptying out of magic, mystery, hints of transcendence, or a faith in realities, entities, or forces unseen but intuited and believed to be essential to human welfare and flourishing. Today's spokesmen include Richard Dawkins and Paul Kurtz, or California's activist doctor-lawyer, Michael Newdow. They all take hard secularism to its logical conclusion, Atheism—the belief in the meaninglessness and irrationality of theism. Such hard secularists are few and far between in America, although more common in Western and Eastern Europe.

The soft secularist individual is neither a convinced Atheist nor a principled materialist, and may not be hostile to religious beliefs and institutions. In fact, the majority are liberal religionists. The soft secularist is willing to take a live-and-let-live attitude toward religion as long as it doesn't impinge on his freedom of choice or seek control of American public institutions. For the soft secularist, religion is properly a private lifestyle option, which must not threaten liberty and social harmony in a differentiated and pluralistic society.

The majority of America's self-described identifiers with No Religion, the so-called "religious nones," also fit this profile of soft secularists. Their level of secularity shows that they are by no means hard-core Atheists or even Agnostics, who together constitute less than 1 percent of the population (see chapter 3). Sixty-seven percent of Nones believe in the existence of God; 56 percent agree that God intervenes personally in their lives to help them; 57 percent believe that God performs miracles.

The upshot of such findings is that, in America, the majority of secularists are religious in a sense. Even those who do not belong to religious institutions or identify with religious communities have theistic beliefs and concerns. Thus, although the self-described secular population of the U.S. has doubled since 1990, it cannot be said that American society has become more irreligious or anti-religious, only that there is less identification with religious groups *per se*.

American Exceptionalism

Secularity, like religion, takes many forms in American society. Also like religion, it varies in intensity along the trajectories of belonging, belief, and behavior. *Religion in a Free Market* shows that the American public does not subscribe to a binary system. In America, secularity is one option among many in a free-market-oriented society. The boundaries between religion and secularity, and between different religions, are not clearly fixed (see chapter 1). This confusion

is to be expected. Secularism, like religion, has developed in various forms at different levels and in different realms.

By way of institutional differentiation, modernization has involved a degree of secularization. As societies modernize, their religious beliefs, behaviors, and institutions can change in many different ways. This can include forms that are a reaction to secularism, both hard and soft, that are embedded in modernization. Religious fundamentalism, which must not be confused with pre-modern traditional religion *per se*, is an adaptation to conditions of modern secularization (see chapters 11 and 13).

The contemporary United States, by contrast, exhibits both high modernity and substantial religiosity among the populace and so shows that secularization has not been sweeping, thorough and total. This situation is just what many “soft secularist” thinkers of the Enlightenment, such as John Locke, Adam Smith, and Thomas Jefferson, both desired and predicted.

Institutional soft secularism, combined with endeavors to revitalize religious consciousness at the individual level, was exemplified in the American tradition of religious liberty. Created by Roger Williams, William Penn and James Madison’s theologically charged “Memorial and Remonstrance” it was a product of the moral and religious imagination of dissenting Protestantism. The very phrase, separation of church and state, which Jefferson used in his 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, derives from Roger Williams, who sought to keep the garden of the church separate from the politics of the world.

Religious liberty as a constitutional principle arose in a world where many people believed that their duties to God were more primary than their duties to the state; that the state had to make room for its citizens to conduct a higher business than the business of citizenship. Thus the achievement of a secular political order was in service to the religious imperative. Constitutionally, the Establishment Clause was to serve the Free Exercise Clause, and from this perspective social-structural secularization was not meant to further the secularization of consciousness, but to inhibit it.

Or, to put it more sociologically, social-structural “soft secularization” was meant to accomplish in part religious ends. The secular end was democracy as against theocracy, as well as the unfettered progress of science. Religion was to have an instrumental role in disciplining individual behavior and making a free society and a democratic, federal republic a viable collective reality.

This is emphatically not the case in some other countries where separation of church and state—in our terms, social-structural secularization—has been instituted in order to further the secularization of consciousness. The prototype for this hard secularism was the French Revolution in its Jacobin phase, but

perhaps the most radical instance was the former USSR and the remaining Communist countries today. The Marxist-Leninist ideology was based on the conviction that science was superior to religion from an epistemological perspective and that the progress of science would inevitably lead to the elimination of religious consciousness. The ensuing secularization at the social and political levels was designed to assault and eradicate religion using the state apparatus, often in the most brutal ways, in order to bring about a thorough and consistently hard secular society.

Contemporary France and Turkey also separate religion and state in order to advance a secular ideology of republicanism or *laïcité*. The interesting ancillary feature in such polities is that they have developed a highly centralized, statist trajectory particularly in the social and educational realms. The state demands loyalty in terms of consciousness. Its goal is a standardized and homogeneous, relatively hard secularist society. In contrast, in the U.S. and India, the polity encourages pluralism among the people. So America is much less secularized at the level of consciousness, as well as in the worldview and the moral sensibilities of the majority of its citizens, than is France.

Any social configuration has its benefits and costs. The main virtue of this constellation is undoubtedly the peaceful co-existence of diverse religious and non-religious individuals and groups. This regime has avoided both religious wars and theocracy.

What then are the costs or problems associated with U.S. secularism as we enter the 21st century? The most obvious political problem in recent years is that the public sphere has become a battlefield for those who do not accept the status quo of soft secularism, notably the hard secularists and the radical religious movements and theocrats. One cost is that the majority that accepts the traditional American constellation of soft secularism lacks morale and adequate tools, both intellectual and organizational, with which to defend and revitalize this constellation.

A major public policy issue is that hard and soft secularism compete particularly in the arena of jurisprudence. In the mid-20th century, strict separation made the running and succeeded in removing the daily prayer and Bible reading from the public schools, and set greater distance between religious practices and governmental settings than had previously been the case in American history. The conservative political reaction after 1970 limited the trend towards achieving a purer standard of social-structural secularization.

Numerous court decisions since 1990 have reversed the locomotive of hard secularization of the public square, or at least complicated the course of this mode of secularization. The use of public monies to provide tuition vouchers at

private, predominantly religious schools; the failure of legal challenges to arrest the progress of faith-based initiatives—federal funding for religious social service providers; or the symbolic retention of the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance and the public display of the Ten Commandments under certain circumstances, all illustrate the willingness of the present secular order to allow an institutional intimacy with the sacred order.

Popular sovereignty and the decisions of the Supreme Court reflect the recently enhanced religiosity of the American people and so the limits of American hard secularism. From the point of view of the hard secular population these legal decisions are setbacks.

An additional challenge to secular institutions in the public square is that in the minds of most of the American public and electorate the perceived social ills, dilemmas and challenges to family life and values brought by modernity, science, and a free market economy have paradoxically convinced them to desire a greater accommodation between church and state and a broader role for religion in society such as faith-based initiatives. The trend appears towards a “procedural secularism,” whereby religions converse in public discussions over sensitive issues of value and the state authority takes on the job of legal mediator or broker to balance and manage real differences.

In other nations, in countries as different as France, Israel, India, and Iran, the tension between religion and secularism is more pronounced than it is in the United States, where secularism and religion regularly use and redefine each other. They lack a tradition whereby religion, as in the United States, frequently sanctifies the goals of a basically secular society, and the secular society affects and influences the very meaning of religious identification and association. It is therefore not surprising that America can appear to be growing more secular precisely at a time when religious identification is highly pronounced.

Moreover, faced with a myriad of religious options, Americans are aware that not all religion is narrowness and fanaticism. The answer to the conundrum of how there can be a secular state for a religious people lies in the typology formulated in *Figure 1*. This can be seen throughout American history.

Two historical facts stand out. First, America was the first post-feudal Western society and therefore a nation that had not experienced the conflict between ecclesiastical and temporal power. Second, the U.S. was also the first Protestant nation—*ab initio* a Protestant society—where the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches and their hierarchies never held sway. Paradoxically, because of the deeply religious nature of a significant proportion of the American public, pure pragmatism suggests that they require a secularist state and public life. Firmly held but divergent religious beliefs and ties need a neutral playing

field. Today, as much as in 1790, if there is to be an American nation and republic there cannot be a national church or religion.

An International Perspective

Since secularism and secularization developed differently in America from Europe, and of course Asia, some cross-cultural variation must be expected in how terms are interpreted. In the U.S. secularism means opposition to an established religion and religious hegemony in the political or public arena. Yet even where constitutionally there are still established churches, as in Britain (chapter 10) and Denmark (chapter 12), the secularism that has emerged clearly rejects their total authority over society and its collective institutions.

Opening up a new field like the study of secularism, which lacks common language or tools of analysis, is a learning process. This volume provides an opportunity to explore Inglehart and Wenzel's recent thesis⁶ that national values and cultures have a direct impact on political institutions and so on the emergence of democracy or pluralism. Since secular values are closely associated with this process and, as can be observed, differ across cultures, it can be expected that variant forms of secularism will emerge.

The validity of the claim that secular values are part of the heritage of freedom, tolerance and democracy is amply illustrated in the negative by the essay in this volume on the Islamic Republic of Iran. This contemporary example of a "fundamentalist" theocratic state demonstrates the importance of the achievement of the American and French revolutions, whereby political autonomy was affirmed in relation to the authority of any religious standard imposed from above. These revolutions forced religion's exit from government and led to the invention of political sovereignty, giving rise to a set of standards governing collective life that was dictated by the people.

Secularism in this regard can thus be thought of as a political project in a broad sense that deploys the concept of the secular. The cases of India and the U.S. demonstrate that this can occur regardless of the distribution of religious beliefs among the citizenry—the actual level of secularity exhibited by the public. This non-linear relationship also operates in reverse so that a high degree of secularization and levels of secularity among the public can occur alongside a low degree of secularism (i.e. an established state religion as for example in Denmark [chapter 10] and Israel [chapter 12]). However, church-state separation is only one aspect of secularism.

Though it is difficult, and perhaps unwise, to define secularism in one sentence, there appears to be a consensus among the authors in this volume about the common characteristics and principles of the phenomenon they

investigate. The commonality of the secularism they unravel involves legal recognition of individual liberty and autonomy, freedom of thought and religion, peaceful coexistence of social groups, aspiration for consensus in much of the public space, respect for the social contract, and a general acceptance that religious laws should not take precedence over civil ones.

This model or definition of secularism suggests that not only is there a theoretical boundary with theocracy at the edge of soft secularism but also one at the edge of hard secularism. The latter excludes states that construct monist conceptions of political institutions via dogmatic, totalitarian ideologies such as Marxist-Leninism. Such communist regimes demand that both individuals and social institutions (both rows in *Figure 1*) subscribe to an anti-religious viewpoint and propound atheism. Such policies of state-enforced secularization reflect a rejection of the values that many would maintain are part of the essence of secularism.

Society and culture in every continent are constantly evolving, yet alongside new issues, old questions return. The fact is that even the United States is not a finished product because American society and the Constitution are both works in progress that continue to evolve. This truism applies in every nation. Thus, the understanding of the role of secular values and the process of secularization needs continually to be re-defined. The task of ISSSC and its prime motivation in publishing this collection of essays is to study secularism in all its forms in the 21st century, not as the mirror image of religion but as an intellectual and social force in its own right. This volume's ultimate goal is to insure that secularism *per se* does not go unstudied and under-researched in academia.

ENDNOTES

1. Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* Trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).
2. Cox, Harvey. *The Secular City* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1965).
3. Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).
4. Neibuhr, Reinhold. *Pious and Secular America* (New York: Scribners, 1958).
5. Herberg, Will. *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (New York: Doubleday, 1955).
6. Inglehart, Ronald and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).