

# 2

## Comparable Interpretations of Secularization

My theses contradict popular views. Orthodoxy has it that secularization dissolved religion, that religion is nothing to be perfected, and that authenticity is an idea that developed only in the nineteenth century, and hence is not a universally valid value.

Yet as James Crimmins pointed out, besides the orthodox concept of secularization that finds an “essential antagonism” between the secular and the religious, the Reformation developed a concept of the religious in which “religion responds to the changing conditions of life and thought and remains an integral and vital part of social and intellectual activity.” The secular “becomes religious rather than the religious becoming secular,” “entailing ‘a baptism of the secular’” (Crimmins 1990:2f; he also provides here a useful survey on the historically first uses of the term *secular*). Those theologians who, as David Martin remarked, have “capitalized on certain congruencies between Christianity and secularity to welcome secularization as simply an unfolding of the essence of religion” (1978:1) follow this interpretation. Along these lines, already Hegel had claimed Christianity to be “the manifestation of religion as human reason” and of “secular freedom” (2001:353). More cautiously, some German scholars claim today that secularization “is not to be grasped simply as a farewell to the religious

but at least as much as a process of its reinterpretation and transformation” (Vietta and Uerlings 2008:10), but Gianni Vattimo follows Hegel declaring that secularization “is the very essence of Christianity” (1999:50), and so do I, though using arguments different from those of the hermeneutic philosopher Vattimo (cp. Chap. 8). Also, Richard Rorty’s pragmatist interpretation of religion as “romantic polytheism,” which I’ll discuss in the *Epilog*, allows for a Hegelian understanding of secularization.

The most important and unorthodox author on secularization is Charles Taylor. He approves the idea that secularization has left us with the universally valid norm to be unconditionally authentic. Against Alan Bloom’s (1987) critique of the ideal of self-fulfillment, he argues “that there is a powerful moral ideal at work here, however debased and travestied its expression might be,” namely “that of being true to oneself, in a specifically modern understanding of that term” (2003:15; cp. Steinvorth 2016, Chap. 13). He claims

(1) that authenticity is a valid ideal; (2) that you can argue in reason about ideals and about the conformity of practices to these ideals; and (3) that these arguments can make a difference. The first belief flies in the face of the major thrust of criticism of the culture of authenticity, the second involves rejecting subjectivism, and the third is incompatible with those accounts of modernity that see us as imprisoned in modern culture by the “system,” whether this is defined as capitalism, industrial society, or bureaucracy. (2003:23)

I agree with all of these claims and will support them by my arguments. I also agree that “authenticity points us towards a more self-responsible form of life. It allows us to live (potentially) a fuller and more differentiated life, because more fully appropriated as our own” (2003:74), and again agree with the inference from this defense: that it requires

a work of retrieval, that we identify and articulate the higher ideal behind the more or less debased practices, and then criticize these practices from the stand point of their own motivating ideal. In other words, instead of dismissing this culture altogether, or just endorsing it as it is, we ought to

attempt to raise its practice by making more palpable to its participants what the ethic they subscribe to really involves. (72)

Taylor's books on secularization are treasure chests. And yet I think it's possible not only to extend his far-reaching researches and reflections but also to add to them by a short book that sums up and condenses some of his views but also sets different accents. My differences begin when he articulates "three malaises about modernity," which we can identify with secularized societies:

The first fear is about what we might call a loss of meaning, the fading of moral horizons. The second concerns the eclipse of ends, in face of rampant instrumental reason. And the third is about a loss of freedom. (2003:10)

I agree there are these three malaises, but differ from their diagnosis. It's not "moral" but metaphysical horizons that fade, I claim, nor is authenticity an "ethical" but a metaphysical "aspiration" (2003:55). While Taylor focuses on how authenticity relates individuals to one another (though his remarks on post-romantic art in 2003, pt. VIII show, he is aware that in authenticity we relate not only to other people), I focus on how in authenticity individuals relate to themselves and to something absolute. While Taylor criticizes the use of instrumental reason when we should first ask for the end we are to serve, he does not try to analyze the rationality we resort to when determining ends, as I'll attempt to. He also presumes, as I do, that we have the freedom to improve what we worry about, because we are necessitated by neither fate nor nature, but he does not argue how free will is compatible with modern science, the most important element of secularization, as I'll do.

Such differences, I think, show a difference in interest: Taylor aims at an understanding of secularization that takes account of as many phenomena relevant for secularization as possible; I aim at reconstructing secularization from conditions shared by all humans and resulting in values that are universally and unconditionally valid. Yet by my interest in reconstruction I do not contradict Taylor but hopefully complement him.

Another important support for my approach is Charles Larmore. Larmore gave only an outline of secularization in his exploration of the “relation between moral philosophy and modernity” (1996:1). He proposed a most instructive answer to what secularization is that I quote at length to a state where I agree with what he has clarified and where I propose something new:

God is so great he does not have to exist. Thus might we describe the essence of the process of secularization that has so profoundly shaped modern society. The repudiation of idols, the respect for God’s transcendence, is what has led to relieving God from the task of being the ultimate explanation for the order of nature and the course of history. To explain something in terms of divine action or Providence always amounts to placing God among the finite causes we have already found or can imagine discovering. Once we have resolved to let God be God, we can no longer use God for our cognitive ends. A similar unburdening of God seems appropriate in the domain of morality. When the validity of a moral demand is understood in terms of being God’s command, the motive of the moral life becomes the desire to please God, as though we could help him or should fear him... We respect God as God when we learn to value the moral life for itself without appeal to God’s purposes (though we may still believe that God loves what is good and right). (1996:41)

Larmore implies that in secularization, religion ceded the functions of explaining nature and justifying morality to science and religion-independent morality. But religion is left with a task no other sphere can fulfill, to provide “meaning for our lives”:

religion can no longer fulfill certain functions... We can no longer expect religion to provide ultimate explanations of nature or ultimate justifications of morality... But such an outcome does not exclude the possibility that we may still find in God an irreplaceable source of meaning for our lives... If we follow Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as I propose to do, and identify the idea of “religion,” in a restricted sense, with the use of God for cosmological and moral purposes, distinguishing it from faith, then we can say that modern society is beyond religion. (1996:43f)

The loss of former functions was a purification from adulterating elements. Secularization, Larmore implies, is the perfection of religion, or faith, as he calls it. It changes not only institutions and practices, but ideas of God or the absolute, which we ought to follow to find meaning in life. I elaborate on what Larmore has proposed only as a sketch, focusing on the rationality by which people have “resolved to let God be God” and on what we are to understand by “God” at all.

Such a focus was chalked out by Max Weber when he sought to explain the peculiarities of the “Occident,” the particular rationality by which, Weber conjectured, it differs from other civilizations. Yet Weber’s approach was connected to a kind of understanding that he distinguished from explanation in natural science, the “interpretive understanding,” as Kalberg (2002:xlvi) calls it. Moreover, as will become apparent in Chap. 14, Weber, certainly to his own surprise, found parallels between his ideas of rationalization and Hegel’s. What Hegel says by the words I use as a motto to this book is close to how Weber conceived of the rationalization of religion. The approach to historical processes that Weber and Hegel share, though, is not exactly popular among current sociologists. They prefer explanations modeled on science, dissecting phenomena of religion and secularization along the methodology of physics. David Martin represents this trend. In his book with the ambitious title *A General Theory of Secularization*, he states:

My aim is ambitious but limited. I want to suggest under what conditions religious institutions, like churches and sects, become less powerful and how it comes about that religious beliefs are less easily accepted. By stating my aim in this particular way I have to sidestep a great many complicated issues about the nature of ‘religion’ and about the important difference between religious beliefs and religious institutions... By ‘religious’ I mean an acceptance of a level of reality beyond the observable world known to science, to which are ascribed meanings and purposes completing and transcending those of the purely human realm. I do not intend entering the infinite regress of further definitions by words like ‘transcendence’. (1978:12)

By his definition, Martin does sidestep complicated issues, but leaves them unexplained. His definition of *religious* may be sufficient

for some periods of some civilizations, but cannot take account of religions that do not recognize the levels of reality that Martin presupposes. For this reason, current theorists of religions agree with their predecessors (such as Tyler and Frazer, Marx, Durkheim, Freud and Max Weber and William James and Eliade) that religion is best defined by referring not to a “reality beyond,” but to the idea of something sacred (Pals 2015:341; Pargament 1997:31). The difference between this and Martin’s definition is that the idea of something sacred does not imply the idea of something transcendent. His self-limitation leads Martin to end up with “patterns”—the American, British, South American, Russian, Calvinist, Lutheran Pattern—of “crucial historical events” such as the Reformation, the English Civil War, the American, the French and the Russian Revolutions, in which we are to find what secularization is (1978:4–10). The resulting theory may have “an appropriate and honourable place in the economy of science” (1978:13), but not as a general theory of secularization.

In any case, as Grace Davie (2007, especially 57) has argued with particular intensity, the traditional thesis that secularization is the death of religion has become untenable. Significantly, before Martin, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), rather than dissecting religion, understood religion by its goal of providing individuals and societies with meaning (cp. Berger 1967; Luckmann 1967). Yet though Berger understands religion as aiming at meaning, he did not go on to understanding secularization as the process of increasing awareness of this aim. Rather, like most sociologists, he understands secularization as definable by the historical facts of the shrinking importance of traditional religions. Three decades later, he criticized this approach as “false. The world today, with some exceptions... is as furiously religious as ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely libeled as ‘secularization theory’ is essentially mistaken. In my early work I contributed to this literature” (1999:2f).

In fact, Berger implied already in 1966 or 1967 that the world today is as furiously religious as ever because it is struggling for meaning as furiously as ever. So rather than making a “volte-face” (Davie 2007:64) in his intellectual development, he spelt out his approach to religion.

Sociology is hampered by an empirical methodology to answer questions about secularization that Davie did ask, questions whether “secularization would necessarily accompany modernization whenever and wherever the latter occurred,” and whether Europe and its secularization can become “the case against which all other cases” of modernization must be “measured” (Davie 2007:2). If we conceive modernization as a Weberian rationalization, the answer is that everywhere secularization is part of. I’ll discuss this issue in Chap. 18.

In contrast to the prevailing trend in sociology, theology did not dissect religion. Rather, in the twentieth century, theology became the home of reconceiving religion in a way taken up by Taylor, Larmore and this book. Yet there are also “postmodern” trends that I’d like to pillory.

Perhaps most representative of them is Nicholas Lash (1996). I agree with him on important points. He ascribes to all religions a common inherent goal: “the common twofold purpose of weaning us from our idolatry and purifying our desire” (x, cp. 19); he distinguishes between religious progress and regress, measuring them by their approximation to their inherent goal; he understands modernity as determined by and determining the rationalization of religion (11ff, 20f); and he rejects the idea “that the business of religion is with the private heart rather than the public world” (254). Yet not only does he understand the goal of religion to be moral (255) rather than metaphysical, but also prides himself of lacking a conceptual tool to distinguish religion as a sphere of its own from morality and politics. He declares the dissolution of the boundaries of religion as progress and a mark of postmodernity:

the view that ‘religion’ is the name of one particular district which we may inhabit if we feel so inclined, a region of diminishing plausibility and significance, a territory quite distinct from those we know as ‘politics’ and ‘art’, as ‘science’ and ‘law’ and ‘economics’; *this* view of things, peculiar to modern Western culture, had a beginning, in the seventeenth century, and (if ‘*post-modern*’ means anything at all) is now coming to an end. (ix)

I wonder how Lash can seriously claim that there is no difference in the inherent goals of science and law, or of art and the economy, or of religion and, to take a sphere he does not mention, sport. He seems

to be afraid that by assigning a specific sphere to religion, it will be “a region of diminishing plausibility and significance.” Can theologians be closer to denying their own origin? True, secularized religion recognizes no longer as specifically religious the activities and attitudes that traditional religions consider religious, such as prayer, meditation or the suppression of sexual desire. Rather, secularized religion finds religiosity in all activities if they are performed in the right spirit. But secularized religiosity does not imply that religiosity is not a sphere of its own with its specific intrinsic goal, rationality, and perfection. It is a sphere of its own, as I’ll argue; its goal is still the same as ever, to find the right relation to what the believer considers the absolute.

Philosophers will understand Lash’s complaint that “When economists and social theorists, political scientists and experts in international relations gather to discuss... they usually do not invite theologians to take part in the conversation” (253). But why should they if theologians do not differ from those they expect to invite them? Lash’s trip into postmodern ideas is the more irritating as in defining religion by the “twofold purpose of weaning us from our idolatry and purifying our desire,” he provides himself the conceptual tool to assign religion a territory that is not likely to lose plausibility and significance. What may prevent him from using it is that he does not see that this purpose is not *moral*. Morality is to show how not to harm people but to help them. Religion is to show by which actions and attitudes we find meaning in life.

\*

To argue for my three theses, I have to clarify the ideas that I’m using: rationalization, action spheres that can be rationalized, their intrinsic goals, the absolute and authenticity. Intrinsic goals will be the subject of Chap. 3, from which I’ll go on to clarify the other concepts. Thus, I hope to contour my understanding of secularization in Part 1. T3, though, presents a special challenge. It requires arguing for a metaphysical norm without violating the principles of secularization. These principles demand agreement with modern science. Yet science, orthodoxy holds, is incompatible with metaphysical norms. Challenging this orthodoxy, I develop a naturalistic non-reductive proof that the norm



to be unconditionally authentic is universally valid.<sup>1</sup> Because of T3 and the argument for it, this book is an essay in normative non-Aristotelian metaphysics.

In Part 2, I'll answer some of the many questions that my sketch will provoke. This way of presenting the subject of secularization allows me to elaborate on some issues of my sketch and to point to some of the consequences that my claims on secularization have for understanding and responding to phenomena of present societies. I hope it will be entertaining enough not to stop reading this book too early.

## References

- Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy. Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, New York: Doubleday 1967.
- , “The desecularization of the world: a global overview”, in P. Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999.
- Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, New York: Anchor 1966.
- Bloom, Allan. *The Closing of the American Mind*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1987.
- Crimmins, James E. “Introduction”, in J.E. Crimmins, ed., *Religion, Secularization and Political Thought. Thomas Hobbes to J.S. Mill*, New York: Routledge 1990, 1–16.
- Davie, Grace. *The Sociology of Religion*, London: Sage 2007.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *The Philosophy of History*, transl. J. Sibree, London: Bohn 1861, reprint Kitchener: Batoche Books 2001.
- Kalberg, Stephen. “Introduction to *The Protestant Ethic*”, in Weber 2002, xi–lxxvi.
- Larmore, Charles. *The Morals of Modernity*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1996.
- Lash, Nicholas. *The Beginning and the End of ‘Religion’*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1996.

---

<sup>1</sup>One of the few authors who challenge the incompatibility is Motzkin (2002), claiming that “Changing conceptions of science at the beginning of the twentieth century” contributed “to the development of a process of desecularization” (165). But the desecularization he describes is limited to academic circles.

- Luckmann, Thomas. *The Invisible Religion*, New York: Macmillan 1967.
- Martin, David. *A General Theory of Secularization*, Oxford: Blackwell 1978.
- Motzkin, Gabriel. "Science, Secularization, and Desecularization at the Turn of the Twentieth Century", *Science in Context* 15 (1), Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 165–175, 2002.
- Pals, Daniel. *Nine Theories of Religion*, New York: Oxford UP 2015.
- Pargament, Kenneth. *The Psychology of Religion and Coping. Theory, Research, Practice*. New York: Guilford Pr. 1997.
- Steinvorth, Ulrich. *Pride and Authenticity*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2016.
- Taylor, Charles. *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1991), Cambridge/MA: Harvard UP 2003.
- Vattimo, Gianni. *Belief* (1996), Cambridge: Polity 1999.
- Vietta, Silvio and Herbert Uerlings, "Einleitung", in S. Vietta, H. Uerlings, eds, *Ästhetik, Religion und Säkularisierung I*, München: Fink, 2008.

Secularization

An Essay in Normative Metaphysics

Steinvorth, U.

2017, VI, 223 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-63870-6