

SECULARIZATION

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1940s - 1960s

Originally birthed during the Enlightenment era in Western Europe, secularization theory was developed to explain the shift in society away from mass identification with traditional beliefs rooted in religious values towards a non-religious belief system. The theory identifies the shift to a non-religious belief system as being influential enough to minimize the importance of religion in society and government.

Early contributors to secularization theory such as Sigmund Freud believed that as society progressed, there would be widespread declines in religiosity. Freud viewed religion as a necessity for early civilizations, as humans sought father-like figures and needed motivation to restrain from violent urges. Religion thus created communities around common beliefs and values with which individuals could identify. Additionally, a God who offered penance was an intriguing tool to absolve guilt associated with sinning.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud explores the battle between individual freedoms and society, as the push for conformity alienated individualistic expressions. This liminal space is where religion and individuals clash as religious systems enforce conformity. Freud also expressed the idea that believing in one God created a type of power dynamic, wherein people are beholden to their God. This sense of duty in response to their obligation to God worsens the psychotic state of the religious individual. By defying God in any manner, these individuals become frightened about the idea of eternal damnation. While they do not become psychotic in the typical manner we think of today, these religious individuals were on the verge of a worsened condition where their mental state is contingent upon their worship of God. This imbalance could potentially lead to widespread separation from religion, otherwise known as secularization as religious individuals want to break free from the anxieties of displeasing God.

Given that *Civilization and Its Discontents* was published in 1930, Freud had astonishing insight into what the next two decades would look like for the progression of secularization theory.

Some scholars describe secularization theory as an individual phenomenon that has effects for religion overall. Others, however, focus on the decrease in religious power over established institutions such as the judicial system. By the 1940s, the judicial system in the United States began regarding the shift of the “secular individualist” in which the divisiveness of religion

was highlighted from the newly secularized sects of society (Gedicks, 1995). Eventually, these judicial debates led to the acceptance of secularization theory in jurisprudence and increases in Supreme Court cases on topics of religion can be seen.

In the 1960s, secularization theory was prominent amongst sociological circles (Grace, 2013). It was also during this time that secularization theory became debated and discourse surrounding the theory began to circulate. The phenomena of secularization was questioned, and sociologists began to wonder “is secularization an index of the relative weakness of traditionally religious beliefs, values and institutions, or does secularization vary independently of religion?” (Fenn, 1969). For some theorists, “deviations from belief from these [orthodox religious] norms” as an indicator of secularization were weak at best, given that these norms can be problematic (Fenn, 1969).

In the pursuit of analyzing and measuring secularization, some scholars at the time believed it was crucial to ascertain the meaning of secularization from the view of the actor or the religious individual (Fenn, 1969). The methodology of studying secularization in this case is also up for debate, as values could hold different weight for various religious and secular individuals. This approach required assessing the potential for “mundane values” to have “the greatest salience” for a religious individual (Fenn, 1969). At the same time, traditionally religious values could be of importance “for the actor with a secular orientation” (Fenn, 1969).

However, for theorists such as Max Weber, secularization doesn’t happen in a vacuum. Instead, secularization is seen as a process that occurs in response to disenchantment with the world. Popularizing the term disenchantment, Weber used the concept to highlight the effects of Enlightenment era thinking and the power of scientific advancement in eroding the prevalence of religion. During this disenchantment process, a new set of “values and orders” is established and the secular person has set the conditions of their freedom from religion (Fenn, 1969).

For some, the process of disenchantment is difficult to bear as the individual begins to have a sort of existential crisis. This crisis is similar to the process of disenchantment for the actor as the progression of their existentialism leads to further dilemmas. For example, as one author put it, this is akin to having the knowledge that medicine can save lives, but questioning whose life is worth saving (Fenn, 1969).

According to Weber, in response to the process of disenchantment and existentialism, people can respond in two ways. Either by seeking a valuable goal worthy of a lifetime of devotion (religious) or by becoming secular and removing religion as the motivator for how to live. These two methods have different interpretations amongst the literature and scholars, but are nevertheless noteworthy (Fenn, 1969). In the end, however, one scholar interprets Weber’s thoughts on secularization to mean that even if secularization occurs, “life remains essentially religious” (Fenn, 1969). At the same time, the secular individual can completely remove themselves from religion by connecting with nature and “his fellowman without the benefit of the gods” (Fenn, 1969). Additionally, the secular individual can remove religion in themselves by becoming action-oriented in their decision making. Ultimately, this means they do not base

any actions on a religious foundation (Fenn, 1969).

This confusing back and forth on the interpretation of secularization theory calls attention to the unstableness of the theory in general. It produces circular arguments that can lead theorists, sociologists, and theologians to spiral without actually coming to a general consensus on what secularization theory means.

In reviewing Weber's view on secularization theory, some questions are still left unanswered. For example, can we separate the orientation of either being religious or secular from individual behavior given that for Western society, many values and morals are rooted in religion? (For more information see *Invisible Religion*). Additionally, what occurs when societies experience secularization on a grand scale. For theorists of the 1960's, these effects and the "social conditions" that create the stage for social secularization would require further study (Fenn, 1969).

A graduate of the Harvard Divinity school, Mark Chaves believes that "secularization is best understood not as the decline of religion, but as the declining scope of religious authority" (Chaves, 1994). By the 1980s, it seemed like religion was just as prominent despite predictions made in the 60s about the declining role of religion. As Chaves puts it, "religion's stubborn refusal to disappear has prompted major reevaluation of inherited models of secularization" (Chaves, 1994). Taking a critical look at secularization theory in this manner was important to scholars like Chaves, as others had effectively claimed the theory to be false (Chaves, 1994).

According to Chaves there are often two schools of thought surrounding secularization. First, Weberian which "sees secularization in social change that renders these religious meanings less and less" and second, Durkheim who saw religion as a "set of collective representations providing moral unity to society" (Chaves, 1994). Needless to say, how we understand religion has effects for how we understand the role it plays in secularization.

For Chaves, there is a need to differentiate "religion's influence and the mere existence of religious beliefs and sentiments" (Chaves, 1994). This is of importance because we cannot claim that the modern era is without influence from beliefs rooted in religion (For more information see *Invisible Religion*). In response to this, Chaves makes a claim to replace religion as an institution as the basis for secularization theory to religious authority (Chaves, 1994). Although this may not seem as radical as Chaves explained it to be in his writing, his call to action had the potential to undermine how secularization theory was studied.

In his attempts to dissect Weberian thinking on secularization theory, Chaves defines religious authority to mean a social structure "that attempts to enforce its order...by controlling the access of individuals to some desired goods" (Chaves, 1994). The ability of religious authority to enact this control comes from "some supernatural component" that the individual has made legitimate (Chaves, 1994). Goods in this sense means freedom from sickness, poverty, sin, etc.

As made apparent in Chaves', Webers', and Fried's discussions on secularization theory, most expressions of secularization are based on Western or American religious traditions. Because of this, there is difficulty in both studying and observing secularization on an individual and societal scale if researchers define God as the one and only Christian God. Meanwhile in other cultures, god can be defined differently or have the existence of multiple gods in one religion. These limitations of secularization theory make sense however given that the theory grew out of Western Europe, and as such it is difficult to apply the theory to other contexts. For example, in some Islamic countries secularization has not increased over time, directly going against the theory (Grace, 2013).

While secularization may occur in society or among the individual, it does not necessarily indicate a loss of faith. Those who leave the faith may not identify themselves as a part of that specific religion, but they still identify as believers. This means that they do not claim themselves as atheists. In this case, it is critical that atheism and secularization are not used interchangeably or in the same vein.

Secularization can happen at the individual level or en masse as experienced by countries in Western Europe. Whether a small number of individuals will have a huge effect on society in this manner is still up for debate. However, research from the Pew Research Center indicates that about 3 in 10 adults are religiously unaffiliated (Smith, 2021). These unaffiliated individuals may describe themselves as "atheists, agnostics, or nothing in particular" (Smith, 2021). Meanwhile, about 63% of the population has identified as Christian, which has dropped from 75% in 2010 (Smith, 2021). There has also been a decreasing number of Americans who believe that religion is very important in their lives (Smith, 2021). The group with the highest number of self-identified followers, who actively attend worship services and believe their religion is a major part of their lives, are Protestants (Smith, 2021).

For some researchers, analyzing the effects of secularization by looking at data on religious identification is not indicative of social secularization. However, we can assume that these individuals can come to play a role in the power of religious authority in society. After all, what's a King without his people?

We can also assume that declines in identification with religion will have lasting effects on the religious philanthropic sector as these individuals may become less inclined to create non-profits with religious roots/missions, offer funding to these groups, or encourage donors to not spread their wealth to these organizations.

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