

What is “Secularism”?

What is fascinating about our times is the dominant cultural narrative is set *against* religion. By that we mean that our modern secular society depends upon acknowledging that previous cultures were established upon religion and we are not. In other words, we as a society are moving away from something, that something being a religious foundation.

Every civilization in history until recent times has been rooted in a religion or mythology. As Charles Taylor, author of *A Secular Age*, writes,

“If we go back a few centuries in our civilization, we see that God was present in the above sense in a whole host of social practices – not just the political – and at all levels of society: for instance, when the functioning mode of local government was the parish, and the parish was still primarily a community of prayer; or when guilds maintained a ritual life that was more than pro forma; or when the only modes in which the society in all its components could display itself were religious feasts, like, for instance, the Corpus Christi procession. In those societies, you couldn’t engage in any kind of public activity without ‘encountering God’ in the above sense. But the situation is totally different today.

And if you go back even farther in human history, you come to archaic societies in which the whole set of distinctions we make between the religious, political, economic, social, etc., aspects of our society ceases to make sense. In these earlier societies, religion was ‘everywhere’, was interwoven with everything else, and in no sense constituted a separate ‘sphere’ of its own.”

In the West, we’ve been undergoing a transition away from our religious roots for several hundred years and appear to be exponentially accelerating it. The reasons are manifold.

That acceleration probably explains the large divergence in views on the state of our culture. On one hand, some are fretting that the culture is rapidly decaying, they seem to feel like aliens in a strange land. For others, things are getting better with technological advancements and greater social freedom, they're happier than pigs in mud. For the former they feel the culture is against them, while the latter feels that the culture is moving rapidly in their favor. You can guess which group is more likely to be religious.

Going back to the history of religions in societies, exercising one's religious beliefs encompasses every facet of one's life: how one raises a family, what one will or will not do for work, how money is spent, what is acceptable recreation, formal worship, language used, etc. That understanding is reflected even in the U.S. Constitution's 1st Amendment which doesn't grant the right of "freedom of religion", but rather the "free exercise of religion".

But the 1st Amendment is also a clear move to a more secular society by prohibiting "the making of any law respecting an establishment of religion". But what exactly is secularity or secularism?

Interestingly, Charles Taylor identifies three types of secularism, the 1st Amendment being an example of only one. Here's what he has to say about the first form of secularism, which the Constitution enabled:

"One understanding of secularity then is in terms of public spaces. These have been allegedly emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality. Or taken from another side, as we function within various spheres of activity – economic, political, cultural, educational, professional, recreational – the norms and principles we follow, the deliberations we engage in, generally don't refer us to God or to any religious beliefs; the considerations we act on are internal to the

'rationality' of each sphere – maximum gain within the economy, the greatest benefit to the greatest number in the political area, and so on. ...

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...this emptying of religion from autonomous social spheres is, of course, compatible with the vast majority of people still believing in God, and practicing their religion vigorously."

Taylor identifies the second meaning of secularism as the following:

"...secularity consists in the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church. In this sense, the countries of western Europe have mainly become secular – even those who retain the vestigial public references to God in public space. "

It is the third form of secularism that he argues defines our age. Taylor writes:

"Now I believe that an examination of this age as secular is worth taking up in a third sense, closely related to the second, and not without connection to the first. This would focus on the conditions of belief. The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace. In this meaning, as against sense 2, at least many milieus in the United States are secularized, and I would argue that the United States as a whole is...

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... Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives. And this will also likely mean that at least in certain milieus, it may be hard to sustain one's faith. There will be people who feel bound to give it up, even though they

mourn its loss. This has been a recognizable experience in our societies, at least since the mid-nineteenth century. There will be many others to whom faith never even seems an eligible possibility. There are certainly millions today of whom this is true.

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.”

In other words, whereas civilizations in the past, including much of colonial America, viewed human activity first through the lens of a commonly held set of religious beliefs, we no longer do so today. Today, beliefs still matter, but they are not defined by a religion and are dependent upon the individual constructing beliefs to make sense of the mysteries around us, mysteries that our greatly expanded knowledge in science still can't answer. Simply put, religious beliefs inherently include something greater than the individual, something supernatural, that naively or not makes sense of the world for an individual. Meaning in the past was found outside of the human individual.

Taylor argues that that is the fundamental change in the third sense of secularism:

“...we have moved from a world in which the place of fullness was understood as unproblematically outside of or ‘beyond’ human life, to a conflicted age in which this construal is challenged by others which place it (in a wide range of different ways) ‘within’ human life.

When considering the culture promoted by the institutions of education, news, entertainment, business, politics, etc., it would certainly seem that Taylor is on to something with his views of the third type of secularism, one in which we each find meaning within ourselves and our own pursuits, rather than seeing our lives as fitting within a greater transcendent

narrative. Oddly, we are at once confident in our proclamations that truth is relative to the individual, but insecure about proclaiming and holding to our own personal "truth".

What it means for our culture and human happiness will be seen.