



Introduction: Secularization and Intellectual Honesty

“In this day and age, to be religious is to be intellectually dishonest.” It was with this declaration that one of the best-known, most internationally renowned German philosophers began his opening statement at a panel discussion on religion a few years ago, for which I had been selected as his co-debater. A poor basis for mutual understanding, I thought to myself, since it is surely one of the elementary preconditions for civilized dialogue that we refrain from immediately impugning our opposite number’s honesty. But it was nothing personal. It is just that many people nowadays regard religious faith as so clearly outdated—its cognitive claims refuted by the sciences, the reality of its experiential dimension explained by psychology and neuroscience, and its social functions clearly understood—that they are unable to grasp how rational individuals can possibly be prepared to sacrifice their intellects in this way. There must, they presume, be interests at play, a lack of intellectual honesty, psychological problems, or simply a lack of intellectual consistency.

The philosopher who said this claimed that his stance, so sharply critical of religion, at least meant taking the claims of faith seriously. This, he suggested, was better than simply talking of religious worldviews in the same breath as rationally grounded secular ones and calling for dialogue between their exponents. Nothing positive, he asserted, could come from a stance based on intellectual dishonesty. This stance must be exposed, its representatives confronted with vigorous argument. We mustn’t make things too easy for these obscurantists.

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No wonder then that our discussion became heated—so heated that the moderator virtually had to duck as the verbal volleys flew back and forth. The event continued way past its allotted time. Surprisingly, however, my sense that the audience thought our debate a disgrace and the panel discussion a failure proved to be quite wrong. I have rarely heard such prolonged applause. The very fact that we pulled no punches captivated the audience. Among both believers and nonbelievers, the intellectual justifiability of religious faith in today's world is a hotter topic than it has been for decades.

Why is this? We might mention many reasons for the rapid increase in public interest in the topic of religion—from the motives of Islamist terrorists through the issue of Turkish membership of the EU to the debate over whether religion is a significant obstacle to the integration of certain immigrant groups. All of this has been discussed so often that I shall refrain from repeating it here.¹ Of course, the parameters of these discussions are prone to constant and sudden shifts. The unanticipated mass rebellions in Tunisia, Egypt, and other Arab countries have been food for thought for all those who, until recently, declared Islam to be an obstacle to democracy. On a deeper level, regardless of these basically political issues, two apparent certainties that have undergirded arguments about religion since the eighteenth century have emerged as untenable. To paraphrase the opening statement about faith and intellectual honesty, those who ignore these shifts exclude themselves from serious contemporary debate and are merely fighting old battles.

The apparent certainty that long underpinned believers' views, the one they must now abandon, is that human beings are anthropologically primed for religion, and that if this need goes unfulfilled, whether as a result of coercion, human hubris, or shallow consumerism, moral decay is bound to ensue. As yet, the moral decline repeatedly predicted both by serious theologians and straightforward apologists for religion—since without God everything is presumed permissible—has certainly not occurred even in the most secularized of societies. The empirical connections between religiosity and morality seem to be less simple than some would like to assume.

If believers must now give up a supposed certainty, this also applies to those nonbelievers and critics of religion who see religion as past its historical sell-by date. In the eighteenth century, there emerged the idea,

which would previously have been considered outrageous, that Christianity was merely a temporary phenomenon and might yet vanish from the earth. The French Revolution included the greatest state-promoted attack on Christianity in Europe since antiquity. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the notion that Christianity and religion in general would disappear without much resistance, even without the efforts of militant atheists, became so widespread among intellectuals that many felt no need to go to great pains to justify it. Modernization seemed to lead automatically to secularization—not just in the sense of the relative independence of the public sphere from specific religious precepts, but in that of a complete loss of religion. At times, even believers thought this idea plausible. This inevitably made them feel like members of an endangered species and led to the idea that the best way they could serve their faith was by resisting modernization in all its forms.

But this assumption, which may be described in shorthand as “secularization theory,” or, better, “the secularization thesis,” is wrong. To put it more cautiously, most experts now consider it wrong, whereas most of them long considered it correct. The hegemony within the debate has now shifted towards those who believe that there is no automatic connection between modernization and secularization, and who are looking for alternative models to depict religious change. Overcoming the thesis of secularization does not, of course, mean ignoring secularization, but rather seeing it in all its diversity. Precisely because the pseudo-explanation that modernization as such suppresses religion has bitten the dust, we must turn our attention to those cases in which religion has come under pressure or simply run out of steam.

The crucial shift of perspective here is not so much the result of new scholarly insights as of a change in the world itself. More than ever before, economic and scientific-technological modernization has penetrated societies and cultures outside of Europe and North America, in many of which Christianity is not the dominant religious tradition. But in these places the European connection between modernization and secularization is not generally being repeated. Suddenly, it is no longer the United States but secularized Europe that requires explanation as a “special case.”

For demographic reasons alone, our world is becoming increasingly religious. Even the remaining advocates of the secularization thesis admit as

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much. The critics of colonialism were wrong in their expectation that Christianity would be viewed as a foreign implant with no future in former colonies following the end of colonial rule. In Africa, in particular, Christianity and Islam are currently undergoing enormous expansion. In South Korea, rapid modernization and advancing Christianization have coincided.

This can, of course, be evaluated in very different ways. But that is exactly the point. A historical tendency derived from the facts can no longer be used as an argument against religious faith. Both the sense of nonbelievers being at the cutting edge of progress and, conversely, the holier-than-thou self-certainty of being a morally better human being simply by virtue of being a believer have been lost.

The departure of these two mirror-image certainties is no bad thing. Believers and nonbelievers will find it easier to have a dialogue without these assumptions in the background. This may arouse interest in what the representatives of the other party are actually trying to express—through their faith or in their criticisms of a particular religion or of all religions. Curiosity about the other and a willingness to learn can thus become part of the dialogue on religion. The detritus left over from the struggles of the nineteenth century can finally be cleared away.

In political terms, this means that believers and nonbelievers will have to live with and accept one another into the future. The re-evangelization of Europe to which Pope John Paul II aspired will not bring back a unified Christian culture with political backing, no matter how spectacularly successful. Conversely, even if the proportion of believers continues to fall, even in Europe, they will remain a significant part of the population that cannot simply be ascribed to a single party or political camp. Under these circumstances, the democratic state must adopt a productive stance towards this diversity, as should all political actors. The state, Charles Taylor asserts, “can be neither Christian nor Muslim nor Jewish; but by the same token it should also be neither Marxist, nor Kantian, nor Utilitarian.”² All beliefs may be aired in public debate; none should be viewed from the outset as superior to any other, and that includes a “reason” sharply distinguished from faith.

If we want intellectual honesty in debates on religion and secularization, then it seems to me that mutual recognition of this diversity is the key imperative.

And this has brought us to the book's ultimate destination. The first two chapters take a closer look at whether modernization necessarily leads to secularization, and whether secularization inevitably produces moral decline. The third chapter outlines an explanation of actual processes of secularization as an alternative to the so-called theory of secularization. This outline should already clarify how unsatisfactory the terms "modernity" and "modernization" are in attempting to understand the present-day religious situation. Often these terms are merely fighting words that smuggle in normative content—such as secularization—in order to then assert that what one is fighting against is past its historical expiry date. Religious movements that currently exist, and may even be gaining strength, can then be labeled mere leftovers of times past, if not a dangerous relapse that risks the progress achieved.

It is important to ask where this intellectual schema itself comes from and how it is bound up, not just with secularist, but also with specifically religious presuppositions. In chapter 4, I develop the beginnings of an answer, and show how a specific understanding of Protestantism (and not Protestant Christianity as such) developed out of a view of the Reformation and its effects as *progress*, an intellectual structure that had major consequences for ideas about modernization.

There is only one way out of the often unnoticed constraints inherent in the vocabulary of "modernization," namely, an alternative description of the processes of social change based on a greater awareness of their contingency. To this end, chapters 5 and 6, but particularly the former, seek to bring out the variable relationship between the different dimensions of modernization, which are supposedly closely linked with one another. Further, in these two chapters I discuss the possible and observable consequences of the proliferation of action options for the orientation of individuals, including in the field of religion. The proliferation of options is, of course, often considered one of the causes of secularization.

These two chapters demonstrate that, beyond the immediate concerns of this book, I envisage certain fundamental revisions of social scientific theories of social change. But this book is clearly not the right place to elaborate these revisions.³ I believe these chapters are nonetheless vital at this point, since this is the only way to avoid squeezing signs of religious revitalization, or perhaps just an increased public attention to religion,

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into the schema of a “return”—of religion, of gods, of the sacred—or falsely asserting that an epochal change has occurred, as implied in the phrase “post-secular society.”

Chapters 7 and 8 then turn to two issues with which we are inevitably faced in the present-day public discussion of religion: the opportunities and problems associated with interreligious communication and the supposed or real violence-inducing role of religious beliefs. Chapters 9 and 10 then examine the future of Christianity (not of *all* religions). This is done initially in a sociological vein, in other words, with respect to predictable developmental trends, and then in the sense of the identification, not bound to a particular academic discipline, of the intellectual challenges with which any Christianity that aims to be on a par with contemporary intellectual schools finds itself confronted. The process of coming to terms with Troeltsch’s work, which I have been doing for years, I hope creatively, has exercised a major influence not only on this chapter but also on the assessment of “atheistic ethics” and the “cultural significance of Protestantism” in other chapters.

Is this book a religious apologia? In my opinion the description is unjustified, although it is likely that dogmatic secularists will claim precisely that. As the chapters of this book show, I would never defend religion as such, because there is no such thing as religion as such. No uniform value judgment is possible about the diverse range of phenomena covered by the term. There are only specific religions, and even these can scarcely be understood as timeless entities; they are alive in the various historically situated convictions and actions of individual believers and religious communities. Only from the perspective of secularism or in the case of a “completely amorphous yearning for religion”³⁴ that shies away from every concrete instance of faith does religion appear as something about which an undifferentiated judgment might be possible. But neither do I intend an apologia for any particular form of Christianity, or to reject criticisms of religion in any sweeping way. My intention is better described as an attempt to help open up a space for dialogue in which both specific religious and specific secularist assumptions can not only be articulated and related to one another but also questioned. After all, there are also such things as apologias for secularism; secularists sometimes misunderstand

themselves, and on this basis, secularist presuppositions often pose as an unprejudiced attitude or as a purely rational justification. Only by opening up a new space for dialogue in this way can we provide individuals with the freedom to decide in favor of the secular option or the option of faith—of a particular faith.