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Unpacking Secularization

Almost half a century ago, the theologian Harvey Cox made the important distinction between secularization and secularism:

Secularization implies a historical process, almost certainly irreversible . . . [whereas] secularism . . . is the name for an ideology, a new closed world-view which functions very much like a new religion. (Cox, 1965: 20)

The irreversibility of secularization envisioned by Cox, and other scholars of that period, was somewhat premature, as religious persistence and vitality proved in the following decades. However, theorizing secularization in terms of a secularizing social process rather than in terms of an ideology of secular liberalism (Cady, 2005) provides for a better understanding of the multidimensionality and the inherent contradictions of the process. Most important, it may enable one to comprehend how seemingly religious societies can be secularizing or how religion remains significant in seemingly secularizing societies. As discussed in the following chapters, Israel provides a fascinating example of secularization in a state in which religion maintains a significant formal role over public and private life and a society in which secularism (measured in a liberal worldview and commitment) remains rather weak. Some of the developments in Israel, however, have parallels elsewhere, if at different paces and intensities. This chapter sets the theoretical framework for the rest of the book by unpacking the concept of secularization, the forces and motivations behind it, and the way it unfolds.

Studies of secularization have tended to focus on ideological–liberal struggles for freedom and on changes of formal political arrangements that institutionalize religious authority. Secularization for this work is first

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and foremost a decline of religious authority (Chaves, 1994) measured in an institutional change that may or may not be registered in formal political processes. The replacement of religious authority by political and economic institutions – the modern state and the capitalist economy – involved struggles that led to institutional arrangements in which labor and authority were divided between religious and secular organizations. But the stability of these institutions was often temporary as – following social, political, and economic changes – new struggles and challenges emerged. Globalization, neoliberalism, and consumer culture are especially important, as they create not only new and stronger motivations to challenge existing and limiting institutions, but also new opportunities for "secular entrepreneurs" to promote change. This secularization, the result of external, economic, and nonprincipled societal transformations, is loosely related to core liberal values, a coherent secular identity, and liberal political commitments, but nevertheless amounts to a significant challenge to religious authority.

The decline of religious authority is neither complete nor linear. Rather, religions across the world maintain hold over significant aspects of private and public life, and religious organizations continue to struggle, often successfully, over political power. Secularization, however, often based on the changes described above advances not necessarily through social–political struggle, underpinned by a coherent ideology, and not necessarily through formal political changes. Yet, this secularization can undermine both religious authority and the institutional arrangements that secure it.

Five arguments developed in this chapter set the theoretical framework for the rest of this book. First, in contrast to a uniform and coherent secularism, secularization unfolds in inconsistent sets of beliefs, practices, and values. Second, secularization is driven not only by an ideology, but often also through "practices of everyday life" when people engage in leisure activities and consumption habits that violate religious codes but, at the same time, often refuse to define themselves as secular. Third, globalization and the expanding consumer culture challenge existing religion–state arrangements and encourage secular entrepreneurs and individuals to contest religious-imposed limitations. Fourth, although secularization is a political process that involves an institutional change, it is not necessarily a "political project" that involves coherent goals and a coordinated strategy. Rather, it is made of different initiatives and choices of entrepreneurs and individuals with different goals, strategies, and commitments. Finally, fifth, as a result of contemporary developments, this secularization often

takes place outside formal politics and, therefore, might be overlooked by observers who underestimate its significance.

Secularization: from Inevitable to Debatable

The death of religion was envisioned by many Western intellectuals and by the founding figures of sociology who predicted a world in which religion will lose its hold over public and private lives. C. Wright Mills succinctly summarized the expectations: "Once the world was filled with the sacred – in thought, practice and institutional form. After the reformation and the Renaissance, the forces of modernization swept across the globe and secularization, a corollary historical process, loosened the dominance of the sacred. In due course, the sacred shall disappear altogether except, possibly, in the private realm" (Mills, 1959: 32; quoted in Hadden, 1987). Secularization, derived from the Latin *saeculum*, meaning an era and later "the world," came to be associated, following Max Weber, with the process of the rationalization of action coupled with modern-world rationality (Swatos and Christiano, 1999). In some accounts, known as "secularization theory," secularization was almost the inevitable outcome of modernization that would necessarily lead to the decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals (Berger, 1996).

Embedded in the broader theoretical framework of modernization theory, secularization theory proposed that as industrialization, urbanization, rationalization, and religious pluralism increased, religiosity would decline, both in society and in the minds of individuals (Berger, 1996; Hadden, 1987; McClay, 2001). Dynamics of rationalization, a process in which social spheres operate according to their own standards, undermines transcendentally anchored worldviews and institutions (Lechner, 1991). Alongside the Weberian rationalist argument a related explanation, originating from the work of Emile Durkheim, attributed secularization to a process of functional differentiation (Norris and Inglehart, 2004: 9). Functional differentiation of modern industrialized societies entails the evolution of professionals and organizations that perform tasks previously provided by churches. Stripped of their core social purposes, Durkheim predicted, religious institutions will gradually waste away in industrial societies, left with only specific, and often not binding, responsibility for performing the formal rites of births, marriages, and deaths, and the observance of special holidays (Norris and Inglehart, 2004: 9).

Bereft of its privileged, dominant position, religion is to become only one institution among others (Dobbelaere, 1981) as many of its traditional responsibilities are carried out by "professionals" or state bureaucrats. Bureaucratized states that assume power exercise rational-legal authority, no longer rest on religious legitimacy, separate civil and ecclesiastical spheres, and control resources previously managed by churches. The political community's boundaries are also not necessarily based on religious exclusiveness as inclusion on the basis of citizenship has transformed the meaning of membership. Finally, whereas in the past religious institutions and elites maintained clear standards of transcendent belief relevant to all spheres of cultural activity, in modern life science, art and morality no longer require any religious grounding (Lechner, 1991: 1104). Overall, the disengagement of religion from the public sphere, political life, and aesthetic life and its retreat to a private world would limit its authority to its followers (Bell, 1980).

Secularization theory came under attack from scholars who found its claims and predictions unsubstantiated. Religion was hard to ignore or to be dismissed as a private matter as, since the 1970s, new and old religious movements were growing across the world and religion emerged (or reemerged) as a vital force in world politics. The Moral Majority in the United States, the Iranian revolution, or Pentecostalism in South America were a few of the indications that religion continued to play an important role in public and private lives and in politics. In the so-called third world, religious resurgence was explained by the failure of modern secular ideologies and of the new regimes associated with these ideologies (Jurgensmeyer, 1995), but the salience of religion was not confined to one part of the world. Religion, religious identity, and religious behavior manifested themselves in different places not only in relation to the supernatural but also through national and ethnic identities providing a sense of "primordial continuity" (Demerath, 2000; Mitchell, 2006). Consequently, religious politics and tensions remained potent and became one of the characteristics of the post-Cold War era (Jurgensmeyer, 1995). Furthermore, in some cases religious institutions maintained their significance as "vicarious religion" when active minorities performed religious rituals, embodied moral codes, and offered a religious space for a larger number of citizens (Davie, 2007) who continued to identify with religion and to seek religious services in significant or critical periods of their lives. Most important, politically, since the 1980s scholars have been witnessing the de-privatization of religions that refused to accept a marginal and privatized role and often became a significant political force (Casanova, 1994: 5).

The strongest criticism of secularization theory was leveled by research findings that indicated the significant role religion continued to hold over individual lives, leading scholars to argue that secularization never happened, or at most was confined to Western Europe. The supply-side or religious economics model defines secularization as a decline in aggregate levels of religious demand, yet to be found. In the United States, the strongest evidence against secularization theory was found in the numbers of Americans who report they believe in God, church attendance, and prayer, so that "no evidence to support a decisive shift either towards or away from religion" was found (Hadden, 1987). These findings, it was argued, not only undermine secularization theory – because the United States was indisputably modern but not secular – but also explain the stable demand for religion. In the United States, according to the economic model, separation of church and state led to pluralism, competition, specialization, recruitment efficiency, and higher demand, not to secularization. The secularization of Europe, the real anomaly, was explained by the lack of a free market, or the existence of monopolies, that limited choices and participation (Iannaccone, 1995). Moreover, even in the secular Europe, where church membership was low, more than two-thirds of people described themselves as "a religious person" (Stark and Finke, 2000: 33; see also Berger, 1996; Keddie, 2003; Wallis and Bruce, 1989). The fact that religion remained a potent social force therefore underscored the suggestions that secularization as a concept be abandoned altogether and dropped from all theoretical discourse (Stark, 1996, Stark and Iannacone, 1994: 231). Even Peter Berger, one of the leading scholars of secularization theory, admitted in 1999 that the assumption that we live in a secular world is false and that counter-secularization is at least as important a phenomenon in the current world as secularization (Berger, 1999: 6).

Defenders of secularization theory relied not only on other empirical evidence that indicated the erosion of religion in individual lives and in political influence (Voas and Crocket, 2005; Kosmin and Keysar, 2009) but also on theoretical premises that argued that critics of the theory failed to grasp its essential value. Secularization theory, they argued, does not predict a demise of individual religiosity but a decline of religious authority (Chaves, 1994). Consequently, the persistence of individual religiosity in itself does not rule out secularization when the latter is measured in the functional significance of religion. Secularization and religiosity, therefore, are not mutually exclusive. Rather, first, secularization and secularity are always relative to some definition of religion or the religious (Swatos and Christiano, 1999). Second, religious ideas and

practices can be present even when they are "neither theologically pure nor socially insulated" (Ammerman, 2007: 6) and are held and practiced in different ways and with varying levels of commitment. Third, similarly, secularization can be present even when individuals remain believers or continue to practice religion in specific ways.

Complex and nuanced frameworks have been developed that treat secularization as a multidimensional process and distinguish different levels of analysis (Gorski and Altmordu, 2008): *macro-level processes of differentiation* (sometimes described as *laicization*) in which religion loses its primary overarching status over other institutional spheres such as politics and the economy and the latter are "emancipated" from religious institutions and norms (Casanova, 2006; Dobbelaere, 1999); *meso-level processes* (internal secularization) in which religious organizations adapt to the secular world and a "religious market" emerges in which religions compete for the souls of people; and *micro, individual-level* changes in beliefs, identities, affiliations, and practices, often with internal inconsistencies or even contradictions (Beckford, 2002; Dobbelaere, 1999; Norris and Inglehart, 2004; Swatos and Christiano, 1999). On the micro, individual level, the deregulation of the religious realm, combined with a cultural emphasis on freedom and choice, leads to intermingled and interfused forms of religion or a "bricolage" of beliefs, practices, and values. Studies in Europe demonstrate that, on one hand, a reduction in church attendance does not necessarily lead to the adoption of secular alternatives and, on the other hand, most people who perceive themselves as religious do not feel any obligation to attend church on Sunday (Davie, 1994). "Believing without belonging" and an individual patchwork of beliefs or a "religion à la carte" are all examples of the religious bricolage that defines contemporary Western societies that enables both individual and religious institutions to borrow, pick, choose, and imitate (Beckford, 2007; Dobbelaere, 1999; Lambert, 1999).

The disaggregation of the concept of secularization opens up the possibility of a more nuanced and empirical study of both the declining role of religion in society vis-à-vis other systems (political and economic) and the role of religion in individual lives (measured by beliefs, practices, and values). Moreover it allows, coming to a full circle, an understanding of the complexities of modernization as a multifaceted process, of plural and multiple modernities (Eisenstadt, 2000) with varying relations to religion and religiosity. Modernization, in other words, can influence, generate, and contain both secularization and religious revival. The complexity of contemporary religious–secular relations is a reminder that modernity

does not necessarily bring about secularization, but can bring pluralism (Berger, Davie, and Fokas, 2008: 12). This pluralism, intensified by globalization, creates a religious market that, on one hand, can strengthen individual religiosity but, on the other hand, can undermine the authority of traditional religious institutions. We may, as several scholars suggested, be entering a post-secular age in which religious and secular worldviews and ways of life coexist (Gorski and Alinordu, 2008) alongside struggles for power and influence. In this age, more than before, "religious" and "secular" are not zero-sum realities (Ammerman, 2007: 9), so religion can continue to play a role in society regardless of its formal standing (Davie, 2007) and vice versa.

What then, is being secularized? Secularization, as Mark Chaves suggests, is most productively conceived as a "decline in religious authority" and the decrease in the influence of religious values, leaders, and institutions over individual behavior, social institutions, and public discourse (Chaves, 1994). The influence of these processes on individual indicators of religiosity – belief or practices – remains an open question, but secularization need not imply that most individuals relinquish all their interest in religion (Chaves, 1994; Lechner, 1991). Religion, according to this argument, may still have a hold on private beliefs and practices, but secularization will unfold in societal changes that involve a decline of religious authority over significant spheres of life. It is hard to imagine that societal change could occur without individual change or that it would not affect individual change, and vice versa. These changes, however, in spite of their interrelatedness, may occur at different paces and depths and be driven by different forces, as discussed later. Secularization, by this definition, is neither universal, linear, nor deterministic. Rather, the multiple trajectories of religious and secular with their particular histories and politics can be conceived as an institutional change that pertains to political authority.

Secularization, Religion, and Politics: a Neoinstitutional Framework

Scholars of political science had tended to neglect the study of religion until it assumed new prominence in the late 1970s, but even then they tended to focus on specific events or groups that drew attention by their actions (Wald, Silverman, and Fridy, 2005). As a social phenomenon that extends beyond individual belief and private spiritual preferences, religion is always political to some degree and, accordingly, requires a general theory of its political roles and its politicization (ibid.). Religious institutions

in search of power can become "political," politicians in search of support can turn to religion, and religious and political institutions can compete as both claim to give authoritative answers to important questions in "oughts" and terms of commands (Haynes, 1998; Heclo, 2001). In *Politics and Religion*, Steve Bruce includes in "politics" the nature and actions of states and governments, political parties, actions of groups intended to influence governments, and the basic liberties states are supposed to protect (Bruce, 2003: 9). In these debates, church (or any other religious organization) and state may stand in a mutual supportive relationship to one another or religious and political authorities can assume opposed or independent roles (Jelen and Wilcox, 2002: 7).

Explanations for the decline and resurgence of religion in politics tend to rely on ideational factors (Gill and Keshavarzian, 1999) and focus on the formal aspects of politics and decision-making processes where states create rules and enforce them. This focus may be limited, as identifying politics, religious or other, solely with the state and its institutions might overlook negotiations, interactions, and resistances that occur elsewhere (Migdal, 2001: 15). Understanding of the dynamics of politics and political change must widen the scope of and locus of politics so political activity is not only what is openly declared and visible and observed in direct engagements between rulers and elites (Singerman, 1995:14). Changes in religion's role in and authority over public life are the result not only of direct initiatives registered as "political" but also of incremental changes of practices, nonideological choices, and of initiatives outside the "formal" political sphere. Neoinstitutional theory provides a convenient framework for understanding the complex dynamics of religion and politics and the different realms of secularization. The theory

> bridges the gap between the macro-level (structural) and micro-levels (individual behavior and beliefs) of social life by examining how institutions and their myths create social roles, the authority adhering to these roles, and the scripted behavior and knowledge of individuals who enact them. (McMullen, 1994: 711)

Institutions, in this framework, refer to the systems of values, norms, and practices that exist in every society and influence preferences, choices, and actions of groups and individuals, acting as a "set of cultural rules that give generalized meaning to social activity and regulate it in a patterned way" (Meyer, Boli, and Thomas, 1987: 36). Institutions include not only formal government and overarching state structures but also the normative social order that (together with formal institutions) provide the context in which individuals and groups interact with authorities, make

choices and strategies, and wage political struggles. Institutionalization, then, is a set of processes that make authority and rules seem natural and taken for granted and eliminate alternative interpretations and regulations (ibid.). The scope of control exercised by religious authority (Chaves, 1994), therefore, can be described in institutional terms that pertain to "formal rules, compliance procedures and standard operating practices" (Hall, 1986: 19). Similarly, secularization, a challenge that undermines religious authority, can be understood as an institutional change.

Institutions are explained as the result either of a deliberate choice of rational agents interested in efficient and stable rules of the game or as an unintended outcome of the interaction between agents, interests, ideas, and existing institutions. Established at particular moments in history, in response to particular needs, demands, and compromises, institutions tend to persist (Ikenberry 1988: 31) so that they provide a context in which most "normal politics is conducted" (Hall, 1986). Institutions are associated with stability, order, and "path dependency" that structure actions and reactions of agents. But, because institutions emerge at different times and out of different historical configurations they may not "fit together into a coherent, self-reinforcing, let alone functional, whole" (Thelen, 1999). These internal contradictions allow for institutional change when opportunities for those disadvantaged by existing institutional arrangements are opened. Alterations in domestic and international environments may undermine stability (Krasner, 1984: 224) by shaking institutions' material and ideational foundations. These alterations signal to involved parties that the rules of the game have become less binding and encourage them to change their preferences, goals, and strategies. A careful analysis is required not only of ideas that drive the change, but also of the "larger social, economic and political context in which these ideas are situated" (Peters, Pierre, and King, 2005). Change can be the result either of moments when institutions lose their grip and rapid change occurs in what has been described as "punctuated equilibrium" (Krasner, 1984) or from incremental change and shifts of context that are less dramatic but no less significant in outcomes.

The role of religion in social and political life is institutionalized through processes of struggles, negotiations, and political compromises that establish religious authority and define its scope. These political compromises are often endowed with specific formal institutional designs that define the division of authority between the religious and the political but also translate into informal rules that define norms and structure

choices and behavior of individuals. These institutions, like others, can
be challenged when their material and ideational foundations are shaken.
Foundations differ from one state to another and, consequently, differ
in their resilience to external changes and internal pressures. In addition,
secularization within states unfolds differently along ethnic and other
identities in which religion performs different roles. Incremental changes
of beliefs, values, and practices may gradually lead to institutional change.
Significant institutional changes can occur outside formal political pro-
cesses and institutions so a gap is formed between the formal rules and
everyday behavior. Thus, historical processes and conditions have insti-
tutionalized rules and norms, religious or secular, which differ from place
to place. Changes – economic, cultural, and demographic – create new
incentives and opportunities for groups and individuals to challenge the
status quo, as the Israeli case studied here demonstrates.

Political Arrangements: Religion and the State

The *cuius regio, eius religio* (as the ruler, so the religion) principle has
turned into a tenet of religious tolerance and state neutrality toward pri-
vatized religion (Casanova, 1994: 22). The secularization of the modern
state advanced as states freed themselves from dependency and obliga-
tions toward religious authorities. Not only did the modern state take
over many of the functions of religious institutions and limited the role
of religion in public life, but it also found new sources of legitimacy inde-
pendent from religious institutions. This secular state, in Poggi's words,
"disclaims any responsibility for fostering the spiritual wellbeing of its
subjects/citizens or the welfare of religious bodies, and treats as irrelevant
for its own purposes the religious beliefs and the ecclesiastical stand-
ing of individuals" (Poggi, 1990: 20). Politically, secularization could
be observed in several transformations in the basic relationship between
politics and religion. *Constitutionally*, the official character of the state
is no longer defined in religious terms. In *policy terms*, the state ceases to
regulate society on the basis of religious criteria and expands its policy
domains to areas previously controlled by religious institutions. *Institu-
tionally*, religious institutions lose their political significance as pressure
groups, parties, and movements. In *agenda settings*, needs and problems
cease to have an overt religious content. Finally, *ideologically*, values and
belief systems used to evaluate the political ream are no longer couched
in religious terms (Moyser, 1991: 14–15).