

Conclusion: Do We Still Need the Concept of Secularization?

This book was born with a specific aim: to bring back into the spotlight a concept which, whilst it played a crucial role in the philosophical discourse of modernity, is now at the centre of a pressing and convergent theoretical contestation. More precisely, its aim was to track its recent developments, which – this is my book’s main claim – have been so remarkable as to make legitimate, if not mandatory, the reference to Thomas Kuhn’s notion of a paradigm shift.

Once the change has been processed, some interesting details can be fleshed out. The investigator’s attention is drawn, for example, to the fact that the word ‘secularization’ presupposes a concept of process. In other words, uses of the word that are not just vague or allusive involve the picture of a historical transition from one specific condition to another specific condition of opposite sign: in a nutshell, from religion to non-religion. In fact, this shift has appeared to most people as both macroscopic and elusive. It is this incongruity that has muddled and thwarted the discussion about a social phenomenon that, as strange as it may sound, is both stratified and immediately recognizable.

On the other hand, ever since the term appeared in the main European languages, the concept of ‘secularization’ has not only been tracking experience, but has seemed to be perpetually lagging behind it. Indeed, the oft-told story of the birth and spread of the word describes a repeated extemporaneous, albeit not arbitrary, migration from one semantic domain to another.¹

It all began in the sixteenth-century when the term emerged spontaneously from the bosom of the Christian canonical tradition to designate the coming and going of goods and persons between the sacred and profane realms of life. This symbolic dynamism is made possible in a post-axial religion such as Christianity by a two-dimensional conception of time, on which the bifurcation between the economy of salvation and the economy of individual survival is more generally based. The Church itself, after all, is an institution that straddles these distinct yet intertwined planes of reality. Its primary function, in fact, is to oversee the traffic between the city of God and the earthly city, modulating the variable amount of self-love and love of God between which human action oscillates as a consequence of original sin.

1 For the relevant bibliographical references see the Introduction (note 15).

After the Thirty Years War and the cultural cataclysm caused, among other things, by theological disagreements about the interpretation of the right balancing point between rejection of the 'century' and dedication to it, the concept of secularization reappears in a new guise. Its occasional use in a difficult diplomatic negotiation, as people were forced to come to terms with the confiscation of a conspicuous amount of ecclesiastical property in the new European religious and geopolitical order, gives an idea of the extent of the change taking place in the relationship between political and religious authority. With a brilliant move of analogical thinking, 'secularizing', making secular, becomes in that context a synonym of 'nationalizing', putting under state control. With hindsight, one remarkable aspect of the affair is that, thanks to the use of a canonical term, a historical process that could have given rise to an irreligious reading of events was instead at least partly brought back into the realm of a Christian worldview. Along the way, the question of the secularity of the state or, more generally, of the functional differentiation of the political sphere from the religious realm, has taken on its typically modern form.

Finally, a further significant semantic migration occurred in the eighteenth-century. This one was driven by a series of deep social changes and an understandable wave of distrust towards the religious enthusiasm that had proliferated during the Wars of Religion. Back then, the European intelligentsia developed a growing need to give a name to the first symptoms of the crisis of Christianity in Europe. The polemical comparison with the Middle Age played a crucial role here. However, such development was not only a corollary of the *querelle des anciens et des modernes*. For the disillusionment went hand in hand with the persuasion that the various creeds and cults are nothing more than different local instantiations of a universal anthropological phenomenon that goes under the name of 'religion'. It was Hume, in particular, that launched the project of a critique of religion based on a naturalistic reinterpretation of the human tendency to endorse onerous beliefs even when they fail to meet our standards for compelling reasoning.²

Even apart from (most) Enlightenment thinkers' impatience with Christianity and, what is more, the widespread popular resentment against its institutional embodiments, there were many in the Age of Reason who interpreted the meaning of the historical transformation underway in terms of a growing and irreversible mundanization of human mentality and sociality. The decline of Christianity in Europe, rather than as a local and/or temporary phenomenon, was thus increasingly seen as a necessary and irreversible cultural

2 On this aspect of the issue, cf. the useful remarks by Joas, Hans, in *The Power of the Sacred*, ch. 1.

development, which concerned humanity as a whole and indicated an end-goal towards which it was not only reasonable, but inevitable to move. On this basis, the idea of secularization as a Christian '*détour*', the new model of statehood and self-sufficient secular government, and the intuition of spiritual progress within an exclusively immanent horizon merged together in a philosophically fruitful synthesis of the heterogeneous.

The latest migration of the concept is taking place before our eyes today. The theory and practice of 'secularization' or, more precisely, 'secularity', have now definitively emerged from their European or Euro-Atlantic shells and are being forced to measure themselves against a global cultural context encompassing historical trajectories that are in some cases very different from the one that made them possible in the West. Faced with this challenge, the semantic axis of the term gives the impression of being on the verge of collapsing, as though there were a terminal phase for concepts too, in which even the most enlightening categories end their natural evolution by rapidly losing energy and elasticity.

For what of the world around us can be explained only by means of the concept of secularization? Is there something about political Islam, the economic boom of the Asian tigers, Japanese eccentricity, Indian creative chaos, or the African enigma that can be better understood on account of the religious/secular dyad? More generally, does the future of humanity gain or lose clarity depending on whether we refine or set aside such an insidious noun of process?

Doubts about the soundness and residual fruitfulness of the concept are justified. It is not clear, however, whether, they depend on the overambitious use made of it in the past rather than on its intrinsic weakness. If pessimists were right, a few years' moratorium on the scientific use of the term would probably be the most logical choice in the absence of a better lexical alternative, which is not on the horizon, yet.

Conversely, perhaps a prudent, frugal and circumstantial use of the concept might suffice. What is essential is that the resonance with personal and collective experience is not detrimental to the constellation of meanings within which such a resonance can only bear fruit if it does not abuse the deceptive veneer of obviousness that always comes from an excessive acquaintance with its source. This is precisely the conclusion reached by the British historian Owen Chadwick at the end of one of the most balanced analyses of the phenomenon investigated in this book. The spirit that animates it, if I am not wrong, is the same that has guided my attempt to chart – without being able to supervise it – a debate whose complexity far exceeds the synoptic capacities of

any researcher today. It makes sense, therefore, to let him have the last word, while I take my leave of those readers who have had the patience to follow my reasoning up to this point.

Umbrella terms, however doubtful, are useful. I do not think it an abuse of such a term to call this radical process, still in part so obscure to the enquirer, still in part undefined and possibly in part undefinable, by the name of secularization; on the one condition (and it is an absolute condition) that the word is used, neither as the lament of nostalgia for past years, nor as propaganda to induce history to move in one direction rather than another, but simply as a description of something that happened to European society in the last two hundred years. And what happened, and why, must still be matter for much enquiry by students of history and religion and society.³

3 Cf. Chadwick, Owen, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth-Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1975, p. 265 et seq.