

Chapter 3: Secularization

Although the earliest manifestations of the principle of disenchantment were clearly religious in character, occurring in the process by which one type of religion desacralized the worldview of another, the principle of disenchantment is not restricted to cultural interactions between religions. In fact, it is often used to account for the process through which religious worldviews are desacralized by nonreligious processes and institutions. It is in this latter usage that the principle of disenchantment relates to secularization, a major theoretic concept and general thesis that offers an explanatory account of the role and status of religion in the modern West.

The concept of secularization is in flux today, and it is not the intent of this book to enter too far into the energetic dispute about its meaning, value, descriptive adequacy, and theoretic range. There is a rather massive body of literature on this topic, with the greatest number of texts coming out of sociology but including virtually all other fields in the social sciences and humanities. So vast is the literature on secularization and so diverse (and hotly contested) are positions on the topic that a primer such as this can only offer the broadest of overviews. This being the case, this chapter will offer a brief presentation of the “standard account” of the secularization thesis and the beginning of the next chapter will review major positions on the thesis, with note of representative thinkers and their texts.

The first section of this chapter will introduce the standard account in terms of the fundamental claims and key concepts of the thesis. The remainder of the chapter will summarize the standard account of the historical process of secularization in Western culture from its roots in the Christian worldview through the modern period.

The historical summary will follow the standard account without apology, granting, of course, that this very account is being questioned and debated today. Also without apology, this primer recognizes the standard account as a necessary starting point for inquiries into religion and culture in the modern West. Whether the secularization thesis is accepted or rejected, its interpretation of history is valuable in and of itself; moreover, it is arguably one of the foundational interpretations of religion and culture in the modern West. Although this study takes quite seriously the various critiques of the thesis, it also recognizes that a solid grasp of the critiques requires familiarity with the thesis itself.

Finally, despite the necessity and value of the secularization thesis to understanding religion and culture in the modern West, it is also suggested here that, in its standard form, it perhaps serves better as a preface to inquiries into religion and culture in the contemporary (postmodern) world than as an adequate account in and of itself. In short, it is presumed here that

a basic grasp of secularization is needed for an informed understanding of religion and culture in the modern West and as a starting point for inquiries into their relationship in the contemporary world.

The Secularization Thesis:

An Overview

Before examining the process of secularization, we must first equip ourselves with a working understanding of the secularization thesis, differing positions on the thesis, and the major thinkers who have contributed to its development (both constructively and “deconstructively”). For those interested in learning more about the thesis itself, its history, and its current status, there are several helpful texts. Two of particular note are “Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept,” by William H. Swatos, Jr., and Kevin J. Christiano, and Chapters 3 and 4 of *The Sociology of Religion*, by Grace Davie. The first three chapters of Steve Bruce’s *Religion in the Modern World* also give a good sketch of the main features of the thesis, although, unlike the generally neutral treatments of secularization in the other texts cited here, Bruce’s work “is a robust defense of the body of ideas commonly designated the ‘secularization thesis.’” Perhaps the single most important thinker in the emergence, development, and (recent) reconsideration of secularization is Peter Berger, with his *The Sacred Canopy* standing as the preeminent formulation of the standard account of secularization and its historical context. In this work, Berger builds on and synthesizes the work of earlier “classical sociologists,” most notably Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber, but his exposition of the theory and process of secularization is uniquely his own.

What, then, is meant by secularization in the context of the thesis with which it is associated? As with religion, the term is often defined, debated, and disputed. In brief, secularization is the process through which religion is marginalized within a society and its institutional position eclipsed by other institutions. Obviously, as this definition suggests, secularization presumes an earlier cultural situation when religion was more prominent in society and other institutions were less significant by comparison. In the West, this was medieval European culture, often referred to as Christendom—that is, Europe, as a unified culture system grounded in the Catholic religion. Less obvious, perhaps, but equally important to the thesis, is the presumption that with the rise of secularization there are various institutions that move to the position of cultural significance previously held by religion. Among these institutions, those typically cited include government, politics, economics, and science.

Expanding on this definition, Berger explains secularization as “the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and

symbols.” Importantly, he goes on to say that it manifests itself in both the material and intellectual realms. The material impact is the more obvious, being revealed in prohibitions on religious activity in government and public education (separation of church and state), and more radically in the expropriation of religious property and prohibitions of religious practices. The intellectual impact is even more significant, for in this way, secularization influences culture as a whole, affecting the arts, philosophy, literature, economics, and human self understanding. Perhaps the most significant consequences of secularization’s modification of culture is witnessed in the rise of science as an autonomous power in the modern world, the practical application of science in the technological revolution, and the economic application of technology in the Industrial Revolution.

Secularization, then, is a process, not an institution; and it is precisely that social and cultural process that relegates traditional religious affirmations, values, and institutions to secondary status at best, and in some instances (such as communist states) little or no status at all. What secularization does is loosen the grip of religion on society and the whole of culture in a general sense, and individual consciousness in myriad specific instances. In this account, religion does not disappear from the cultural scene, but its importance to individuals and culture as a whole declines.

It must be understood that in the standard account, secularization, per se, is neutral. In itself, it is a descriptive term; and as a general thesis (or collection of variations on a general thesis), it offers an explanation for a cultural process—namely, the marginalization of religion in modern Western culture. Notably, the standard account of secularization readily grants the continuance of religion in the face of (and often in opposition to) the secularization process.

As a descriptive term and general thesis, secularization has no agenda and no stake in any particular outcome. It is not a political ideology. Secularization does not seek to destroy religion, marginalize it, or separate it from the rest of culture. Individuals and social movements may well celebrate such goals and pursue them through various means, but those individuals and social movements are not following a doctrine in any way articulated by the secularization thesis. Perhaps they might be referred to as secularists or proponents of “secularism.” In this regard, the beliefs and actions of an avowed secularist would be accounted for within the secularization thesis; then, again, however, so too would the beliefs and actions of an avowed religionist, who might be committed to strenuously resisting the process of secularization or the ideology of secularism. In itself, however, secularization is not an “ism”; it is a thesis that contains a descriptive component. One can debate the thesis (pro and con) and one can dispute its descriptive power and range; and, as we will see a bit later, there are certainly no limits to the debates and disputes spawned by the thesis.

Typically, secularization, or at least its emergence, is presented in the context of modernity, with the modern period (however it might be dated) representing a decisive break with the medieval period.⁶ In this regard, secularization offers a theoretic explanation for the diminished role of religion in modern Western culture compared to its dominant role in the Middle Ages. As will be considered a bit later in this chapter, a number of historical events and various cultural processes initiated secularization and later supported and

nourished its growth. Chief among these are the Protestant Reformation and, shortly thereafter (as Max Weber first observed), the rise of the capitalist economic system.

Although many other elements could be included in an outline of the secularization thesis, those offered here are generally consistent in the standard account. The additional elements at times engender disagreements, but they are not the major point of dispute. The major point is whether the thesis is itself adequate. For working purposes, it will be presumed here that the account is valuable to understanding the relationship of religion and culture in the modern West.

As a process, secularization offers an explanation for both the emergence of the modern worldview in the period of the Renaissance and Reformation, as well as the expansion and maintenance of that worldview from that time up to our own. It explains how institutional energies and cultural forces that awakened in the Renaissance and Reformation loosened the grip first of medieval Catholicism and later of Christianity itself (Catholic and Protestant) on the societies and minds of Western Europe. Before isolating the forces that triggered the decisive eruption of secularization in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a word must be said about its cultural context, and to do so, we must return to an earlier time, when the monotheistic impulse to desacralize and disenchant the world was interrupted by the rise of Christianity.

The Rise of Christianity and the Resacralization of the World

As noted in the previous chapter, the disenchantment of the world, so critical to the emergence of secularization, is traced to the Axial Age, and the initial expression of transcendental monotheism in the scriptures of Judaism. Also, as noted in that chapter, although ancient Judaism included the principle of disenchantment in its myths and worldview, it did not implement the principle to any historically significant extent. That was left to the later monotheisms—Christianity and Islam. Disenchantment as it transpires in the context of Islam is worthy of study; however, this book is focused on Christianity and the West, so it will have to suffice to observe that the course of the disenchantment process in Islam follows a distinctly different path from that followed by Christianity.

In fact, the disenchantment process in Christianity was not thoroughly initiated until the onset of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Further, Christianity, in all of its forms, remains the most cosmological of the three monotheisms. This is due to the foundational belief in Christianity that the ultimate power (God) is incarnated in the person of Jesus. In short, divinity takes human form, thus mitigating the element of radical transcendence that is at the heart of the disenchantment process. This belief separates Christianity from both Judaism and Islam, and positions Christianity closer to those cosmological systems in which deities incarnate.

This basic theological affinity with cosmological religions did not, however, result in Christianity's acceptance of these religions. In fact, from its earliest cultural embodiments, Christianity vehemently rejected traditional cosmological religions—especially the polytheistic religions it encountered in the Roman Empire during its rise to power. As with Judaism, in its initial form, Christianity's rejection of cosmological systems was rhetorical and mythic; although countless Christians gave their lives due to this rejection.

The rise of Christianity to a position of religious dominance in the Roman Empire is much too detailed and complex to be more than summarized here. First, it can be noted that the development of Christianity from

a small, apocalyptic Jewish sect into the official religion of the Roman Empire was incredibly rapid. Soon after the time of Jesus, Christianity began missionizing the Mediterranean world. Paul's work was vital, but the essential message of the religion had a powerfully attractive appeal to citizens of the empire. At its core were several key principles. First, the transcendental vision of a supernatural God and a supernatural concept of the human appealed to persons familiar with Hellenistic Judaism and the more mystical philosophic schools. Additionally, and in distinction to the capricious deities of GrecoRoman pantheon, this God cared for the fate of humanity and individuals, and gave instructions for living justly and righteously. Joined with this was a variation on cosmological belief; the incarnation of this God in human form and the sacrifice of this incarnation for the sake of his human followers. It was this sacrifice that would allow his followers the opportunity to dwell in paradise and, soon enough, to witness the radical transformation of the earth itself into a perfect world. This was not a pure transcendental monotheism, but rather, something of a hybrid of transcendental and cosmological beliefs. At the time of its emergence, it was one of many such hybrids in Roman culture.

In opposition to the young religion were two major forces: (1) the Roman government (and its state religion) and (2) other dynamic and attractive religions. A number of developments and innate features within the religion stand out as major factors contributing to the success of the movement in this period.

In response to challenges from the state, the religion relied on its universal appeal, fanatic support, and its growing acceptance by the upper classes. By the second century (100–200), the Roman army contained many Christians, thus making persecutions more difficult. Martyrs were excellent propaganda for the religion, as their fanatic support (even to death) helped convince others that there was something quite powerful about the faith they followed. Finally, the support of politically and economically advantaged classes tended to protect the religion and give it credence.

In response to the challenge posed by other religions and religious movements within Christianity, what became the Catholic Church began a process of institutionalization. The process resulted in official scriptures of the religion, established creeds outlining basic teachings, and a sanctioned clergy that conducted official rituals. The religion was further strengthened in its struggle with other faiths due to its universality, urban concentration, and (again) upper-class support.

By successfully overcoming both challenges, Christianity emerged as the only official religion of the Empire. In 313, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan giving Christianity legal status as a religion and in 380, the emperor Theodosius issued his famous decree, making Christianity the only legal religion in the empire (although Judaism was given a special exception).

During this period, the leaders of the Church met together on several occasions. These meetings were called General Councils, and the most notable ones were held at Nicea (325), Constantinople (381), and Chalcedon (451). These councils were convened to resolve issues and questions regarding Church teachings and organization.

The leaders of the Church during this period were dynamic, powerful, and interesting figures. They were genuine revolutionaries. They were also thinkers who had been schooled in Greek philosophy (especially the philosophy of the great idealist, Plato). Many were also outstanding speakers whose sermons would hold listeners spellbound for hours. In addition to their academic prowess and rhetorical aptitude, these men were

also excellent organizers and managers. Most were politically literate, and many had experience in government and law. In short, these were talented individuals who knew “how things worked.”

Augustine, Christendom, and Christianity's

"Retrogressive Step"

Towering above all other thinkers of the early period was a bishop and theologian from North Africa, Augustine of Hippo (354-430). Arguably, the most influential thinker in the history of Christianity, and certainly in Western Christianity, Augustine inspired the religion's beliefs about original sin, just war, predestination, and the distinction between religion and secular culture. His legacy was not limited to Catholicism, as Protestantism embraced his teachings as well. Without the theology of Augustine, Christianity and the culture it dominated would have a very different appearance today.

Among Augustine's numerous works, two are of enormous importance to the culture of the West: *Confessions* and *The City of God*. The former was an autobiography, a theology of the individual that narrated how a sophisticated Roman citizen came to embrace the new religion of Christianity. The latter offered a theology of culture that interpreted human history as the interaction between two contrasting institutions or worldviews—the Earthly City and the City of God. The Earthly City was unstable, prone to disruption, the rise and fall of nations, informed by the pursuit of material power and success, and populated by persons destined for divine punishment. The City of God, on the other hand, was nonmaterial, oblivious to the vicissitudes of the Earthly City, represented (but not manifested) by the Church, and populated by individuals seeking God above all else. As *Confessions* offered emerging Christian culture a model for individual religious life, *The City of God* presented a template for Western culture itself, one that drew a clear bright line between the religious realm and the rest of human life. That the non-religious realm was relegated to an inferior status supported religious domination of society, but it also led to unintended consequences—most notably, creation of the cultural foundation for secularization in its sharp contrast between the religious realm of culture (the City of God) and the non-religious realm (the Earthly City).

Long before the rise of secularization, however, *The City of God* offered a blueprint for a culture in which Christianity served as the source of sacred legitimation. This culture emerged in the 5th century as the social and political order of the Roman Empire began to disintegrate. By this time, Christianity had spread beyond the Mediterranean Basin and the confines of the empire, unifying Europe religiously, but not politically; and creating Christendom, a cultural system that would last for a thousand years.

With the rise of Christendom, Christianity moved, somewhat unevenly but certainly relentlessly, to eliminate the indigenous cosmological religions of Europe. This was facilitated through missionary activities and with the support of the new governing entities that replaced the old Roman Empire with a wide array of small states. Concurrent with its expansion and consolidation of cultural power, Christianity underwent a notable transformation. Berger describes it as a “retrogressive step in terms of the secularizing motifs of the Old Testament.”⁸ What he means, in terms of the concepts developed here, is that Christianity assumed cosmological features. In many instances these features were appropriated rather directly from the indigenous cosmological religions Christianity encountered and in others they were unique modifications predicated on cosmological tendencies present in Christianity itself. In fact, it could be argued that at least after its

legalization in the fourth century (if not for some time before), Christianity was essentially a cosmological religion; and only with the Reformation did it take on more traditional transcendental features.

Besides the incarnation, previously mentioned, the inventory of significant cosmological features includes the trinitarian concept of deity, the nature and function of saints, the ritual of transubstantiation, the sacralization of unique geographic locales as pilgrimage sites, the veneration of relics, and the reaffirmation of priestly administration of rituals. The liturgical year, itself essentially cosmological in character, designated holy days using those previously sacralized by cosmological religions, including Easter, Christmas, and All Saints' Day. In short, Christianity—as it came to exist as the ultimate source for the legitimation of the medieval social order—was hardly a classical transcendental religion. Arguably, it had more in common with archaic cosmological religions than the transcendental monotheism affirmed in Judaism. On the eve of the sixteenth century, it also had no serious opposition. Culturally, it was the only sacred game in town. The game was about to change, however, and so was the town.

The Eruption of Secularization

The secularization process proper is correctly traced to the Renaissance-Reformation period, perhaps more specifically, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Although the groundwork was prepared by ancient transcendental religious notions, and most directly by Augustine's theology of culture, secularization in the modern period was an entirely novel and radiant force.

To understand the modern secularization process, we might best proceed much as we did in our approach to the disenchantment process initiated by the biblical worldview. That is, by comparison of the new worldview with the resident one that it challenged and rather swiftly delegitimize. In the case of modern secularization, the worldview that it challenged and soon replaced was that of medieval Catholicism—a religion with certain salient features reminiscent of the cosmological religions of antiquity.

In surveying late-medieval Catholicism, we are at once struck by its affinities with cosmological religions. Although the triumph of the Catholic form of Christianity over the polytheism of the Roman Empire seemed at first glance to be a victory of the transcendental religious vision over the cosmological, as we have noted, the triumph was paradoxical, for with the rise of Catholicism came a host of cosmological elements, and at the very least a process of re-cosmicization. Perhaps it was no transcendental triumph at all, but only a transition from one type of cosmological system to another. However it may be conceived, the unified religious base of late-medieval European culture was shattered by the Protestant Reformation.

It was to medieval Catholicism that Luther, Calvin, and other reformers were reacting; and in effect, the Reformation replicated in Western Europe the disenchantment process of antiquity. As had been the case in that earlier time, a thoroughly mediated and unified religious worldview was challenged on the basis of a radically transcendental understanding of divinity. Berger captures the full seriousness and extent of the situation:

The Protestant believer no longer lives in a world ongoingly penetrated by sacred beings and forces. Reality is polarized between a radically transcendent divinity and a radically fallen humanity. . . . Between them lies an altogether “natural” universe. . . . The radical transcendence of God confronts a universe of radical immanence, of “closedness” to the sacred. . . . Protestantism abolished most . . .

mediations. It broke the continuity, cut the umbilical cord between heaven and earth, and thereby threw man back upon himself in a historically unprecedented manner.

This is the Protestant version of disenchantment. In principle, it is no different from the disenchantment process articulated in the scriptures of Judaism. In fact, it is a reaffirmation of that principle in the context of Christianity—a reaffirmation that had not occurred in the religion’s first millennium. What is different, however, between the Protestant version of disenchantment and the version witnessed in early Judaism, is that Protestantism quickly became a powerful political and economic force.

What Protestantism also did, especially in Luther’s modification of Augustine’s concept of the “two cities” (the City of God and the Earthly City), was grant religious sanction to the human city—and with it, secular culture. No longer was secular culture (the human city) relegated to secondary status beside the Church (which represented the City of God). Secular culture became a place in which God could be served just as fully as the Church. Calvin would take this religious validation of secular activity even further by equating the concept of divine election with material well-being and economic success.

By validating the secular world, Protestantism also devalued the world of religious meaning. In one sense this was a cunning theological tactic, for by challenging the Catholic assumption that life’s ultimate meaning could be found only through the Church, the Protestant impulse to legitimate the secular world served to delegitimize the Catholic religion. In a more profound sense, it was a colossal blunder, since the recognition of the viability of a secular society was a de facto recognition of the autonomy of secular society apart from any religious affirmation, Catholic or Protestant. To combat Catholic claims of religious ultimacy, Protestantism aligned itself with forces outside the religious sphere. In the case of Luther, the alliance was with the forces of nationalism in Germany; in the case of Calvin, it was with the forces of emerging capitalism. In both cases, the alliance was efficacious to the cause of the new religion. The alliance between Protestantism and the emerging forces of secularization, however, turned out to be a Faustian bargain, for ultimately, secularization would delegitimize all religious claims to ultimacy, which is to say, it would delegitimize religion itself. Ironically, due to the Reformation, what was previously deemed secular now assumed the role of the sacred.

The Protestant attack on Catholicism can be seen as the spark that triggered the modern secularization process, and while that attack has certain similarities with early Judaism’s challenge to cosmological worldviews, there is an important distinction. What makes the situation of the Reformation different from the ancient situation is that in the Reformation the legitimacy of a non-religious (secular) world was affirmed by religion itself. Rather than depreciated, it was now, in the view of the Protestants, the arena of God’s glory. Initially, this legitimacy was tacit and perhaps only expedient; but over time, this legitimacy increased until, by the Enlightenment, the secular world had the power to assert not only its full autonomy from religion, but also its greater legitimacy than religion. Unlike the ancient struggle, the encounter here was not between two rival religions, but rather between religion and an irreligious worldview—at least that is how the struggle has been interpreted traditionally.

Citing the Reformation as the spark of the secularization process is only the beginning of the story. The process itself extends well beyond the Reformation and, in fact, according to some, up to the present day. As they argue, between then and now the process has continued unchecked, but it has been punctuated by several significant events and driven by several historical forces.

The first event of note actually occurred before the Reformation, in 1454. In that year Johann Gensfleisch of Gutenberg perfected movable type and the printing press was born. It has been argued that Luther's "95 Theses" of 1517 would never have touched off the Reformation had it not been for the printing press. Equally arguable is the decisiveness of the press to the secularization process. What the press did was nothing short of a transformation of society. Suddenly, the amount of knowledge to which people had access was tremendously expanded. Before this invention, very few books could be produced, and, as a corollary, very few people could read and very few had the opportunity to study and learn. Before the press, few knew the events of the past—what Rome was, what history was all about. Before Gensfleisch's breakthrough, few knew geography—the location of nations and peoples, rivers and oceans. Before the press, few knew mathematics of even the simplest sort. Whatever the average person knew was probably received from the Church, and the Church as an institution was less than democratic in its educational mission and very resistant to change. Once the press came into existence, however, change was inevitable, and the Church could go along or be left behind. That it was left behind is part of the secularization process.

The next decisive event was the Thirty Years' War and the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. As a result of this war, which was fought largely on the basis of religious differences, the importance of religion was drastically reduced and its practice became largely a private rather than a public concern. For over a thousand years, the central feature of cultural life and individual existence had been the Church. Beginning with the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, and fueled by over a century of religious violence (of which the Thirty Years' War was the culmination), Christianity began to lose its hold on the minds and hearts of Western Europeans. Just as after the Peace of Westphalia, religion was not something worth killing or being killed for, so too did it cease to be a driving force in cultural life. This is another part of the secularization process.

In the wake of the Thirty Years' War and with the erosion of religion as a motivating force in cultural life, new institutions of a decidedly secular character arose. Some of the major new institutions that vied for the interest and devotion of the masses were education, politics, nationalism, and economics. In the case of each of these institutions, persons were given opportunities for self identification apart from religion. In each case, persons who once would have identified themselves in religious terms and looked to the Church to explain their role in society, could now look elsewhere for self-legitimation. As a consequence, religion was devalued in society and its sphere of cultural influence drastically contracted. Thus, while I might be a Christian, I was first what I was educated to be, perhaps a lawyer, or a scientist, an engineer, a teacher. If I were a politician or involved in political issues, I might still be a Christian, but I was first a Democrat, a Monarchist, or, later, a Socialist or a Marxist. If I were a nationalist, I might still be a Christian, but I was first a Frenchman, a Pole, an Englishman, a German, a Serb. In economic terms, I might still be a Christian, but I was first a capitalist, a merchant, a tenant, an investor, a landlord, an employee. The great change, and the turn toward secularization revealed by the development of these new institutions for self definition, is that until this time, the vast majority of Europeans did not identify themselves apart from religion and religious categories of existence. Additionally, most were uneducated agriculturalists with few, if any, material possessions and no property, usually ruled on one hand by a powerful lord and on the other by an even more powerful Church.

The Enlightenment and the First Flowering of Secularization

Beyond the crucible of the Renaissance and the Reformation, the next great era of consequence in the standard account of the secularization process was the Enlightenment. It was at this time that secularization became fully established as the secular vision forcefully asserted its dominance over society and religion. Whether the Enlightenment is over or not is a debatable point, but even if the Enlightenment is simply an historical era (i.e., the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), it is an era whose chief themes and forces continue to powerfully influence the West.

The origin of the word tells us much about the ideology of the Enlightenment: “The Enlightenment” (Aufklärung) was first used by eighteenth century thinkers to characterize their times over and against the medieval period, which, in contrast, came to be known as the Dark Ages. In its most forceful denotation, the term expressed an anti-religious stance, since the “darkness” of medievalism (against which the “light” of eighteenth century culture was contrasted) was a darkness caused by superstition and ignorance attributed to the religious domination of society. In its social and cultural vision, the Enlightenment stressed secular non-religious knowledge and, just as the social, political, and academic leaders of ancient Rome left their polytheistic religions for the new religion of Christianity during the Christian revolution of the second through fourth centuries, so the leaders of eighteenth century Europe left the Christian religion for the various movements in the orbit of secularization.

During the Enlightenment, science bloomed, the horizons of intellectual inquiry expanded, and everything was questioned and doubted until proven true according to the emerging materialist ethic of the time. New inventions and technologies proliferated, and they continued to change the world, just as the printing press had done at the beginning of the secularization process. Concurrent with the Enlightenment were three revolutions: the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution—each representing important motifs of modernization. The American Revolution, initiated in 1776, features a large-scale commitment to violence (a war) predicated on secular ideals: economic freedom, political self-determination, and nationalism. This was not a revolution predicated on religious beliefs, and in its wake came a host of societal structures typical of secularization: the institutionalization and legalization of the separation of the religious and secular realms, the beginning of state-supported pluralism, and, in the name of religious freedom, the free and open competition between religions for the allegiance of believers.

The French Revolution, sparked in 1789, also reveals features common to many other modern political revolutions. Again, violence was legitimated on the basis of secular ideals—liberty, equality, fraternity. The brutality of the revolutionaries was alarming and legendary, and in this instance, religion itself was attacked. Along with the French aristocracy, the revolutionaries targeted the Catholic Church. Church properties were nationalized, clerics were forced to vow allegiance to the state, and statues symbolizing secular ideals (e.g., Reason and Liberty) were erected in church buildings. Even more than the American Revolution, the French Revolution represented the aggressive assertion of a secular worldview, and the destructive potential of this worldview to religion.

Finally, in place of a king, who ruled by divine right, an authoritarian leader (Napoleon) took control of the state and commenced military action against the rest of Europe in an attempt to establish an empire. Subsequent secular revolutions have followed a similar path. Finally, with the Industrial Revolution, came the expansion and complexification of manufacturing, intensified urbanization, and the stratification of society along economic lines. The result was an unprecedented transformation of Western culture; one to which religion was ill prepared to respond or even fully understand.

A popular date given for the beginning of the Industrial Revolution is 1769. In that year, James Watt (a Scottish engineer) perfected the first efficient steam engine. It is of note that only five years later, Watt joined with Matthew Boulton to establish a company to manufacture the engines.¹⁰ This little footnote to the invention of the steam engine tells us much about how the Industrial Revolution worked and continues to work to this day.

It is not just a new invention or the perfection of a new technology that changes the world. What changed the world is not what James Watt did, but what he and Matthew Boulton did. What changed transportation was not the invention of the car; what changed transportation and, with it, all of American society, was Henry Ford's assembly line. The cultural logic of an industrialized culture is not based on the discovery of new devices but on the discovery of ways to reproduce and distribute the devices on a massive scale.

This is what the Industrial Revolution tells us, and we have to really take a step back behind Watt's steam engine to find what may actually be the event that triggered this revolution. Rather than Watt's engine of 1769, this event may well be the perfection of a manufacturing device by John Kay in 1733.

Kay's machine was called the flying shuttle, and it allowed weavers to produce cloth more rapidly and in greater widths than had ever been possible before. Thirty years later (1764), James Hargreaves perfected a machine, called the "spinning jenny" (named after his wife or daughter), that could spin eight threads of yarn simultaneously. Hargreaves' jennys thus augmented the productive capacity of Kay's shuttles by greatly increasing the quantity of thread available for their use. Then, by the early 1770s, the productive capacity of both (and their successor machines) was increased geometrically by the proliferation of steam engines. In 1789, the first steam-powered cotton factory was built in Manchester, England; and "by the early 1800s nearly all spinning and weaving was being done in factories, after having been a home process for thousands of years."¹¹

What these inventions allowed was an incredible increase in the production of textiles—fabrics. With the increase in fabrics came an increase in clothing and a reduction in costs for apparel. Soon enough raw materials (wool and cotton) began to be consumed at incredible rates. Cotton became the preferred material, because wool production could not keep up with the demand. A direct consequence of this was a dramatic increase in the cultivation of cotton, chiefly in the southern part of the United States, and with this came a corresponding increase in the use of human slaves as agricultural workers.

The flying shuttle was, of course, just the beginning, and this, too, is what makes the birth of industrialization so revolutionary, and so critical to the emergence of the modern West. There had been other remarkable discoveries and inventions in the past, to be sure (metallurgy, the compass, gun powder, the printing press, optical devices, the wheel), but what happened beginning in the late eighteenth century had never happened before.

First, the new devices and manufacturing processes proliferated at an astonishing rate. Second, the new devices tended to be synergistically related, as one new device often led to the invention of others of direct benefit to the first (as with the jenny and the shuttle). Third, each new manufacturing technology was quickly standardized and then replicated over and over again. The steam powered factory in Manchester in 1789, previously noted, after all, was only the first. Other factories would follow. Fourth, the new inventions tended to be focused on the mass production of material goods (commodities). The end result was the rise of a

culture based on an economic system driven by vast numbers of factories producing an ever-expanding stream of commodities—textiles, bullets, clothing, nails, shoes, circular saws, cotton gins, and so on. Fifth, needless to say, and as is well-known today, with the rise of industrial culture, there was a correspondingly swift degradation of the natural environment. The ecological consequences of the Industrial Revolution were devastating—and they continue to be.

Writing of the impact of the Industrial Revolution, Marx observed:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted uncertainty and agitation distinguish [this] epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face his real conditions of life, and his mutual relations with a sober eye.

Among those venerable prejudices and opinions being swept away were those long safeguarded by religion. The Industrial Revolution transformed the West with stunning celerity. Not only was the natural environment ravished, so too was the social environment. Families were dislocated, traditional communities were wrecked, and the pulse of life accelerated. Religion, which was already shaken by the wars of religion and the wrenching dismemberment of Christendom, was staggered again as its concept of the world was stunningly disenchanting. In the place of the world legitimated by Christian myths and rituals dating back to antiquity, the West discovered a new world, one with myths and rituals befitting an industrial culture: myths of technology and mass production, and rituals of factory labor and production quotas. Where the cultural centers of medieval life had been churches, the cultural centers of modern industrial life were factories—Blake’s “dark Satanic mills.”

Besides the revolutions that transformed the political and economic landscape of the West, the Enlightenment also brought a far reaching intellectual revolution. Like the others, it has had a long lasting negative impact on religion. This primer is not the place to go into extensive detail about the many thinkers of the Enlightenment who critiqued religion and its claims. Still, some must be mentioned, for they exemplify the process through which the intellectual community directly attacked the plausibility structures of religion. Each of these thinkers, and the intellectual milieu as a whole, dealt religion a devastating blow by attacking it at its very core—certainty and finality. In an age of assertive inquiry, religious claims of certainty and finality seemed empty and meaningless for all but the “unenlightened.”

To set the strategy, although not necessarily the main religious theme for the intellectual revolution of the Enlightenment, we can look at the work of René Descartes. It was Descartes who introduced systematic doubt as a working philosophic methodology. Of course, Descartes is best remembered for the “Cogito,” but his real importance to the Enlightenment and the entire intellectual ambiance of modernity is his preface to “Cogito ergo sum” (I think therefore I am); namely, the “Dubito”: “Dubito ergo cogito” (I doubt, therefore I think). For Descartes, all things could be doubted, except, initially, the fact that he doubted. The importance of this approach is that Descartes predicated his philosophic inquiry not on received truths or faith, but, rather, on doubt. If he had not doubted, he would never have concluded that he thought. Doubt, then, was the key to the Cartesian system, and was a critical element in the foundation of modern intellectual history. Descartes did go on to construct arguments for God’s existence that were not unlike those of medieval theologians before him,

Anselm and Aquinas. Those arguments, however, did not set the tone for modern thought. What set the tone was the doubt, and the thinkers of the Enlightenment picked up where Descartes left off and moved on to test the limits of human knowing and meaning.

The Western intellectual tradition has followed Descartes' strategy in one way or another ever since. In the wake of Descartes came Hume, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Marx. Each of these figures found religion as it had existed before the Enlightenment somehow unfulfilled and inauthentic. Each tampered with traditional Christian assumptions, and Hume, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Marx blasted institutional Christianity from pillar to post. Each contributed to the secular-modernist understanding of religion, and each informed the intellectuals of the West that there is something decisively wrong with religion in theory or practice or both. Most emblematic of the secular-modernist stance toward religion is perhaps this passage from Nietzsche:

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. . . . God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."¹³

What started with Descartes' doubt of all things and moved to his philosophic proof for the existence of God, led to Nietzsche's philosophy rejection of religion and his affirmation that God is dead. Although rather dramatic in its phrasing, Nietzsche's position is not significantly different from the standard account of the secularization thesis. In fact, a leading proponent of the thesis, Steve Bruce, uses the affirmation, "God is dead," as the title of one of his more important books.¹⁴ Dramatic rhetoric aside, Bruce is in essential agreement with Nietzsche. For all intents and purposes, religion has been rejected as the primary source of meaning and value for Western culture, and the God of Christianity is functionally deceased—or so the standard account would have it.

Whether this account is still valid, however, is the subject of vigorous dispute today. The context and contours of this dispute will be considered in the next chapter.

Chapter 4:

The Secularization Dispute and Beyond: Religion and Western Culture Today The Secularization Dispute Today

With apologies to William Swatos and Daniel Olson, disagreements about secularization seem better characterized as a dispute than a debate. If it is a debate, it is an intense one, at least at times. It often seems more like a heated argument, one in which decorum is not always present and the positions of one's opponents are not treated with respect or even seriously engaged. Frankly, in many instances, the arena of dispute seems to resemble the rough and tumble world of politics, with attacks running back and forth from both sides and debates where candidates present mini-lectures that may have no relevance to specific questions posed by moderators or their fellow candidates. Why all the heat? Well, an oft cited truism gets us near a good explanation: When there is conflict there is something at stake. The greater the conflict, the more is at stake. What is at stake in the secularization dispute is the role and function of religion in the contemporary world. Hence, the heat.

It is not the intent of this primer to enter into the dispute, although I do have a position on the topic. It is also beyond the range of this primer to examine more than a few of the major positions in the dispute. However, the contours of this dispute must be borne in mind when studying religion in the contemporary West. Without this preliminary awareness, the authority of one or another text might be overestimated and the merits of alternative views underestimated or missed entirely. Suffice it to say, there is no authoritative position today, and few scholars endorse the thesis without qualification.

Although there are many nuances to be found in contemporary approaches to secularization, a clear distinction can be drawn between two major camps and two major periods. The first division separates those who reject the secularization thesis and those who, despite certain challenges, find that it has merit. The second division separates the period of ascendancy for the thesis (1960s to 1980s) from the period of its reconsideration (1990s to present).

Proponents

In the first period, a number of important works by influential thinkers helped establish secularization as the central theory for interpreting the status and function of religion in the modern world. The list of thinkers and works is quite extensive, but only a select number will be noted here. As previously noted, Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy* (1967)³ is a leading source for the standard account of secularization and its historical context. Berger's many other works in the early period also focused on religion in the context of secularization. Of particular note are *The Homeless Mind* (1973) and *The Heretical Imperative* (1979).⁴

Equal in rank to Berger in the formative development of the theory is Bryan Wilson, whose notable early contributions include *Religion in Secular Society* (1969) and *Contemporary Transformations of Religion* (1976).⁵ A later article by Wilson, “The Secularization Thesis: Criticisms and Rebuttals” (1998),⁶ is also especially keen in its presentation of the thesis and defenses against its critics. Karel Dobbelaere’s “Secularization: A Multi-Dimensional Concept” (1981)⁷ is also among the important contributions to the development of the theory. An often overlooked proponent is Political Scientist, Marcel Gauchet, who deployed the thesis with only slight modifications in *The Disenchantment of the World* (1997).⁸ For Gauchet, transcendental elements Christianity inherited from Judaism, long mitigated in Catholicism, eventually reemerged in Protestantism, leading to Christianity's inability to legitimate culture, and its replacement by new (non-religious) sources of legitimation, particularly political institutions. Finally, a major theological interpretation of the secularization thesis was offered by Harvey Cox in his widely read book, *The Secular City* (1965).⁹

As is obvious from the title of Wilson’s 1998 article, by the latter part of the twentieth century, the secularization thesis had critics— many of them, in fact. It also had supporters, including Wilson, Dobbelaere, and Gauchet—but, notably, not Berger. Foremost among its contemporary champions is Steve Bruce, who has defended the thesis against major challenges brought by critics. Bruce’s position is best revealed in two representative works, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (1996) and *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West* (2002).¹⁰ Each presents a summary of the standard account, rebuttals of criticisms, and selected case studies of religion in the contemporary West. The rebuttals of Bruce and Wilson are noteworthy in light of the following section, which summarizes the major criticisms of the secularization thesis. These criticisms are significant, but it must be remembered that they are not without rebuttals from defenders of the thesis.

Besides the proponents of the thesis, there are a number of important thinkers who take a more nuanced approach. Among the more notable are Yves Lambert, Grace Davis, Vincent Pecora, and Charles Taylor. Each maintains elements of the thesis but qualifies its reach.¹¹ Lambert recognizes two "thresholds of secularization" (decline in religious authority and elimination of religious symbolism) and claims that the first threshold has been passed, but not the second. Davie, for her part, offers the concept of "multiple modernities" and "conceptual maps," recognizing that there is diversity in the way different cultures undergo the modernization process and, hence, different maps (like the secularization thesis or rational choice theory) are required to help us navigate diverse cultural terrains. Pecora finds religion and secularization in a dialectical relationship, in which religion persists as a "semantic resonance" in the midst of secular culture. Contrasting himself with "traditional" secularization theorists, Taylor identifies three concepts of "secularity," which focus, respectively, on: society, individuals, and cultural consciousness. Favoring the third, he argues that even in such secular systems references to transcendental religiosity tend to reappear.

Critics

Perhaps the first notable critic of the secularization theory is David Martin, whose article, “Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularization” (1965),¹² was a clear challenge to the developing acceptance of the theory. His objections were further developed in his subsequent works, including his major work, *A General Theory of Secularization* (1978); articles, such as “The Secularization Issue”; and, more recently, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (2005).¹³ Martin’s challenge, in brief, is that the theory is of greatest relevance to modern European culture and that it is less helpful in accounting for the status of

religion in other cultures. Martin was also instrumental in developing a critique of the thesis on the basis of the claim that it presumed an earlier period of religious fervor (a golden age of faith) prior to the rise of secularization.

A more hostile critique was offered in 1986 by Jeffery Hadden. As explained by Swatos and Kevin Christiano:

The core of his argument is that in and from its genesis secularization constituted a “doctrine more than a theory” based on “presuppositions that . . . represent a taken-for-granted ideology.” . . . Over time in social scientific circles . . . “the idea of secularization became sacralized.”¹⁴

In short, this type of challenge contends that secularization is an academic dogma rather than a genuine theory, and that scholars accept the thesis, not because it is well supported or gives an accurate account of religion, but because of pressures within the academy. Hadden, and others, conclude that religion is alive, well, and flourishing in the contemporary world.

One of the most recognized critics of the secularization thesis, Rodney Stark, certainly agrees with Hadden. Stark and various associates (notably William Bainbridge, Roger Finke, and Laurence Iannaccone) are arguably the leading opponents of the secularization thesis today. It is not just that they challenge the standard account of the secularization thesis (as, for example, Stark’s “Secularization, R.I.P.”¹⁵), they go considerably further, offering an alternative and contradictory theory that accounts for the vitality of religion in the contemporary world. This alternative is a variation of a general theory used in the social sciences known as rational choice theory (RCT). As nicely summarized by Davie, as it applies to religion, RCT is largely an American approach that “postulates that individuals are naturally religious (to be so is part of the human condition) and will activate their religious choices, just like any other choices, in order to maximize gain (however conceptualized) and to minimize loss.”¹⁶

Unlike the secularization thesis, RCT thus recognizes religion as an elemental feature of cultural life, if not a fundamental human need, and its presence in society as a cultural necessity. It goes further to claim, as Stark and Bainbridge affirm in *The Future of Religion* (1985):

Having erroneously equated religion with a particular set of religious organizations, Western intellectuals have misread the secularization of these groups as the doom of religion in general. But it is foolish to look only at sunsets and never observe the dawn: this history of religion is not only a pattern of decline; it is equally a portrait of birth and growth. We argue that the sources of religion are shifting constantly in societies but that the amount of religion remains relatively constant.¹⁷

To the degree that the secularization thesis seeks to minimize the significance of religion, it misinterprets the role of religion in human culture, according to Stark and Bainbridge. Moreover, should the thesis be construed to predict an eventual disappearance of religion, it is grievously wrong. Finally, if “the amount of religion remains constant” within a culture system, secularization is impossible—a point acknowledged and rebutted by Bruce, by the way, in his critique of Stark and Bainbridge.¹⁸ Besides the texts already noted, other works countering the secularization thesis from the RCT community include Stark and Iannaccone’s “A Supply-side Reinterpretation of the ‘Secularization of Europe’” (1994) and Stark and Finke’s *Acts of Faith* (2000).¹⁹

From among the many other criticisms of the secularization thesis that could be included here, none is more telling than that of Peter Berger, one of the first major proponents of the thesis. Berger today has had a major change of heart. The title of a recent book of essays, which he edited, expresses this change of heart most vividly: *The Desecularization of the World*.²⁰ In his introduction to the collection, Berger writes, quite candidly: “My point is that the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions . . . is as furiously religious as it ever was.”²¹ He then proceeds to summarize what he perceives to be the various errors in the secularization thesis, especially as they are revealed in resurgence of religion in the contemporary world. The chapters that follow focus on the resurgence of religion in various parts of the world, with the obvious intent of supporting the contention contained in the title.

This chapter could continue on (perhaps interminably) citing additional sources of support for the theory, others in opposition, and others (perhaps the largest group) offering nuanced treatments. It is obvious, however, that the secularization thesis is disputed today, and there are hardened positions (pro and con) on its merits. Readers are left to their own interpretations—and they are certainly encouraged to review the literature on the subject, some of which has been presented here. It is the contention of this primer, however, that grasping the primary aspects of the secularization thesis (presented in Chapter 3) is necessary for understanding religion in modern Western culture and, initially at least, encountering religion in the contemporary West.

Modernity and Postmodernity

What, then, can be said about religion in contemporary culture? Among other reasonable assertions is that, for many, the status of religion is framed by an approach that characterizes contemporary culture as postmodern. The introduction of this term is not intended as a definitive classification of contemporary culture, nor does this primer aim to resolve the complex nest of issues commingled in and around the term postmodern. The term is in extreme flux today, in part due to its magnificent popularity in both popular and academic culture. Certainly not without its critics, it remains one of those alluring labels that at once classifies an incredibly vast array of cultural phenomena while simultaneously (and necessarily) defying any and all efforts to stabilize its meaning with anything close to precision. It is a term of conjure and conjecture, and ultimately, I suspect, uncertainty for many. This uncertainty may not be diminished here, although it is my hope to present the concept of postmodernity in an introductory manner without minimizing the genuine complexities associated with the ever-expanding dialogue about its meaning.

First, whatever else may be meant by postmodern, it is clearly intended to mark a cultural epoch following the modern period. Modernity has been presented previously in the context of secularization. To what was said previously, we can add that modernity is driven by industrialization, the disintegration of earlier social structures (such as feudalism, small-scale agrarian communities, and the religious organization of time), and the rise of new social structures (the nation-state, the corporation, and the monetization of time).

Some selected elements, institutions, ideals, and forces typically associated with modernity, include the following:

Replacement of a religious worldview by a scientific worldview

Celebration of science as a liberating force

The myth of perfectibility and perpetual advance through rational inquiry

“Novus ordo seclorum” (found on the reverse of the Great Seal of the United States)

Humanism

Capitalism and the emergence of industrial capitalism

The quest to understand, organize, and control society through rational means

Secularization

Democratization and the emergence of political parties

Positivism and the idealization of scientific method

The quest for universal truth(s) and “the spirit of discovery”

Bureaucratization

Compulsory education, universal literacy, and text-based communication

Euro-American colonialism

Heightened individualism

“The spirit of discovery”

Nationalism

The autonomy of human reason

The quest to subdue and master nature (including human nature)

Social compartmentalizations and dichotomies, such as private/ public, church/state, labor/management, family/job)

Rise of the mass media and popular culture

Development of religious denominations

These cultural features and ideals help identify and distinguish modernity as the historical period following and replacing the medieval—both in terms of human consciousness and historical periods. Thus, the beginning of modernity is often traced to events, movements, and persons seen as marking the end of the medieval period, and, specifically, the end of religious domination of society, feudal economic systems, and scientific/technological inertia.

Dates for its emergence are wide-ranging. It could be traced to the Renaissance (1453/1454), the Reformation (1517), the life of René Descartes (1596–1650), or any of many other possible candidates. For working purposes, the end of the Thirty Years' War (1648) seems quite satisfactory, since it marked the end of the last great European war in which religion was a major inspiration. In short, after 1648 religion was not a compelling motivating force for personal and institutional violence. More bluntly, it was not worth dying for; and even more to the point, it was not worth killing for, or sending one's children forth to kill and die for.

The consideration of the power of religion (or any other dominant cultural institution) on the basis of one's willingness to die for it is derived, in part, from Roger Corless' treatment of a portion of Ninian Smart's *Beyond Ideology: Religion and the Future of Western Civilization*, and Corless' comments on "what-you-would-die-for-isms."²² The Corless-Smart notion of die-for-isms is relevant to considerations of religion in the contemporary world, where we again see people willing to die for religion. I would only add that the distinct relevance of this notion is brought into even sharper clarity when the other two features are added to the notion: (1) something one will kill for and (2) something one willingly sends forth one's children to kill for and die for. Together with the notion of die-for-isms, these features may be interpreted as indicators of that which is of ultimate importance to groups, nations, and cultures.

In any event, since 1648, religion has not been important enough in Western culture to inspire the ultimate sacrifice—at least not on a large scale. Other institutions certainly have been, however: politics, the nation-state, economic models, secular ideals (liberty, solidarity, equality, representation, fair taxation, economic opportunity, and so on). Perhaps the "ultimate sacrifice test" best captures the notion of secularization. It certainly points to a major distinction between the pre-modern world and the modern world; and it seems also to suggest a similar distinction between the contemporary (postmodern) world and the modern world. We will leave it at that for now.

Suffice it to say, there are a variety of dates that one can use to mark the emergence of modern culture. Whatever that date may be, it is somewhat easier to specify the first great flowering of modernity. This would be the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, marked by the three great revolutions of that century: the American, the French, and the Industrial. For working purposes, here, 1950 will mark the close of the modern period and the beginning of the postmodern. The year 1950 is chosen because it marks the point in Western culture when features identified as postmodern (to be described later in this chapter) begin to manifest in Western consciousness and material culture.

As already noted, postmodernity is the period that follows the modern and emerges in distinction to the modern. The list of contributors to theories of postmodernity is quite lengthy, although a number of major figures can be isolated. These include: Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, David Harvey, Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, and Jean-Francois Lyotard.

From the work of these and other theorists, certain critical features of postmodernity can be extracted. Four of special note are cited by Paul Heelas in his comments on the work of James Beckford:

1. A refusal to regard positivistic, rationalistic, instrumental criteria as the sole or exclusive standard of worthwhile knowledge.
2. A willingness to combine symbols from disparate codes or frameworks of meaning, even at the cost of disjunctions and eclecticism.
3. A celebration of spontaneity,

fragmentation, superficiality, irony, and playfulness. 4. A willingness to abandon the search for over-arching or triumphalist myths, narratives, or frameworks of knowledge.”²³

Paul Lakeland also offers a list of four “essential postmodern issues” derived from Stephen White: “growing incredulity toward traditional metanarratives, new awareness of the costs of societal rationalization, the explosion of informational technologies, and the emergence of new social movements.”²⁴ Lakeland continues, that “above all” postmodernity is a “challenge to the legacy of the Enlightenment,” and further:

Postmodernism is a frontal attack on [modernity]. It abandons the idea of ordered progress toward some goal, in which the autonomous human subject exercises the power of reason to subdue and arrange previously intractable nature toward that end. It is deeply suspicious of notions of universal reason, and it rejects all metaphysical or religious foundations, all “grand theory,” all theoretical systems.²⁵

Besides these features, other representative features are frequently considered in works on postmodernity. Adding these to those previously noted yields a list of elements, institutions, ideals, and forces that are commonly identified as distinctive manifestations of postmodernity:

Replacement of a techno-scientific worldview by a de-centered, a-historical worldview

The myth of pluralism

Historical, cultural, and ethical relativism

“The spirit of self-discovery” and the quest for personal meaning

The quest to “deconstruct” (one is tempted to say everything, but particularly) oppressive economic and political systems

Re-enchantment processes (New Age groups, Neo-Paganisms) Religious resurgence (Fundamentalisms, Revival movements)

Participatory democracy and institutional decentralization Expansion and technological sophistication of the mass media Cyber-literacy Radical individualism

Post-colonialism and globalization

Environmental degradation, ecological crises, climate change, and the emergence of the environmental movement

Eclipse of production-based capitalism with consumption-based capitalism

Technologization of the human environment and consciousness

The Green Revolution and explosive population growth

The rise of image-based communication

Blurring of distinctions between “high,” “folk,” and “popular” cultures, and the celebration of popular culture

Apocalypticism (religious, secular, ecological)

Rejection of repressive social compartmentalizations and dichotomies (gender, sexual choice, racial, ethnic)

Rejection of metanarratives (especially Eurocentric, androcentric, and religious)

Appreciation (and celebration) of irony, paradox, contradiction, rapid social change

In all of its many forms and definitions, postmodernity is understood as distinct from modernity. Thus, its beginning can be traced to events, movements, and persons seen as marking the end of the modern period, and specifically the end of the idealization of science, faith in the West’s world-supremacy, beliefs in human perfectibility, and trust in an inexhaustible supply of natural resources. These are among the metanarratives that the postmodern worldview calls into question.

In this regard, the advent of postmodernity could be traced to decisive events that challenged the worldview or guiding principles of modernity. Candidates include the start or end of World War II (1939–1945), the Holocaust (1933–1945), the Vietnam War (1960s–1970s), Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962). As already noted, for working purposes (following Fredric Jameson), 1950 seems especially relevant, for it was around that time that the constellation of cultural features associated with postmodernity began to emerge in recognizable fashion. The fearful implications of atomic power began to be recognized and, with them, concerns about an apocalyptic nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union—an apocalypse initiated not by a transcendent deity but by human beings. With it came questions about the virtue of scientific exploration and doubts about human perfectibility. Suspicions were raised about the benefits of technology and the West’s incredible manufacturing capacity, with the increasing awareness of the perils of industrial pollution and the relationship between industrial production and ecological destruction.

The world dominance of the West began to erode as the European nations gradually lost or abandoned their colonial holdings. This process was punctuated by events such as India gaining its independence from Britain, the French loss of Indochina and Algeria, and later the United States’ loss in South Vietnam. The 1950s also saw the beginning of the ascent of Asian powers as challengers to the West’s global hegemony. In this decade, Japan began its ascent as an industrial and technological challenger to the West, and China first appeared as a political and military challenger. The oil embargo of the early 1970s, which precipitated a severe recession in the West, only confirmed trends set in motion two decades before: the economies of the West were dependent on natural resources possessed by nations in other parts of the world—nations the West no longer could easily control.

Despite these challenges, the 1950s confirmed the United States’ position as the world’s greatest economic power even as powerful winds of change swept across its domestic cultural landscape. In this decade the Civil Rights movement was born, first with the Supreme Court decision, *Brown vs. Board of Education* (May 17, 1954), outlawing segregation in education. The next year, an African American seamstress (Rosa Parks) refused to give up her seat to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama, leading to a boycott of the city’s buses led by a young preacher, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The Interstate Highway Act was

passed in 1956, ending the dominance of the railroads as the primary method for interstate commerce and quickly making the entire nation accessible to individuals by automobile. Urban centers of the nation's great cities began to die as suburban communities developed, initially with William J. Levitt's planned community on Long Island in 1952—the first Levittown. Concurrent with the rise of suburbia came shopping centers. By 1957 there were 940; the number doubled by 1960, and doubled again by 1963.²⁶ A technology was perfected for reducing the size of air conditioning systems, and the mass production of these new “windowbox” air conditioners helped fuel a migration from northern industrial states to what came to be called “the Sun Belt.” The GI Bill, targeted at veterans of World War II, resulted in dramatic increases in college enrollments and home construction. The veterans also started families, leading to the baby boom. Somewhat paradoxically, family planning was revolutionized with the perfection of an oral contraceptive product (a birth control pill) for women, which gave women control over not only their reproductive cycles but their career opportunities, as well. The 1950s also brought affordable televisions to most American homes, fast food and motel franchising, and the publication of the first issues of *Playboy* (1953) and *Sports Illustrated* (1954).

Capitalism also began to change at this time, as the production based economic system of industrial capitalism began its transition to late capitalism's consumption-based system. During the 1950s, technological advances and manufacturing capacity transformed the economic order from one in which the focus was on production of commodities to one in which the focus was on their consumption. This shift from industrial/production-based systems is a major reason why some scholars equate the postmodern with the postindustrial, often using the latter term in place of postmodern. What is important to remember about this shift is that it is also reflected in culture, with the norms and values of a production-based system (which prizes labor, productivity, and the work ethic) being replaced by norms and values appropriate to a consumption-based system (which prizes recreation, consumption, and a leisure ethic).

As described by Fredric Jameson, in postmodern culture “commodity production [is based on the] frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of evermore novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover,” in which there is “an immense dilation of . . . the sphere of commodities . . . a commodity rush, our ‘representations’ of things tending to arouse an enthusiasm and a mood swing not necessarily inspired by the things themselves.”²⁷ The “culture of consumption” is a dynamic force that, when “unleashed,” consumes persons “to the point of being unable to imagine anything else.”²⁸ Moreover, “we are inside the culture of the market and . . . the inner dynamic of the culture of consumption is an infernal machine from which one does not escape.”²⁹

Jameson's reading of consumption as the dominant characteristic of postmodern culture is affirmed and advanced by Jean Baudrillard. As noted by his critical exegete, Douglas Kellner, Baudrillard interprets postmodern culture as a culture of consumption in which “participation . . . requires systematic purchase and organization of domestic objects, fashion and so on into a system of organized codes and models.”³⁰ In Baudrillard's own words:

We have reached the point where “consumption” has grasped the whole of life, where all activities are connected in the same combinatorial mode. . . . In the phenomenology of consumption, this general climatization of life, goods, objects, services, behaviors and social relations represents the perfected, “consummated” stage of evolution which, through articulated networks of objects, ascends from pure and simple abundance to complete conditioning of action and time and finally to the systematic

organization of ambience, which is characteristic of the drugstores, the shopping mall, or the modern airports in our futuristic cities.³¹

Kellner further interprets Baudrillard: “The consumer . . . cannot avoid the obligation to consume, because it is consumption that is the primary mode of social integration and the primary ethic and activity within the consumer society.”³² For him, consumerism requires “active labor, incessant curiosity and search for novelty, and conformity to the latest fads, products and demands to consume”; and through the acquisition of commodities “our entire society communicates and speaks of and to itself.”³³ Finally, and most significantly, Baudrillard characterizes the consumer’s mental attitude toward consumption as “magical thought”: “a miraculous mentality which rules everyday life, a primitive mentality in the sense that it is defined as a belief in the omnipotence of thoughts: in this case, belief in the omnipotence of signs.”³⁴

It is the assumption of this primer that Jameson and Baudrillard are essentially correct and that contemporary Western culture is accurately (if not conclusively) interpreted as one in which the consumption is a dominant feature and the consumption-based economic system a dominant institution. As I have argued elsewhere, consumption is, in fact, much more than merely a dominant feature, but actually a sacred obligation and the basis of postmodern religious life.³⁵ For purposes of this text, however, we will let it go with the more modest statement previously given, and also note that other institutions make fair claim to playing a dominant role in contemporary culture. These include politics and/or government, nationalism, the media, education, and science. Whatever institution(s) one chooses to specify as dominant, it is reasonable to recognize it (or them) as the source for the legitimation of the social order—much as religion was in earlier times. The concept of legitimation takes us back to the opening of Chapter 1, where the relationship of culture, society, and religion was sketched. As noted there:

For the vast bulk of human existence, religion has served as the primary source of foundational support for society. Sociologists refer to this sort of support as legitimation, by which they mean the process through which cultural understandings and social arrangements (large or small, oppressive or liberating, passive or assertive) are justified, especially in instances when they are questioned. Historically, religion has supplied society with the ultimate sort of legitimation by locating the social order in the context of a sacred (ultimate) order of existence.

What, then, is the role and status of religion in postmodern culture, where its traditional role in legitimating society seems to have been marginalized, if not replaced, by other cultural institutions? This is certainly a reasonable question in the context of the secularization thesis and its claims about modern culture; and to the degree that the secularization thesis is accepted, the reduced role and status of religion in modern culture seems clear enough. It was marginalized, its claims were desacralized, the world it described was disenchanting; and new institutions legitimated the social order, defining the world and justifying social conditions in ways that religion simply did not or could not. Those new institutions were the same as those cited here with reference to postmodern culture. Can the same claims be made today, however? Perhaps, but perhaps not. Perhaps it is politics and government, economics, science and technology, the media, and education (one or several, some or all) that are the dominant institutions of the contemporary West, defining the world and individual existence, supplying meaning and value, and legitimating society as a whole. Perhaps religion is out of the mix and out of the legitimation business today. Perhaps not.

Whether it is or is not is the subject of lively debate, and there is no end to the possible answers. Good arguments can be found on all sides, and several of the major positions have been reviewed in this chapter. It is left up to readers to consider the merits of the various positions and consult others as well. Suffice it to say, that just as contemporary Western culture (termed postmodern here) is nothing if not in the throes of vigorous transformation, the role and status of religion in this culture is likewise in the throes of change. What this change and transformation may mean to our understanding of religion and culture in the West, and with it the secularization thesis, is very much an open question. Central to this question, and part of what makes it particularly difficult to answer, is the reemergence of religion as a distinct cultural presence in the contemporary world. This reemergence, most often referred to as a resurgence, will be considered in the final section of this primer.

