



Secularization, Desecularization, and Toleration

Cross-Disciplinary Challenges
to a Modern Myth

Edited by
Vyacheslav Karpov · Manfred Svensson

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CHAPTER 1

Secularization, Desecularization, and Toleration: Toward an Agency-Focused Reassessment

Vyacheslav Karpov and Manfred Svensson

1.1 THE INTERTWINED HISTORIES OF TOLERATION AND SECULARIZATION

While hiding after being branded a traitor for his criticism of the 1793 French Constitution, the Marquis de Condorcet wrote one of the most representative works of Enlightenment historical thought, the *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind*. Published posthumously in 1795, it not only argued for a discernable pattern of development in human history but also for specific links between individual

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freedom, secular science, and tolerance. Thus, Condorcet described the epoch of Crusades as a time when “theological reveries, superstitious delusions, are become the sole genius of man, religious intolerance his only morality.”¹ The time from Descartes to the formation of the French Republic, in contrast, he depicted as a period in which “religious intolerance still survives,” but merely “as a homage to the prejudices of the people.” However somber this past may be, a more promising future could be expected thanks to the “general diffusion of the philosophical ideas of justice and equality.”² The view so forthrightly expressed by Condorcet has outlived the Enlightenment era, morphed into the mainstream of Western humanities and social sciences, and has persisted well into the twenty-first century. A hundred and seventy years after the publication of Condorcet’s *Outlines*, Harvey Cox used sociological arguments to herald the dawn of a “secular city” where secularization and urbanization bring about an age of “no religion at all.” “Pluralism and tolerance,” Cox wrote, “are the children of secularization. They represent a society’s unwillingness to enforce any particular worldview in its citizens.”³ Lately, such sweeping and candid statements of this view have become less common, at least in academic literature. Yet, the view itself has persisted, albeit in more sophisticated versions. Thus, for instance, more recently, the sociologist Bryan Wilson has argued that toleration owes its origins exclusively to secularization and rationalization of society. By this he means neither the ideas of tolerationists, nor those of secularists (Condorcet’s “philosophical ideas of justice”), who, Wilson says, can be as intolerant as religious proselytizers. He simply refers to the social and technological changes which did away with religion’s influence over other dimensions of human existence. Once that process leads to a secular state, the conditions for the toleration of multiple religions would be ripe.⁴

Although separated by more than two centuries and by a growing sophistication, Condorcet’s and Wilson’s formulations reflect essentially the same persistent and influential view. Integrated into variable narratives of modernity and progress, the view inseparably links toleration to secularization. Thus, toleration’s ideational sources have been mostly found within secular thought or within unorthodox religious currents,

¹ Condorcet, *Outlines*, 137.

² Condorcet, 229.

³ Cox, *The Secular City*, 3.

⁴ Wilson, “Reflections on Toleration.”

while its structural sources were found in institutions freed from religious influence. In contrast, religious orthodoxies have been typically presumed to serve as grounds for intolerance and persecution. The purportedly irreversible movement toward secularity was credited with bringing about greater religious tolerance and inclusion. Religious resurgences were not supposed to take place; and if they did, they were looked at as undermining tolerance and engendering persecution.

We encounter these ideas in a variety of forms. Sometimes it is a popular belief, a weapon in the ongoing culture wars. Sometimes it is a guiding thread in grand narratives of modernity, as in Jonathan Israel's massive history of Enlightenment thought.⁵ But often the link between toleration and secularization has been more of an implicit assumption than an explicitly stated thesis. If we want to test this assumption, its logic must be made explicit.

The aforesaid logic builds, at least in large part, on a linear and, ultimately, teleological conception of history. In the case of the genesis of toleration, a classical example of such a conception has been the influential view that the Protestant Reformation inaugurated a future of freedom.⁶ Here, the implicit telos of human history was, more or less, an "Enlightened" understanding of the Protestant faith. In other words, it was a privatized or internalized religion, a faith less concerned with right belief and obedience to church authority, which made toleration possible. A logical flipside of this thesis is that a more orthodox, traditional, and churchly faith is, inevitably, the source of intolerance. In his 1931 book *The Whig Interpretation of History*, Herbert Butterfield provided a powerful indictment of this view. After that rebuttal, the simplistic link between Reformation and toleration has been banished from serious studies of the period. Yet, for Butterfield, this narrative was only one example of a more general and persistent way of writing history, the tendency "to emphasise certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present."⁷ The causal attribution of toleration to secularization that we address in the present book is a form that the aforesaid persistent view took after its Reformation version had vanished. As Benjamin Kaplan writes, "The secularization story was

⁵ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*; Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*.

⁶ For a classical example of this narrative, see W.K. Jordan's four-volume *The Development of Religious Toleration*.

⁷ Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation*, v.

heir and successor to the Whig interpretation, and so it remains.”⁸ But any version of this view of history must exclude a host of riots, wars, exclusions, and murders, which have taken place precisely during times conceived as of ascendant tolerance.⁹ It is always possible to dismiss all these well-known events as exceptions (which might leave us with a surprisingly small number of non-exceptional cases). But if we do not indulge in such self-deception, any history of monocausal progress toward greater toleration becomes problematic.

Alongside the questionable assumptions and accounts about the history of toleration, the influential view that we reassess in this volume employs a simplistic notion of secularization itself. As long as secularization is understood as a single, monolithic, and universal process, it is relatively easy to make generalized claims about the effects it will have. As we will discuss in detail later, however, this changes dramatically once we become attentive to multiple types of secularization. Secularization can be approached as a process and as a project, and in the latter case, whether it brings about tolerance or persecution will significantly depend upon the secularizing actors, their motivations, and their interpretations of religion and secularity.

As contributions to this volume will show, different visions of the secular future have also gone hand in hand with quite different conceptions and policies of tolerance. When secularization is understood as the disestablishment of religion, as a secularization of the state, for instance, toleration of actual religious differences appears more likely. Yet, even then the norms and practices of toleration will differ drastically along the lines of different understandings of what disestablishment and a secular state mean; consider, for instance, the contrast between the non-establishment practices in the United States and laicism in France. Andrew Murphy’s account of William Penn in this volume highlights the intricate nature of envisioning and constructing a secular space that accommodates religious pluralism. However, when secularizing actors envision a general secularization of culture and society, the outcomes for toleration are even less predictable. In many cases, such grandiose secularization projects unleashed ruthless persecution, decades-long repressions, and wars of resistance (consider, for instance, Jean Meyer’s chapter on Mexico in this volume). Theoretically, one may also arrive at a more peaceful coexistence.

⁸ Kaplan, *Divided by Faith*, 357.

⁹ For a list of such events see Kaplan, 5–6.

Yet, to the extent that secularization of culture and society succeeds, there will be no substantive religious claims opposing each other, and, thus, there will not be much to actually tolerate. Moreover, it is also possible that, under such conditions, substantive claims, should they arise, will regularly be read as per se intolerant. Bryan Wilson again provides a good example. In the piece we have already quoted, he rightly mentions that Martin Luther abandoned his early position in favor of toleration. However, to prove this turn to intolerance, Wilson does not cite any acts of intolerance; instead, he evokes Luther's description of the Mass as a blasphemy.¹⁰ Here, tolerance is no longer understood as the patient putting up with things we find objectionable, but rather it is associated with the disappearance of objections themselves. The very ingredient of objection that is integral to the specific phenomenon of toleration is eliminated.¹¹ Once the very concept of toleration is thus changed, it is the raising of objections that is taken to be intolerant. Against this background, it is not surprising that resilient and resurgent religions are looked at not only as inexplicable failures to follow the irreversible movement toward secularity, but also as obviously undermining tolerance and engendering persecution.

These assumptions about toleration, secularity, and their conjoint historical progression have all been seriously challenged by more recent theoretical and empirical scholarship, including research on histories of religious toleration and persecution and more nuanced accounts of secularization and desecularization. More subtle and complex accounts have emerged within various disciplines. Students of secularization have come to question the assumptions about its irreversibility, universality, and social sources, and research on desecularization has picked up considerably. At the same time, students of toleration have engaged in serious reexaminations of its origins, nature, history, and limits. Thus, linear narratives of secularization and toleration have been undermined on both sides and independently from each other. But much is still to be done in terms of cross-fertilization between these lines of research. To our knowledge, this volume is the first cross-disciplinary attempt to bring together critical reconsiderations of the histories and present realities of the interplay

¹⁰Wilson, "Reflections on Toleration," 43.

¹¹For the centrality of this ingredient see, King, *Toleration*; and Horton, "Traditional Conception."

between secularization and toleration.¹² Moreover, this collective work surveys historical and current developments in a variety of world's regions and thus goes beyond the so-far prevalent North Atlantic focus of toleration and secularization studies. In the present introduction, we will first consider these changes as they have developed within secularization theory. Next, we will introduce the ways in which the concept of desecularization can serve as a tool in the analysis of religious resurgences. In a further step, we will consider the way in which the contemporary debate has been enriched by a revised evaluation of the history of toleration. We then will turn to the possibilities of cross-fertilization between these different fields of research, which this volume aims at promoting. Finally, we explain why the questions that we raise in this book matter far beyond purely academic concerns and involve issues of human coexistence in the world in which an overwhelming majority of inhabitants consists of the adherents of diverse faiths.

1.2 SECULARIZATION: A PARADIGM IN CRISIS

The influential view that secularization engenders and expands toleration is usually expressed in one or both of the following versions. The first version is that secularization supplies ideational sources, or, to use a Weberian term, motives for the practice of toleration. Earlier in this introduction, we saw this approach epitomized in Condorcet's exaltation of secular reason as an antidote to prejudice and persecution. One could term this interpretation "culturalist" since it focuses on culturally shaped subjective meanings that inform tolerant practices. By the same logic, the second version could be termed "structuralist." It stipulates that secularization creates structural conditions for toleration through functional differentiation of religion from other institutions. This is believed to weaken religion's influence on society and alter the ways in which dissent and nonconformity are treated. Bryan Wilson's earlier cited work exemplifies this logic. To him, the rise of toleration has nothing to do with tolerant ideas and everything

¹² An important previous study is Stepan and Taylor, *Boundaries of Toleration*. We incorporate its relevant findings in subsequent chapters. Yet, relevant as it is, Stepan and Taylor's collection has a markedly different focus. It deals predominantly with the relationship of toleration to multiple forms of secularism. Meanwhile, it largely leaves out the problematics of the interplay between the histories of toleration and secularization and desecularization (as projects and historical processes), which is the focus of this volume, and which engages considerably different bodies of theoretical and empirical scholarship.

to do with structural changes in modern societies. Classical interpretations of secularization include ideational changes (e.g., de-religionization of culture) alongside structural-functional ones, and thus the two versions are not mutually exclusive.¹³ Furthermore, the versions are identical in their logic; both present secularity as toleration's foundation, be it cultural, structural, or both. In all the cases, secularization is the logical antecedent, and the rise of toleration, the consequent.

Yet, recent developments in the social-scientific study of religion have challenged this logic formidably. Secularization, toleration's presumed source, is no longer taken for granted and agreed upon as a universal and irreversible historical tendency, and its intrinsic link to modernity is in dispute. Once popular and forcefully expressed beliefs about the historically inevitable wane of religion's role in modern society gave way to profound skepticism and revisionist accounts concerning secularization's sources, scope, consequences, and sometimes, its very reality. Secularization theory has lost its dominant, paradigmatic status in the sociology of religion.¹⁴ Its critiques range from outright refutations to empirical and conceptual qualifications so serious that it is no longer obvious how much descriptive and explanatory, let alone predictive power the theory still retains. Moreover, many studies have shown the vitality of religions and their ability to resurge in response to secularization, and a growing literature has focused on desecularizing trends and forces in modern societies. Thus, the very foundation of the argument that attributes toleration to secularization is undermined.

This paradigmatic crisis has expressed itself in lengthy and intense debates surrounding secularization. A detailed overview of the debates would lead us far beyond this introduction's limits. Thus, what follows is an outline of intellectual developments that inform this volume's reconsideration of the secularization-toleration nexus.

¹³ See Peter Berger's classical yet later abandoned treatment of secularization in *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, 105–71.

¹⁴ We use "secularization theory" here as an umbrella term for a family of scholarly narratives that actually differ greatly in the extent to which they are empirically testable yet are united by their focus on various aspects of the purported decline of religion and/or its societal role in modern society.

1.2.1 *The Origins and Nature of the Secularization Orthodoxy*

Contemporary sociology has inherited its narrative of secularization from the discipline's canonized founders and classics, and ultimately, from Enlightenment philosophy, especially in its French version.¹⁵ From Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, and Karl Marx¹⁶ to modernization theorists of the second half of the past century, the idea of secularization evolved and solidified into a dominant, paradigmatic view of religion and social change. The idea of secularization has always been more than an ordinary theory purporting to account for empirical facts. As Rodney Stark pointed out, along with the sociological cannon itself, the idea of secularization was largely developed by atheists or agnostics,¹⁷ for whom the waning of religion was not merely a theory, but also a normative principle and a desirable outcome. This approach has been reinforced by what Stark calls "ancestor worship,"¹⁸ contemporary sociology's uncritical reception of its classics. In Philip Rieff's more forceful formulation, sociology began as a "deathwork against European Catholic social order," and the deathwork keeps being reenacted in "our institutions of higher illiteracy."¹⁹

Secularization theory was greatly informed by the evolutionary model of history and its progressivist hypostasis. The model entails a stadial perspective on social and cultural changes, which culminate in modernity. The perspective relegates religion's rise and domination to social evolution's pre-modern past and envisions a largely (if not completely, as in the

¹⁵ Gertrude Himmelfarb argues that British and American versions of Enlightenment philosophy focus on freedom for religion rather than from it, which was the paramount preoccupation of their French counterpart. See Himmelfarb, *Roads to Modernity*. Himmelfarb, *Roads to Modernity*.

¹⁶ Max Weber is also routinely included in the list of "founding fathers" of secularization theory. Yet, his impact on the formation of the paradigm is of a different scope and nature. Weber's philosophy of history is drastically different from the evolutionary paradigm of Comte, Durkheim, and Marx (who combined his revolutionary views with an evolutionary philosophy of history) that gave rise to secularization theory's stadial thinking about religion's imminent demise. Furthermore, while recent theories have appropriated Weber's ideas of rationalization and disenchantment as vehicles of secularization, it is not obvious that he himself saw these tendencies as irreversible and predictive of things to come, as his concluding "no one knows..." remark about the future of rationalization so tellingly shows. See Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 182; See also Hughey, "Idea Secularization."

¹⁷ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 1–21.

¹⁸ Stark, "Putting an End to Ancestor Worship."

¹⁹ Rieff, *My Life*, 16.

case of Marx) irreligious future. This, as if by definition, makes the present to be the time of transition from religion's domination of society to a secular social order in which faith will play at most a minimal role. As C. Wright Mills succinctly put it, secularization is modernization's "corollary historical process" in which "[t]he sacred shall disappear altogether, except, possibly, in the private realm."²⁰

From this perspective, even though religion in some form (e.g., socially inconsequential private beliefs and practices) may persist in the present, it is essentially a remnant of the past. Furthermore, in this context, any tendency toward a reaffirmation of religion's role in society is inevitably seen as regressive and reactionary, and as going against the very logic of evolution and modernization. A corollary to this is a rather typical secularist view that religious adherents and their organizations in modern times are potential or actual reactionary holdovers from social evolution's previous stages, and that secular modernity needs to be guarded against intrinsically regressive religious impulses. Religious resurgences are generally not supposed to happen. Yet if they do, they can be explained away as disturbances²¹ in and/or "fundamentalist"²² reactions to modernization.

The stadial and directional view of social evolution has been secularization theory's prevalent meta-narrative. Even though the evolutionary perspective is often implied rather than declared, secularization theory makes most sense in its context and derives its credibility from it. It is logical, then, that secularization theory achieved a nearly unchallenged domination in the social-scientific mainstream when functionalist theory of social evolution and the derivative theories of modernization were all the rage. Alternative views of history, such as Oswald Spengler and Pitirim Sorokin's cyclical models, and even Weber's pluralistic and rather indeterministic approach were nearly completely abandoned. It was during that time, from the 1950s through the 1970s that the secularization perspective achieved the status of a social-scientific orthodoxy.²³

²⁰Wright Mills, *Sociological Imagination*, 32–33.

²¹We take the term "disturbances" from Neil Smelser's influential essay "Theory Modernization."

²²We put the term "fundamentalist" in quotation marks because of its notoriously imprecise meaning and negative connotation. See Berger, *Between Relativism and Fundamentalism*, 6–7.

²³Marxist and Neo-Marxist infusions into the social-scientific mainstream that intensified since the end of the 1960s only reinforced this orthodoxy. This is because alongside its emphasis on revolutionary change, Marxism also embraces a stadial view of history that cul-

1.2.2 *Challenging the Orthodoxy*

“The facts do not bear this theory out.”²⁴ Just a few decades after Condorcet’s *Outlines*, Tocqueville could utter this laconic judgment about the recalcitrance of Enlightenment versions of the secularization thesis. The twentieth-century orthodoxy did not go unchallenged either, yet proved remarkably resistant to theoretical and empirical subversions. Given the long history and seriousness of its critiques, it is not surprising that secularization theory ultimately lost its paradigmatic status. It is surprising how long it has taken the sociological mainstream to largely abandon the paradigm. Explaining why it has taken so long could be an interesting task for a sociologist of knowledge. Some of the most devastating critiques of the paradigm were published as early as in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, it took roughly thirty more years for the paradigm to noticeably lose its grip on the sociological imagination. Moreover, as David Martin noted, “recent summaries of the secularization debate often place critique [...] considerably later.”²⁵ Let us add that such misplacements, even if unintentional, conveniently justify social scientists’ belated collective awakening to the pitfalls of the paradigm.

Indeed, already in 1965,²⁶ David Martin suggested eliminating the concept of secularization as, on the one hand, a hotchpotch of contradictory ideas, and, on the other, “as an ideological and philosophical imposition *on* history rather than an inference *from* history.”²⁷ Simultaneously, Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark concluded that studies had provided hardly any support for secularization theory.²⁸ In 1972, Andrew Greeley’s *Unsecular Man* targeted secularization theory’s evolutionary logic. “If we admit that the historical evolutionary model is a tacit and frequently unconscious assumption,” Greeley wrote, “then the conventional wisdom about the crisis and decline in religion is obviously in deep trouble.”²⁹ The challenge, he argued, is not to explain religion’s persistence in the changing world, for it is to be taken for granted. The real challenge would be to

minates in communism, at which point religion is supposed to disappear without a trace together with its social sources.

²⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 340; I, II, 9.

²⁵ Martin, *Religion and Power*, 15.

²⁶ Martin, “Eliminating Concept,” 169–82.

²⁷ Martin, *Secularization*, 19.

²⁸ Stark and Charles, *Religion and Society*.

²⁹ Greeley, *Unsecular Man*, 28.

describe and explain the secularizing changes to the extent that they have occurred.³⁰ In other words, once the historical evolutionary model is abandoned, secularization can no longer be taken for granted as a “naturally” occurring process, and it is the cases of religious decline that need to be accounted for as unusual. Copernican for its time, Greeley’s argument foreshadowed sociology of religion’s later turn to understand secularization as a secular revolution rather than a self-propelled evolutionary trend.

Critiques of secularization theory’s conceptual fuzziness, ideological bias, and rootedness in a questionable model of history continued throughout the debates of the 1980s and 1990s. Yet, the debates were also fueled by new empirical and theoretical inputs. Particularly impactful were rational choice theorists and proponents of the religious economies model. Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, William Sims Bainbridge, and others expanded the logic of cost-benefit analysis to include the rewards provided by religious interpretations of reality. From this perspective, and contrary to secularization theorists’ stadial presumptions, people’s search for religious meanings is by no means a historical rudiment or a sign of backwardness. Relocations of faith to pre-modern, and of irreligion, to modern times are mythical.³¹ Moderns are not different from their pre-modern counterparts; they choose to follow or abandon a religion based on a fully rational calculation of costs and benefits. The rise and fall of faiths, be it early Christianity or contemporary Mormonism, is driven by these choices. Religious adherence grows in pluralistic, competitive markets, and declines where dominant faiths become “lazy,” unchallenged monopolies. Thus, churches remain vibrant in pluralistic America, yet they wane in the religiously monopolistic European settings. Challenging the orthodox view of secularization as intrinsic to modernization, Finke and Stark³² documented the process of the “churching” of America throughout its decidedly modern history. Furthermore, in competitive markets, stricter groups that demand greater investment from their adherents grow. In contrast, more accommodating churches secularize and decline. However, such secularizing trends are self-limiting because they are usually resisted and overturned by zealous sectarians who, in search of greater other-worldly benefits, reignite tensions with the mundane. Thus, the religious economies theory does not deny the reality of secularization processes, but

³⁰ Greeley, 28.

³¹ Stark, “Secularization, R.I.P.,” 61.

³² Finke and Stark, *The Churching*.

rather sees them as limited and ultimately countered by religious revitalizations.³³

1.2.3 *Revisions, Refinements, and Recantations*

In 1987, Jeffrey K. Hadden summarized the aforesaid empirical and theoretical arguments against secularization theory and famously proposed to “desacralize” it as a “marginally useful” intellectual device.³⁴ “[I]f secularization is to be a useful construct for analyzing a historical process,” he wrote, “it will have to be significantly refined.”³⁵ In reality, serious revisions predated this appeal. In 1969, David Martin disposed of the deterministic model of an irreversible and universal secularization in favor of a probabilistic and pluralistic one. He saw religion’s functional differentiation as conditioned by “crucial historical events” and complexes of cultural conditions unique to each specific society and branch of Christianity.³⁶ Subsequent revisions further narrowed the far-reaching claims of secularization theory. In Mark Chaves’s view, the theory’s useful core was not an all-encompassing decline of religion, but rather a decline of religious authority, and such that could be challenged by movements in the opposite direction.³⁷ Karl Dobbelaere³⁸ disaggregated secularization processes as developing at three distinct levels: macro (societal), meso (organizational), and micro (individual-level). A particularly consequential revision came from the work of José Casanova. He conceptualized secularization as inclusive of three *unintegrated* processes: differentiation of societal institutions from religious norms, decline of religious beliefs and practices, and privatization of religion (i.e., its marginalization from the public sphere).³⁹ These unintegrated changes may or may unfold simultaneously. Moreover, Casanova showed that against the backdrop of differentiation and declining religious adherence, religion’s public role can, and in some contexts does grow.

³³ See, however, a thorough assessment of evidence for and against these arguments over-viewed Olson, “Quantitative Evidence Favoring and Opposing the Religious Economies Model,” 95–114.

³⁴ Hadden, “Desacralizing Secularization.”

³⁵ Hadden, 608.

³⁶ Martin, “General Theory.”

³⁷ Chaves, “Secularization as Declining.”

³⁸ Dobbelaere, “Integrated Perspective.”

³⁹ Casanova, *Public Religions*.

These and other reformulations moved the idea of secularization farther and farther away from the original imagery of an unstoppable and triumphant modern juggernaut. Instead, as conceptual refinements and theoretical qualifications were introduced, secularization increasingly looked like a term denoting processes confined to specific historical and social circumstances. In a marked departure from the classical narrative of a sweeping social transformation, revisions portrayed secularization as a combination of loosely (if at all) interrelated trends that may (but not necessarily will) develop in various societal domains, and that may even be reversed in some cases.⁴⁰

Yet another major revision dealt with the driving forces of secularization. Research has moved away from the view that secularization is driven, as if automatically, by the impersonal social forces of modernity, such as industrialization, mass education, or scientific growth.⁴¹ Instead, as Chaves put it, “Secularization occurs, or not, as the result of social and political conflicts between those social actors who would enhance or maintain religion’s social significance and those who would reduce it. The social significance of the religious sphere at a given time and place is the outcome of previous conflicts of this nature.”⁴² Building on ideas of the sociology of revolutions and social movements, Christian Smith wrote that previous secularization research had neglected the “issues of agency, interests, mobilization, alliances, resources, organizations, power, and strategy in social transformations.”⁴³ Religion’s marginalization in public institutions, he stated, amounted to a “secular revolution” that was accomplished by

⁴⁰ Even committed proponents of the theory have ultimately offered far more specific and empirically sensitive interpretation of the concept. See, for instance, Bruce, *God Is Dead*, 3.

⁴¹ Not that such interpretations have been entirely abandoned, however. For instance, Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris in their influential *Sacred and Secular* attributed secularization to increases in existential security, which, in their view, results from higher levels of socioeconomic development. This was mostly based on negative associations between country-level indicators of socioeconomic development and religiosity. The limits of this chapter do not allow for a detailed critical analysis of this viewpoint. Therefore, let us just evoke the trite yet relevant remark that associations do not always mean causation and note the somewhat simplistic concept of “existential security” employed in Inglehart and Norris’s interpretation. Other social scientists more convincingly point to the persistent relevance of religions’ promise of salvation amidst the insecurities of modern life, even at the heights of economic development. See, for instance, Riesebrodt, *The Promise*.

⁴² Chaves, “Secularization as Declining,” 752.

⁴³ Smith, *Secular Revolution*, 29.

“secularizing activists” who had specific interests, grievances, and ideological orientations leading them to engage in secularizing efforts.⁴⁴

None of these reformulations discarded the concept of secularization in its entirety, nor did they deny the existence of secularization processes. However, they took away the grandeur of the narrative of secularization as a presumably inevitable and irreversible modern trend. As Peter Berger acknowledged in his renunciation of the theory of which he once had been a leading proponent, the idea that modernity and secularization “go hand in hand” was basically wrong.⁴⁵ Gone was the determinism of the stages of evolution, and with it, the conviction in the inevitability of the decline of religion. Instead, sociologists focused on more modest tasks, analyzing secularizing tendencies and forces limited and attributable to specific social and historical circumstances. As a result, the sociology of religion could no longer claim to provide a general theoretical paradigm for interpreting histories of religions in modern societies. On the contrary, sociology stood to learn from historians who had long examined concrete processes and forces of secularization in specific times and places.

1.2.4 *Historical Inputs*

Historians, in the meantime, did their fair share of reexamining the grand narrative, and their studies often paralleled the aforesaid sociological revisions. The very nature of their field makes historians attentive to multiple sequences of secularizing events that vary across contexts and are driven by concrete actors with specific interests and ideological agendas. Thus, Hugh McLeod explains how secularization occurred in England, France, and Germany in different times and for divergent reasons that involved intense struggles between multiple rival religious and secular forces battling each other on many fronts.⁴⁶ Similarly complex, pluralistic, and contextualized is McLeod’s account of the secularizing impact of the “long 1960s” on Western societies.⁴⁷

Alongside such context-specific analyses, historians have reconsidered secularization’s presumed relationship with modernity. J.C.D. Clark subjected the grand narrative linking secularization to modernization to a

⁴⁴ Smith, 32–33.

⁴⁵ Berger, “Epistemological Modesty,” 794.

⁴⁶ McLeod, *Secularization*, 286–89.

⁴⁷ McLeod, *Religious Crisis*.

particularly ruthless critique.⁴⁸ The narrative, he showed, got the stories of both modernization and secularization wrong. Functional specialization of the economy, for instance, predated Protestant Reformation. Attributions of “rationalization” to Reformation involve a murky concept of rationality. Egalitarianism had been a religious principle long before it entered secular politics. Marked declines in church attendance in the twentieth century reflect the inner dynamic of ecclesiastical life rather than external “modern” pressures, and so on. Moreover, the very notion of secularization as an objectively occurring historical process is problematic. From a historian’s perspective, Clark wrote, secularization can be seen “not as a process but as a project [...] still pursued, sometimes with an evangelical zeal, by its apostles. But if secularization is not a process, historians can deal with the idea that ‘it’ is not a thing, instantiated overtime, but a variety of phenomena grouped under one label. That is, the idea of ‘secularization’ can be turned from the key which will open all locks into an important component of the history of ideas that can itself be explained historically.”⁴⁹

1.2.5 *Ideologies, Projects, and Processes*

Clark’s interpretation entails two interrelated research strategies. The first one is to look at secularization as a project, or, in fact, a variety of projects that were previously subsumed by one name. The other strategy is to turn to the history of ideas that have animated the diverse projects of secularization. This, second, strategy has been lately embraced by historians of ideas and of religion.⁵⁰ Understanding specific ideologies, beliefs, and narratives that have informed a variety of secularizing (as well as counter-secularizing) projects is indispensable. Yet, approaching secularization as a project, or, rather, multiple projects, as Clark’s pluralistic interpretation suggests, needs not to be limited to the exploration of ideas behind them. Projects involve social actors, their actions, and the actions’ outcomes. Furthermore, projects are implemented in a sequence of actions and events that produce (or fail to produce) secularizing outcomes, such as new or transformed social institutions and structures. The sequences can be thought of as constituting secularizing *processes*. In other words, one

⁴⁸ Clark, “Secularization and Modernization.”

⁴⁹ Clark, 191.

⁵⁰ See Harrison, “Narratives of Secularization”; Nash, “Believing.”

can see secularization as an umbrella term for many projects (secular revolutions, to use Christian Smith's term) that initiate the processes of secularizing institutional and social-structural change. Thus, a strict logical disjunction between secularization as a project and as a process is not necessarily warranted, especially if we are to understand a variety of projects informed by diverse ideas and resulting in the establishment of a variety of secular orders.⁵¹ Moreover, for sociology which is perennially preoccupied with the question of how subjective meanings generate structural change through social action, the unfolding of secularizing projects into secularization processes and the resulting rise of a secular order are crucially important.

1.2.6 *Toward an Analytical Concept of Secularization*

We have seen how over the past six decades the idea of secularization has undergone a spectacular transformation. Secularization is no longer seen in a stadial, evolutionary fashion as a sweeping transformation intrinsic to modernity. The theory lost its appeal of a powerful explanatory and predictive device, and with it, its paradigmatic status in the social-scientific theory. What is left of the notion of secularization then?

Recent studies have altered the original notion of secularization in many ways, and disagreements in its interpretation persist. However, if we were to summarize the most consequential alterations, their outcome would look approximately as follows. To the extent it is analytically employed in contemporary studies, the concept of secularization has come to denote (a) a variety of contextually confined and typically contested projects through which specific social actors aim to limit religions' societal role (according to the actors' concrete understandings of what constitutes a religion and its desirable boundaries); and/or (b) multiple unintegrated, potentially self-limiting, and reversible processes of change that result, directly or indirectly, from the aforesaid projects and may lead to rescindable declines in religions' impact on social institutions and cultural subsystems, its status in public life, and its influence on people's beliefs and behavior.

⁵¹The study of the variety of secularisms, secularizing trends, and social arrangements delineating the religious from the secular is an important multi-disciplinary field that has grown alongside the secularization debate. See, Warner et al. *Varieties of Secularism*, Calhoun et al., *Rethinking Secularism* and Gorski et al., *The Post-Secular in Question*.