

EUROPE TODAY: ENGAGING THE PRESENT

Europe—a secular continent?

1. What is 'secular'? *Secular, Secularisation & Secularism.*

Dictionary:

secular |'sekyələr |

adjective

1 denoting attitudes, activities, or other things that have no religious or spiritual basis : *secular buildings* | *secular moral theory*. Contrasted with **sacred** .

2 Christian Church (of clergy) not subject to or bound by religious rule; not belonging to or living in a monastic or other order. Contrasted with **regular** .

3 Astronomy of or denoting slow changes in the motion of the sun or planets.

4 Economics (of a fluctuation or trend) occurring or persisting over an indefinitely long period : *there is evidence that the slump is not cyclical but secular*.

5 occurring once every century or similarly long period (used esp. in reference to celebratory games in ancient Rome).

noun: a secular priest.

ORIGIN Middle English : senses 1 and 2 from Old French *seculer*, from Latin *saecularis*, from *saeculum* 'generation, age,' used in Christian Latin to mean '*the world*' (as opposed to the Church); senses 3, 4, and 5 (early 19th cent.) from Latin *saecularis* '*relating to an age or period.*'

Secularization is the transformation of a society from close identification with religious values and institutions toward non-religious (or "irreligious") values and secular institutions.

Secularization thesis refers to the belief that as societies "progress", particularly through modernization and rationalization, religion loses its authority in all aspects of social life and governance.

The term secularization is also used in the context of the lifting of the monastic restrictions from a member of the clergy.

In Catholic theology, the term can also denote the permission or authorization given for an individual (typically clergy, who become secular clergy) to live outside his or her religious colony (monastery), either for a fixed or permanent period.

Secularism is the concept that government or other entities should exist separately from religion and/or religious beliefs.

In one sense, secularism may assert the right to be free from religious rule and teachings, and the right to freedom from governmental imposition of religion upon the people within a state that is neutral on matters of belief. (cf. Separation of church and state and *Laïcité*.) In another sense, it refers to the view that human activities and decisions, especially political ones, should be based on evidence and fact unbiased by religious influence.

2. Secularisation since the Middle Ages:

- ***The sacred canopy*** (Peter Berger)

Utrecht and Amsterdam are good examples of cities that developed initially under the 'sacred canopy' - cathedral central. Amsterdam's Oude Kerk was called the city's 'living room'.

- ***Renaissance:***

Wikipedia: **Humanism** focuses on human values and concerns. The term can mean:

1. A historical movement associated especially with the Italian Renaissance that turned away from medieval scholasticism (so often caught up in allegory and divorced from earthly concerns) and revived interest in ancient Greek and Roman thought-recovery of classic harmony and balance, and the rational.
2. A secular ideology which espouses reason, ethics, and justice, whilst specifically rejecting supernatural and religious dogma as a basis of morality and decision-making.

The last interpretation may be attributed to Secular Humanism as a specific humanistic life stance. Modern meanings of the word have therefore come to be associated with a rejection of appeals to the supernatural or to some higher authority. This interpretation may be directly contrasted with other prominent uses of the term in traditional religious circles. Humanism of this strand arose from a trajectory extending from the deism and anti-clericalism of the Enlightenment, the various secular movements of the 19th century (such as positivism), and the overarching expansion of the scientific project.

Prepared the way for the Reformation:
Without Erasmus, no Luther?

- ***Reformation:*** hastened the rise of individualism (*conscience: 'Here I stand..'*) and rationality. Individualism threatened the communal basis of religious belief and behaviour.

Old order of empire and papal hierarchy challenged: Counter-reformation, religious wars: *Thirty Years War, Hundred Years War; 1648 Treaty of Westphalia* beginning of new order based on the nation-state. *As the prince, so the religion.* (Window in Oude Kerk)

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Grace Davie: *For at least three centuries, religious controversy dominated much of Europe's political, military and cultural life.; it took the form of competing convictions about the nature of God and his relationship to the individual believer (notably Catholic and Protestant understandings of the only way to salvation). This is the period associated with the emergence of the nation-state as the effective form of political organization in Europe.*

• *Enlightenment:*

The **Age of Enlightenment** (or simply the **Enlightenment**) is the era in Western philosophy, intellectual, scientific and cultural life, centered upon the 18th century, in which reason was advocated as the primary source for legitimacy and authority. It is also known as the **Age of Reason**. The enlightenment was a movement of science and reason.

God > man
Heaven > earth
Revelation > reason

René Descartes: (1596-1650)

A natural philosopher, and writer who spent most of his adult life in the Dutch Republic. He has been dubbed the "Father of Modern Philosophy", and much subsequent Western philosophy is a response to his writings, which are studied closely to this day. In particular, his *Meditations on First Philosophy* continues to be a standard text at most university philosophy departments. Descartes's influence in mathematics is also apparent; the Cartesian coordinate system – allowing geometric shapes to be expressed in algebraic equations – was named after him. He is credited as the father of analytical geometry. Descartes was also one of the key figures in the Scientific Revolution.

Baruch (or Benedictus) Spinoza (1632-1677)

Considered one of the great rationalists of the 17th-century philosophy, laying the groundwork for the 18th century Enlightenment and modern biblical criticism. By virtue of his magnum opus, the posthumous *Ethics*, in which he opposed Descartes' mind-body dualism, Spinoza is considered to be one of Western philosophy's most important philosophers. His extremely naturalistic views on God, the world, the human being and knowledge serve to ground a moral philosophy centered on the control of the passions leading to virtue and happiness.

Banned from Amsterdam by the Jewish community as a 23-year old.

Spinoza pleaded for tolerance and freedom of expression. Tolerance is depicted on his statue as parakeets on his cloak, colourful exotic birds which now have found their place among the native sparrows of Amsterdam, also depicted. The inscription reads: *'The purpose of the state is freedom'*

France: reaction to corrupt church and clericism.

McGrath: (*The Twilight of Atheism*) Most radical French philosophers of the 18th are actually to be categorized not as atheists but as Deists—that is, supporters of an ideal philosophical notion of God, based on reason or nature, rather than a more specifically Christian view.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), **Voltaire** (1694-1778) are regularly stereotyped as atheists but are best regarded as Deists. McGrath: '*Voltaire regarded atheism with about as much enthusiasm as he did about the teachings of the Christian church. He urged the reconstruction of religion on the basis of the Supreme Being disclosed in nature.*'

*If the heavens, stripped of their noble imprint
Could ever cease to reveal him
If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him
Whom the sage proclaims and whom kings adore.'* Voltaire

• **Modernity:**

Darwin, Marx & Freud offered further explanations of life and society needing no reference of a God or gods. Further erosion of public influence of church and religion.

Nietzsche famously declared God was dead:

'God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? —Nietzsche

The 20th century:

Two World Wars, a Great Depression, a Cold War, democide
(when governments kill their own citizens), **the Holocaust...**

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3. The theory of secularisation: *Modernity & secularisation go hand in hand*

Secularization is a necessary part of modernization. As the world modernized (i.e. followed Europe's example), it would automatically secularize.

Is this so? Need to refine the concept:

- **Secularization as *differentiation* of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms** (cf USA and France- separation of church & state; not religion and politics!)

Is there a legitimate public role for religion in the modern world?

- **Secularization as *decline* of religious beliefs and practices**
- **Secularization as *marginalization* of religion to a privatized sphere**

See Cambridge Paper: It has long been believed that secularisation is the inevitable by-product of Modernisation, and that the rise of modern science, pluralism, and consumerism is sure to usher in the decline of religion. This secularisation myth has functioned as a 'master narrative', shaping the way we look at the world. It has boosted the self-confidence of generations of non-believers and left believers feeling doomed and outdated. However, in recent years, sociologists of religion have become increasingly sceptical about traditional secularisation theory. This paper explains why this is so, and argues that Christians should not succumb to cultural pessimism.

4. The theory debunked: *God returns!*

[By] the twenty-first century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture.

(**Peter Berger**, sociologist, *The New York Times*, 1968)

The assumption that we live in a secularised world is false: The world today, with some exceptions...is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. (Peter Berger, The Desecularization of the World, 1999)

Conclusion

At the start of Christianity's third millennium, Western Christians are tempted to despair. Secularisation can seem unstoppable. Yet although Christianity in the West has taken a severe battering in the last three centuries, even here there are many signs of life – growing churches, intellectual vitality, compassionate social action. And given the reality of globalisation and cultural exchange, we are no longer insulated from the revitalising influence of dynamic Christian movements in other parts of the world. Being a Christian in the third millennium will not be easy, and will require considerable imagination, but there are good reasons to be encouraged.

Literature:

God is back, Micklethwait and Woodbridge (The Economist)
The desecularization of the world, Peter Berger (ed)
Einstein's God, Krista Tippett
Europe: the exceptional case, Grace Davie
The Next Christendom, Philip Jenkins
God's Continent, Jenkins
Earthly Powers, Michael Burleigh
Sacred Causes, Burleigh
The Twilight of Atheism, Alister McGrath
Straw Dogs, John Gray

Grace Davie:

Europe: the exceptional case - *believing without belonging*

Davie looks at religion from a global perspective, and reaches the conclusion that outside Europe, religious practice world-wide is on the increase.

While the tendency with such a conclusion is to ring alarm-bells and blame secularisation as the culprit, a more enlightened interpretation is that Europeans, particularly Catholics, are still in the main believers.

The exceptions are the predominantly non-Catholic countries such as England, Germany and Scandinavia.

France, on the other hand, is at odds with all of Europe.

The data contained in this volume testifies to this.

In the case of frequency of church attendance in Catholic countries, we find that in Ireland 56% attend weekly, in Italy 41%, Portugal 36% and Spain 25%. In non-Catholic nations the figure for Great Britain is 14%, Sweden 3.8% and Denmark 2.7%: while in France only 7.6% attend weekly. The European average is 20%.

What of basic questions such as belief in God? In Ireland, Italy and Portugal the figure for believers is around 90%; in Great Britain it is 71%, while Sweden rates 53.4%.

The overall European average of belief in Heaven is 46.3%, while 33.9% believe in Hell. The Italians and the Irish are the strongest Catholic believers and the Swedes and French are the least likely to believe.

So what conclusions are to be drawn?

With belief in God still relatively high, there is a hope and a challenge. The challenge is to engage in the new evangelisation, proclaimed by Pope John Paul II.

Davie's book clearly sets out the task facing the Christian Churches, particularly in Europe.

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5. The New Atheists: *Dawkins & co - 'running scared'?*

The Dawkins delusion, McGrath
Debate with John Lennox

6. Renewed Spirituality: *biblical or non-biblical?*

Davie: Modern societies may well corrode their traditional religious base, but at the same time they open up spaces or sectors that only religion can fill. - 'utopian spaces'

The paradox of modernity: in its historical form it removes the need for and sense of religion, but in its utopian forms must stay in touch with the religious (the need for a religious future.)

What form could that future take?

- *Islam*
- *New spiritualities*
- *Biblical spirituality?*