

## Religion and secularization

*A theoretical framework for understanding religion's place in US politics*

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### The “religious” and the “secular”



An important aspect of how the concept of “religion” came to be understood in modern Western societies is the distinction between the categories “religious” and “secular.” Under US law, things categorized as religious may be either privileged or restricted in ways that things categorized as secular are not.

For example: If a person objects to working on Sundays for a reason that the government considers religious—such as believing that God’s commandments forbid working on the Lord’s day—then US civil rights law requires an employer to accommodate the person’s wish not to work on Sundays (unless doing so would create an undue hardship for the employer). However, if another person objects to working on Sundays for a reason that the government considers secular rather than religious—for instance, the person would like to spend more time with their family—the law does not require an employer to accommodate that person’s wish. This is an example of something religious being *privileged* over something secular. In other cases, though, religion can be *restricted* by comparison to the secular. If, for instance, a certain form of meditation is judged to be a religious practice, then the courts will likely rule it unconstitutional for public schools to lead students in the practice, on the grounds that this creates “an establishment of religion,” forbidden by the First Amendment. But if the meditation is judged to be secular, then there will be no constitutional reason to restrict the practice in public schools.

What exactly does “secular” mean? The English word comes from the Latin *saeculum*, which ancient Romans used to mean “an age” in the sense of a long time span. (The Latin word appears with this

meaning on the Great Seal of the United States, in the motto *Novus ordo seclorum*, “New order of the ages.”) Christians living in the Roman empire used *saeculum* to refer to the present age of earthly existence as distinct from eternal life. Christian authorities taught that the ideal life, the most spiritual life, is one separated from the *saeculum*—that is, from earthly concerns and values. In English, this came to be called separating oneself from “the world.” For things pertaining to “the world” in this theological sense, English-speaking Christians in the 1200s borrowed a word from Old French, *seculer*, which in turn came from Latin *saeculum*. Priests who did not belong to monastic orders, and thus who lived “in the world,” were called “secular” priests. “Secular” literature and “secular” music dealt with worldly subjects rather than with scriptural or devotional ones. The civil authorities, as distinct from church authorities, were called “the secular arm.” If civil authorities took possession of church property (as when Henry VIII seized England’s monasteries during the Reformation), the property was said to have been “secularized.”

The word “secular” thus came into use in medieval Europe to demarcate a social sphere apart from the church. The church’s sphere came to be labeled “religious,” another Latin-derived word with its own complex history of usage.

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### Secularization as a modern process



In the 20th century, Western social scientists adopted the term “secularization” to describe a transformation that took place in Western societies during the modern era, defined roughly as the 1500s on. This transformation was a reducing of the influence that Christian institutions and teachings had in important social spheres, including science, government, and

the economy. Increasingly, those social spheres were operated by experts with highly specialized training. Church leaders and theologians, lacking this training, came to be widely regarded, even by themselves, as having limited authority to speak to matters in these social spheres. People who were recognized as experts in these spheres increasingly used, in their work, forms of reasoning that did not invoke the authority of the Bible or Christian theologies; considered what was pertinent to this world only, not to people's fate in the afterlife; and assumed the existence of natural causes and forces only, not supernatural ones. That is to say, these social spheres came to be dominated by secular reasoning, not religious reasoning.

In the historically Christian-dominated societies of the global West, secularization was a process of reducing the social influence of Christianity. To the extent that non-Western societies have adopted or adapted modern Western cultural patterns (science, government, economy, etc.), those societies have also been, to some extent, secularized. This means that, to some extent, there has been a reducing of the social influence of whatever religious institutions, beliefs, or values were dominant in those societies.

In secularized societies, people may continue to have religious beliefs and identities, but religion becomes "privatized." As religion becomes less relevant to how the most widely influential social spheres operate, religion comes to be seen as a private, or personal, matter—your own business, not society's business. The privatization of religion in secularized societies can, in turn, promote religious pluralism in those societies, meaning that diverse religions can coexist with minimal friction. If religion doesn't make much difference to how society operates, then it won't matter much if people espouse different religions as part of their private lives, and people won't have much social incentive (for instance, political incentives) to fight over religion. By the same token, however, people in a secularized society have less

social incentive to be religious (the law doesn't require it, your social status doesn't depend on it, etc.), so there's a potential for religious affiliation and participation to decrease in secularized societies. Much will depend on whether or not people in these societies find religion to be, in some way, personally meaningful.

There is an important difference between "secularization" and "secularism." "Secularization" is a neutral label for the social transformation described above. "Secularism" is an ideological orientation that positively values secularization. All Americans live in a society that is **secularized** compared to Western societies earlier in history. But some Americans are more **secularist** than others because some Americans want their nation to be secularized to a greater extent than other Americans do.

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### *Secularization and religion in US politics*



Secularization needs to be thought of as a process that can unfold in different ways or to different extents in different societies. Consider England, for instance, compared to the United States. England's state church has less social influence today than it used to. To hold government office in England, a person used to have to take communion in the state church; and to attend or teach at Oxford or Cambridge, a person used to have to affirm the state church's creed. The removal of those requirements, during the 1800s, are examples of secularization. Nevertheless, England still has a state church, unlike the United States. In that respect, then, England is less secularized than the United States. During the 1800s, many Americans took pride in the fact that their nation did not have a state church, unlike nations of Europe. In other words, Americans took pride in the fact that their nation was more secularized, in that respect, than nations of Europe (though Americans wouldn't have used the word "secularized" that way in that era).

However, Americans have always disagreed about exactly how, or how far, their nation should be secularized, particularly in the sphere of politics—meaning, the government and public debates about what the government should do. Throughout US history, many Americans who have embraced the principles of religious freedom and disestablishment (the abolishing of state churches) have simultaneously expected the US political sphere to be governed by certain religious values and to be the site of certain religious practices. Different Americans, at different times, have varied in how narrow or broad they want the governing religious influence in politics to be: Protestant? Christian? Judeo-Christian? Very generally theistic? Even more widely pluralistic? These shifting, competing ideals reflect a shifting landscape of interreligious rivalries and alliances over the course of US history. Furthermore, alongside Americans who have advocated some kind of governing religious influence in politics, there have always been Americans who have advocated relatively more secularist ideals, typically in the name of church-state separation and often with the aim of supporting religious pluralism.

In disputes today about the place of religion in US politics, it is very common for people on all sides of the dispute to be convinced that their position—whatever it is—reflects the intentions of the nation’s Founders. This happens because historical figures whom one could make a case for identifying as Founders held different views on the place of religion in the nation’s politics. Consequently, Americans who today hold competing views on that question can

all draw support for their views from statements or actions of different Founders.

To reiterate: What is at question in disputes about religion’s place in US politics is not, usually, *whether* the political sphere should be secularized. All Americans favor some degree of secularization who favor the Constitution’s ban on religious tests for government office or who agree that there should not be, in the words of the First Amendment, “an establishment of religion” (whether someone interprets the amendment as meaning merely that there shouldn’t be a state church or as banning religion in government more broadly). Americans do dispute, though, *how far*, or *in what ways*, their politics should be secularized. As a result, while certain forms of secularization have occurred in the US political sphere and have been widely accepted by the citizenry, many Americans have, at the same time, employed religion in various ways to advance their political views and agendas. This has been the case throughout the nation’s history and remains so today.

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