



BEYOND CHURCH AND STATE

DEMOCRACY,
SECULARISM, AND
CONVERSION

MATTHEW SCHERER

CAMBRIDGE

Beyond Church and State

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Beyond Church and State
Democracy, Secularism, and Conversion

Secularism is often imagined, in Thomas Jefferson's words, as "a wall of separation between Church & State." *Beyond Church and State* moves past that standard picture to argue that secularism is a process that reshapes both religion and politics. Borrowing a term from religious traditions, the book goes further to argue that this process should be understood as a process of conversion. Matthew Scherer studies Saint Augustine, John Locke, John Rawls, Henri Bergson, and Stanley Cavell to present a more accurate picture of what secularism is, what it does, and how it can be reimagined to be more conducive to genuine democracy.

Matthew Scherer is Assistant Professor of Government and Politics at George Mason University.

*For my parents,
Patricia Scherer and Oscar Scherer*

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Introduction

Beyond the Separation of Church and State

Secularism as Conversion

This book's thesis can be stated in three parts: First, secularism is not now, and in fact never has been, primarily a matter of separating religion and politics, despite the prevalence of that authorized view. Second, secularism has been, and continues to be, a process that transforms religion and politics. Third, in a Euro-American context, in a global context even, if done carefully, it will be useful to think of that process of transformation as a process of crystalline conversion. To develop this thesis, I draw upon a figure of conversion that is inscribed in the margins of the Augustinian tradition; that is expressed in minor trajectories within the writings of the great early modern and contemporary proponents of secularism, John Locke and John Rawls; and that recurs as a major theme in the work of two of the past century's most salient philosophical critics of secularism, Henri Bergson and Stanley Cavell. I argue that the commonplace image of secularism as the separation of church and state presents an obstacle to the development of a more genuinely democratic politics, and that refiguring secularism as a process of conversion may open new possibilities for democracy within the condition of deep pluralism that marks contemporary global politics.

Insofar as this book aims to move its readers toward a new perspective on a familiar problem, its objective, and thus to some extent its writing, reflects its subject matter: it is a book about secularism and conversion that aims to produce a certain kind of conversion in its readers' view of secularism. Such a prospect is worth entertaining, I submit, because secularism is a central and an essentially contested component of modern democracy – precisely because arguments over the very meaning of this

term can be expected to persist, it is of critical importance to engage them.¹

Secularism is a moving target, for its forms change over time, but it consistently names the processes that continuously recontour both religious and political life. The metaphor of a “wall of separation between church & state,” for example, most famously employed in the early nineteenth century by Thomas Jefferson, although it long predates him, is currently the authorized emblem of modern secularism.² It actively shapes American constitutional jurisprudence and circulates widely within public debates, within popular consciousness, and even within contemporary theoretical analyses.³ The idea of separation lies at the core of many of today’s most important debates about secularism: whether political discourse can be separated from religious discourse, whether political institutions are separate from religious institutions, whether modern Western secularism is separate from the religious traditions that have conditioned it, whether and how the West’s apparent secularism separates it from the non-Western world.⁴ The separation of church and state remains a fundamental and persistent part of the modern secular imaginary, to be sure, but it is also just as certainly an imperfect characterization of modern secularism. Secularism today is neither primarily a matter of separating religion from the major domains of modern life – including politics, economics, science, morality, and the arts – nor has it ever primarily been a matter of separating religion from these domains. Secularism has instead always been a crystalline process of transformation that produces and reshapes key dimensions of political and religious life. If the idea of “a wall of separation between church & state” presents an insufficient image of secularism, and if it would be more accurate to say that secularism is instead a process of transformation, the figure of conversion shows how and why this process produces such an image. In the language this book

¹ The term “essentially contested concept” was introduced by W. B. Gallie, but I borrow from William E. Connolly’s discussion and use of it in *The Terms of Political Discourse*.

² For a history of Jefferson’s phrase, see Daniel Dreisbach’s *Thomas Jefferson and the Wall of Separation between Church and State*.

³ Thomas Jefferson, “A Letter to the Danbury Baptists.”

⁴ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theologies*; William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*; John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*; Jürgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere”; Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*; Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*; Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*; Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*; Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*; Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations”; Gil Anidjar, “Secularism”; Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety*.

will develop, figuring secularism as conversion shows how the image of separation constitutes the authorized surface of a deeper, crystalline process of transformation. Figuring secularism as conversion accounts for the persistent appeal, even the necessity, of conceiving secularism as the separation of church and state despite the inadequacy of that conception.

The modern secular imaginary isolates a single part of a much larger, multifaceted process that reshapes the specific practices, institutions, and discourses that condition experience in both political and religious domains when it promotes the principle of separation to a central place. This larger process has produced a series of variable boundaries between politics and religion throughout history – and not only modern and Western history. In the context of modern Euro-American secularism, this process unfolds as a process of conversion; ironically, it is a process of conversion in which modern secularism emerges by excluding religious conversion from public life, and from its own narrative self-identity. Within the Augustinian tradition from which I draw this figure, conversion refers to a transformational process of ethical character formation and communal reorientation that is retrospectively consolidated through the production of a new narrative self-identity. Such a figure foregrounds the transformation of individuals in relation to communities mediated by narrative, which is by no means merely a religious phenomenon, but occurs instead within politics generally, and within the politics of modern secularism specifically.

Figuring the emergence of modern secularism as a process of conversion shows how secularism has in fact emerged in new, distinctly modern forms by reshaping institutions, practices, sensibilities, communities, and discourses. It also shows how these transformations are catalyzed and obscured by a simplifying figure of secularism as the separation of church and state. One already sees in Augustine's writings a conversion, which involves the complex disciplinary process of ethical character formation, represented and refigured by a conversion narrative, which obscures, simplifies, and consolidates this work. The social transformations that produced modern Euro-American secularism entailed a long, slow, and quiet conversion of political and religious sensibilities, which underpinned the exclusion of forced conversion from politics, a process that has since been obscured by conversion narratives that simplify and consolidate its outlines. Modern secularism is bound to the problem of conversion in a historical sense, and the figure of conversion can illuminate the contours of secularism as a process of transformation in a theoretical sense.

The connection proposed here between the problem of modern secularism and the figure of conversion – a figure of *religious* conversion it must be noted – should be surprising insofar as religious conversion was explicitly excluded from the purview of political institutions, and from the conceptual vocabulary of political thought, precisely as a concept of separation became ascendant in early European modernity. A constitutive moment, it is widely held, of the modern separation of public and private spheres consisted in excluding religious conversion from public life and consigning it to the private – such is a plausible way of understanding the core of the seventeenth century’s debates over toleration. Although this exclusion formed a precondition for a more tolerant politics, it also restricted the theoretical vocabulary within which processes of social transformation could be described – toleration becomes possible when new strictures are successfully imposed upon the public sphere and upon speaking subjects, and it can be cogently argued that such strictures compromise the possibility of a deep, genuinely pluralistic democratic politics.⁵ This book returns to the figure of conversion in part to reconsider the limitations placed on aspirations for a more democratic politics by the legacies of modern secularism, and to reopen the question of how elements of what we now think of as “the religious” can and should figure within politics.

To figure secularism as a process of conversion is also to propose a new way of thinking about the connection between secularism and Christianity; it represents one way of drawing on the resources of “religious” and “spiritual” traditions to rethink problematic categories of “the political.” To say that secularism is a form of conversion strongly suggests that Euro-American secularism cannot be cleanly separated from the forms of Christianity that dominated the context in which it emerged, but it also helps to account for secularism’s perceptible distance from Christianity (and other religions). Conversion is both a process that unfolds slowly through the continuous amendment of habits, dispositions, and communal attachments, and an outcome enabled by a retrospective narrative that posits an instantaneous moment of separation between old and new.⁶ Conversion therefore transforms sensibilities and retrospectively represents this transformation as a clean separation between past and present. As a figure for secularism, it suggests that this formation is

⁵ For these latter claims, see Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion*; Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular*; William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*.

⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*; Peter Brown, *Augustine*; John Freccero, *Dante*.

sustained by retrospective narratives that intensify and consolidate the changes it introduces by imposing a categorical difference between a secular modernity and a religious past. A theory of secularism based on the figure of conversion registers multiple forms of connection between Christianity and secularism, and it explains why narratives about the emergence of secularism nonetheless posit a series of clean separations between secularism and its others. More precisely, the formal demands of the Christian conversion narrative that contribute to the identity of modern Euro-American secularism impose a series of clean breaks between politics and religion, secularism and Christianity, and Christianity and non-Christianity that belie the processes of transformation connecting each of these terms. This book aims to show how dominant conceptions of modern secularism as the separation of church and state emerge as part of a multifaceted process of transformation, which suppresses conversion on the one hand, but itself unfolds as a process of conversion on the other. This introduction will treat the problem of modern secularism and the figure of conversion in turn and then explain how the figure of conversion can be used to address the problem of secularism. It concludes by previewing the arguments of coming chapters.

The Problem of Modern Secularism

The figure of conversion presents the problem of modern secularism in a new light, but it is important at the outset to present a relatively uncontroversial view of this terrain before introducing the figure of conversion. It is widely agreed that modern secularism is a broad rubric under which to group a series of more precisely formulated problematics, most importantly “secularization,” “secularity,” and “secularism” proper.⁷ What follows immediately are the outlines of commonplace approaches to these three problematics.⁸

Theories of “secularization” are largely the provenance of sociology thanks in large part to the foundational work of Émile Durkheim and Max Weber. In its strongest form, the secularization thesis posits a long-term and large-scale historical process of differentiation in which major

⁷ William Connolly and Talal Asad go further, isolating “secularists” and disinterring “the secular,” respectively. See William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*; Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular*; and Matthew Scherer, “Landmarks in the Critical Study of Secularism.”

⁸ This introductory overview draws from my entry on “secularism” published in *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought*.

areas of human activity such as politics, law, economics, science, and art have been effectively separated from religion. More specifically, this process is presented as unfolding with respect to Christianity in Europe in three interlocking dimensions: the retreat of religion from public life, the restriction of religion to individual belief, and the general decline of belief. The theory of “disenchantment” sketched in Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* provides a classical locus for the theory of secularization. Durkheim’s claim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* that “the Sacred” lies at the core of primitive religion and that a functional analogue underpins modern social integration represents a different but equally classic locus for the concept of secularization, in which modern society replaces the content of the sacred while retaining its formal structure. Despite its prominence, two central problems with a strong form of the theory of secularization are commonly cited: the first is that these theories are undermined by empirical research; the second is that they produce an ambiguity with respect to the relation between the secular and the religious.⁹ In Weber’s account, for example, it is unclear whether the spirit of capitalism that grows from the Protestant ethic emerges freestanding and independent of its religious foundation or represents instead a more profound continuity between the secular modern present and its religious past. In Durkheim’s account, the functional equivalence of the sacred and the social transforms this ambiguity into a formal identity, such that there is no effective difference between the sacred and the social or the religious and the secular.

The indeterminacy left in such theories of secularization has become the object of fierce debate, the key positions of which were marked out by the mid-twentieth century when Hans Blumenberg advanced the thesis that the modern age is freestanding and self-legitimizing against Carl Schmitt’s contention that modernity is dependent upon and derived from a prior Christianity.¹⁰ More recently, a movement known as Radical Orthodoxy has taken over a position in debates about secularism comparable, although not reducible, to Schmitt’s. From the perspective of Radical Orthodoxy, it is philosophy that constitutes secularism by claiming adequate knowledge of an immanent world independent of any transcendent creator and by claiming its independence from theology. Once more, in this story, secularism is constituted through a break with

⁹ José Casanova’s *Public Religions in the Modern World* is a landmark statement of the relatively recent wave of empirical criticism of the secularization thesis.

¹⁰ Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*; Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*.

Christianity. And in this view, secular modernity is an extremely arrogant but nonetheless heretical offshoot of Christianity: secularism is synonymous with nihilism and necessarily consigned to spiritual, moral, and social decline. Radical Orthodoxy attempts to turn the tables on both modern social theory and modern theologies, which it views as complicit in the assumptions of modern social theory, by undermining philosophy's claims to independence and reasserting the foundational position of theology, of early Christianity – and, ultimately, as it were, of God. On the one hand, Radical Orthodoxy's argument that the modern separation of philosophy from theology must be erased is disarmingly simple: because everything is created by and "participates in" God, everything must be countenanced within a theological framework; if God is everywhere, so too must be theology. On the other hand, however, it reinscribes the modern separation of philosophy from theology insofar as it constitutes itself as "radical" and "orthodox" through contrast with its modern and post-modern rivals. To put this another way, Radical Orthodoxy reverses the privilege of the secular over the religious in modern social theory and seeks to restore the privilege of the religious over the secular that it takes as characteristic of medieval and early Christian orders. But its polemical portrait of a modernity constituted by the division of an ascendant secular world from a beleaguered Christian Tradition does nothing to question the distinction between religious and secular.

Taking over a position comparable but again by no means reducible to Blumenberg's, Jeffrey Stout articulates a powerful critique of the religious traditionalism exemplified by Radical Orthodoxy – as well as by such thinkers as Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas – and he offers an alternative interpretation of modern secular politics. Stout argues that the proponents of religious traditionalism misapprehend important dimensions of contemporary political life, and that they do so to the extent that they inherit insufficient understandings of both "religion" and "politics" from the "secularist" theories that they oppose. Stout takes John Rawls and Richard Rorty as key examples of the secularist position insofar as both argue that liberal democracies can and should exclude religion from public argument at key points. He joins the traditionalists in opposing that exclusion, but Stout argues that the traditionalists err by treating this secularist position as a sufficient characterization of modern liberal democratic politics. From Stout's perspective, both proponents and opponents of secularism are blinded by a secularist ideology that posits a clean distinction between religion and politics. Beneath a secularist ideology, Stout maintains, religion has always in fact played important public roles in the

rich and variegated practices that constitute the “democratic tradition” as it has been lived historically – at least in the United States, the focus of his study. In the terms I develop here, Stout argues that secularists and their opponents are both captured within a modern secular imaginary that takes the separation of “politics” and “religion” as an accomplished fact, whereas contemporary politics is marked instead by the intersection of these fields. For Stout, as for me, the task in approaching secularism is to understand precisely how religion and politics intersect, constitute, and reconstitute each other within modern liberal democracies.

With such debates in mind, this book employs a relatively circumspect concept of secularization, in which secularization refers to a transformation of the multiple relations between religion and morality, politics, economics, science, and art. In this view, secularization does not refer to the emergence of a new secular order from a prior religious order. Instead it names a process whereby both “the religious” and “the secular” are constructed as opposed but nonetheless constitutively interrelated domains. The secular and the religious, in other words, form two sides of a single process of secularization that continuously shapes and recreates both. In the course of the Protestant Reformation, for example, Martin Luther argued for the importance of a strong secular authority but precisely with the understanding that such an authority would serve to manage and limit theological disputes. The Protestant Reformation, in such a view, did not simply remove religion from public life but rather redistributed power and authority between newly emerging forms of politics and religion. In this view, it is not the case that modernity is constituted as the overcoming of religion but rather that the very concepts of “religious” and “secular” are produced with distinctly modern grammars through a process of secularization.

If the secularization thesis is particularly at home in the discipline of sociology, “secularity” is more typically the subject of philosophy and increasingly of anthropology. Rather than a transformational process, secularity refers to the specific qualities that mark certain forms of thought, speech, and conduct in their difference from religious or pious forms. Enlightenment idioms stretching from Descartes to Kant emphasize the qualities of a mind that dares to think for itself, to produce knowledge with its own authority, and to criticize dogma and tradition, all of which are often taken to be constitutive of modern secularity (*avant la lettre*). To these are often added historical consciousness, worldliness, and self-reflectiveness. Although Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls have typically shifted attention to the public or intersubjective dimensions of

secularity, their arguments are nonetheless consistent with an enlightenment heritage that marks public or communicative reason in its difference from religious or theological discourses. In counterpoint to philosophical valorizations, similar qualities of speech, thought, and conduct have been construed in a variety of religious or theological idioms as incoherent, ungrounded, naive, faithless, corrupt, debased, egotistical, self-glorifying, bankrupt, mutilated, and nihilistic.¹¹ The precise nature and value of modern secularity remain topics of research and debate, and the anthropologist Talal Asad has persuasively argued that the study of secularity is only now at its very beginning.¹² Insofar as it is aligned with modern social and philosophical developments, it is difficult to disentangle secularity from the process of secularization – for if there is such a thing as modern secularity, it must be intimately bound with the process of secularization.

In Euro-American contexts, “secularism” is often framed alongside political liberalism as an outgrowth of the regimes of religious toleration, and in such commonplace narratives, secular liberalism appears on the world stage as part of the political resolution to the wars of faith that followed the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹³ By way of contrast with “secularization” and “secularity,”

¹¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*; Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*; John Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory*.

¹² Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular*.

¹³ The emergence of modern secularism, however, may also be framed within a number of competing historical narratives. It has, for example, been analyzed as a function of state formation. In such a view, the imperatives of neutrality toward religious differences emerged in the seventeenth century as responses to the turmoil of confessionalization begun in the sixteenth century. Superseding the principle of *cuius regio eius religio* (roughly, “who rules a territory decides its religion”), a nascent secular state emerged blind to its subjects’ religious beliefs and practices and foreswore forcible interference with the individual consciences of its subjects in pursuit of its own interests. The state would also intervene to prevent religious associations from exercising forms of coercive power, reserving that prerogative for itself. Secularism has been cast as the product of changing political discourses. In this view, faced with the obstinate fact of religious difference, a sociopolitical vocabulary free of the principles of heresy, schism, apostasy, and scandal evolved, thereby obviating the options of persecution and forced conversion as a resolution for the forms of deep doctrinal conflict named by these principles. Shifting to still another perspective, broad patterns of sociability shifted as a correlate of this transformed political discourse. And in this view, secularism emerged as truth began to enter public contests in a different fashion, aligned with probability, tempered by skepticism, and mediated by the toleration of difference. As a result, civility flourished as a regulative norm for public intercourse as modern republican theories, practices, and sensibilities were invented and disseminated. From a theological- or church-historical perspective, the Protestant Reformation has been