

Introduction

Rethinking the Secularization of American Public Life

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WHY RETHINK SECULARIZATION?

Secularization is not a zeitgeist but a process of conflict.

RANDALL COLLINS, *The Sociology of Philosophies*

A Secular Revolution?

History is written by the victors. And for this reason, perhaps, we are not accustomed to thinking about the secularization of American public life as the successful outcome of an intentional political struggle by secularizing activists to overthrow a religious establishment's control over socially legitimate knowledge. Rather, we have been taught to think of secularization as the natural and inevitable by-product of "modernization." But this standard modernization account of secularization is moribund. In hopes of offering a more interesting and insightful explanation for the profound changes that altered American institutions between 1870 and 1930, this book explores the possibility that the secularization of American public life was in fact something much more like a contested revolutionary struggle than a natural evolutionary progression.

Thinking through the revolution analogy in the American context, we should understand the overthrown regime in this secular revolution as what we commonly think of as the nineteenth century's mainline Protestant establishment. The rebel insurgency consisted of waves of networks of activists who were largely skeptical, freethinking, agnostic, atheist, or theologically liberal; who were well educated and socially located mainly in knowledge-production occupations; and who generally espoused materialism, naturalism, positivism, and the privatization or extinction of religion. They were

motivated by a complex mix of antipathy toward the Protestant establishment's exclusivity and perceived outdatedness; by their own quasi-religious visions of secular progress, prosperity, and higher civilization; and often by the material gain that secularization promised them, for example, with the professionalization of a field that seemed to require the exclusion of religion. In different times, places, and ways, these insurgents enjoyed limited alliances with activist Protestant liberals and certain other excluded religious groups, including Roman Catholics, Mormons, Adventists, and separationist Baptists. As with most successful political insurgencies, the secular revolution was decisively abetted by a complex of distracting and debilitating internal divisions within mainline Protestantism and by other unintentionally facilitating structural forces and historical events, such as expanding capitalism, state expansion, and so on. It was also aided by the intellectually thin character of mainstream nineteenth-century Protestantism, which tended to emphasize populist common sense, subjective experience, and mass-based emotional revivalism and so failed to develop a defensible theological approach to knowledge and society that could withstand the attacks of elite challengers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

To be more precise, the secularization of American public life might be helpfully thought of as a kind of revolution in several ways. First, before the revolution, there existed an established regime whose institutional privilege and dominance provoked increasing grievances among excluded groups. Second, in response, these aggrieved groups mobilized movements to depose the established regime from its positions of control. Third, aided by a set of facilitating forces and events, these insurgent activists managed to overthrow the established regime in most quarters and to transform the institutions which it had previously dominated. Fourth, in the process of transferring power and control from the old to the new regime, this insurgency effected a profound cultural revolution which transformed cultural codes and structures of thought, expectations, and practices. In sum, macrosocial secularization in America was revolutionary in that (1) it fundamentally concerned questions of power and authority; (2) an identifiable network of insurgents intentionally and successfully struggled to displace an established power, largely against its will; and (3) the triumphant regime fundamentally transformed in many areas the cultural and institutional structures that governed the public life of the nation.

Thus, for example, the secular revolution transformed the social construction of science and its production of new knowledge from an enterprise thought compatible with and, to some extent, at the service of theism into one which considered religion to be irrelevant and often an obscuring impediment to true knowledge. The secular revolution transformed higher education from college institutions promoting a general Protestant world view and morality into universities where religious concerns were marginal-

ized in favor of the “objective,” a-religious and irreligious pursuit and transmission of knowledge and credentializing of new professions. The secular revolution transformed mass primary and secondary education from a mainline Protestant program to homogenize dissimilar social groups—that is, to “Protestantize” Catholics, Jews, and others—into a “neutral,” “non-sectarian,” secular enterprise in which religious discourse and practice are assiduously excluded through legal mandate. In public philosophy, the secular revolution deposed the mainline Protestant custodianship of public culture, with its emphasis on Christian America and moral integration, supplanting it with the liberal political theory’s “procedural republic,” in which religion is privatized and made irrelevant to public deliberations. In the judicial sphere, the secular revolution replaced the old Protestant legal supposition that religion is and should be an integral part of normal social relations which involve the state with the liberal legal doctrine that things religious are “sectarian,” that they belong exclusively to the private sphere, and that the courts must maintain a strict “wall of separation” between church and state. The secular revolution transformed the basic cultural understanding of the human self and its care, displacing the established spiritually and morally framed Protestant conception of the “care of souls” (over which the church and its agencies held jurisdiction), and establishing instead a naturalistic, psychologized model of human personhood (over which therapists and psychologists are the authorities). In the sphere of print and broadcast media, the secular revolution (aided by the interests of corporate capitalism) replaced rather pluralistic and religion-friendly modes of public discourse with a centrally owned system involving “objective” and “neutral” reporting practices, which marginalized the particularities of religious and other explicitly value-committed perspectives.

But does the revolution image really work? Misunderstandings of political revolutions and how they happen might raise concerns about political revolution as an appropriate analytical image for macrosocial secularization. Revolutions are popularly thought of as the result of explosive emotional grievances reacting against an established regime; as sudden and dramatic events that result from people’s losing patience with the old system and finally deciding to mobilize to take power; as involving a unitary, well-organized cadre of insurgents who struggle together to topple an old government; as propelled by the extraordinary efforts of history-making leaders (like Lenin, Mao Tse-tung, George Washington); as always accomplished through armed violence, in which members of the overthrown regime are executed, imprisoned, or physically exiled; and as complete overthrows of established regimes and comprehensive transformations of sociopolitical systems. These images make it difficult to think of secularization as revolution, since most secularizing agents cannot be fairly characterized as emotionally explosive actors; since the secularization of American

public life was not a sudden event, but an extended process; since the process of secularization certainly must be explained by structural factors and unintended consequences in addition to the intentional actions of certain actors; since the activists propelling secularization were many, diverse, and sometimes at best loosely networked; since secularization was not clearly the result of the actions of only a few identifiable leaders; since secularization did not involve guns and bombs, nor were leaders of the Protestant establishment physically executed¹; and since the deposing of the Protestant establishment was a less than complete accomplishment, varying in extent in different areas of public life.

However, studies of political revolutions tell us that these popular images are often misinformed. Revolutions certainly involve emotional grievances, but they also entail dispassionate, rational, strategic actions by revolutionaries. Political revolutions are seldom won by unitary, consolidated organizations of insurgents, but usually by conglomerations of diverse, often disconnected, and typically competing opposition groups. No revolution succeeds merely by the efforts of famous individual leaders, or even by the intentional actions of rebel groups, however important they may be; success requires multilayered complexities of partisans, allies, facilitating resources, mobilizing organizations, structured political opportunities, and so on, which often operate with irony and unintended consequences. Furthermore, not all political revolutions are accomplished through armed violence; some—such as the overthrow of Filipino dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986 and Czechoslovakia’s “Velvet Revolution” of 1991—are achieved without violence and bloodshed. In addition, not all revolutions execute, imprison, or exile their deposed enemies, who are sometimes merely deprived of power and forced to live marginal lives. Moreover, not all political revolutions are complete and comprehensive—some never entirely displace elements of the old regime from positions of influence and thus fail to consolidate fully their revolutionary programs. Finally, it is wrong to view revolutions as happening suddenly and dramatically; they are usually aided by long-term structural and organizational shifts and sometimes take years and even decades to come to fruition.

The secularization of American public life might be thought of as a kind of revolution insofar as it fundamentally concerned questions of power and authority. An identifiable network of insurgents intentionally and largely successfully struggled to displace an established power; and the triumphant regime significantly transformed the cultural and institutional structures that governed the public life of the nation. Even so, if we are to think about secularization as a kind of revolution, we must consider it as accomplished in uneven stages over decades in a series of ongoing “campaigns” by a loosely connected network of activists. It was intentional, rational, and strategic, but simultaneously made successful through the facilitation of

propitious external structural forces and unintended effects. This secular revolution was achieved in part by well-known leaders, but also by a multitude of unrenowned partisans and allies. And, although its success was decisive, it was not absolute and entirely complete. Thus, we might argue that the secular revolution was a *distinctive kind* of revolution, but a real political, cultural, and institutional revolution nonetheless.

Again, we are not used to thinking about the secularization of modern public life as a kind of political revolution. But that may be partly because most of those who have theorized and narrated secularization for us, frequently like the historians of “real” political revolutions, are themselves socially situated vis-à-vis that secular revolution. Their stories are told from a particular perspective—one which encourages us to think about secularization not as a revolution, but instead as a natural and inevitable historical process.

Why Even Think about Secularization?

Many scholars have become bored with or frustrated by secularization theory. They say, often with good reason, that it is too broad and analytically unhelpful to be worth paying much attention to. Some are even prepared to drop the concept from sociological vocabulary altogether. So why might attention to secularization now be worth the effort?

Certain considerations suggest that a rethinking of secularization in fact might prove rewarding. For one thing, the idea of secularization still persists in the sociological conceptual repertoire, however much in the backwaters, and emerges recurrently—sometimes ritualistically—in everything from introductory sociology textbooks to sophisticated sociological analyses that touch only tangentially on religious change. Moreover, scholars from other fields, such as history, continue to rely with varying degrees of explicitness on sociological secularization theory in their work. Between 1985 and 1999 alone, for example, 51 American Ph.D. students wrote dissertations about secularization specifically, and 314 wrote dissertations using secularization as a central analytical concept.² But if conventional secularization theory is defective, as its critics suggest, then it does no good to sociology—or any other discipline which employs the idea—passively to allow it to linger, like some embarrassingly eccentric uncle that nobody in the family will ask to leave. Better to revise secularization theory or abandon it.

A more important reason to rethink macro-level secularization theory afresh, and not simply to neglect or automatically discard it, is that something real at the level of macrosocial change, which secularization theory has tried to theorize, has actually happened in history, and we need to account for and understand that change. There are indeed some very important ways in which the influence of religion in the institutions and practices

of public life at the macro level has in fact been diminished in the modern West. Most of sociology's founding thinkers—Comte, Durkheim, Weber, Toennies, Marx, Simmel—recognized this and wrote more than a little about it. It may be that the theory of secularization we have inherited is flawed. But that does not mean that the macrosocial transformations which that theory attempted to describe and explain were not real and important.³ In some circles it is unfashionable to talk about secularization as religious decline; the focus instead is on the “relocation” or “restructuring” of religion. But this language too easily misses real historical changes in the cultural authority and control of resources that religion has enjoyed. We are not altogether wrong to consider macrosocial secularization as including real forms of decline. If so, we should not disregard the project of theorizing macrosocial secularization, but rather work to revise the theory itself to be adequate for making sense of the real social transformations that the theory has long sought to explain.

A third reason for rethinking macro-level secularization theory is somewhat more “practical”: the question of what role, if any, religion should play in American public life has reasserted itself with new urgency and importance. The final two decades of the twentieth century witnessed a resurgence of publicly engaged religions in the United States and around the globe. Observers in mid-twentieth-century America might have assumed that the remains of religion in the modern world had been privatized, relegated to the sphere of personal preference and interest.⁴ But religion seems to have since reawakened and reasserted itself with new vigor in American public life. This occurrence has produced an abundance of creative and significant philosophical, legal, and theological reflections on the question of religion's proper role in the public sphere.⁵ Many accomplished philosophers, theologians, and legal scholars have advanced a variety of incisive arguments rethinking the normative issues, providing much-needed clarification and elaboration, enlivening and enriching the debate, and advancing the state of thinking on the matter. But this robust and growing body of normative literature has not been matched by an equally illuminating body of scholarship in sociology on the issues in question. Historical sociology could very well contribute to public deliberations about religion's role in American public life an enhanced understanding of where we have come from, where we have come to, and how and why we got from there to here.⁶ This sociological-historical perspective could surely illuminate a debate often marked by more heat than light. But sociologists have been nearly silent on the matter—at best producing a variety of uneven contemporary analyses of the “Religious Right.” One reason why sociologists have not stepped up to this challenge and opportunity, so relevant to a question pressing with increasing urgency, is that the dominant theoretical tradition

which historically has framed the question of religion in public life for sociologists—secularization theory—is not adequate to the task. Its assumptions, causal logic, and substantive conclusions have little of interest to contribute to the discussion. If sociology is to advance anything valuable to contemporary debates about the proper role of religion in public life, it will first have to rethink its theory of macro-level secularization.

Secularization theory has for decades been the object of criticism (see, e.g., Martin 1969). But in recent years secularization theory has come under particular attack from a specific perspective, as it has become apparent that in the United States and elsewhere—at least by some measures—religion does not appear to be withering away. Finke and Stark (1992), for example, have shown that American history is one of ever-increasing church adherence. And Smith et al. (1998) have argued that American evangelicalism is thriving as a religious movement not despite the forces of secular modernity but in part precisely because of them. But these most recent critiques of secularization theory argue primarily at the micro level of individual belief and practice. Few of them address the organizational and macrosocial levels of secularization (see Dobbelaere 1981; Chaves 1994). On the one hand, the idea that religion has lost its significance and influence at the macro-institutional level of political, legal, educational, and economic life remains widely accepted. On the other hand, few contemporary scholars are happy with the theory that purports to explain this change. We need fundamentally to rethink macro-level secularization—as others have already reconsidered individual-level secularization—in order to develop a more satisfactory theoretical account of the historical evidence.

Problematizing the Secularization of American Public Life

Besides this rationale for rethinking secularization theory, a series of other considerations help to problematize the historical secularization of American public life in interesting ways. First, there is the curious contrast between the relative importance of religion in the lives of the vast majority of ordinary Americans versus the predominant irrelevance and absence (in some cases, exclusion) of religion in most institutions of public life. In 1993, according to the General Social Survey, for example, 77 percent of adult Americans said that faith in God was either “very important” or “one of the most important” things to them personally, yet relatively few traces of or responses to people’s religious faith could be found, for example, in the public schools that educate their children. America is often observed as being at once the most religious and the most secular nation on earth. Whether or not this is precisely so, it is clear that the religious concerns of the majority of Americans are at best dimly reflected in the public spheres

of education, business, law, government, mass media, and so on, which constitute the largely unavoidable institutional contexts in which much of their lives are lived. Americans disagree vehemently about whether this is a good or bad thing. But that does not change the fact: one need not be a Christian Right activist to recognize that religion is quite prevalent and strong among ordinary Americans, but largely absent in many of the institutions of American public life. This strength and absence may be correlated: given the positions and interests of the relevant actors involved, the strength of religion “on the ground” may itself have encouraged its removal by secular elites from the institutions of public life.

A second and related consideration that interestingly problematizes America’s historical experience of macrosocial secularization is the comparative observation that the role of religion in public life in many other countries—including Western industrialized countries—is not like its role in the United States. A few examples will suffice: in the Netherlands—hardly a religiously overrun country—the government publicly funds on a nondiscriminatory basis Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Hindu, Islamic, and private secular schools, which are formally free to be as religious or nonreligious as they wish. Likewise, in Australia the state finances Catholic, Anglican, Jewish, Lutheran, Adventist, Baptist, Pentecostal, Hare Krishna, as well as nonreligious private schools. Meanwhile, the German welfare state relies heavily on religious organizations in its delivery of health care and social services. In fact, when viewed in a comparative perspective, the United States is rather unique in its insistent removal of religion from state functions, especially educational ones (see Monsma and Soper 1997). This of course raises the point of historical non-inevitability: because things are different elsewhere, they perhaps might have turned out differently here. Indeed, in the future they still could become different, which is why Americans vehemently disagree about the matter: they have an interested stake in different outcomes that are real possibilities. For present purposes, this historical non-inevitability makes all the more interesting the question of exactly what social forces caused the American experience to turn out in the distinctive way that it did, and not in some other way.

A third factor to pique our interest in these matters is the retrospective observation that many of the justifications originally given for the historical secularization of American public life now appear to us so many years later to be hopelessly untenable. It might be the positivist Auguste Comte’s simplistic, three-stage theory of social evolution, which easily abandons religions to the dustbin of primitive history. It might be University of Chicago President William Rainey Harper’s 1905 optimism that the university’s replacement of faith-grounded theological studies with “scientific” studies of religion would actually *strengthen* students’ personal esteem for religion by associating religion with science instead of with women:

If the university promotes the [scientific] study of religion, a larger respect and appreciation will be accorded these subjects by students as well as by people at large, because the problems are problems on which learned and scientific men are at work. An influence will be set at work to counteract the marked tendency . . . [to think] religious feeling is something peculiar to women and weak men. (quoted in Reuben 1996: 100)

Or it might be nearly any of the other myriad explanations and legitimations that were advanced by secularizers along the way—which one repeatedly encounters in studying this history—as to why traditional religion should be moved out of the institutions of public life. In case after case, arguments that were once crucial in effecting secularization we would now regard as pathetically naive and often illegitimate. Realizing that our society’s course of action on an important matter has been guided by what turn out to be naive beliefs and erroneous arguments, it is intellectually fascinating to reconstruct more clearly why and how our forebears took that historical course of action and perhaps reasonable to consider whether or not it is sensible now to continue that course of action.

Fourth, and related to the previous point, the contemporary view of historians of science about the relationship between religious faith and science also ought to prompt in us an interest in rethinking macrosocial secularization in America. A popular view of the science-religion issue pits the two in an enduring “warfare” of fact against faith. Science and religion in this perspective are thought of as two antithetical means to knowledge, inherently incompatible kinds of claims to truth that have been ever battling each other for human allegiance. This common view, however, turns out to be less a reflection of historical reality, and more an interest-driven ideological frame first promoted by certain late-Victorian academics—most notably New York University chemist John William Draper, who in 1874 published *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*; and Cornell University’s first president, Andrew Dickson White, who in 1896 published *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (also see Shipley 1927). University of California sociologist Stephen Shapin, in *The Scientific Revolution*, a masterful synthesis of the historical literature, observes, “It has been a very long time since these [“warfare”] attitudes have been held by historians of science.” Rather, Shapin says, in the historiography of science, “the intimate connections between science and religion have been a leading concern” (1996: 195). According to the seminal work of University of Wisconsin historians David Lindberg and Ronald Numbers, *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science*, recent decades have seen “a developing consensus among scholars that Christianity and science had not been at war” (1986: 6; see Turner 1978).⁷

Histories less biased by the “warfare” lens show instead, for example, that the Catholic Church was in fact not a particular enemy of science (Shapin:

“There is no longer any sustainable and interesting sense in which it can be said that the Catholic Church was ‘unscientific’ or even unambiguously opposed to ‘the new science’” [1996: 198]). They show, for instance, that most of the early leaders of the Scientific Revolution were theists, if not Christians, who viewed science and religious faith as mutually reinforcing (Shapin again: “In speaking about the purposes of changing natural knowledge in the seventeenth century, it is obligatory to treat its uses in *supporting* and *extending* broadly religious aims. There was *no such thing* as a necessary seventeenth-century conflict between science and religion” [1996: 136; italics in original]). And they show, for example, that nineteenth-century orthodox Christians engaged evolutionary geology and biology not with simple obscurantist antagonism but by articulating a broad range of complex positions, including quite supportive perspectives (Lindberg and Numbers: “Reconcilers experienced little difficulty accommodating the testimony of the rocks. When conflict occurred, it was not along a simple line separating scientists and clerics. . . . The issues raised by Darwin also provoked widespread controversy . . . but the conflicts surrounding Darwin were far more complex than the science-versus-religion formula suggests” [1986: 13–14]; also see Livingstone 1987; Moore 1979; Dupree 1986). Randall Collins says it succinctly: “Science is theologically neutral” (1998: 571).

Two points here are relevant. First, the received “warfare” view of religion and science is not a useful assumption that should frame our historical analysis. Rather we ought to view it as one of the ideological moves of late-nineteenth-century activist secularizers, itself historical data which we need to examine and understand as part of the secular revolution. To be clear: central to the vision of this book is the idea of a political struggle between various religious and secular activists.⁸ But that was a struggle for social status and institutional control by identifiable contending social groups, *not* an inherent logical warfare between faith and science—a key distinction to bear in mind. Second, if science and religion are *not* in fact inherently incompatible and mutually hostile ways of knowing, then the secularization of America’s public institutions becomes all the more curious. One of the key rationales for secularization was the categorical distinction constructed between science as objective and truthful versus religion as irrational and obscurantist. But if this distinction is problematic, we might, as suggested above, wish to rethink the significant political and institutional uses to which it was put.

A fifth consideration that helps problematize America’s historical experience of macrosocial secularization is an important development in philosophy that parallels the preceding observations about the history of science and religion. For centuries, many philosophers have—typically assuming some version of classical foundationalism⁹—prevailed in arguing that religious faith and belief in God are irrational, that religion fails to sat-

isfy the criteria of reliable knowledge or warranted commitment. That view is now changing. Classical foundationalism has in recent decades withered under a broad series of cogent attacks. And a group of leading philosophers in epistemology and the philosophy of religion—especially William Alston of Syracuse University, Alvin Plantinga of Notre Dame University, and Nicholas Wolterstorff of Yale University—have elaborated a school of thought known as “Reformed Epistemology.” Their approach contends that religious faith and belief in God are *not* irrational, but rational, certainly no less rationally warranted than agnosticism or atheism.¹⁰ Some skeptical philosophers still contest Reformed Epistemology—a normal process in working out the significance of any major shift in thinking. But Reformed Epistemology has decisively altered the terms of the debate. The burden is now on those who believe in religion’s particular irrationality to defend that position. Meanwhile, many philosophers have been persuaded. Even atheist philosopher Richard Rorty has conceded Reformed Epistemology’s accomplishment: “Plantinga’s *God and Other Minds* is quite convincing on many points, and I admire Wolterstorff’s *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*. . . . I admire them both as remarkable philosophers . . . [who] show why we atheists should stop praising ourselves for being more ‘rational’ than theists. On this point they seem to me quite right.”¹¹ If Reformed Epistemology is right, then a crucial historical, philosophical rationale for the secularization of American public life evaporates. If religious beliefs are in fact particularly irrational, unwarranted, and unreliable, it makes sense to bar them from informing public debate or shaping public institutions. Religion should be sequestered to people’s private lives—for those who still insist on clinging to such superstitions—or better yet, discarded altogether. However, if religious beliefs are, as Reformed Epistemology claims, no less rational, warranted, or epistemically reliable than basic nonreligious commitments, then it is unclear why religious views should be automatically excluded from public debates and institutions—at least for the reason of religion’s supposed irrationality. And it is therefore all the more intellectually enticing a puzzle to try to reconstruct more clearly, in this light, how and why secularization history unfolded the way it did.

This book lays out a theoretical framework for a “secular revolution” approach to macrosocial secularization, and examines a set of specific institutions to see how this analytical approach might work in particular cases. This work is a provisional start in a new direction of analysis, not a final or comprehensive alternative theoretical statement. It intends to alter the way we make sense of the historical secularization of the institutions of public life. But it is only among the first steps to that end. The next section clears theoretical ground for a secular movement analysis by critically examining problems in the old secularization theory. The final section of this introduction elaborates a broad analytical framework for an alternative secular

movement approach. Chapter 2 and those that follow continue by presenting specific historical case studies that engage and evaluate the proposed secular movement framework with regard to specific fields and institutions, to see in what ways it might improve our understanding of the historical secularization of American public life.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH SECULARIZATION THEORY?

Reason is no abstract force pushing inexorably toward greater freedom at the end of history. Its forms and uses are determined by the narrower purposes of men and women; their interests and ideals shape even what counts as knowledge.

PAUL STARR, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*

If we want to think more clearly about the secularization of American public life, we should begin by thinking critically about traditional secularization theory. By assessing what is wrong with the old theory, we may be better able to formulate a new approach that is more useful. This section critiques the once-dominant secularization theory, and then attempts to develop an alternative analytical framework for understanding the secularization of American public life.

On "Differentiation"

The two fundamental images of social change that are most frequently employed in social theory to explain secularization are "rationalization" and "differentiation." The main classical source of the rationalization approach is the work of Max Weber, and the primary spring of the differentiation perspective is that of Emile Durkheim. These two basic images often intermingle in secularization accounts and also sometimes combine with other images—the literature has often not been careful to specify which levels (micro/individual, meso/organizational, or macro/societal) and processes (implausibility, differentiation, accommodation, etc.) of secularization are under consideration. Broadly speaking, however, rationalization is often used to explain individual-level loss of religious belief, commitment, or orthodoxy. Differentiation is often employed to explain macrosocial-level decline in religious authority and jurisdiction, the result of which is said to be religious privatization.¹² Although individual-level theories of secularization have in recent years suffered increasingly damaging criticism (e.g., Finke and Stark 1992; Smith et al. 1998), it is this project's primary focus to rethink secularization at the macrosocial level, which requires us to reconsider the key image of differentiation.

That theorists usually conceptualized macrosocial secularization fundamentally as differentiation is clear. David Martin, for example, writes that "[t]he church becomes partially differentiated from other institutional

spheres: such as justice, ideological legitimation, the state apparatus, social control, education, welfare; and . . . this is paralleled by a compartmentalization of an individual's religious role which may encourage a range of variation in personal religion which contributes to institutional disintegration" (1978: 3). Peter Berger puts the matter in simpler terms: "By secularization we mean the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols" (1967: 107). Karel Dobbelaere conceives of secularization "as a process of laicization, conceptualized as a process of differentiation, i.e. a process of growing independence of institutional spheres (such as politics, education, economy, and science), each developing its own rationale, which implies the rejection of the over-arching claim of religion. . . . Secularization is basically a consequence of a differentiation process that results in a process of specialization of sub-structures" (1981: 14, 31). In the same work, Dobbelaere writes that "[l]aicization . . . is a process in which autonomous institutional 'ideologies' replace, within their own domain, an over-arching and transcendent universe of norms. Church religion, an institutionally specialized social form of religion, is pushed to the periphery of modern industrial societies" (15). Bryan Wilson concurs, arguing that "[t]he presidency that the Church once exercised over social life has gone, as other agencies have assumed the functions that it once fulfilled" (1976: 16). And Thomas Luckmann advances the same perspective, suggesting that "[t]he relation between industrialization and secularization is indirect. . . . Industrialization and urbanization were processes that reinforced the tendency of institutional specialization. Institutional specialization, in turn, tended to 'free' the norms of the various institutional areas from the influence of the originally superordinated 'religious' values" (1967: 39).

It is important for our purposes, however, to recall that the notion of differentiation in sociological theory came under a barrage of criticism in the 1960s and 1970s. As part of the collapse of structural-functionalism and modernization theory's postwar theoretical dominance, the concept of differentiation, which comprised macrosocial secularization's fundamental explanatory image, was attacked and undermined by sharp critics. By the mid-1970s, Jeffrey Alexander notes, "Differentiation theory was given up for dead" (1990: 10).¹³ What killed it, says Alexander, was its "lack of phase-specific analysis, its failure to address institutional and structural levels, [and] its negation of process" (8). Attempts have been made to revive and revise differentiation theory (e.g., Rueschemeyer 1977; Rhoades 1990), almost all of which contend for the need to pay closer attention to the role of power, agency, and elites in the differentiation process. These are precisely some of the factors that the next section attempts to bring back into secularization theory.¹⁴ To be clear, the position here is that "differentiation" may well describe a general process at work in secularization, but that, taken

by itself, the idea is badly incomplete; one of the tasks of this book is to elaborate in more concrete analytical terms the hows and whys of differentiation in secularization. Before moving to that discussion, however, we need first to conduct a more thorough and general critical accounting of the defects of the old secularization theory. We need to know more exactly what is wrong with secularization theory that makes it so uninteresting and unhelpful. Here I review seven specific defects.

Seven Defects

Traditional secularization theory suffers from (1) far too much abstraction; (2) a lack of human agency; (3) a sense of over-deterministic inevitability; (4) an orientation (primarily among historians) of idealist intellectual history; (5) an over-romanticization of the religious past; (6) an overemphasis on religious self-destruction; and (7) an under-specification of the causal mechanisms of secularization.

1. *Over-Abstraction*

First, secularization theory is often cast in abstract terms that mask important historical specificities. In a review article in which he claims that sociologists “underestimate the degree of coherence that obtains in the writings on secularization,” Oliver Tschannen summarizes the main conceptual elements of the “secularization paradigm.” These include “differentiation,” “autonomization,” “privatization,” “generalization,” “pluralization,” “scientization,” and “sociologization” (1991: 413, 401). Many of these terms border on the abstruse. Other theorists discuss “transcendentalization,” “historization,” “societalization,” and other recondite conceptual abstractions in their works. Of course theories by definition entail abstractions. But the over-abstraction that often characterizes secularization theory obscures concrete social and political factors crucial to understanding the matter in question—including specific historical actors, interests, ideologies, cultural codes, institutions, resources, power relations, and so on. In this way, our view of how and why the role of religion in American public life has been transformed is clouded rather than enlightened.

2. *Lack of Human Agency*

Often as a result of its conceptual over-abstraction, secularization theory suffers from lack of human agency in historical process. Typically, it offers transformation without protagonists, action without actors, historical process without agents. Rarely do we hear of interest- and norm-driven parties proactively struggling together and at odds to accomplish goals, to reform institutions, to transform social structures. Seldom do secularization ac-

counts involve historical agents who, for example, take strategic actions to edge religion out of public life. Instead, we hear of broad social processes and forces as causes and encounter passively phrased summaries (“the declining importance of religion,” “the reduction of religion’s authority”) as effects. Occasionally, even secularization theorists recognize this flaw. Karel Dobbelaere, for example, writes,

Too little attention has been paid to the question of just which people in just which social positions became the “sacralizers” or the “secularizers” in given situations. . . . Laicization is not a mechanical process to be imputed to impersonal and abstract forces. It is . . . carried out by people and groups who manifestly want to laicize society and its sub-structures. . . . Secularization as laicization is the result of opposing interest groups. (1981: 61, 67, 69)

But the tradition as a whole has not corrected itself on this point—even Dobbelaere most recently uses the passive “is being reduced” (1999: 232) to define secularization. In some cases, secularization theorists are actually at pains to deny human agency in the process. Warren Nord’s lucid synopsis of secularization theory, for example, makes a point of saying that “[t]he secularization of the modern world is not the work of secularists. . . . It was not secularists that secularized the world—it was Protestantism and pluralism, science and technology, economic and political liberalism. Indeed, the secularization of modern civilization was largely unintended” (1995: 39). This absence of human agency, however, is theoretically inadequate. It submerges from view a host of important historical, intentional struggles, movements, social constructions, and accomplishments responsible for the formation of our contemporary situation regarding religion and public life.

3. *Over-Deterministic Inevitability*

Secularization theory suffers from a strong sense of over-deterministic inevitability, as if the historical outcome were destined by an inexorable fate. Shaped somewhat by functionalism’s tautological predisposition to view everything social that exists as serving a necessary social function that itself explains its existence, much secularization theory typically conveys the impression that the “functional requisites” of a modern society necessitated the historical privatization of religion.¹⁵ Religion’s marginalization from public life is portrayed as a natural and inevitable process like cell mitosis or adolescent puberty (again, functionalism’s heavy conceptual reliance on biological and corporatist metaphors is evident; positivist, linear social evolutionism in the tradition of Comte and Spencer are also discernable here). Typically, this sense of inevitability is implicit in secularization analyses, but sometimes it manifests itself explicitly. Durkheim foreshadowed the mentality when he wrote, “If there is one truth that history teaches us beyond