
Secularity, Spirituality, and Liberal Arts Education

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As director of a Religious and Spiritual Life Office at a leading secular liberal arts college, I've come to see the question of secularity in campus life as a critical lens for understanding how higher education shapes student belief and practice. At most U.S. campuses, the encounter with the secularity of higher education is a defining experience. What's startling about our present moment is that the "secularization thesis," a theory widely accepted in the West since the early 20th Century, has now become a much contested question. Most briefly put, the secularization thesis is the notion that as societies modernize, religion falls away. A host of now-also-questioned assumptions accompany this notion, including that the past was more religious than the present, and that there is a clear "dichotomy between sacred tradition and secular modernity, assuming the more of one, the less of the other."¹ While important debates continue about what counts as evidence of changes in secularity or religiosity, there's wide acceptance on all sides that religion hasn't gone away. So now the confident thesis—the more modern, the more secular—has become an unresolved question.

In this essay, I use the sometimes strange world of higher education chaplaincy as a lens into current debates about secularization's relation to modernity. As director of Religious and Spiritual Life at a secularly defined liberal arts campus, I've learned that an important part of my work is to help students begin to see that their felt difficulty with questions of religious identity is not unique to them, or peculiar to our college, but part of contested historical efforts to safeguard the interplay of religious, political, and public spheres. The secularization thesis is an important part of this history. As we turn needed attention to questions of religious diversity and student spirituality, we also need to think critically about the forces that construct the unstable secular frame through which we're considering our surprise at religion's tenacity. As new attention is given to the religious life of undergraduates, I argue that one important place to start is by paying more attention to the contested secular ethos in which they learn.

I begin by outlining a history of secularization in my own context at a secularly defined liberal arts college. I then turn to current efforts to revise the secularization thesis as religion's privatization, using admittedly anecdotal evidence to show how difficult it is to know what even counts as

evidence in this debate. While much remains unresolved, the debate points at clear problems with the ways in which religious life is framed in higher education. These challenges provide a new opening for both religious and secular voices to contribute unexpectedly to current efforts to enliven liberal arts education as a democratic force.

Secularization in Higher Education: a Brief Local History

As Talal Asad has shown, secularity has become a kind of organizing principle of Western modernity, experienced by some as a mechanism for keeping religion out of public life. Part of the difficulty of even thinking about secular assumptions is that, as Asad has observed, secularity is “so much a part of our modern life, it is not easy to grasp directly.”² The Latin root of secular means *age* or *of this age*, and this root meaning is reflected in the widespread understanding that secular means *this-worldly*—referring to, in Asad’s terms, “a direct access to reality,” a needed “disenchantment,” a “stripping away of myth, magic, and the sacred.”³ At its best, the ideal of secularity is a form of discourse that allows people who do not share worldviews to discuss and debate our shared public life. Yet these needed modes of discourse send students conflicting signals, honoring and limiting their exploration of their religious identities.

Our notions of the secular have their roots in questions of church and state, where originally the secular referred to the distinction the church wanted to keep between its ecclesiastical authority over things eternal and the temporal powers of this-worldly leaders and their institutions. It’s worth remembering here that secular comes from the Latin for “age.” Whereas originally the distinctions the term marks between temporal and religious governance pointed at the church’s higher authority (and greater land holdings), its modern use points at the declining influence of religious authority. In the modern uses that developed with the Enlightenment, and the rise of science and technology, secularization referred to the process by which state, market, and educational institutions freed themselves of a church whose authority had become authoritarian. Wars of religion had made clear the dangers of religious power in state hands. At the beginning of the 20th Century, a new discipline—sociology—described these developments as a necessary disenchantment; the promise of new knowledge in science, technology, economics, democracy was thought to usher in an age of rational humanism and, in Max Weber’s new term in 1910, “secularization.” This secularization was seen as a universal, a necessary process for societies that wanted to be part of the promise of a new era of human progress.⁴

Higher education was at the center of this new optimism. If William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1903) pointed at the emerging crisis of belief and unbelief in modernity,⁵ higher education still regularly turned to liberal clergy for their leadership—where *liberal* here means open to relating the new claims of modernity to the longstanding but now questioned claims of religious traditions. The first four presidents of Vassar College where I serve were all clergy (from 1861-1914). Yet the history of my office after these clerical presidents seems to confirm the secularization thesis’s confidence about the declining influence of religious authority over U.S. social institutions. After the turn away from the president-clergy leadership model, the college created a chaplaincy with faculty responsibilities. This model was eventually further secularized,

transforming the chaplaincy into an “Office”—first of “Religious Activities and Chaplaincy Services,” and then, shortly before I came, of “Religious and Spiritual Life.” In the debates surrounding the transition from the chaplaincy to the Office of Religious Activities and Chaplaincy Services, some faculty and administrators called for letting go of the office altogether. Not surprisingly, this confidence in the secularization thesis was being voiced in the late 1970’s and early 80’s, before people started trying to reckon with the apparent resurgence of religion during the last quarter of the 20th Century.

For the past two and a half decades, my office has been overseen not by a chaplain, but a director—and a director who need not have clergy status and who is not a member of the faculty. People on campus continue to be surprised that I am an ordained pastor, even as they seem relieved that I’ve been trained to speak out of more than managerial traditions in times of life and death, and national crisis. This latest name change—from “Religious Activities and Chaplaincy Services” to the present “Religious and Spiritual Life”—reflects Charles Taylor’s observations about the ongoing decoupling of religious life from its wider social affiliations.⁶ For the college has taken out the institutionally-inflected language of the previous title, opening the way to see religious and spiritual life on campus in the individual’s experience. I’m told that part of the faculty meeting debate about this name change included concern that the new title, “Religious and Spiritual Life,” implied that the college itself has a religious and spiritual life—a claim that would be at odds with our self-perceived secularity. So it becomes important to make clear that I direct not the college’s religious and spiritual life, but its *Office* of Religious and Spiritual Life. This distinction makes clear that my office is an entity designed to meet the needs of some members of our community—without imposing the notion that our campus could come to any agreement about the religious and spiritual character of our collective life.

Privitization—the New Secularization Thesis

This turn to spirituality as a form of expressive individualism points to recent efforts to retain the secularization thesis by revising it. Secularization is now seen by some not as the decline of religion, but as its transformation, and specifically its privatization. Jose Casanova summarizes this position as the argument that privatized religion is a “normative condition, indeed...a precondition for modern liberal democratic politics.”⁷ Privatization thus becomes an attempt to hold on to a version of the secularization thesis—religion’s displacement in modernity—while at the same time accounting for religion’s continuing vitality, albeit in privatized forms. A closer look at practices on my own campus reveals a host of tensions surrounding the notion that modernity and many liberal arts campuses require religion to become a personal and private choice.

The administrative ritual on many campuses of the “religious preference card” seems a good example of the privatizing presuppositions of higher education. This card is part of an annual practice of some twenty years that I inherited and continue, in which I ask incoming first year students to tell us about their past and present religious affiliations. I explain that the card has two purposes; one is to help us keep some record of the student religious landscape, and the other is to connect students with the communities they tell me they want to hear from. I promise that I will keep such information private, and only give their information to the campus communities

they indicate as their “preference.”

This “religious preference card” thus reveals ways higher education socializes students into understanding religion as a personal choice. Such socialization may be the first time some students experience their religion in this way. My campus is thus a symptomatic location for the production of religion’s privatization. Those of us interested in how students experience religion on campuses today need to address the ways we socialize students into this “acceptably” secular understanding of the role of religion.

This understanding of religion as personal preference sits easier with some students than with others. For some, learning that they are to regard religion as an aspect of their private person is fairly consistent with how they have come to think of themselves as individuals with a range of social, political, and cultural affiliations. With others, however, it sits less easily. Students for whom this socialization into religion as private choice is especially difficult include: first generation college goers, so-called “nontraditional” students, students who have attended religious schools, international students from places where religion is not merely one among many cultural attributes.⁸ They sense that public religion is unsmart, certainly uncool. They haven’t before experienced religion as an aspect of themselves that is assumed to be backward, over-with, irrelevant or socially marginal. The diminishing of religion to private experience is unfamiliar and painful, and they then feel—and rightly so—that the understanding of religion that they brought to campus was somehow illegitimate. They feel a bit illegitimate as well.

Given these experiences, it is not surprising that I hear from some students that they find my campus a “difficult place to be religious”—though at first glance it may be surprising that I hear this not only from religiously observant students, but also from students from religiously liberal backgrounds. My experience is that this is usually one version or another of students encountering the secularity of higher education, especially the tensions surrounding whether or not religion is best privatized in campus life, and American cultural life. The challenge for chaplaincy programs is to respond to these valid complaints (this is a difficult context in which to be religious) with circumspect understanding about what makes this context difficult and what makes spiritual commitments within it practicable. Part of this response means reflecting on what students mean when they describe such difficulty. Is such difficulty a problem? Should it be easy?

Often there seems to be a preference, both by students and the general campus ethos, to keep spiritual activities pleasantly social. This can be seen in the ways religious and cultural life programs provide opportunities for like-minded students to gather together over meals, outings, discussions, and services. In this sense, initiatives like the religious preference card can and should be seen as part of positive efforts to support religious life, to help spiritually-minded students find companions and mentors who can nurture their religious identity. On my campus, and generally in the literature on spirituality and higher education, there is an increasing realization that questions of religious identity need to be integrated into other forms of social, cultural, and communal identity. These examples of communal spiritual life enrich and complicate our notions of campuses as religiously privatizing; they provide alternative publics that belie our assumed secularity.

Often the assumption is that diversity initiatives are the way to integrate religious life into the fabric of campus life. Yet the experience of the “non-traditional” students I describe above raises important questions about this approach. Are the dynamics of religious practice, exploration, or conviction equivalent or analogous to understanding one’s racial, ethnic, cultural, sexual or class identity? I support inclusion of religious practices into discussions of how campuses can more adequately provide resources for the diversity of its student body. Yet a strategy of supporting and appreciating diverse religious identities as a means of making spiritual life more fully part of campus life seems ultimately incomplete. For this effort to add religion to diversity initiatives runs the risk of missing what’s really at issue in the difficulty people report in being “religious” in secularized contexts of higher education. For while ethnic “identities” can be secularized and remain at least inhabitable and coherent, religious experience and practice, when secularized, is no longer religious, or becomes something else not easily recognized in our usual ways of thinking about what is religious and what is secular. Another way to put this dilemma is to note how the effort to integrate religion into campus diversity efforts bumps up against the debates about whether privatized religion is, or should be, a norm for campus life. We feel this unresolved debate about religion’s privatization on campus especially in evangelical Christian communities whose racial diversity liberal campuses want to support, but whose questions about privatized religion challenge campus secular norms.

The effort to integrate such questions of religious identity into diversity initiatives points at developments that counter the claim that campuses privatize religion; yet the tension around integrating such questions into the heart of campus life—its intellectual life—supports arguments that campuses are privatizing. In either case, it’s hard to know what makes a convincing case that religion is or isn’t privatized on campus. Crucially, the tensions surrounding all sides of the privatizing debate point at underlying ambivalences—at what Charles Taylor has described as the continuing and still unresolved debate about belief and unbelief in modernity. Sometimes it’s this debate itself that’s privatized, kept quiet. Yet higher education’s ambivalence about whether and how we can talk about a religious dimension in history or public life is itself now under scrutiny. To considerable publicity, a Harvard curriculum committee has recently proposed making the study of religion a required course. Such recommendations point at remarkably changed assumptions about religions in modernity. Yet more attention is still needed on campus to the separations produced by religions’ secularization or privatization. In particular, it is critical to explore what intellectual resources can help students integrate their questions of commitment and practice, of learning and life calling. As Taylor has also noted, the dilemmas involved in such work to understand our sources for justice or human flourishing are not somehow made less problematic by removing the richly complex resources of religious traditions from the discussion.⁹

Spirituality—Is It Religious or Secular?

The privatization of religion might be said to find its fullest expression in the turn to a growing range of spiritual practices now more publicly visible on our campuses. Do such practices—including yoga or mindfulness-based stress reduction—confirm the notion that religion is on the decline? Is this what the campus mantra, “I’m spiritual but not religious” means? One of the

important debates today among leading sociologists is about whether or not spirituality is on the rise on our campuses. A recent national study defines spirituality (with no apparent irony) as what “points to our interiors, our subjective life, as contrasted to the objective domain of material events and objects.” The study’s findings include that nearly 80% of students report that this broad definition describes them—and human beings generally.¹⁰ The problem here is the question of how the boundaries of the “spiritual” are to be understood, and of what thus counts as evidence of an increase in spirituality (or secularity, or religiosity). Challenging the study mentioned above, Robert Wuthnow has argued that there is no such thing as “generic spirituality,” understood apart from particular traditions from which different spiritual insights are drawn.¹¹ If it doesn’t make sense to talk about generic spirituality, what does seem common to emerging forms of spirituality is that they take the form of private preference.

Student interest in spiritual practices seems to depend a lot on how such practices are framed. A few years ago, one of the student groups supported by my office was a Zen Meditation group. On the Religious Preference Card I mention above, Zen Meditation received more interest (over 400 students) than any other student religious community on campus; by comparison, the second most respondents (for the Vassar Jewish Union) was about 250 students. Despite the strong expression of interest, student leadership of the Zen group faded, and I worked with a new student leader to revive the group. We decided it would be best to broaden the range of mindfulness practices and teachings we made available to students, and re-named the group the Buddhist Sangha. But the linking of Zen practice to its complex relationship to Buddhist teachings apparently dampened student interest. Now not 400, but 80 students indicate on the Religious Preference Card that they would like to hear more about this re-named group, even as sitting meditation remains its primary practice. Student interest in Buddhist-informed practices remains strong, but more in parity with other communities on campus linked with institutionalized traditions.

There are a number of other signs of a growing public visibility for forms of individualized spirituality. Yoga, Tai Chi, and “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction” are now offerings through the college’s physical education classes. *Reiki* is offered through Health Services. New student groups devoted to practices that “integrate mind, body, and spirit,” or that explore “shamanic journeying” approach my office for support and resources.

I seek to show students that I welcome these emerging spiritualities. I co-sponsor their programs and I support a range of teachers and practitioners to campus to encourage student’s explorations and deepening commitments. I’m also aware, in ways that perhaps students are not, that bringing, say, Buddhist lamas to campus to teach meditation is at dissonance with some contemporary appropriations of these traditions. In bringing such resources to new spiritualities, I’m countering the apparent secularization tenets that religion is anti-intellectual, and that linking practices with self-critical traditions undermines individual freedom.

These various developments point to aspects of religious life in higher education that are privatized and privatizing. By privatization here, I mean what Charles Taylor has described as the decoupling of religious affiliation from wider social and political affiliations. As Taylor has insightfully observed, the new development of recent decades is that the expressive individualism

of the Romantic period has now become a mass phenomenon. I hear students from a startling diversity of traditions (secular, spiritual, religious) share a deep commitment to what Taylor calls the “culture of authenticity,” to the notion that “each of us has his or her own way of realizing one’s own humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.”¹² What’s not clear at this point, and likely to remain the subject of continuing debate, is whether this turn to expressive individualism is a sign of increasing or decreasing spirituality, or religiosity, or secularity. Is yoga in the gym more secular or more religious than yoga in an ashram, or in a yoga retreat center? And how would one know?

Separating the Secular and the Modern—Openings for the Religious

But there is a more striking challenge to the secularization thesis, whether by secularization we mean the erosion of belief, or its privatization. For even the revised secularization thesis (what I have called its privatization) relies on an opposition of “the religious” and “the secular” that is untenable and unstable. As Talal Asad has shown, this version of the secularization thesis relies upon a whole set of Western presuppositions about religion as a phenomenon we can differentiate from its culture. Asad has shown us, in other words, that our notions of “religion” as a universal phenomenon are themselves constructions of a Western secular project. Jose Casanova builds on Asad’s insights to argue that the impasse in the debate is our lingering coupling of “processes of secularization and processes of modernization.” Casanova maintains that we should instead assess secularization theory in relation to “the patterns of fusion and dissolution of religious, political, and societal communities—that is, of churches, states, and nations.”¹³ Casanova thus points us to look specifically at the multiple and changing ways different religious practices take shape in and shape their contexts—and he calls us to look less at religion’s decline, and more at the new and changing forms that religious communities in all the great traditions are taking.

Such critiques ask us to consider whether the secularization debate can free itself from its association with the Eurocentric claims of modernization theory, and the racist and civilizationist claims it undergirds. These critics’ insights thus offer a number of sharp challenges to secular liberal arts institutions as they work beyond thinking of the secular, as Asad has put it, “as the place where real human life gradually emancipates itself from the controlling power of ‘religion’ and thus achieves the latter’s relocation.” Such arguments point at the “concept of multiple modernities,” and thus undermine the single models we tend to assume are needed to separate religious and democratic spheres, and that question our presumptions of the incompatibility of religion and modernity.

As campuses become—or catch up to the fact that they long ago became—global cities in miniature, this claim that western modernity is universal humanity is clearly unsupportable. The crisis of the secularization thesis—felt at a wide range of higher education institutions¹⁴—leaves us questioning the anthropologies that this thesis founded, and wondering how much such notions form the edifice of contemporary higher education. In short, to take up the question of secularity

and its failings is to take up the vocation of the modern university, which is itself coming to terms with the loss of any single idea as its governing ethos.¹⁵ Perhaps religion—deprivatized—might help institutions of higher education better resist their colonization by the two great powers of modernity, the market and the state. So having once shed the shackles of religious authority, higher education might now loosen the grip of today’s ultimate authorities with a renewed engagement with the varieties of its own religious—and secular—experience.

I want to emphasize that I describe this history and present portrait of campus life not to lament it. I urge people in my role—namely Protestant clergy from erstwhile mainline traditions—to see this “decline” as an opening, a needed break from Christendom’s burdening the faith with the need to permeate and explain all things. Crucially, this paradox of a decline signaling an opening is not a call for the return of religious authority or for a kind of de-secularization. In fact, it’s the encounter with the failed hegemony of Protestantism in higher education that gives people in my role practice in letting go of the assumptions we thought governed the liberal arts.

Part of what our disenchantment with disenchantment opens is room for a recovery of the prophetic, that tradition of lament and buoyant hope that names what is dying in a culture—especially today the loss of any single governing tradition—in order to make way for the new. In the cracks of the present order, prophetic traditions, embodied in living communities, point at rupturing realities outside the market’s governing force, and transcendent horizons thought closed by secular modernity.

Despite their sharp critiques of Western secular assumptions, writers like Asad and Casanova remain committed to some version of secularization as the separation of public and political spheres from religious ones. Viewed from the American context they seem to point more at James Madison’s notion of keeping a more subtle “line of distinction” between church and state than Thomas Jefferson’s better known “wall of separation.”¹⁶ But in either case what’s needed—for higher education and its religious life—are more capacious, and modest, notions of secularism. Rather than see secularism as the problem for religious life to overcome, or the hegemon to resent, these emerging conversations reveal ways that religious and secular traditions are both under challenge and in need of one another.¹⁷ Perhaps higher education may be the place where religion re-articulates itself beyond the unresolved debate between belief and unbelief in modernity, and where the liberal arts learns to re-articulate its secularism without falling into notions of secular reason as a neutral arbiter of its mission, and privatized religion as necessary for public debate.¹⁸

Endnotes

¹ Jose Casanova, “Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective,” *The Hedgehog Review*, 8:1-2 (Spring-Summer, 2006), 14. For an insightful summary of the present debate, see in the same issue: Kevin M. Schultz, “Secularization: A Bibliographic Essay,” 170-177.

² Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford

University, 2003), 16. On the secular as an “institutionalizing” “principle,” see 13.

³ Ibid., 13, 24.

⁴ Casanova, 7.

⁵ Charles Taylor describes the enduring significance of James’ insight into this still unresolved debate in his recent *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University, 2002).

⁶ Ibid. 96.

⁷ Casanova, “Rethinking Secularization,” 7.

⁸ Part of the creative potential of increasingly cosmopolitan campuses is that students can gain perspective on their dilemmas through the perspective of other cultures—in a way that counters the corrosive effects of secularity I am describing here. For example, Jose Casanova has suggested that the “modern individual is condemned to pick and choose from a wide arrangement of meaning systems.” Yet Casanova notes that this predicament is only a novel one in Western monotheistic contexts; in Asian pantheist traditions choice among various spiritual traditions and practices has long been an option, at least among the elites in Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist communities. See “Rethinking Secularization,” 18.

⁹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1989), 412-413. Indicators on my own campus that religious traditions are being integrated into both the public and intellectual life of our campuses are the development in recent years of visible curricular and student life resources in both the thought and the practice of Judaism and Eastern religions. Such programs reflect national trends and point at significant new leadership in articulating more nuanced readings of the interplay of cultural, religious, and secular identities.

¹⁰ Alexander Astin, “Why Spirituality Deserves a Central Place in Higher Education,” *Spirituality in Higher Education Newsletter*, 1:1 (April 2004). See also “Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose,” *Summary of Initial Findings*, 3.

¹¹ Robert Wuthnow, Teagle Foundation, “Listening on Religious Work,” September 9-10, 2005, Little Switzerland, NC. I’m grateful for Wuthnow’s permission to cite his presentation.

¹² Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, 80, 83.

¹³ Casanova, 15.

¹⁴ I’ve deliberately focused my comments in this brief essay on my present experience at a residential liberal arts college. That said, recent studies point at widespread questions in multiple higher education contexts about the explanatory power of the secularization thesis. See Conrad Cherry, Betty A. DeBerg, and Amanda Porterfield, with the assistance of William Durbin and John Schmalzbauer, *Religion on Campus: What Religion Really Means to Today’s Undergraduates*

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2001). Their in-depth ethnographic study of four different kinds colleges and universities offers an alternative to recent laments about the secularization of the academy. See also Kathleen A. Mahoney, John Schmalzbauer, and James Youniss, "Religion: A Comeback on Campus," *Liberal Education* 87:4 (Fall 2001). See <http://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/le-fa01/le-fa01feature.cfm>.

15 See Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996).

16 See Martin E. Marty, with Jonathan Moore, *Education, Religion and the Common Good: Advancing a Distinctly American Conversation About Religion's Role in our Shared Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 13.

17 Langdon Gilkey makes this point in a sermon tracing the surprising religious history of the 20th Century. Sermon at Rockefeller Memorial Chapel, University of Chicago, June 7, 1998.

18 On secularism without the secular see the helpful review of Talal Asad's *Formations of the Secular* by James K.A. Smith, "Secularity, Religion, and the Politics of Ambiguity," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 6:3 (Fall 2005).