

SECULARISM AS MONOATHEISM: THE INVERTED THEOLOGY OF DISENCHANTMENT

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ABSTRACT: Everyone can agree that modern Westerners live in a secular age. That the process of "disenchantment" which led to this age constituted an epistemic loss, that it was not just a rejection of false beliefs but a real alteration in the way the world is experienced, has been shown by previous scholarship, notably that of Charles Taylor. This paper makes the case that this disenchantment was not only a latent possibility from the earliest interactions of Christianity with pre-Christian Roman society, but developed from theological and political developments unique to Western Christendom. In so doing, it builds on the work of Taylor as well as that of Michael Allen Gillespie, who has written about the theological origins of modernity. It also provides a brief illustration of a recurrence, within the secular epistemic frame, of the same distinct features Christianity demonstrated in Rome which first made that frame possible.

KEYWORDS: Secularism; Religion; Modernity

INTRODUCTION

It is generally understood that the modern West is defined by, among other things, its secularism (or secularity). Secularism, of course, is defined in opposition to religiosity. This dyad carries with it a narrative about itself; implicit in the notions of the secular and the religious is the story of how one could be superseded by the other. Indeed, as the story is commonly told, it may be wrong even to speak of supersession, because the secular is seen as what remains when the religious has been rejected or disprivileged.

Once upon a time, the West was dominated in its moral and social philosophy by Christian ideas and in its political organization by the Church; thus it was a religious civilization. Then, with the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution, the supremacy of the Church, and eventually of Christianity itself, was challenged and ultimately disestablished. What remained, then, was the secular: the substrate that had existed all along under the weight of superstition but was now free to develop unencumbered.

Thus we have what Charles Taylor calls a subtraction story. In Taylor's view, however, it would in fact be truer to speak of supersession rather than subtraction. The West was once dominated by the Christian epistemic frame, and now it is dominated by a different epistemic frame. But at no point are we somehow without a frame through which experiences are interpreted and categorized. And if our ancestors lived in an "enchanted" world, whereas we live in a "disenchanted" one, it is not simply a matter of "belief" and "unbelief", but a difference of experience:

On the subtraction story, there can be no epistemic loss in the transition from enchantment to disenchantment; we have just shucked off some false beliefs, baseless fears, and imagined objects. Looked at my way, the process of disenchantment involves a change in sensibility: one is open to different things, yet one has lost one important way in which people used to experience the world.¹

Thus we inhabit a new frame of experience in which the experience of the sacred may be accessible, but has been deterritorialized or disembedded from social life. It is seen as an optional addition to one's life, rather than a fundamental feature of it as in ages past. What I want to show here is that, first, the possibility, perhaps even the necessity, of this "secular" frame in Western life was introduced the very moment Christianity became a presence in the Roman Empire; secondly, that the development of the secular frame in the early modern period was in large part an effect of specific theological and political notions which developed during, and sought to put an end to, the Wars of Religion which followed the Protestant Reformation; and thirdly, that the features of Christianity which first allowed for the possibility of the secular were demonstrated once more in Western Europe by the very effort on the part of secular revolutionaries to abolish Christianity in France. Thus secularism has been shaped by, or is synonymous with, *monotheism*, that is, a lack of belief in the monotheistic conception of the divine combined with an apparent unawareness that the divine could be conceived of in any other way. To put it differently, the monotheist believes certain things are inextricable from the notion of divinity; the monotheist agrees, but then rejects the notion rather than affirming it.

ENCHANTMENT, DISEMBEDDING, AND INVERSION

To begin with, we must unpack the subtraction story a bit more, and establish a narrative of the development of religion which reveals its inadequacy. There is a crucially important notion implicit in the subtraction story, which we might be inclined to take for granted: that “religion” is something capable of being subtracted from a society at all. In order for this to be possible, the concepts and constructs associated with the term “religion” must have already been disembedded from the rest of everyday experience. As obvious as it may seem to us now that “religion” can be cloven off from the rest of life, such was not the case for the ancients. As Taylor notes, for the earliest human societies, religion and social life were inseparable. One interacted with the divine as part of a community. There was no sense of identity by which the ascriptions of meaning made by an individual as an individual could supersede those made according to common custom. One's life was inextricably bound up in things undertaken as a group and articulated by means of sacred roles (that of the chieftain, the shaman, etc.). Those living in such early societies “couldn't conceive of themselves as potentially disconnected from this social matrix. It would probably never even occur to them to try.”²

In the religious traditions which emerge from what Karl Jaspers called the “Axial Age”, however, there is a certain disembedding, if not of the divine from everyday life, of the self from previously integrated social, cosmic, and moral contexts.³ In these traditions (for example, Buddhism) one can now speak of individual enlightenment or salvation, and thus of a good beyond human flourishing. The individual can now be spoken of as having socially, cosmically, and morally important goals which do not necessarily align with the sacred actions undertaken by the group. Perhaps we can see in this notion of individuality a predecessor to the modern conception of the self, and in its arguable disembedding of the immanent and the transcendent a step on the path to modernity.

But there is an important ingredient in the “recipe” for modernity which is still missing from the picture, another instance of disembedding which is perhaps more consequential. For even in the civilized, “postaxial” ancient world, “religion” remained embedded in social life to such a degree, and in such a way, that even the medieval world shows a distinct departure. In Rome, for example, *religiō* was demonstrated as much in filial piety as in piety toward the gods. A religious person in this sense would be not only someone who honored the gods according to proper custom, but also one who cared for his family and showed reverence for the Emperor:

We struggle to understand the persecution of the Christians under the Roman empire. Roman society tolerated a great variety of deities and cults; worship of Christ as (a) God did not in itself threaten or offend, and religious innovation was

not impossible. The emergence of Christianity itself coincided with the novelty of cultic worship of the Roman emperors or their tutelary spirits, which could be included alongside other deities in existing religious frameworks.

Christian beliefs and practices were, however, radically exclusive, or radically extensive in their claims over the whole of religious loyalty. The reactions of Perpetua's father and the presiding magistrate at her trial demonstrate palpable frustration, not just with her personal intransigence, but with her apparent misconstrual of how personal belief should and should not have functioned, relative to the religious fabric of society itself. Loyalty to father and to son, as well as support for the well-being of the emperors, were matters of piety for Romans, not of secular duty – for the secular did not exist.

By the same token, neither did religion.⁴

From this point of view the medieval West and the modern West share certain peculiar presuppositions about “religion”. For these latter two “religion” refers less to matters of custom and more to sets of explicit propositions about the divine which can be evaluated as true (and thereby legitimate) or false (or illegitimate). Thus it would be a mistake to consider the development of secularism to be a mere continuation of what we might call the axial process. Really we have two cases of disembedding, one of which is a “loosening” or “differentiation” and the other of which is an outright cleavage. This latter is what Jan Assmann refers to as the Mosaic distinction, given that its origin is traditionally ascribed to Moses.⁵ The Mosaic distinction divides “true” religion from “false”; it prevents or works against the sort of developments that we would now call syncretic. More crucially, religions which adhere to it—which Assmann calls “counter-religions”—reject the ancient norm of translatability by which different cultures were made comprehensible to one another. As normal as it may seem to us that a religious body would declare other beliefs and customs to be false, “pagan”, even evil, this tendency is actually peculiar to the Abrahamic religions, as well as, as I will later attempt to illustrate, at least one instance of modern ideology. Outside these contexts, different religious customs were, and are, treated much like different languages. Perhaps the best known instance of such translation is the *interpretatiō graeca* by which, for example, Zeus was equated with Jupiter and Athena with Minerva. But this understanding extended far beyond Classical civilization; the Romans and Greeks also engaged in such *interpretatiō* with relation to the gods of the Egyptians, the Phoenicians, and other Europeans; it is to this last instance of translation that we owe, for example, our English *Wednesday* (“Odin's day”) for French *mercredi* (“Mercury's day”).

Christianity was alien to the Classical understanding in that it did not respect this notion of translatability. While Rome had a history of disfavoring new cults on

account of their foreignness or tendency to disturb the social order (perhaps the best known example being the banning of the Bacchanalia by the Republic in 186 BC).⁶ Christians rejected all other cults, including that of the Emperor, on account of their falsehood, or more precisely, because to participate in them would constitute apostasy from the “true god”. As the Bible says:

Take heed to thyself, lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land whither thou goest, lest it be for a snare in the midst of thee: But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves: For thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name *is* Jealous, *is* a jealous God[.]⁷

Thus Christians practiced sacramental exclusivity: only Christian beliefs and rites were valid in relation to the divine, and to deny this was to deny the Christian conception of divinity. Accordingly, when Christianity was adopted by the Roman imperial government, altars were destroyed, images were broken, and groves were cut down. Pleas for tolerance now came from non-Christians:

It is a striking indication of the urgency felt within the church, that the ideal held up for imitation in accounts of evangelical efforts were heroes that would lock an old man for life in their private dungeon of some sort, or burn a heathen priest to death. Government, too, at the urging of the bishops weighed in with threats, and more than threats, of fines, confiscation, exile, imprisonment, flogging, torture, beheading, and crucifixion. What more could be imagined? Nothing. The extremes of conceivable pressure were brought to bear. Thus, over the course of many centuries, compliance was eventually secured and the empire made Christian in truth.⁸

Now once sacramental exclusivity had been established, it was only logical that a concept analogous to the secular, even if not yet called by that name, would emerge. There had to be a way to conceive of duties to family and to the State once they had been shorn of their “pagan” religious significance. And despite the calls that can be heard in the Christian tradition to “relativize” such loyalties, as Taylor puts it, a “Romanized” Christianity which sought to convert an entire empire could not very well do without an epistemic space for family and civic life.⁹ This epistemic space was decidedly outside the sphere of specifically “religious” things, of course, which not only implies the desacralization and desemiosis of “non-religious” or “merely human” loyalties but, correspondingly, indicates a change in the perception of the “religious” and of things sacred. Now once Europe and the Near East had been thoroughly Christianized and there were no longer any other traditions “competing” with the Church—in other words, as long as everybody was assured that everybody else was a Christian—this change was not necessarily evident to the layman. Sacred images of Christ, Mary, and the saints were venerated much as had been those of the gods in

ages past; pilgrimages were made to sacred sites; and a great many practices carried over from pre-Christian days were now “baptised”, or again, emptied of explicit reference to ancient deities and therefore no longer understood as “religious”.¹⁰

But when looking at the period of upheaval before this state of “total Christianity” had been reached, the nature of this change in how the divine was understood is made especially clear. A non-Christian during the former period might have wondered why Christians did not simply add their customs and constructions to the already existing mix—this, after all, was what every other “pagan” cult did. If Apollo could coexist with Serapis, why could Jesus not do likewise? The very fact of a conflict between Christianity and the old religious practices implies that Christians did not see things this way. Divinity or sacrality was no longer something that could be implicitly enjoyed as emanating from various aspects of daily life, from communal dances to songs to sacrifices; it was now considered a matter of explicit proposition. Whether or not something counted as godly, or as “cleansed” of “pagan” significance, was determined by whether it had been stamped, as it were, with the Christian mark of approval. This was expressed quite literally in the practice found in the Eastern Mediterranean of marking “pagan” statuary with crosses.¹¹

Thus the old understanding of divinity—that is, the understanding demonstrated in practice, irrespective of explicit theological claims—had been more or less inverted. God was no longer inherently present in a culture; he had to be superimposed. By the same token, he could now be subtracted. This was not possible in a “pagan” world, but for the Christian world one might argue that it was only a matter of time before it was demonstrated.

THE THEOLOGY OF MONOATHEISM

Now to look at the period of disestablishment during which the removal of the divine or the sacred from the Western cultural experience *was* demonstrated. First it must be understood that this removal was not intended by the reformers whose efforts we are about to discuss; on the contrary, much of what makes the modern age distinctive it owes to the persistence of certain metaphysical or theological ideas—authenticity and the “true self”, an inherent human ability to overcome the strictures of the natural world, etc. What makes these ideas so “embedded” in modern life, however, is their secularity—that is, the absence of Christianity as an explicit system of propositions to ascribe them to. As we’ll see, the conditions leading to this absence were not developed out of anti-Christian fervor but (in part) out of a desire to make peace between Christians of different sects.

Contrary to the notion of a liberalism determined from the beginning to crush “superstition” and usher in a new age of “irreligious” rationalism, the modern predominance of the secular frame began quite modestly—at least if we take it to have begun with the Peace of Westphalia, which made official the legitimacy of a conception of civic life which did not favor any particular sect. Once the Protestant Reformation had begun, there was no longer a single epistemic frame by which all of Western Europe could interpret Christian ideas and order Christian life. Just as the early Christians had drawn the Mosaic distinction against “pagans”, Protestants and Catholics now drew it against each other. As a result, Europe was at war with herself for over a century. In order for this fighting to end, a new cultural space had to be opened up, as it were, which both Protestants and Catholics could inhabit. Such a development was effected by the Peace of Westphalia. For not only did the Treaty of Westphalia reinforce the doctrine established at the Peace of Augsburg: *cuius regiō, eius religiō*, whereby a sovereign could determine the official sect within his own realm; it went further, proclaiming the right of those who were not members of the official sect in a given realm to practice their rites unmolested.¹²

But this is only part of the story. The Westphalian norm was in effect the legislative enactment of something already underway in the realm of ideas. Well before even the Protestant Reformation, a crucial shift in the way the world was understood had begun to take place in Christendom. While medieval scholastic philosophy considered nature to be a series of instantiations of what might be described as thoughts in the mind of a rational god, nominalism, which emerged in the 13th and 14th centuries, challenged this conception and was critical of its Aristotelian underpinnings, and eventually came to supersede it. Rather than seeing God as a rational being atop an ontic chain, as the “pagan” Aristotle had, nominalists contended that since God was omnipotent, to claim that he could be understood by observing his creation was to ascribe limits to his power and thus to deny him. Thus for nominalism, perhaps best exemplified by the work of William of Ockham, there is a profound separation between an infinite creator and his finite creation. There was no great chain of being mediating between the two, but an inscrutable god on the one hand and a “chaos of radically individual beings” on the other.¹³

This may seem like a dry and arcane dispute of little consequence, but we must remember that this was no longer a “pagan” world in which the very fact of a multiplicity of rites and symbolisms implied an “immanence” or “emergence” to God. That multiplicity had been effaced, and in its place was the notion of a god revealed through the scriptures and rites of one organization. Thus the advent of nominalism both followed from such a notion and had particularly decisive implications because of

it. For if God was radically separate from creation, and could only be known, if at all, through Scripture, it was difficult to understand him as benevolent. As per Michael Allen Gillespie:

...the God that nominalism revealed was no longer the beneficent and reasonably predictable God of scholasticism. The gap between man and God had been greatly increased. God could no longer be understood or influenced by human beings—he acted simply out of freedom and was indifferent to the consequences of his acts. He laid down rules for human conduct, but he might change them at any moment. Some were saved and some were damned, but there was only an accidental relation between salvation and saintliness, and damnation and sin. It is not even clear that this God loves man. The world this God created was thus a radical chaos of utterly diverse things in which humans could find no point of certainty or security.¹⁴

As Gillespie articulates in the work quoted above, the development of modern thinking resulted from attempts to answer the questions that this new view of God opened up about God himself, about the natural world, about man, and about the relation each of these had to the others. Gillespie shows how the Renaissance and the Reformation approached these questions, and though we will not linger upon those subjects here, I do want to show how the forefathers of the Enlightenment moved forward with the answers each of those two movements arrived at, and thus how the secular frame was “stretched open” by these metaphysical or theological ideas as much as it was “carved out” politically by the Peace of Westphalia.

First, briefly, to describe what these answers were. Out of the nominalist revolution came a dispute about the bondage of the will—that is, a dispute as to whether man had free will and thus in a sense shared in God's infinite potential, or instead was entirely subordinate to the will of God. This dispute came to a head with the debate between Erasmus and Luther which led up to the Protestant Reformation. Erasmus took the former position, and Luther the latter. Over a century later, Descartes and Hobbes, respectively, would further articulate the implications of these opposing views, and each would put them in service of his own effort to develop a scientific worldview that could attenuate, even eliminate, the conflict over religion which had been so violently ravaging Europe. Thus, again, we have a development which was to the intellect what Westphalia was to politics.

In order to effect such a development, Descartes and Hobbes did not reject or remove God—at least, such was neither's intention. Rather, each articulated his conception of God so as to “delimit the sphere of divine will and religious authority”,¹⁵ and though both did their part to open up the secular frame we now inhabit, they did so by making use of unmistakably Christian ideas:

God for Descartes is no longer the wild and unpredictable God of nominalism. In fact, it is precisely this God that Descartes suppresses in favor of a more rational God, or at least a God that can be comprehended by human reason. At the same time as he brings God downward towards man, he Descartes elevates man towards God with his claim that man has the same infinite will as God. Hobbes, by contrast, accepts a more orthodox Calvinist position that asserts the absolute power of God and the insignificance of man. According to the doctrine of predestination, each individual either is or is not saved by God's will alone. Since God is no man's debtor, man can do nothing to influence God. In an ironic fashion, God thereby becomes irrelevant for human conduct and human life, that is, he becomes nothing other than the enduring first cause, or the motion of matter determined by a series of mechanical causes. While God in a narrow sense may be disposed of in this way, it would be a mistake to believe that any explanation of the whole can do without those powers and capacities that were attributed to him.¹⁶

In this way, the process at the heart of modernity that we call secularization is in fact a concealment of its own origins. The claims made by the likes of Descartes and Hobbes “thus cease to be disputable theological assertions and become unquestionable scientific and moral givens.”¹⁷ Thus the god of monotheism—more precisely, that of nominalism—never went anywhere. His attributes were simply redistributed, and he became the no-god of monotheism.

THE OPPOSITE OF CHRISTIANIZATION?

There is another way in which the secular frame shows itself to be a mirror image or extension of Christianity: the behavior of the anti-Christian movements which have developed within it. To cite just one, the French Revolution furnishes an example of the same treatment that the early Christians showed “pagans”, and that Catholics and Protestants showed each other in the Wars of Religion—with the difference that now not only were the victims Christians, the perpetrators no longer saw themselves as “religious” at all. Yet in their actions they were as “counter-religious” as any 4th-century bishop. They may have given up the Cross and the sacraments, but the old injunction to “destroy their altars” would seem to have remained intact. Just as before, places of worship were attacked and symbols of the old order were destroyed and replaced:

The campaign [of de-Christianization], which was at its most intense in the winter and spring of 1793-94 [...] comprised a number of different activities. These ranged from the removal of plate, statues and other fittings from places of worship, the destruction of crosses, bells, shrines and other 'external signs of worship', the closure of churches, the enforced abdication and, occasionally, the

marriage of constitutional priests, the substitution of a Revolutionary calendar for the Gregorian one, the alteration of personal and place names which had any ecclesiastical connotations to more suitably Revolutionary ones, through to the promotion of new cults, notably those of reason and of the Supreme Being.¹⁸

The resemblances go even further; some revolutionary zealots are described by Michel Vovelle as “apostles” as opposed to outright “persecutors”:

This apostolic or more simply pedagogic ideal spread during the following months and made itself felt at about the time of the dechristianizing campaign. We encounter it almost everywhere, but particularly in those places where resistance was becoming apparent. To give just a few examples, we recall the civic sermons which were given around Lyons during Nivose in Year 2 [December 1793] by the actor Dorfeuille and the journalist Millet, the editor of *Pere Duchesne de Commune affranchie*. At Louhans, on 12 Pluviose [31 January 1794], the popular society conceived the idea of nominating in every commune a worthy citizen, who would both give instruction and edify his fellow citizens by his exemplary life.¹⁹

Vovelle also provides a particularly notable example of de-Christianizing ritual from the time:

Thus the patriotic mayor of Puimoisson, in the Basses-Alpes, who was in despair at his inability *to force his parish priest to abdicate, was reduced to setting an example by having himself solemnly de-baptised, and giving himself the new forenames of Hyacinth-Coriander.*²⁰

Thus we have enough of a picture of anti-Christian activities in Revolutionary France to note the way in which the ideology motivating such activities retained certain features exhibited by Christianity in Late Antiquity—the very same features which made possible the secular frame of experience in which said ideology emerged. To elaborate further on the behavioral commonalities between Christians encountering “pagans” and self-proclaimed antireligious movements in Christian (and even other) countries would be beyond the necessities of the present essay. It is enough that the carrying over into the secular frame of traits peculiar to monotheism has been demonstrated.

CONCLUSION

We've now seen how Christianity introduced into Western society the possibility of a cleavage between the “secular” and the “religious” by drawing a distinction between itself as “the true religion” and “paganism” as falsehood; how the evolution of Christian theology in response to the advent of nominalism, as well as the evolution of European politics in response to the Wars of Religion, opened up the secular frame of

experience; and how secular revolutionary movements—at least one such movement—have exhibited “counter-religious” behavior in a fashion mirroring Christianity. Thus, monotheism: a phenomenon which could only be the aftermath of a loss of hegemony on the part of monotheism in a society without any “pagan” religions with which to fill the gap. This monotheism was implied by Christianity from the beginning, grew out of theological and political developments specific to Western Christendom, and has demonstrated in its reaction against the Christianity that gave it birth the same traits Christianity demonstrated in making it possible.

Thus in order to understand what makes the modern West so distinctive in its mores, we must understand what made the Christian West so distinctive. And if we wish to transcend the epistemic limitations the modern secular frame imposes, we must reveal what it has concealed about its own origins. As long as we remain locked within the dialectic of monotheistic affirmation and monotheistic denial, the questions which animate the modern project, and which are provoked by interactions between the modern West and other cultural paradigms, will remain difficult to answer. It is my hope that the present essay contribute to an effort to escape this dialectic, and thereby answer those questions.

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ENDNOTES

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