

Zygon and the Future of Religion-and-Science

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STAGE-TWO SECULARITY AND THE FUTURE OF THEOLOGY-AND-SCIENCE

by Gregory R. Peterson

Abstract. Charles Taylor has recently provided an in-depth exploration of secularity, with a central characteristic being the understanding that religious commitment is optional. This essay extends this analysis, considering the possibility that American society may be entering a second stage of secularity, one in which the possibility of religious commitment ceases to be an option at all for many. The possible implications of such a development are considered for the theology-and-science dialogue.

Keywords: new atheism; religious naturalism; secularism; stage-one secularity; stage-two secularity; Charles Taylor

Recent polls have suggested that the ranks of atheism are growing in the United States. A hint of this was given in a 2008 Pew Forum poll, which indicated that the number of those declaring themselves religiously unaffiliated had swelled to 16 percent (Lugo et al. 2008). A more recent poll, this one by Gallup (Newport 2009), indicates that the percentage of indi-

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viduals in the United States who affirm that religion is an important part of their daily life has dropped to less than half the population in some areas, especially in the New England “blue states” of Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, and Massachusetts. Taken together, these poll numbers suggest that a turning point has been reached in American religious life, that the United States is moving down the path of secularism already blazed by Western Europe.

These numbers follow a decade of conflict, both literal and ideological, in which religion has played a leading role. This in turn has contributed significantly to the rise of a “new atheism,” characterized by the works of Sam Harris (2004), Richard Dawkins (2006), Daniel Dennett (2007), and Christopher Hitchens (2007), who share a common contempt for all things religious and who appeal to a rationality informed by science and shorn of superstition. These works are notable both for their popularity in terms of book sales and for their take-no-prisoners rhetoric. In one sense there is little that is new in these works; a perusal of their contents will reveal familiar antireligious arguments that previous generations of atheists aimed at their religiously minded opponents. One has only to turn to Bertrand Russell’s *Why I Am Not a Christian* (1957) or the writings of David Hume to realize that most of the arguments in play have a long history, however new they may appear to the uninitiated.

In another sense, something new does seem to be going on that is reflected both in the popular reception of these works and in the tone of the works themselves. It is difficult to imagine polemics of this sort receiving similar attention a mere decade ago, and they collectively share a brazenness in approach and a contempt for their religious targets that, while not altogether missing from the history of thought on religion, is nearly unprecedented at this level of prominence. These considerations prompt the question, Why now? What has occurred to account for the change? Recent political events may provide a sufficient explanation. But a second possibility looms: that the prophets of the end of religion may be right in whole or part, and that what we are seeing now is a transition not simply to secularism but to a new kind of secularism. That such a trend is in place is not completely clear, but it is worthy of attention. If such is the case, what does this portend for theology-and-science?

SECOND-STAGE SECULARITY

The idea of secularity has been a topic of interest to religion scholars in the past decade, receiving very different but related treatments from Talal Asad (2003), John Milbank (2006), and Charles Taylor (2007). In popular construals, *secular* seems to have two distinct but overlapping meanings, the first merely rejecting the requirement of religious allegiance as a prerequisite for participation in society, especially government, and the second

taking the more assertive line of banning religion from the public sphere, both social and political. Implied in both definitions is some idea of the distinction of public and private as well as some understanding of the religious versus nonreligious. Secularity, tied as it has been to the rise of global dominance of Western civilizations, Western science, and Western political forms, also has other associations, although the necessity of these links—a value placed on individualism, freedom of expression, and democratic forms of government—are not as immediately obvious.

Secularity typically is understood to be ideologically opposed to religion, although this is not necessarily the case. If we take secularity in the sense of rejecting the requirement of religious allegiance for social and political life, the secular is understood to place bounds on the religious but not necessarily to oppose it. Indeed, there may be religious reasons to support such a notion of the secular, and American forms of secularity, embodied in the doctrine of separation of church and state, has over the centuries been able to draw on religious communities for support. Even secularity in the stronger sense of banning religion from the public sphere need not be interpreted as being opposed to religion in general, although the kind of religion it is compatible with, a deeply individualized one with few aspirations to communal weal, is necessarily severely circumscribed in scope.

These theoretical considerations are important, but they overlay a history that is far more complex. Contemporary Western societies, broadly understood to be secular, are in fact a polyglot mixture of communities existing in mutual cohabitation, cooperation, and competition. This is complicated by the fact that, although it is standard to contrast the American experience of secularity with that of Western Europe, secularism in Europe is itself complex, tied as it is to the particular histories of the particular communities and nation-states. Consideration of the experience of Eastern European nations further complicates the situation. When cast in the light of history, secularity is more readily understood as an ongoing process or development that has been progressive in recent centuries but also is characterized by bumps, turns, and complexities.

One key to understanding this progression is provided by Taylor, who argues that a secular society is defined by its capacity to consider religious commitment as optional (2007). On Taylor's account, to visit premodern Europe, in either its ancient or medieval forms, is to visit a culture that swims in the religious. The issue here is not simply whether one personally subscribes to God or a specific conception of God but that it is immensely difficult to think of the cosmos and life in other than teleological terms, and that the biases of language, myth, and ritual conjure the religious so effectively that it becomes impossible in a practical sense to think in other than those terms. Secular society, by contrast, provides precisely that possibility. Not only is understanding the world in religious terms optional, it

is difficult to think of it in terms other than optional. Religions and, more generally, worldviews are options to which one can commit but which cannot be intellectually compelled. Religion becomes the province of the will rather than the intellect, whose area of authority increasingly becomes limited to the quantitative and scientific. As such, secularity in this sense, what may be called stage-one secularity (for reasons that will become clear), is comfortable with there being more than one form of religious commitment and with participating in social arrangements where such commitments are diverse and disconnected from the arrangements themselves.

If one were to give a phenomenology of stage-one secularity in the United States during the past century, certain cultural contours would stand out as significant, and these would be shared by participants in the culture, whether or not one chose to be religious. Most individuals in twentieth-century America grew up in a religious household, probably but not necessarily Christian. In such a household, there would be a fair chance that one or both parents would be more than nominally religious and that the family would be religiously observant to at least some degree. Even if this were not the case, the average individual would know and perhaps be close to family members who were observant, and would be so in a wide range of familiar ways—from the pious aunt raising money for the disadvantaged to the severe and judgmental grandfather, to pick two stereotypes. Further, the average individual would grow up in a culture that swam in religious images and stories. The prominence of religion in daily and public life would require some knowledge of the doctrinal content of relevant religious groups, including Roman Catholicism and the varieties of Protestantism. For many, religious literacy would be a necessary and unavoidable part of growing up and would be not simply a kind of rote factual knowledge but something personally lived and encountered—in short, the difference between knowing about a place and having actually visited there.

I paint this picture, which admittedly is something of an idealization, to suggest the kind of secular society that was available to Americans in the twentieth century. In principle, religion was optional; one did not have to be religious, and many were not, although significant social pressures could be attached to such a rejection. If the characterization is correct, two things appear to follow. First, even if one were not religious, one would still be familiar with the content of religion (or at least some few religions or varieties thereof), and familiar in a very personal way. Second, this familiarity is part of what makes religion an option. If Taylor is correct that secularity is characterized by religion's being optional, not only is it optional to not be religious, but it also is optional to be religious. Being religious is in the realm of the possible.

Imagine, however, that a secular society of such kind is only one of the possibilities, representing perhaps an early stage of secularization. A further stage may be imagined, call it second-stage secularity, which becomes

possible when enough in society choose not to be religious so that a kind of critical mass is reached: Not only is it possible to not be religious, but it is possible to live in communities of the similarly nonreligious and do so in relative isolation from the religious. Unlike members of a stage-one secular society, nonreligious participants in a stage-two secular society would be able, perhaps for the first time in history, to not personally know anyone who is religious in any significant sense of the word. Such an individual would be raised by parents who were not religiously observant and whose extended family was not religiously observant. Because the culture as a whole no longer swims in religion, religious literacy would not be mandatory for participation in the culture and would be inherited from neither culture nor family. As a result, all religions would tend to look the same, as if viewing them from a great distance, and so a few generalizations (religions are about faith as opposed to reason, religions are about salvation and miracles and something called God) are sufficient to get by in life. Most of one's friends are similarly not religious, and those who are come to be considered as peculiar oddities. Indeed, when religion comes up, it is more likely to be the source of conflict, because religion, and the religious, is precisely that Other that can no longer be understood. This is reinforced by the fact that the recognized elites of the culture, whether in the sciences, the arts, or other arenas, are widely understood to be nonreligious, presumably for very good reasons, and by the fact that media images are more likely to reinforce negative stereotypes of religion than in a stage-one secular society.

A central feature of stage-one secularism is the perception of religion as optional. A stage-two secular society would seem to remove that option. In fact, we might define a stage-two secular society as one where religion is no longer an option for most, and it is no longer an option precisely because the possibility of being religious seems too remote, too absurd, and too incomprehensible to contemplate. Not that religion would disappear altogether, but for most being religious (in general) would be like being Amish—fascinating and peculiar, but not something that one would want to take up or spend much time studying.

Is such a stage-two secular society possible? The idea that religion would eventually disappear, presumably done in by science, among other factors, was widely predicted among prominent sociologists, only to fall on hard times as the late twentieth century witnessed a revival of influence of and participation in religion in the United States and the developing world. But recent decades have also seen a sharp decline in religious participation in Europe. The recent (admittedly modest) trends away from religious identification and observance in the United States would seem to bring new support to the secularization thesis. Arguably, to the extent that stage-two secularism has occurred at all, it has occurred particularly among segments

of the scientific and academic communities. Polling data from the 1990s show that the level of belief in a personal God among scientists has remained relatively unchanged since the early twentieth century but has been consistently lower than in the American population as a whole. Further, polling data with respect to personal religious belief and religious affiliation suggest that both have decreased among elite scientists (for overviews of polling data see Zuckerman 2007; Beit-Hallahmi 2007). To the extent that second-stage secularization has occurred, elements of the scientific community are a most likely locus, a possibility of particular importance to the theology-science dialogue.

IMPLICATIONS

If we are slowly entering a stage-two secular society, what are the implications for a science-theology dialogue? The initial answer would be that it depends on several factors. At its broadest, theology can be understood as a discipline that seeks to answer questions of ultimate meaning and purpose. In this sense it is inclusive of a wide range of frameworks, including non-Western nontheistic traditions (Peterson 2008). More narrowly, theology may be said to be “God-talk,” primarily referencing the major traditions of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Even here, however, there are distinctions to make. One that is especially relevant to the rise of a second-stage secularism is that between naturalistic and nonnaturalistic theologies.

As the label implies, naturalistic theologies subscribe to a naturalistic ontology limited to that of contemporary science. I have in mind here the various religious naturalisms, which may take either theistic forms, epitomized by Gordon Kaufman’s (1995) identification of God with the “serendipitous creativity” inherent in the evolutionary process, or nontheistic forms, most clearly exemplified in Ursula Goodenough’s work (2000). For such naturalistic theologies the advent of second-stage secularism may be seen as a positive development because presumably it would vindicate the naturalistic ontology to which religious naturalists already subscribe. The primary difficulty would lie in persuading members of a second-stage secular society to believe that religious naturalism has something to offer. The primary question will not be “Why be a naturalist?” but “Why be a religious naturalist?” For one who is already fully secularized, what does religious naturalism offer?

It would seem that the religious naturalist would need something akin to an apologetic, some explanation of the fruitfulness of religious language, symbols, and action in the context of a fully naturalistic ontology. This would be most true for theistic versions of religious naturalism, which seek to retain God-language but understand (one might say reinterpret) God in purely naturalistic categories. In a society that is already primarily theistic

in its convictions, the retention of God-language makes some sense, because the word *God* has such powerful resonance that it retains its power to conjure the sacred even when the referent of the term has been redefined. In a second-stage secular society it is unlikely that the word would retain this kind of symbolic pull. Instead, *God* would be understood in terms of the simplified, third-person account of religion that is widely shared. For God-language to retain its power would seem to require a reintroduction to the original connotations of God followed by an account of its continued relevance in a naturalistic framework.

This would imply that nontheistic religious naturalisms (nontheistic naturalistic theologies) would fare better in a stage-two secular society. But even here there are difficulties—in this case persuading others of the continued utility of the language, symbols, and practices typically understood to belong to the domain of religion. To some extent this is already a problem. Dawkins, a prominent proponent of the new atheism, seems as puzzled by religious naturalism as any second-stage secularist would be (Dawkins 2006, 13).

If in the future we move to a stage-two secular society, the implications are more significant for nonnaturalistic theologies engaged with the sciences, indeed for nonnaturalistic theologies generally. By nonnaturalistic I mean theologies that understand God to be transcendent over the natural and not reducible to or identifiable with it. Classical theisms, pantheisms, and process theisms would be nonnaturalistic in this sense, although process theists such as David Ray Griffin (2000) have argued that a definition of naturalism that is inclusive of process theism is to be preferred. I am sympathetic with the reasons for this kind of rhetorical move, but I think that expansively redefining *natural* in this way serves more to muddy the waters than to clear them. Nonnaturalistic theologians would be better served to embrace language that clearly states the difference, although finding an alternative that does not carry unwanted baggage presents problems.

In a stage-two secular society, the problem for nonnaturalistic theisms is that they are precisely what are taken to be no longer conceivable. This results in no small part from the lack of familiarity with theistic traditions in general, and so one corrective would be to provide greater religious and theological literacy. Further, continued effort would need to be made to indicate how the claims of nonnaturalistic theism are consistent with the best of contemporary historical and scientific knowledge. The major achievement of theology-and-science scholarship has been to show precisely this, that a theistic worldview can be consistent with the findings coming from contemporary science, including cosmology, evolution, genetics, and neuroscience (summarized and analyzed nicely in Barbour 1997). This is no small thing, as much of the public and to some extent even the scholarly debate is preoccupied with the assumption (often little more than that) that theism and contemporary science are not consistent with one another.

It is questionable, however, whether consistency arguments will be enough in a stage-two secular society. The problem will be that for stage-two seculars theism will no longer seem a live option, much as communism and Freudianism, two captivating ideologies of the twentieth century, seemed to no longer be live options by the end of the 1990s. This suggests that something further will be needed—indeed, is needed now: clear reasons to consider theism as a live option. Put simply, what reason do we have to believe that God in fact exists or that a theistic worldview (as opposed to a purely naturalistic one) is plausible, or even to be preferred? In a stage-two secular society, what will increasingly be required is a renewed emphasis on apologetics and natural theology.

Apologetics and natural theology are not completely foreign to theology-and-science as a field, the most obvious instance being the extended arguments surrounding the anthropic principle (Barrow and Tipler 1988; Worthing 1996). There also have been significant efforts to use insights from the philosophy of science to rebuild theological inquiry and so defend its epistemic status (Barbour 1974; Clayton 1989; Murphy 1993). Both of these endeavors have resulted in important contributions and insights. However, they have yet to generate theological proposals that provide the kind of reason giving that would be considered not only within theology-and-science but outside of it as well. More recent theology-and-science scholarship has tended to move away from even these forms of reason giving and has concentrated more extensively on consistency arguments with respect to the content of the sciences. There are important reasons for this, fueled by public debates over evolution and by ongoing change and development within the sciences themselves, especially in the areas of genetics and neuroscience. Another reason is that categories of apologetics and natural theology are out of favor in contemporary theology proper for reasons that have much to do with broader intellectual currents that are very distantly related to the content of the sciences. One sees this in works as diverse as Robert Russell's *Cosmology: From Alpha to Omega* (2008) and Wentzel van Huyssteen's *The Shaping of Rationality* (1999). Both works for the most part presume the intellectual integrity of the theology. Russell's main task is to demonstrate the consistency of Christian doctrinal commitments with physics and cosmology, while van Huyssteen addresses how best to proceed in interdisciplinary engagement, which may be read as an effort to lay out how best to assess consistency claims. There are apologetic themes to both works, and both are examples of fine scholarship that bring important insights to the engagement of science and theology, but neither addresses fully the more fundamental issue of the intellectual integrity of theology, as may well be increasingly needed.

If scholars doing theology-and-science are to contribute to this more foundational effort, how might they do so? Appeal to existing forms of well-known traditional arguments (ontological, cosmological, teleological)

would not seem to do the trick. These may deserve a closer look, and they have been the source of careful reflection by philosophers of religion in the past two decades, but their problems are well known. Another approach has been outlined through a series of works by Alasdair MacIntyre (1990; 2007), whose account of rival traditions suggests a framework within which the content of secular societies (whether stage one or stage two) and theological alternatives may be understood. There is much of importance in MacIntyre's work, but one should note that much of what he says stands at the level of metaproposal. That is, he does not fully lay out the content of the Roman Catholic tradition, and although he clearly sees Thomas Aquinas as a central figure, he obviously is not proposing a repristination of Thomism. Also, although he spends considerable effort charting the intellectual transformations of the past millennia, the natural sciences do not figure prominently in his narrative. Indeed, for MacIntyre's proposal to become concrete, to move toward providing an understanding of a theological tradition that can serve as a rival to its competitors, accounting for the content and success of natural science would seem to be a key ingredient.

One further possibility: Much of theology-and-science scholarship focuses on questions of belief and whether theological doctrines or beliefs can be understood to be consistent with scientific theories and findings. Arguments buttressing the rationality of theology are similarly put forth in terms of belief, which easily raises epistemic issues of justification. Often left out are categories of faith, hope, and commitment.

Although scholars of theology-and-science sometimes are inclined to emphasize the similarities between theological inquiry and scientific inquiry, dissimilarities exist as well; a central one is the role that existential commitment plays in the differing discourses. Commitment is not a foreign commodity to the natural sciences. Thomas Kuhn (1962) controversially used the word *faith* to express the kind of commitment scientists give to competing theoretical programs during times of scientific revolution. Yet, although scientists may be committed to scientific theories, such commitment is professional in character and related to issues of reputation and standing. Scientific theories may elicit something like religious commitment in certain individuals, but this is not their purpose—and arguably a betrayal of their function.

Theology does indeed involve categories of belief—the kinds of belief that involve not simply professional but also existential commitment. The proper analogy for theological belief and commitment may not be science as much as politics, which raises similar issues of belief and hope. In the early stages of a political race, one chooses to support a candidate even though one does not know all the facts about the candidate or the likelihood of the candidate's winning. Yet, at some point one must choose if one is to have a voice in the political process at all, and one may end up choosing a candidate not because she or he is perceived to be likely to win but

because that candidate most adeptly expresses one's own viewpoint. Indeed, one may choose to support a candidate even if she or he is not the most likely to win. One commits in the absence of evidence and takes risks in doing so, balanced only by the desirability of the outcome.

One finds here shades of both Blaise Pascal and William James, and it is not difficult to connect to contemporary decision theory. Niels Gregersen (2003) is among those who have explored the issue in a preliminary way, but there may be much that is worthy of further exploration. Other approaches are possible and need not be limited to those I have mentioned. I am not suggesting a return to Cartesian-style foundationalist projects, in which all claims have to be grounded in undoubtable, fundamental truths. Reason giving always occurs in an existing cultural context, and a change in context changes the assessed plausibility of different forms of belief, with the result that those found to be less plausible are forced to provide justifications in ways that they previously were not required to. In a stage-two secular society, this is precisely the situation in which nonnaturalistic theologies would find themselves.

HISTORY AND SECULARITY

These are admittedly summary comments, and they leave out many promising avenues as well as complex problems. They do indicate something of the challenge that may lie ahead. That we may be facing the advent of stage-two secularity, however, is different from asserting that it will indeed come to pass, and that it will do so is not at all clear. Taylor thinks not; he envisions a future that remains characterized by religious yearnings, even if those yearnings are met by different forms of religious expression than currently exist. The linear extrapolation of current trends is always tempting, and often misleading. Despite the recent wave of "new atheism" writings and the drift away from conventional religious options among a minority, the future may hold something quite different, perhaps because of deficiencies within the secular frameworks themselves. Indeed, we may see an increasingly diverse society, inclusive of greater religious pluralism as well as a greater presence of communities that have many of the elements of stage-two secularity, which may be especially associated with the sciences and their practitioners. If so, this suggests an important role for theology-and-science, which must continue to engage the content of science as well as the culture that draws from it in all of its diversity. Either way, the cultural and intellectual winds seem to be changing, and theological scholarship will need to adapt to meet these changes in the years ahead.

NOTE

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