

## From "Atheism" to "Religious Indifference": Suggestions for Future Research on Secularization

Franzmann, Manuel

Preprint / Preprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Franzmann, M. (2016). From "Atheism" to "Religious Indifference": Suggestions for Future Research on Secularization. *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion*, 7, 1-12. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004319301\\_002](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004319301_002)

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Deposit-Lizenz (Keine Weiterverbreitung - keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

**gesis**  
Leibniz-Institut  
für Sozialwissenschaften

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under Deposit Licence (No Redistribution - no modifications). We grant a non-exclusive, non-transferable, individual and limited right to using this document. This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

Mitglied der  
  
Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

## From “Atheism” to “Religious Indifference”. Suggestions for Future Research on Secularization.

This is a preprint of:

Franzmann, Manuel (2016): „From ‘Atheism’ to ‘Religious Indifference’.  
Suggestions for Future Research on Secularization“. In: Cipriani, Roberto;  
Garelli, Franco (Hrsg.) *Sociology of Atheism*. Leiden: Brill (Annual Review of  
the Sociology of Religion), pp. 1–16.

DR. MANUEL FRANZMANN

Manuel Franzmann

## **From “Atheism” to “Religious Indifference”. Suggestions for Future Research on Secularization.**

### **Introduction**

More than fifteen years ago, Rodney Stark expressed his hope that after nearly three centuries of thought about there being a trend towards secularization, the social sciences could now leave the “secularization thesis” behind (Stark 1999). This hope has not been fulfilled. On the contrary, never before has there been so much controversy and research on the subject. After years of incantatory funeral eulogies for the thesis, a wave of new research has emerged on issues of "atheism", "unbelief", "non-religion", "secularity", "agnosticism", "religious indifference", and "secularization". The fundamental attacks against the thesis thus seem to have had a mobilizing effect.

Two years before Stark published his "Secularization R.I.P." article, Peter L. Berger, the most prominent secularization theorist of the 1960s and 1970s, followed the growing criticism and abandoned the thesis (Berger 1997, see also Berger 1999). He confessed that for him "modern secularity is a much more puzzling phenomenon than all these religious explosions" (Berger 1999: 12). With this statement, he wanted to confirm that religion is the rule and a secular life-conduct a rather strange exception. It is interesting to note, however, how he admitted that he never gained understanding of secular lives despite being engaged for decades as an expert in secularization theory. Many researchers today draw the conclusion that more research has to be done about these "puzzling" things. They are right in doing so, for without clarifying secularity, secularization theory remains unclear too.

It is no coincidence that most of the controversies about the theory concern its validity with regard to the individual. Many scientists still agree that there is something called the secularization of the state or of societal institutions. However, they often disagree about a trend towards the secularization of people and their life concepts. Nonetheless, for a long time almost nobody followed Colin Campbell's call in 1971 for a "sociology of irreligion" (Campbell 1971). Although "secularization" was a controversially discussed subject in the sociology of religion for many decades, few researchers engaged in empirically reconstructing secularized modes of faith and life-conduct in a systematic way at the individual level. In fact, this research desideratum is actually much older than Campbell's call. Max Weber had already expressed the notion that the secular world views of his contemporaries (i.e. their secular continuation of protestant ethics) was a puzzle (to him) (Weber 2001: 32; Weber and Kalberg 2001: 30). However, he never decided to analyze it systematically, and nor have most of his successors for a very long time.

It is thus little wonder that many misconceptions about individual secularization were not subsequently overcome. To name four arbitrarily chosen examples: 1.) Rodney Stark still thinks that there is no substantial difference between paganism (with its magical worldview) and secularized ("disenchanted") models of life-conduct (see e.g. his argument against a "golden age of faith", Stark and Finke 2000: 63-72). 2.) Many scholars use "secularization" and "desacralization" synonymously, as if secular people had no values and nothing was sacred to them. However, it seems appropriate that Max Weber spoke only of

"disenchantment", "rationalization" and "intellectualization", but never of "desacralization". 3.) To the secular life, Peter L. Berger (and others) generally ascribe "the shallowness of a culture that tries to get along without any transcendent points of reference" (Berger 1999: 13). This characterization would be true only if you restrict the notion of transcendence to religious forms right from the start. However, in this case the argument would be circular and pointless. In fact, there are secular modes of transcendence, which refer to a community, to humankind or to something like George Herbert Mead's "logical universe of discourse". These things still exist after the individual's death and can motivate personal devotion to others, to the common good, etc. 4.) Many scholars are used to speaking of secular "unbelief", "disbelief" or "non-belief" (among them atheistic as well as religious scholars). However, this is a misleading language for analytical purposes. In relation to a particular belief, e.g. a belief in god, it might be usable. As a general diction, it erroneously suggests that secular people do not believe in anything (this implies that this is either because they are completely depressed and hopeless human beings or, on the contrary, because they conduct their life only based on supreme scientific "knowledge"). In fact, each form of life-conduct rests on belief. Secularization does not resolve belief. It only transforms the *contents* of belief. That is why I proposed to use the notion of "secular or secularized belief" (or "faith") instead of "unbelief" (Franzmann 2014).

Many misconceptions become obvious, if we engage systematically in empirically reconstructing the structure, logic, and the particular characteristics of secularized belief and life-conduct at the individual level in their diverse variants. I have done this for many years based on interviews and biographical material (Franzmann 2005; Franzmann 2008; Franzmann 2012; Franzmann 2014; Franzmann 2015; Oevermann and Franzmann 2006). An extensive monograph including essential results of this research is underway (Franzmann 2016) and this article is also a product of that research. I am pleased to see that there are many more who have conducted or are on the way to conducting such research, as we can only master its complex challenges collaboratively.

### **Shortcomings of the New Wave of Research on "Non religion" and "Secularity"**

The new wave of research on "non-religion", "secularity", and the like, however, has some distinctive shortcomings, if you regard the whole research process from a broader perspective. For this reason, this article will offer some suggestions for readjusting research strategies. For this purpose, I will later introduce "atheism" and "religious indifference" in a specific way as an important conceptual pairing in the sociology of religion.

The new research boom is comprised of different strands. I will focus on two of them. A *first* strand consists of traditional survey and indicator research with numbers about secularization processes and religious transformations. This well-established practice dates back to the days of Max Weber, although it has evolved enormously. Since the criticism of the secularization thesis was totalized in the 1990s, a remarkable upswing has been noticeable with lots of interesting counterevidence for the rivaling approaches of "religious economies" and "religious individualization" as well as additional evidence for secularization theory. Colleagues like Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, Steve Bruce, David Voas, Detlef Pollack, Gert Pickel and many others have contributed to its boom. This line of research, however, hardly tackles the above-mentioned research desideratum, namely the "puzzle" of secularity that Max Weber, Peter L. Berger and others have noted. It instead uses a rather abstract notion of secularization, which limits itself to a *formal* and a solely *negative* definition of

secularization à la Bruce Wilson, in which secularization is deemed to be a "process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance" (Wilson 1966: 14).

A *second* strand of research finally brings Colin Campbell's idea of a "sociology of irreligion" to life. It is comprised of insightful statistical studies, which seek for example to elucidate the composition and characteristics of the "nones" (religiously unaffiliated) — a term that functions as a residual category in survey research. There are also many case studies that explore the field more openly. *Unfortunately, this whole strand has largely lost touch with the secularization thesis and theory.* There is thus a great danger at the moment that it will end as self-referential niche-research, which does not realize its great potential for understanding characteristics of modernity and current religious transformations in general. So what I am suggesting is a "sociology of irreligion" that explores the features and different variants of secularity *as an important, strategic part of secularization theory and research.*

The first, more traditional strand of research urgently needs such a sibling, for its typically formal and negative notion of secularization falls below the intellectual level of the classical secularization theory established by Max Weber. In recent decades, his theory has often been shortened, not to say castrated, to a theory of "functional differentiation". However, it is not a coincidence, in fact a clear sign of its deficient abstractness, that this differentiation approach has been used as a core theory by proponents and opponents of secularization theory alike. Of course, Max Weber's secularization theory undoubtedly remained rudimentary. However, Weber clearly moved in the direction of a *material, positive* notion of secularization. For him, secularization was a process of "disenchantment", "rationalization", and "intellectualization". This implies that there is *something* that becomes disenchanted, rationalized, intellectualized: culture-building worldviews and interpretations of human life practice that have to be studied in detail in order to understand just what "secularization" factually means. Thus, Weber's approach did not limit itself to a subtraction perspective (losing religion) and to only a *formal* notion of secular contents of belief (which is of course easier to operationalize within survey research, but deficient as a matter of fact). Weber was interested in the *concreteness* of the transformation processes, the dialectics of decay and emergence as a whole. His approach has inspired a strand of research which followed the specific history of religious ideas and their line of transformation towards secular successors (the secularization of history, progress, time, sin, death and so on), of religious institutions towards secular ones. However, this research never reached the *biographical level* of individual belief and life-conduct on a systematic scale. It is high time to address this as the "puzzle" of individual secularity has already remained underresearched for a long time.

### **"Atheism" and "Religious Indifference" as Structure-analytical, Dialectical Concepts**

Before specifying a strategic program for future research, I will turn towards the notions of "atheism" and "religious indifference". They are only two of a series of expressions, which are used in the new wave of research, such as "secularity", "secularism", "secularization", "non-religion", "irreligion", "unbelief", "unaffiliated", "nones", "agnosticism", and others. We have good reasons, however, to give particular attention and importance to them for analytical purposes. This applies in particular to the perspective of secularization research.

Scholars of religious studies are aware that the original word meaning of "atheism" goes back to the Greek word "atheos", which simply means "without god" or "godless". However, in everyday language it denotes more frequently an openly *rejectionist* attitude to the belief in

(a) god, ultimately an anti-theistic, if not in general an *anti-religious* stance. This applies again in the case of today's "new atheism", which continues with the older tradition of religion criticism. Reasons for this linguistic practice are historical. Many cases, for which the term was used in the last 250 years, also in fact had an anti-religious tendency and the meaning of words is of course shaped by its concrete usage in common practice.

Even so, it is an important principle in the social sciences to keep the *literal meaning* of words in view in order to be as explicit as possible. Oftentimes it seems reasonable to depart from the everyday usage of an expression and to use it more consistently in its literal meaning. This seems to be the case with the words "belief" and "unbelief". Most people automatically think of religious beliefs, when they hear the word "belief". However, secular people also conduct their lives according to "beliefs", if you focus on the literal meaning of the expression. To use the word "belief" in a way that includes secular worldviews carries great potential for the social sciences to correct false assumptions about secular people. That is for instance the view that secular worldviews are principally based on supreme knowledge and not on belief or the opposite view that as "unbelief" they lack all the positive aspects of "believing" like hope, life optimism, confidence in the future, a sense of purpose, motivation, a feeling of security and so on.

In the case of "atheism", however, I am advocating a scholarly usage, which gives priority to the colloquial and not the literal meaning. Why? Because in this particular case, the literal meaning is hidden from recipients who do not have a knowledge of Greek, Latin or etymology. Another reason is that we urgently need an appropriate name for the many cases that not only conduct their life without a belief in (a) god, but also have a clear tendency towards hostility to religion, a tendency for a *forced* rejection of it that is embraced as a means of stabilizing their identity. The advantages of this conceptual strategy should become clearer in the course of this article.

The notion "religious indifference" allows different interpretations too. For example, you can think of an attitude to religion that is characterized by a narrow-minded disinterest and illiterate ignorance. In this case, the relation to religion is generally indifferent. Some scholars define the notion more specifically. They speak of religious indifference if people do not take a decision about believing or not believing in religious contents, i.e. if people leave the question open as to whether religious statements are true for them or not (see e.g. Gartner, Pollack, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2003). Note, however, that this does not necessarily exclude an interest in religious questions.

I propose to use the notion in an even more specific way, which is closely related to the notion "atheism" as explained above. Whereas an atheist's identity is negatively bound to religion, a religiously indifferent person conducts life in a secular manner without any immanent impulse to justify itself *in contrast to* religion. Religious contents have simply stopped being meaningful for this person's life-conduct. Neither do they function as belief that guides life-conduct, nor do they serve negatively as a counterpart that helps stabilize a precarious self-identity by means of demarcation. To say that religious contents have, in this case, stopped being meaningful *in life-conduct* implies that this does not necessarily hold for other aspects. Indeed, "religious indifference" is here strictly limited to the *practical role of religious contents in personal life-conduct*. This implies that such an individual can nevertheless be interested in studying religion. He or she can cooperate intensively with religious believers and religious organizations, appreciate their contributions to society, and

acknowledge their historical achievements. For an individual to be deemed "religiously indifferent", it suffices that in his or her personal identity and life-conduct religious contents have ceased to be meaningful in a positive or negative manner, because they have been replaced in a sustainable way by secular contents. In contrast to, a classical "atheist" emphasizes, if not to say exaggerates, negative aspects of religions and of their history, by, for example, unilaterally denouncing historical crimes by religious institutions.

Such a use of the notion of "religious indifference" does not imply "indecision" with regard to religious questions, as in the definition of Christel Gärtner, Detlef Pollack and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr (Gartner, Pollack, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2003). On the contrary, the decision to accede to secular contents of belief *inevitably implies* decisions "against" believing in god and other religious matters. It implies decisions "against" *different* secular contents of belief as well. Such *factual* decisions "against" religious interpretations of life, however, do not automatically imply a negative bond to religion. These decisions are in many cases "pro" secular *in the first place* and "contra" religion only by implication. Only where pro secular decisions are made *openly against* religion can we talk about an atheistic identity which is negatively bound to religion. Such an atheist stabilizes itself by means of *forced* negation of religion comparable with an adolescent, who facilitates his pulling away from its parents by means of excessive criticism. In contrast to that, for a religiously indifferent individual religion has ceased to be an object of personal preoccupation, because such an individual has already pulled away from religion successfully. It has grown out of it, so to speak, and become established with its secular life-conduct, which legitimates itself only by its own belief contents. There is no need any more for additional stabilization by means of negation. That is why it can be more balanced in its judgment about religion compared with a classical atheist, who struggles to move away from religion. Such "religious indifference" represents an advanced form of secularization that prospers at a later stage of secularization history.

Some sociologists of religion see in the history of secularization a movement from anti-religious atheism towards a-religious indifference. Members of the clergy also recognized such a trend, such as the Vatican's "Pontifical Council for Culture" at its plenary assembly from March 11-13, 2004 on the theme of "Where is Your God? Responding to the Challenge of Unbelief and Religious Indifference Today".<sup>1</sup> Together with Ulrich Oevermann, I applied a similar perspective at a conference in 2003 (Oevermann and Franzmann 2006). However, it has been discussed in particular in Britain. For example, Colin Campbell had already written in 1971, that

*there has been considerable discussion of the tendency for the a-religious response to have gradually supplanted the anti-religious response as the primary form of irreligion in British society. The first half of the nineteenth century had been marked by virulent anti-religious campaigns, but by mid-Victorian times these had died down and instead of attacking religion 'many people were simply uninterested in religion or else regarded it as a curious historical phenomenon destined like others to pass away'.*

CAMPBELL 1971: 25, see also BAGG and VOAS 2010; BRUCE 2002: 41-43

---

<sup>1</sup> Concluding document of this assembly at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

However, although some scholars recognize the factual importance of the conceptual pair of "atheism" and "religious indifference", and although some use these or similar notions to point to an historical trend within the dynamics of secularization, there has been no consistent attempt so far to explicate them theoretically. Their usage remains *descriptive*, sometimes *theoretically inconsistent* or is aimed at *classifying* phenomena. However, *describing* things or *classifying* them is not the same as *analyzing* them. A descriptive or classificatory usage of these notions without a theoretical framework is of course legitimate. However, I argue we should use them in the first place for things that are more important: for analytical-theoretical purposes. They have great potential as a conceptual pair, which denotes two different *structural types* within a *continuum* of secularization. Classical "atheism" falls into the earlier stage of (manifest) secularization at the individual level. "Religious indifference" is a product of advanced secularization. Of course, the transitions are fluid. Because both notions receive their shape through a dynamic framework, we can also call them *dialectic* notions.

"Atheism" is marked by its proximity to religion. This has two important implications. *First*, its manifestations paradoxically resemble in many aspects the religious culture that his proponents criticize. For this reason, some scholars tend to speak of "secular religion". Atheistic groups frequently build their secular lives by *analogy with* a former religion to cope with the task of filling the gap the abandoned religion has left. For these reasons, many atheistic manifestations take the form of a cobbled together surrogate religion. People from traditional religious communities frequently misinterpret this artificiality and lack of originality as proof that religions are indispensable. However, this is only the result of the *low, rudimentary* development of individual secularization, which at this early stage can hardly do without some borrowing from the abandoned religion. That is changing fundamentally in the course of advancing secularization. The *second* important implication of the proximity of atheism to religion is that it generates a sharp tension for its proponents, because they tend to pull away from religion, but have not yet succeeded in doing so. In this respect, they are comparable with adolescents, who are prepared to mentally leave their parents and are striving for a stable identity as autonomous adults. But by definition, they have not completed this process. They are in a precarious situation where for structural reasons it is tempting for them on an unconscious level to facilitate the process of pulling away by means of forced opposition and criticism. A similar thing happens with atheism, which belongs, metaphorically speaking, to the "adolescence" of secularization.

It is worth noting, however, that in this early phase of individual secularization a forced negation and criticism of religion is not really necessary. Adolescents too do not in any case rebel against their parents. There is an interesting example of an early stage of individual secularization without forced negation of religion which is offered by Max Weber. In his often cited letter to Ferdinand Tönnies (dated 19.2.1909, the letter is published in the "Max Weber Gesamtausgabe" 11/6, pp. 63-66, and in Vahland 2001: 47 f.), in which he described himself as "religiously unmusical", Weber made clear that the religious content of belief in general has lost its "believability" for him. In this regard, the decline of the religiously founded German Empire in the early twentieth century, the transition to democracy with its secular principle of legitimating state authority (i.e. the sovereignty of the people) was an important trigger.

His rudimentary secularity, however, was not a satisfying solution for him either. It came to resemble a vacuum rather than a robust fundament. It was against this background that Weber described himself as "religiously unmusical", as if his a-religiosity was the result of personal



shortcomings. He made it unequivocally clear, however, that for his personal life he refused the religious content of belief *through his own free will*. His unsatisfying, rudimentary secularity, which nevertheless was a point of no return for him, also allowed him to see his position as a *loss* of the former religious culture. In this context, he came to the peculiar formula of being "religiously unmusical". Being *authentic* in this situation of a secular vacuum was his top priority.<sup>2</sup> That is why he rejected all forms of inauthentic retro-religiosity as well as atheistic surrogate religions, which criticized religions in a one-sided, inauthentic way and at the same time imitated them instead of conducting the secular life consistently according to its own standards. Weber was not yet in the position of "religious indifference". He was not an "atheist" either, one who facilitates his pulling away from religion by the (unconscious) trick of *a forced* and therein also in some aspects inauthentic negation of religion. Certainly, people such as Weber were historical exceptions who possessed an unusually radical focus on authenticity as a consequence of a scientific or artistic search for experience and truth. For this reason, the conceptual pairing of "atheism" and "religious indifference" is appropriate as a means of characterizing the *normal flow* of individual secularization.<sup>3</sup>

I agree with Steve Bruce's "imagination" that religious indifference represents the "endpoint" of individual secularization (Bruce 2002: 42), although only in a quite distinct sense: There is no other *category* that replaces "religious indifference" at a later time. This certainly does not mean, however, that the process of secularization will come to an end. When the process of pulling away from religion is complete and the individual has reached the state of a self-sustainable secularized life-conduct, the process of disenchantment, rationalization, and intellectualization can still continue and affect further aspects and details of human life. Then, the transformation continues *within* the general category of "religious indifference". If you regard secularization as a *material* and not just a formal transformation of cultural worldviews like Weber, then this process never reaches a definitive endpoint and you have to concede that there are processes of disenchantment, rationalization, and intellectualization *within the sphere of secularity* as well.<sup>4</sup> For example, one rather obvious motive behind the pronounced criticism levelled against the secularization thesis in the last two decades was to overcome the questionable secularism of the 1960s and 1970s, which has also shaped the social sciences. The secularist attitude of this time with its proximity to Marxist ideas frequently served as a surrogate religion. It still had a collectivist character like religions being criticized. This often led to intolerance and arrogance toward religious believers, who were lumped together as being "backward" without closer attention to individuals. The secularist proponents in the social sciences often replaced religion with social scientific theories, thereby blurring the line between *theory and practice* and turning science into a quasi-religious and at the same time a technocratic undertaking that should lead the people and their practice to emancipation. The disenchantment of this secularism was in fact a further secularization step. You can even track

---

<sup>2</sup> However, it is true that he tended sometimes to drift towards a stylized pose of soberness and realism.

<sup>3</sup> The term "authentic" does not necessarily imply value-judgments. In this article it does definitely not. The experienced analyst of cases knows that "inauthenticity" can also be analytically identified as a quality within the whole set of available semiotic expressions of a case. You do not need to apply standards that are coming from outside to speak of authenticity. As an analyst, you only reconstruct a case by its own standards that he or she can also miss of course.

<sup>4</sup> Just the same, you have to consider that there are transformations of religions, which follow the direction of disenchantment, rationalization, and intellectualization, although manifest secular contents of belief are not involved. Such transformations appear as an approximation to secularization. For this reason, I have never understood why Peter L. Berger and others put forward examples of religious vitality like the boom in Protestant sects in Latin America, Africa and Asia to disprove the secularization thesis (typically without any closer examination), as these examples seem to fit very well with Weber's classical secularization approach.

the motive of overcoming the secularist attitude of the 1960s and 1970s in Rodney Stark's criticism. In 1999, for instance, he wrote the following footnote:

*Then in 1968, in contrast to all of this intellectual pussy-footing, Peter Berger (1968: 3) told the New York Times that by 'the 21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture.' [...] I quote his statements during the 1960s only because they so fully express the mood of the times, a mood that I shared.*

STARK 1999: 251

A problem with Stark's criticism is that he assimilates all proponents of the secularization thesis to the secularist attitude of the 1960s and 1970s. He even attributed Max Weber and Emile Durkheim with the words "that religion is false and harmful" (Stark and Finke 2000: 28), which is grossly untrue. Furthermore, it is almost inconceivable that Max Weber, the author of classic secularization theory, would have made such an incautious prediction as that of Berger.

### **A Strategic Focus for Future Secularization Research**

In this final section, I wish to specify a strategic focus for future secularization research in the light of what I have said above. I have argued that more scholars should engage systematically in empirically reconstructing secularized forms of individual belief and life-conduct, because most of the long-lasting controversies about secularization concern the *individual level* that has remained an underresearched "puzzle". The new wave of research already contributes to closing this research gap. However, to gain *strategic importance* for key debates about modernity, secularization and religious transformation, it has to be more ambitious in theoretical terms. It has to integrate secularization theory systematically in its research efforts. In this section, I will advocate also that in doing so scholars should pay particular attention to *advanced forms* of secularized belief and life-conduct, i.e. manifestations of *religious indifference*. The simplest reason for this is that these manifestations are newer phenomena, whereas atheism has a long history. This is reflected in social scientific research. We know much more about atheism in fact, whereas the majority of scholars have not even learned to distinguish clearly between atheism and religious indifference. There is a second and more important reason: the special significance of *advanced forms* for understanding development processes. As our language already suggests, a later stage of "development" reveals more openly through its differentiation the inbound tendency, the nature of its driving logic. For this reason, it is much easier to understand the dynamical logic of individual secularization by means of analyzing advanced manifestations. I think Durkheim was wrong when he assumed in his "Elementary Forms of the Religious Life" that it is easier to reconstruct universal aspects of the religious life by means of analyzing its most "primitive" forms. The opposite in fact seems to be true. The lack of phenomenological complexity of early human societies implies that many aspects build a complex fusion, where it is very difficult to identify single aspects, because they are amalgamated with others. On the other hand, very complex societies with a great degree of differentiation have a confusing phenomenological complexity at first sight. It is easier, however, to identify different aspects because they are already differentiated in reality. Such a society is much more "developed". In order to understand the nature of individual

secularization, we should therefore engage in particular in empirically reconstructing its most advanced, "developed" forms, i.e. secularized religious indifference.

From this perspective, the methodological premise of Charles Taylor's monumental study of "A Secular Age" (Taylor 2007) seems questionable. Taylor justified his impressive and in many aspects very interesting walks through the history of ideas, which led to the "secular age" of our time, with the sentence: "I have told a long story, because I believe that one can *only* get a handle on this [the secular age] if one comes at it historically." (Taylor 2007: 768 [emphasis added]) But how can you track the history of something, the "Entstehungsgeschichte" (Taylor 2007: 26), appropriately without clarifying the object of investigation first? I learned that an appropriate reconstruction of the historical formation of "something" depends on a clear notion and systematic understanding of the object, whose formation process should be investigated. In a way, the latter leads the former. For this reason, a deficient concept of secularity automatically limits a historical investigation of its formation right from the start. I feel that this applies to Taylor's book. For many years, I analyzed advanced forms of a secularized "religious indifference" and what I have learned from this does not match with Taylor's notion of secularity and secularization. Taylor seems to derive his notion (as well as his central metaphor of a "buffered self") from 18th century enlightenment philosophy, as if there was no major progress in the centuries afterwards. He does not analyze current manifestations, nor does he look at the secular life-conduct of living people instead of abstract philosophical discourses. For these reasons, I think he misses important aspects of individual secularization. To give but two examples. 1.) I learned from my analyzes that "authenticity" gains *particular* significance in these advanced forms of individual secularization. Unfortunately, I cannot enter this topic here in any depth. However, Taylor seems to see no connection. There is a related problem with Taylor's interpretation of 19th century romanticism, where "authenticity" originated as an important value. Taylor puts this romantic turn only in opposition to the secular ideas of the enlightenment philosophers. For sure, this turn presents itself as a *criticism* of enlightenment philosophy. However, I think that this criticism has to be understood as a criticism of the *abstractness* of this philosophy, as a move towards *realizing* its enlightenment program, as a move towards becoming concrete by *actually searching for experience*. That is why proponents of romanticism discovered all sorts of the Foreign (faraway countries and cultures, craziness, the unconscious, nature, the individual, etc.). Against this background, authenticity became important as a central category of concrete, i.e. *aesthetic*, experience. From this perspective, the romantic turn appears above all as a remarkable secularization step and not as a countermovement to secularization as Taylor suggests. It is no coincidence that it followed the French Revolution of 1789, when the secularization process entered its manifest phase on the most general level of political constitution. 2.) I also learned from my analyzes to take a fact more seriously, which shows in this historical revolution. There the secularization process *materialized* in the transition from the "divine right of kings" to the "sovereignty of the people" as a political legitimation principle. This implies that the secularization process materialized among other things in the "realization" of *autonomy* as a secular, "earthly" structure potential of human practice. Here the expression "realization" has a twofold meaning. This potential has been recognized and articulated in the societal discourse. Simultaneously, it has been realized practically. Both aspects are mutually reinforcing and drive a dialectical transformation. The process entered its manifest phase on the *most general* level of political constitution which the French Revolution has become a symbol of. However, the process later continued to penetrate the interior of society, where it first transformed societal institutions that also became

autonomous step by step. It was a long road until this process finally reached down to the individual level on a mass scale in the course of the 20th century. *On this Level, secularization materializes as autonomization too*. Now, if secularization materializes as a realization of earthly autonomy from the political level over the societal sphere down to the individual level, then Charles Taylor's story of the emergence of "a secular option" seems incomplete. It does not include the fact that the "secular option" for the individual is itself a consequence of the political and societal secularization. The same holds true for the pluralization of worldviews. If autonomy has become a fundamental value in society, then individual beliefs have to be respected as long as they respect the autonomy of others as well, regardless of whether they are comprised of religious or secular contents. By the way, the idea of telling the story of the occurrence of a "secular option" is not new. It has been implemented very explicitly by the prominent American historian James Turner in his book *Without God, without creed. The origins of unbelief in America* (Turner 1985). I do not know why Taylor does not mention this book once in the 870 pages of his own monograph.

I am suggesting engaging in empirically reconstructing advanced forms of individual secularization ("religious indifference") on a broad scale, after years of exploring this research focus.<sup>5</sup> This implies that I have already tested its fruitfulness extensively with lots of interesting insights and clarifications (see the previously mentioned publications), at least from my point of view. However, there is so much work that still has to be done. For this reason, my work is at best a small contribution.

There is a last point that seems essential to a successful outcome: the use of research methods. These should be able to reconstruct the *structure* of a case. When I say structure, I think of a different notion than the standard definition, where it simply denotes the particular *relationship* of elements. This is far too abstract for the purposes of sociology. Here we should think of the particular *decision pattern*, which an actor (or an acting collectivity) exposes in practice. We should also think of the worldview, habitus and other subjective dispositions that stand behind this particular selectivity in practice. Without analyzing the actual *structure* of life-conduct and of its guiding belief, we cannot cope with the challenges of the outlined research. We do not know much about a case if we only identify isolated contents of belief as in classical content analysis. Their *architecture* is crucial as well as the practical decision pattern as a *whole*. There is one social scientific methodology that I know which is well adjusted to this difficult challenge. It is called "objective hermeneutics" ("Objektive Hermeneutik"), because it focuses on the meaning of utterances<sup>6</sup> (or actions and artifacts) first, before it speculates about speaker's (or actor's and producer's) intentions.<sup>7</sup> The German sociologist Ulrich Oevermann initiated it in the 1970s and the core instrument of this methodology is "sequential analysis", which systematically follows the factual sequence of acts (oftentimes speech acts) in order to reconstruct the factual decision patterns and underlying subjective dispositions. There is no other methodology that I know which does that. Unfortunately, this methodology is still largely unknown to the English-speaking world, although it has been well established in German speaking countries for nearly forty years. This is a very strange case of a failed scientific exchange of ideas. However, without such a

---

<sup>5</sup> As I mentioned above, a extensive monography with essential results of this work will be published in the near future (although as a German monograph).

<sup>6</sup> Which is among other things a function of the tacit knowledge of intersubjective linguistic rules.

<sup>7</sup> See [www.objective-hermeneutics.com](http://www.objective-hermeneutics.com).

methodology it will be extremely difficult to cope with the challenges of the research outlined above.

## References

- Bagg, Samuel, and David Voas. 2010. "The Triumph of Indifference. Irreligion in British Society." In *Atheism and Secularity 2*, edited by Phil Zuckerman, 91-111. Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger.
- Berger, Peter L. 1997. "Epistemological Modesty: An Interview with Peter Berger." *Christian Century* 114: 972-75, 978.
- . ed. 1999. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center.
- Bruce, Steve. 2002. *God Is Dead. Secularization in the West*. Religion in the Modern World. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Campbell, Colin. 1971. *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*. London: Macmillan.
- Franzmann, Manuel. 2005. "Generation and Secularisation in Germany. The Succession of Generations up to the Youngest Adult Generation and the Advancing Process of Secularisation." In *Moderné Náboženstvo- Modern Religion*, edited by Zostavila SilviaJozefciaková, 44-54. Bratislava: Ústav pre vzťahy štátu a cirkví.
- . 2008. *Why people would not stop contributing if an unconditional basic income were introduced. An argumentation from within the Sociology of Religion*. Frankfurt am Main: Goethe-University. <http://publikationen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/volltexte/2008/5628/>.
- . 2012. "Analiza materialna zsekularyzowanej wiary jako przyczynek do potwierdzonego empirycznie pojęcia sekularyzacji." In *Pomiędzy sekularyzacją i religijnym ożywieniem podobieństwa i różnice w przemianach religijnych w polsce i w niemczech*, edited by Elżbieta Firlit, Michael Hainz, Maria Libiszowska-Zótkowska, Gert Pickel, and Detlef Pollack, 153-163. Krakow: Akademia Ignatianum w Krakowie.
- . 2014. "Materiale Analyse des säkularisierten GLAUBENS als Beitrag zu einem empirisch gesättigten Säkularisierungsbegriff." In *Zwischen Säkularisierung und religiöser Vitalisierung Religiosität in Deutschland und Polen im Vergleich*, edited by Michael Hainz, Gert Pickel, Detlef Pollack, M. Libiszowska-Zótkowska, and E. Firlit, 127-133. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
- . 2015. "Zur Theorie des Zusammenhangs von existenzieller Sicherheit und Säkularisierung bei Pippa Norris und Ronald Inglehart. Anmerkungen aus Sicht einer fallanalytischen Säkularisierungsforschung." In *Routinen der Krise - Krise der Routinen. Verhandlungen des 37. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie in Trier 2014*, edited by Stephan Lessenich. Verhandlungen Der Kongresse Der Deutschen Gesellschaft Für Soziologie. <http://publikationen.soziologie.de>.
- . 2016. *Säkularisierter Glauben*. Weinheim: Beltz-Juventa. (scheduled).
- Gartner, Christel, Detlef Pollack, and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr. 2003. "Einleitung." In *Atheismus und religiöse Indifferenz*, 9-20. Opladen: Leske & Budrich.
- Oevermann, Ulrich, and Manuel Franzmann. 2006. "Strukturelle Religiosität auf dem Wege zur religiösen Indifferenz." In *Religiosität in der säkularisierten Welt. Theoretische und*

*empirische Beiträge zur Säkularisierungsdebatte in der Religionssoziologie*, edited by Manuel Franzmann, Christel Gartner, and Nicole Kock, 49-82. Veröffentlichungen der Sektion Religionssoziologie der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie, Bd. n. Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag.

Stark, Rodney. 1999. "Secularization, R.I.P." *Sociology of Religion* 60 (3): 249-274.

Stark, Rodney, and Roger Finke. 2000. *Acts of Faith. Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press.

Turner, James. 1985. *Without God, without Creed The Origins of Unbelief in America*. New Studies in American Intellectual and Cultural History. Baltimore u.a.: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Vahland, Joachim. 2001. *Max Webers entzauberte Welt*. Königshausen & Neumann. Weber, Max. 2001. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London and New York: Routledge.

Weber, Max, and Stephen Kalberg. 2001. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Taylor & Francis.

Wilson, Bryan R. 1966. *Religion in Secular Society. A Sociological Comment*. The New Thinkers Library 15. London: Watts.