

There is pretty clear evidence of the acute secularization of Western society. Ironically this secularization includes the religious. The midwayers make this strong statement before 1942: "At the time of this revelation, the prevailing intellectual and philosophical climate of both European and American life is decidedly secular—humanistic. For three hundred years Western thinking has been progressively secularized. Religion has become more and more a nominal influence, largely a ritualistic exercise. The majority of professed Christians of Western civilization are unwittingly actual secularists." 195:8.3 (2081.3) The last sentence has puzzled me for quite a long time. Just how does one who practices one's faith in Christianity be an "actual secularist"? What is an actual secularist? And why do the midwayers make it sound like this is an irony that borders on a paradox?

The word *secular* originates from the Latin term **saeculum**, meaning "generation," "age," or "worldly time." It was used to contrast the eternal and spiritual with the temporal and earthly. During the Middle Ages, the term evolved into **saecularis** in Medieval Latin, referring to things "of this world" as opposed to the sacred. It passed into Old French as *séculer* and then into Middle English as *seculer*, eventually becoming the modern term *secular*. The word reflects its historical development as a concept associated with the distinction between temporal and spiritual domains.

In its more extreme forms, secularism takes on the approach to the universe as *materialism*. In fact, it seems that secularism could be considered a slippery slope to materialism. Materialism, as a philosophical stance, posits that **matter is the fundamental substance of reality**, and all phenomena, including consciousness and emotions, arise from material interactions. In this view, there is no need for a divine or supernatural explanation, as everything can be understood in terms of physical processes. This implicit (or explicit) denial of God or any transcendent reality is what aligns materialism with atheism and makes it a direct challenge to religious beliefs. For many in Western society, materialism is seen as inherently opposed to theism because it leaves no room for a deity's existence or intervention in the universe.

Secularism, on the other hand, is less about denying God and more about **ignoring Him** in public and civic life. It focuses on creating a neutral space where religious beliefs do not influence governance, laws, or public institutions. Secularism does not inherently oppose religion; rather, it advocates for the **separation of religion and state** to ensure equality and freedom of belief for everyone. Because of this, a person can be both a **religionist and a secularist**, as long as they compartmentalize their religious beliefs and ensure these beliefs do not interfere with their engagement in secular public life. One has to wonder how this can actually be accomplished. It is as though one would have to have two differently functioning personalities. How would ethics and morality not cross over?

To start to get a handle on these and other paradoxical questions, it is useful to look at two practical issues that occurred separately in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century politics.

The controversies surrounding Barack Obama's association with Rev. Jeremiah Wright during his presidential campaign and John F. Kennedy's Catholicism during his 1960 campaign reflect similar tensions between religion and secular governance in American politics. Both cases raised the question of whether a candidate's religious affiliation or associations would improperly influence their ability to govern in a secular state. However, their reconciliations of these concerns differed in tone and focus, reflecting the unique challenges of their times.

### **What Exactly is Secularism?**

Secularism can be understood in different ways, depending on the context. At its core, it is a *belief* that government and public institutions should remain neutral and not favor or be influenced by any specific religion. This ensures fairness for everyone, regardless of their religious beliefs or lack thereof. For example, a secular government doesn't make laws based on any one religion but instead focuses on principles that apply to all citizens.

It can also be seen as a *system* that organizes society by separating religion from public institutions like schools, courts, and governments. In a secular system, these institutions operate based on facts and universal rules rather than religious teachings. For instance, public schools in a secular society focus on subjects like science and history, rather than promoting religious doctrines.

In addition to being a system, secularism reflects a *societal trend* where religion becomes less central in public life. This doesn't mean religion disappears, but rather, it becomes more personal and less involved in government policies or public decision-making. In such societies, individuals can still practice their faith freely, but religious beliefs do not dictate public rules.

Finally, secularism can also be seen as a *rulebook for fairness*, organizing laws and policies to protect everyone's rights. It ensures that people are free to practice their religion—or not—without interference or favoritism from the government. For example, secular laws might allow individuals to wear religious symbols if they choose, but they won't require anyone to follow specific religious practices.

At the end of the day, secularism is best described as a *system* for organizing society that promotes fairness and neutrality in public spaces. It combines ideas of equality, legal protections, and societal trends to create a fair environment where everyone, regardless of their beliefs, is treated equally.

### Barack Obama: Addressing the Wright Controversy

**D**uring Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, his association with Rev. Jeremiah Wright, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, became a major controversy. Wright had made inflammatory remarks in his sermons, including criticisms of U.S. foreign policy and racial injustices, which opponents used to question Obama's judgment and patriotism. Critics argued that Wright's rhetoric could reflect on Obama's worldview and questioned whether Obama shared or was influenced by these views.

#### Obama's Response

Obama addressed the controversy in a now-famous speech titled "**A More Perfect Union**" (March 18, 2008). In his speech:

1. **Acknowledged the Controversy:** Obama did not disavow his relationship with Wright outright but condemned Wright's divisive rhetoric, distinguishing between the man and his words.
2. **Framed Wright's Rhetoric Historically:** He contextualized Wright's comments within the broader experience of racial injustices in America, portraying them as reflective of generational frustration rather than a personal belief he shared.
3. **Separated Personal Faith from Public Policy:** Obama emphasized that his personal faith, shaped by his church, did not dictate his political decisions. He reinforced his belief in the separation of

church and state, arguing that his public service was guided by a commitment to unity, inclusivity, and shared values rather than by specific religious ideologies or affiliations.

Obama's speech was seen as a nuanced defense of both his religious background and his commitment to secular governance. He effectively argued that his faith was a personal moral compass but did not define his political agenda or disqualify him as a secular leader.

### **John F. Kennedy: Addressing the Catholic Question**

John F. Kennedy faced a different but analogous challenge during his 1960 campaign as the first Catholic to run for the presidency. Critics, particularly Protestant leaders, expressed fears that Kennedy would be subservient to the Pope or that Catholic dogma would unduly influence his decisions as president, compromising the secular nature of the U.S. government.

### **Kennedy's Response**

Kennedy delivered a speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association on **September 12, 1960**, directly addressing these concerns:

1. **Affirmed Separation of Church and State:** Kennedy emphasized his strong belief in the separation of church and state, stating, *"I am not the Catholic candidate for president. I am the Democratic Party's candidate for president who happens also to be a Catholic."*
2. **Declared Independence from Religious Authority:** He assured the audience that he would not take directives from the Catholic Church or any religious authority in executing his duties as president. He affirmed that his decisions would be guided by his oath of office and the Constitution, not by religious dogma.
3. **Framed Religion as a Private Matter:** Kennedy reinforced the idea that religious beliefs were a private matter that should not interfere with public service, asserting that Americans had the right to expect their president to serve the country without religious bias or influence.

Kennedy's logic resonated with a pluralistic electorate, assuring them that his Catholicism would not conflict with his responsibilities as a secular leader.

### **Comparison of Obama and Kennedy's Logic**

Both Obama and Kennedy used similar frameworks to address concerns about their religion:

- **Emphasis on Separation of Church and State:** Both argued that their faith would not interfere with their duty to uphold the Constitution and serve a diverse population.
- **Framing Religion as Personal:** Both positioned their religion as a private source of moral guidance rather than a determinant of public policy.
- **Appeal to Shared Values:** Obama highlighted unity and inclusivity, while Kennedy stressed pluralism and constitutional principles.

However, there were differences:

- **Contextual Approach:** Obama addressed the specific cultural and racial context of his association with Wright, seeking to educate the public on systemic issues while distancing himself from divisive rhetoric. Kennedy's focus was broader, directly addressing fears of religious interference in governance without delving into the specifics of his faith.
- **Tone and Audience:** Kennedy's audience was primarily concerned with Catholic doctrine's potential influence, while Obama spoke to concerns about divisiveness and patriotism stemming from his pastor's rhetoric.

Both Obama and Kennedy successfully reconciled concerns about their religious affiliations by affirming their commitment to secular governance and the principle of separation of church and state. Their responses reflected the unique challenges of their times but ultimately reinforced the idea that personal faith need not compromise a leader's ability to serve in a pluralistic, secular society. Their approaches affirmed the resilience of secularism in American political life while acknowledging the diversity of personal beliefs within it.

The narratives surrounding Barack Obama and John F. Kennedy highlight a recurring tension at least in U.S. political discourse and potentially is parroted in all of Western society: the interplay between religion, secularism, and public trust in a candidate's ability to govern impartially. These cases reveal the complexities of how religion is perceived in politics, often shaped more by **partisan alignment and cultural identity** than by a consistent stance on secularism. The current climate in the U.S. further illustrates this tension, especially within the religious Right, where accusations of hypocrisy or hyperbole frequently arise.

What has intrigued me for some time is the

### **What Exactly is Modern Conventional Secularism?**

Secularism is a principle or philosophy advocating the separation of religion from public institutions, ensuring neutrality in governance and public affairs. It is rooted in the idea that religious beliefs and practices should remain personal and private, while public policies and institutions operate independently of religious influence. This principle supports freedom of religion and belief, providing space for individuals to follow diverse paths. Secularism is not inherently anti-religious; it is instead a framework to maintain impartiality and equal treatment for all beliefs, religious or non-religious.

Secularism is the principle or philosophy that advocates for the separation of religion from governmental institutions and public affairs. It holds that religion should not influence government policies, laws, or the education system, ensuring that public decisions and civic life are based on reason, logic, and universal human rights rather than religious doctrine or beliefs.

Secularism is rooted in the idea of neutrality towards all religions, where no particular religion is favored or privileged in public life. This allows individuals of all faiths—or none—to coexist freely, ensuring that personal religious beliefs remain private and are not imposed on others through state mechanisms.

Key aspects of secularism include:

1. **Separation of Church and State:** Governments are independent of religious institutions, and laws are made without religious influence.

2. **Freedom of Religion and Belief:** Individuals are free to practice any religion, or none, without state interference or coercion.
3. **Equal Treatment:** No religion receives special privileges, and people of all religious backgrounds are treated equally in public life.

Many believe secularism is important in promoting pluralism, religious tolerance, and social harmony, as it prevents any one group from using governmental power to enforce their beliefs on others. It is a common framework in modern democracies, though its interpretation and implementation can vary from one country to another. We'll examine that more closely but before we do that, a look at the timing of materialism related to secularism is important to consider.

### **Crowding Out Supernaturalism – A Millenium of Evolution**

Materialism emerged long before secularism. It had origins in ancient Greek philosophy through figures like Democritus and Leucippus, who posited that everything is composed of matter and governed by physical laws. Secularism, as a formal ideology, arose more than a millennium later during the Enlightenment as a response to religious authority over public life by resurrecting the Greek belief in rational thought.<sup>1</sup>

Except for the Greeks it seems, and noticeable few others in history, supernatural causes for many of humanity's situations predominated humanity. Indeed, very soon after Jesus resurrected, ecclesiastical authority took over control of the narrative – and supernaturalism became the predominant belief in Christianity with respect to how God's universe worked for well over a millennium. In fact, to this day, the much of Christianity struggles with how God manages and administers His universe. This is clearly plays out in the beliefs of Deism or Theism in one dimension of theology to consider.

Christianity began as a marginalized movement within the Roman Empire, often facing persecution for its refusal to conform to the state-sanctioned pagan practices. However, over the course of several centuries, it transformed into the dominant force shaping both the secular and religious realms of Western civilization. This transformation was driven by a combination of theological development, strategic accommodation of pagan traditions, and alliances with secular rulers, leading to Christianity's unparalleled authority over society.

The turning point for Christianity's rise came with Emperor Constantine's conversion in the early 4th century. Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 CE granted religious tolerance to Christians, and by the end of the century, Emperor Theodosius I declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. This shift integrated Christian doctrine into the fabric of the state, making it both a spiritual and political force. The Church Fathers, notably Augustine of Hippo and Ambrose of Milan, played a key role in shaping Christian theology and establishing the Church as the primary moral authority. These theologians not only articulated doctrines of salvation and divine grace but also emphasized the Church's role in guiding rulers and legitimizing their authority. As a result, secular leaders began to see the Church as an indispensable ally for maintaining order and consolidating their power. This power subsumed both the secular and the sacred.

In the process of asserting dominance, Christianity absorbed and transformed many elements of paganism, facilitating its spread among diverse populations. The Church Fathers subsumed pagan supernatural beliefs into Christian doctrine by reinterpreting local deities as saints or demons and

converting pagan festivals into Christian celebrations. For example, Saturnalia became Christmas, and spring fertility rites evolved into Easter. These adaptations made Christianity more accessible to pagan populations while allowing the Church to reframe pagan supernaturalism within a Christian worldview. This strategy not only unified the populace under a single religious framework but also reinforced the Church's claim to spiritual and moral authority.

Christianity's integration with secular power became even more pronounced during the Middle Ages. The Church provided legitimacy to kings and potentates through coronation rituals and the endorsement of their divine right to rule. In return, secular leaders supported the Church by enforcing its doctrines and suppressing heresies. This symbiotic relationship enabled the Church to exert control over nearly every aspect of life, from governance and education to personal morality. By the 10th century, theocratic hegemony was firmly established, with the Church wielding significant influence over the policies of kingdoms in both the Western and Eastern parts of Occidental society.

In the Eastern Roman Empire, or Byzantine Empire, Christianity developed a unique blend of religious and secular authority known as **Caesaropapism**, where the emperor held both political and spiritual leadership. This system further entrenched Christianity as the unifying force of society, extending its influence over not just religious practices but also the administration of the state. The Eastern Church, while distinct from its Western counterpart, mirrored the broader trend of Christianity dominating both secular and religious spheres, creating a unified worldview that left little room for competing ideologies.

Ultimately, Christianity's ascension as the dominant force in the West was achieved through a combination of theological adaptation, political alliances, and the strategic incorporation of pagan elements. By subsuming the supernatural traditions of paganism and aligning itself with secular rulers, the Church established near-total control over both the spiritual and temporal realms of society. This dual authority persisted for centuries, shaping the trajectory of Western civilization and influencing the cultural, political, and intellectual development of the region.

**T**he transition from a society dominated by ecclesiastical authority to one shaped by secularism and materialism in the West was a gradual and complex process. As just noted, the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire established a worldview centered on supernatural explanations for events. Christianity's blossoming secular dominance reinforced its absorption of pagan elements, such as rituals, festivals, and symbols, which helped it integrate seamlessly into various cultures. By the 10th century, this theocratic hegemony was well-established, with the Church serving as the primary authority in both spiritual and temporal matters. Events such as natural disasters or personal misfortunes were commonly interpreted as manifestations of divine will, a perspective that deeply influenced daily life.

The shift away from this supernatural framework occurred in stages over centuries. The scholastic tradition of the Middle Ages, led by thinkers like Thomas Aquinas, began to integrate reason with faith, laying the intellectual groundwork for later developments. The Renaissance furthered this process by reviving classical Greek learning emphasizing human potential, creativity, and reason. This gradually diminished the Church's monopoly over intellectual life. The Protestant Reformation in the 16th century marked a significant break from Catholic authority, empowering individuals to interpret religious texts independently and opening the door to diverse religious and secular perspectives.

The Scientific Revolution of the 16th to 18th centuries was pivotal in challenging the Church's explanations for natural phenomena. Scientists like Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton introduced a mechanistic understanding of the universe governed by natural laws, which reduced the need for supernatural explanations. Building on this, the Enlightenment of the 18th century promoted reason, individualism, and skepticism of religious authority. Philosophers such as Voltaire and Kant argued for secular governance and intellectual freedom, further marginalizing the role of religion in public and intellectual life.

Political revolutions, including the American and French Revolutions, institutionalized secular ideas by advocating for the separation of church and state. These revolutions weakened the Church's influence over governance and emphasized individual rights and freedoms. The Industrial Revolution of the 19th century accelerated these changes by fostering urbanization and technological advancements, which shifted societal focus from agrarian, Church-centered communities to secular, industrialized ones. During this period, secular educational systems expanded, reducing reliance on religious institutions for knowledge and moral guidance.

The publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 further advanced materialist views by providing a naturalistic explanation for the diversity of life. Darwin's theory of evolution challenged traditional religious accounts of creation and reinforced a worldview grounded in natural causes rather than supernatural intervention. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, these cumulative developments had firmly established secularism and materialism as dominant paradigms in Western thought. Science, reason, and individualism increasingly replaced supernatural explanations for understanding the world.

Thus, the transition from a theocratic worldview to a secular and materialist one was driven by key intellectual, cultural, and political developments over centuries. While Christianity initially established a supernatural framework, movements such as the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment gradually eroded ecclesiastical authority. These shifts replaced religious dominance with secular governance and materialist explanations, fundamentally transforming how Western societies understood life, the world, and the universe. This evolution illustrates the gradual but profound impact of intellectual and cultural change on societal beliefs and structures.

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### **Are There Any Reliable Data Regarding the Professed Belief Systems People Identify By?**

Reliable data on secularism and materialism often comes from organizations like the Pew Research Center and the World Religion Database. Pew reports that approximately 28% of U.S. adults identify as religiously unaffiliated, which includes atheists, agnostics, and those with no particular religious affiliation. Materialism, as a specific belief that matter is all that exists, is less commonly surveyed but is often inferred in societies with high levels of atheism or scientific rationalism. Globally, secularism tends to flourish in developed democracies, while materialism overlaps with non-religious or atheistic populations.

### **Refer Me to Some Essays, Books, or Publications That Analyze These Two Trends.**

Several works analyze secularism and materialism, including Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, which explores the cultural shift from automatic religious belief to pluralism, and Owen Chadwick's *The*

*Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*, which traces the decline of religious authority in Europe. George Marsden's *The Twilight of the American Enlightenment* focuses on secularism's rise in the United States. Additionally, works by Julian Baggini and Robert N. Bellah offer perspectives on the interplay between secularism, materialism, and culture.

**It Appears from the Above Responses That Secularism Rides Upon Two Definitions: 1) the Belief in the Separation of Church and State, and 2) an Inverse Law Where an Individual Makes a Binary Decision Between Either Religion or Non-Religion. If This Premise Is Correct, Which of the Above Essays, Books, and Publications Discuss and Handle This Current Ambiguity?**

Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* explicitly addresses the ambiguity of secularism, distinguishing between its role as a framework for governance and its cultural impact on individual belief systems. Rajeev Bhargava's *Secularism and Its Critics* critiques secularism's dual nature, offering global perspectives. Owen Chadwick's historical analysis shows how secularism transitioned from political separation to a cultural shift toward non-religion. These works explore how secularism functions as both a political principle and an existential stance, often leading to conflicting interpretations.

### **Summary Conclusion**

Secularism and materialism, while distinct, share intellectual and historical connections that shape modern societies. Secularism originated as a response to religious dominance in public life, later intertwining with materialism's naturalistic worldview. Reliable data on these ideologies highlight their influence on individual beliefs and societal structures. Authors like Charles Taylor and Owen Chadwick delve into secularism's evolution, revealing its dual role as a political principle and a cultural framework. This paradoxical relationship underscores the complexities of navigating values in pluralistic societies, offering rich terrain for ongoing philosophical and sociological exploration.

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<sup>1</sup> That fact in itself is significant. Why did it take over a thousand years for humanity to become "rational" as a driving force within it? Was Western society exasperated enough to say 'enough' of this ecclesiastical domination of thought?