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Secularism and Nonreligion: Making Sense of Confusing Concepts

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ABSTRACT

Secularism and nonreligion are confusing concepts. Over time, with strategic redefinition, they have accreted several, sometimes contradictory meanings. Today, their semantic excess creates confusion, both among scholars and between scholars and the public. This confusion undermines their analytic value and makes the rich conversations they generate unnecessarily obscure. By building on scholarship from several subfields, this essay observes key moments in these concepts' redefinition and describes the strategies their new meanings have supported. Understanding how different subfields approach secularism and nonreligion—and how those approaches relate to one another—helps us rethink our basic assumptions and overcome our field-specific path-dependency. Making sense of secularism and nonreligion is important because doing so helps describe enormous changes as disparate as declining rates of religion and the crisis of political liberalism. We cannot do without “secularism” and “nonreligion,” so we must do better.

1 | Introduction

Secularism and nonreligion are inherently ambiguous concepts. Over time, with strategic redefinition, they have accreted several, sometimes contradictory meanings. Today, their semantic excess creates confusion, both among scholars and between scholars and the public. This confusion undermines the analytic value of secularism and nonreligion and makes the rich conversations they generate unnecessarily obscure. By building on scholarship from several fields, this essay observes key moments in these concepts' redefinition and describes the strategies their new meanings have supported. Making sense of secularism and nonreligion is important because doing so helps describe enormous changes as disparate as declining rates of religion and the crisis of political liberalism. We cannot do without “secularism” and “nonreligion,” so we must do better.

That few of us can influence the popularity of a word's meaning is both humbling and obvious. The most important tasks in understanding secularism and nonreligion are thus (1) to analyze

how particular meanings support certain political strategies, and (2) to recognize how these concepts' internal contradictions make settling their meanings impossible. As I note in this essay's conclusion, scholars would do well to avoid the positivism of narrow definitions and remember that every significant concept is haunted by its polysemy, despite our attempts to stipulate away the meanings we'd rather not consider (Bauman 1991).

To sum up what follows: secularism was coined in 1851 to refer to the beliefs and values of nonbelievers, or secular people. Later in the nineteenth century, secularism gained the meaning of separation of church and state, though this sense did not become popular until after World War II. In recent decades, secularism has begun to mean religion-making, which is the process through which religion gets created and nation-states manage religion within their borders and internationally. This newer sense of secularism critiques political liberalism and state management of religion, but it also echoes an older, anti-secular usage developed by religious conservatives. Disentangling the various meanings of secularism and showing how they weave

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together reveals centuries of religious and political strategies, which remain at work today.

A better understanding of secularism aids our understanding of nonreligion. For example, the notion that secularism is not religious obscures the religious diversity among nonreligious, ostensibly “secular” people. Paradoxically, most nonreligious people are part of religion-like traditions that have existed for centuries. Despite the difficulty our present language poses, understanding nonreligion demands recognition of the distinct lifeways of atheists, agnostics, humanists, and freethinkers, as well as the religiously indifferent and the spiritual but not religious. Nonreligious people’s secular-religious ambiguity reveals the Christian assumptions that pervade European languages and cultures, which structure how we perceive both religion and nonreligion today. Recovering the tensions within secularism and nonreligion facilitates an immanent critique of the world religions paradigm and continues the work begun by the critique of secularism.

We inherit many overloaded concepts, which scholars should continue to use if we want our scholarship to matter to everyday people. Hopefully this essay can illuminate for its readers the various strategies performed by the many meanings of secularism and nonreligion, revealing both what they accomplish and what they obscure.

2 | Secularism as the Beliefs of Nonbelievers

Though the intellectual histories of “secularism” and “non-religion” diverge in important ways, they actually begin together. “Secularism” was coined by British freethinker George Jacob Holyoake in 1851 to name the beliefs of nonbelievers, including their ethical values (Holyoake 1896). Holyoake wanted to move away from the ontological certainty of atheism’s assertion that God does not exist. His coinage of “secularism” precedes “agnosticism,” which Thomas Huxley coined in 1869 to describe how science and its method of falsification cannot offer the same kinds of certainty as rational deduction or faith (Holland 2007; Huxley 1902). Secularism provided a way to express agnosticism *avant la lettre*.

Holyoake also wanted to avoid the inherent negativity of “atheism,” which has, in practice, meant “heretic” for most of its history (Kors 1990; Whitmarsh 2016). Holyoake’s coinage of secularism is contemporary with August Comte’s creation of a non-theistic “Religion of Humanity,” which shaped the broader movement of non-theistic “humanism” that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century (Comte 1851; Olds 1996). “Secularism,” like Comte’s “Religion of Humanity,” provided atheists and freethinkers a new, affirmative label for their beliefs, practices, and communities. Identifying with “secularism” was a way to join an Anglophone, international social movement of like-minded others and distinguish oneself from more strident, self-avowed “atheists.” Along with “freethought,” “secularism” was a popular term that nineteenth-century nonbelievers used to describe themselves. Though surpassed in popularity by “humanism” in the twentieth century, all three remain common terms that nonbelievers use to label their beliefs, attitudes, and values (Brown 2000, 2017; Post 1943; Warren 1943; Schmidt 2016, 2021; Weldon 2020).

Holyoake recognized that “secular” is ambiguous, so he sometimes tried to clarify its meanings. For example:

Secular education is the policy of a school—Secularism is a policy of life to those who do not accept Theology. Secularity draws the line of separation between the things of time and the things of eternity. That is Secular which pertains to this world.

(Holyoake 1870, 27)

In this passage from *The Principles of Secularism*, Holyoake draws a distinction between his capital-S “Secularism,” which is a worldview, and secular education. The latter means forbidding the teaching of theology in public schools, but it also means focusing on this-worldly knowledge, or that which is verifiable through sense data, that is, empiricism. As a belief system and way of life, worldview secularism is ironically analogous to Christianity and other religions. Holyoake argued that his kind of worldview secularism ought not to be taught in public schools, even as schools should only teach secular, or this-worldly things (Holyoake and Bradlaugh 1870). In other words, empiricism should be the epistemology of public schools, but building an entire worldview around empiricism, including an ethics, is a religion-like project that the state should not engage in.

There remains a tension between secularism as a non-theistic, religion-like worldview and secular as free-from-religion, which continues to structure debates over the secularity of the public sphere and the permissibility of religious reasons in public life (Rawls 1996, 1999; Laborde 2017). Sociologist Craig Calhoun has argued that a secular public sphere privileges those who are privately secular, such as atheists and agnostics, because it forces religious people to divide themselves into contradictory private (religious) and public (secular) selves (Calhoun 2011; Habermas 2010). Political theorists like Chantal Mouffe and William Connolly have proposed an “agonistic” or “deep” pluralism instead of an exclusively secular liberalism. Agonistic pluralism acknowledges fundamental differences in beliefs and values without restricting religious reasons from public discourse (Mouffe 2000; Connolly 2007, 2011). Questions about the proper role of religion in public life—and religion’s role in schools, in particular—remain at the core of debates about secularism (Ferrara 2024).

3 | Secularism as Separation of Church and State

“Secularism” acquired another meaning with the creation of the National Liberal League (NLL) in the United States. The NLL advocated for the separation of church and state and religious freedom. It was founded in part to oppose the National Reform Association, which sought a Christian amendment to the U.S. Constitution (Wenger 2010). On January 6, 1876, Francis Ellingwood Abbot published an essay called “The Unfinished Window” in the pages of *The Index*, a radical freethought journal he founded in 1870, which became a mouthpiece for the NLL. Abbot was likely the first to use the term “secularism” to mean “separation of church and state”:

The religion of every free State is free religion; and free religion, on its political side, is absolute secularism—the absolute restriction of government to the transaction of all public affairs by the simple rules of intelligence, justice, liberty, and equal rights, and the absolute exclusion of all rules introducing revelations or supernaturalisms or ecclesiasticisms of any sort. *This is the common religion of mankind.* Every special religion pretends to include it, but crucifies it in the act.

(Abbot 1876)

Earlier in life, Abbot had been a Unitarian minister. In 1867, he cofounded the Free Religious Association (FRA), and he eventually left the Unitarian Church because he was no longer Christian (Ahlstrom 1951). The FRA, and its local groups, promoted “free religion,” by which they meant the freedom of their members to practice any religion or none. In “The Unfinished Window,” Abbot connected free religion to politics by marrying Holyoake’s term to the separationist aims of the NLL. Mainstream publications in the United States did not begin using “secularism” to mean “separation of church and state” until after World War II (Blankholm 2017).

Today, it remains difficult to disentangle what Abbot knotted together. The Secular Coalition for America (SCA) is a lobbying outfit that provides an instructive example because it has a two-pronged mission that mirrors the two meanings of secularism after Abbot: advocate for the rights and freedoms of nonbelievers, and advocate for the separation of church and state. SCA was founded in the U.S. in 2002 as a strategy to unite its member organizations in a common political cause. These organizations represent people who are nonbelievers, such as atheists, agnostics, humanists, and freethinkers (Blankholm 2022). They include longstanding groups like the American Humanist Association (founded in 1941) and the Center for Inquiry (founded in 1991), as well as newer organizations like the Clergy Project and Black Nonbelievers (both founded in 2011). These groups tend to fight amongst one another over donors and members, but as member organizations of SCA, they work together.

As part of its support for the separation of church and state, SCA partners with groups that advocate for religious people, such as the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and Americans United for Separation of Church and State (formerly Protestants and Other Americans United for Separation of Church and State). When working in coalitions that include religious believers, SCA staff members emphasize the “secular values” they all share. The ambiguity of “secular” makes it possible to agree on the separation of church and state and downplay their advocacy for nonbelievers while remaining loyal to their nontheistic member organizations. SCA is a good case study for understanding the power of semantic excess (Blankholm 2014, 2022).

4 | Secularism as Religion-Making

In recent decades, “secularism” has acquired another meaning. This twenty-first-century addition is no less strategic than

Abbot’s innovation in the nineteenth. Among scholars of religion, secularism has begun to mean “religion-making.” It now refers to how Europeans effected religions-in-the-plural through colonial encounter (Masuzawa 2005; Josephson 2011) and how nation-states manage religion through law and other means, domestically and internationally (Dressler and Mandair 2011).

The anthropologist Talal Asad has done the most to elaborate secularism as religion-making, which first developed within late twentieth-century postcolonial critiques (Bhargava 1998). Asad opens his 2003 book, *Formations of the Secular*, with a question: “What is the connection between ‘the secular’ as an epistemic category and ‘secularism’ as a political doctrine?” (Asad 2003, 1). In other words, what is the relationship between Holyoake’s worldview and the separation of church and state, which Abbot combined under the sign of “secularism” in “The Unfinished Window,” and which SCA strategically separates in its two-pronged mission?

Asad argues that the technical mastery empiricism enables when supported by state-based science has led to the violent extraction of resources from the earth and the violent precision of modern warfare. This “secularism” has also produced an amoral calculus that only pretends to value human life. The technocratic elites who control nation-states maintain their global power in part through the sequestration and management of religious worldviews that could provide an alternative to this secular episteme (An 2024; Amer Meziiane 2023). Secularism, in this Asadian sense, is what Michel Foucault calls a “discursive formation,” operating as an assumption and source of justification rather than a strategy that needs to be justified (Scott 2018). Discourse, for Foucault, and for Asad, includes not just words and arguments, but also feelings, dispositions, and habits, which make the contingent seem obvious. Discourses also produce distinct subjectivities, or ways of being in the world (Foucault 2000, 2002). Secular discourse produces a secular subjectivity, but also the condition of secularity, in which the need for empirical evidence is assumed, technological innovation is considered progress, and religion is an illusion already or soon-to-be overcome.

Though Asad at times emphasizes the contingency of the secular and its historical development, he argues consistently across his writings that a secular episteme and secularism as a political project are inextricably imbricated (Asad 2003, 2006, 2009, 2018; pace Asad see Tamimi Arab 2017). Asad also implies an inherent link between secularism, political liberalism, colonialism, and secular ethical systems like utilitarianism (see Anidjar 2006). The tensions within Holyoake’s project that I highlighted above—between worldview secularism and the exclusive empiricism of secular education—are the ties that bind the various senses of secularism together (see Weir 2015). In the critique of secularism pioneered by Asad, SCA’s two-pronged mission is really the operation of a single discourse, manifest in various discursive formations.

Power and agency are diffuse in the Foucauldian approach to discourse that Asad adopts. They are evident in the particular choices and actions of specific individuals. Contrary to what many people believe a billionaire or deft propagandist can achieve, however, these powerful actors cannot determine a

discourse; it flows through them, and they are sites of its flow. Sociologist Christian Smith has mirrored Asad in a less Foucauldian way, arguing that specific people effected nothing short of a “secular revolution” and established empiricism as the dominant episteme in the modern world (Smith 2003). Asad and Smith agree that despite the apparent political weakness of secularist movements in the 19th and 20th centuries, and despite nonbelievers’ relatively small numbers and social marginalization, the secularism they advocated has had an enormous impact on contemporary life around the world (pace Schmidt 2016, 2021). Though SCA considers itself a small lobbying operation that loses many of its battles, scholars engaged in the critique of secularism tend to treat SCA’s two-pronged mission as a *fait accompli* that defines modernity. In the strongest version of this critique, secularism, as a set of beliefs and values averred by a small minority, has become the epistemological and ontological atmosphere of secularity, which gives priority to empiricism and refuses the reality of that which cannot be falsified by testing the senses.

The critique of secularism has strange bedfellows, however, whose power belies the marginal position to which they claim secularism has sequestered them (Greenberg and Steinmetz-Jenkins 2016, 2018; Greenberg 2020). Asad’s arguments echo the criticisms of theological conservatives throughout the twentieth century, who opposed, as a singular enemy, both the beliefs of nonbelievers and the secularist political project of church-state separation (see also Gunn 2009). These criticisms include John Milbank’s “Radical Orthodoxy” (Milbank et al. 2006), critiques of secularist (and crypto-Protestant) anti-Catholicism (Cavanaugh 2009; see also Fessenden 2007), and evangelical Christian criticism of secular humanism as the de facto established religion of secular governments and a sign of the End Times (Schaeffer 1976; LaHaye 1979; Whitehead and Conlan 1978; see also Toumey 1993; Harding 2020). The critique of secularism also integrates leftist critiques of centrist-liberal values that have provided hypocritical cover for military intervention in Muslim-majority societies and discrimination against Muslim immigrants in Europe (Mahmood 2006; Fernando 2014). Calling the ills of liberalism, colonialism, Christianity, and technocracy by the name “secularism” is a semantic strategy that associates them strongly with secular discourse, which includes secular people, what they believe, and how they live. That “secularism” could possibly contain such a wide range of imbricated discourses without internal contradiction would certainly come as a surprise to most secularists. Abbot’s strategic combination of secularism as a worldview and secularism as separation of church and state is the gift of a smoking gun for those who consider a secular episteme and political secularism both harmful and inseparable.

5 | Secularization

The clear tension between these meanings should raise crucial questions about secularization: Does it mean less religion or more secularism? Does secularization describe a decline of religion, its replacement, both, or neither? What is there now less of if not religion, and what has proliferated in religion’s stead, or with the proliferation of religion, despite it?

Sociologist José Casanova has provided a helpful breakdown of three ways “secularization” has been used by sociologists and political scientists to describe changes to modern life over the 20th century: religious differentiation, privatization, and decline (Casanova 1994). Differentiation describes the process through which different spheres like religion, politics, and economics became distinct and governed by their own norms over time (see also Bourdieu 1991). Church-state separation is one example of this kind of differentiation because it reflects the independence of the state from clergy. Privatization is related and describes another aspect of church-state separation: the sequestration of religion from public life. This sequestration includes the liberal approach to public discourse described above, which political theorist John Rawls advocated (Rawls 1996) and sociologist Craig Calhoun has critiqued (Calhoun 2011). Decline describes falling rates of religious belief, behavior, and belonging. This last sense of secularization is probably closest to its everyday meaning, and it’s worth deeper investigation because decline’s odd ambiguity reveals a paradox in contemporary thinking about secularism, secularity, and the secular.

Relying on diverse datasets from around the world, sociologists Kasselstrand, Zuckerman, and Cragun have shown widespread decline in traditional measures of religion in many of the wealthiest countries and regions (Kasselstrand et al. 2023). Their findings reinforce earlier studies showing that education, a strong social safety net, and access to technology and the internet all encourage secularization (Voas 2009; Bruce 2013; Voas and Chaves 2016). They also observe that younger generations are less religious, which points to secularization continuing because of failure to pass on religious traditions (Hout and Fischer 2014). A growing number of young people will not adopt the religion of their parents, in part because of the education they receive at public schools (Strhan and Shillitoe 2025) and in universities. Birth rates are higher in the most religious countries, however, so globally, there will continue to be more children born into religious families. The future of religion is difficult to predict with even the best data (Hackett et al. 2025), though evidence of religious decline is fairly clear in many parts of the world today.

Philosopher Charles Taylor has criticized the simplistic “subtraction narrative” of secularization as religion’s decline (Taylor 2007), and he recognizes that secularization reflects the growth of certain secular ways of life, such as the philosophical existentialism of Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre (Nietzsche 1967; Camus 1955; Sartre 1956). Ironically, the central argument of Taylor’s magnum opus, *A Secular Age*, is that people with secular worldviews long for a lost transcendence. This is another kind of subtraction narrative because it still focuses on secularization as decline, that is, the decline of human access to transcendence. We can set aside Taylor’s critique of what secular people lack, however, and assess his argument in sociological terms: does secularization describe religion’s decline, or can it also describe its replacement? In other words, if we try to measure secularization, to what extent are we looking for a secular presence, like worldview secularism, in addition to an absence, such as declining rates of religious affiliation, prayer, and belief in God?

6 | Nonbelonging, Nonbelief, Nonbehavior

That most statistical variables capturing nonreligion are negative makes them inherently inadequate for answering our difficult question about secularization as decline or replacement. Atheism provides a helpful example for thinking through the problem. In ancient Rome, early Christians called the polytheistic Romans “atheists” for denying their God, and the Romans called early Christians “atheists” for denying their gods (Whitmarsh 2016). Christianity is an atheism to polytheism and vice versa. One could measure the decline of polytheism as a decrease in belief in the gods, but this would overlook the rise of Christianity. The measurement of decline would be accurate, but it would perceive only absence where there is a meaningful presence on the rise.

An analogy to color makes the problem clear. If “secular” means only “not religious,” then most things are secular, just like most things are not orange. Observing that most things are not orange fails to tell us what color most things are. We fail to recognize green, we fail to recognize purple, and we fail to recognize that green is not purple. We miss green’s presence, and we also miss the diversity within non-orange. We even risk failing to recognize that color itself—color that is not orange—exists at all. Demographers are measuring religious decline, but for the most part, failing to measure the growth of the discourses replacing traditional religion.

Understanding the secular as nonreligion, as an absence, makes the secular’s presence and its internal diversity hard to perceive. We fail to recognize worldviews like Holyoake’s secularism, Sartre’s existentialism, Marx’s materialism, and non-theistic humanism, which are all different and all secular. The secular is an internally diverse discursive formation with a complex history, which looks a lot like a distinct tradition that shapes how secular people live in the world (Blankholm 2022). Like Christianity, the secular tradition is a tree with many branches, which has produced a variety of secular subjectivities. Secularization is not merely a decline; it’s a becoming, or really multiple becomings. Not all nonreligious people participate in secular discourse. There are spiritual but not religious people and other kinds of nonreligious people, too.

It’s a meaningful statistic that 28% of adults in the United States now claim no religious affiliation, but it’s deeply inaccurate to assume those people are nonreligious. Among the 28% of adults in the United States who claim no religious affiliation, 17% identify as atheist, 20% as agnostic, and 63% as “nothing in particular” (Pew Research Center 2025). Among those who claim to be “nothing in particular,” 20% believe in the God of the Bible and 63% believe in a higher power. Fully 40% of those who are “nothing in particular” report praying at least monthly (*Religious ‘Nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe* 2024). Social scientists have recognized that nonreligion is a helpful starting point for understanding a radical transformation in how many people around the world have begun to live, but without more careful inquiry, it’s inadequate (Lee 2015). Nonreligion is a relational category that requires researchers to acknowledge both what nonreligious people reject and what they embrace instead (Quack 2014).

To escape the trap of nonreligion’s negativity, we need to break religion apart and consider how its parts are related. Sociologists who measure religiosity often distinguish among religious belonging, religious behavior, and religious belief. There can be more or less of each aspect of religiosity and in different combinations. The same is true for nonreligion. Religious nonbelonging does not mean nonbelieving, nor does it mean nonbehaving. Take, for example, someone who is spiritual but not religious, never goes to church, believes in a higher power, and prays to that higher power. They are religiously unaffiliated, so they don’t belong religiously, but they believe and behave in ways most people would consider “religious.” If someone is not religious, we cannot assume they’re nothing. So what are they?

7 | Secular and Spiritual Traditions Among the Nonreligious

In recent years, scholars have begun to investigate the belief systems of nonbelievers (Zuckerman et al. 2016; Schnell et al. 2023). In the United States, people who identify as “atheist” or “agnostic” tend to be exclusive empiricists who believe in mortal finitude. Exclusive empiricism means prioritizing the senses as the only valid source of knowledge and then trusting the scientific method to test what the senses perceive. Believing in mortal finitude means considering death the final end of individual consciousness (Blankholm et al. 2025). The relationship between these beliefs and identifying as atheist or agnostic is bidirectional, so holding these beliefs predicts being atheist or agnostic, and being atheist or agnostic predicts holding these beliefs. In other words, exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude are distinctive to atheists and agnostics and not nearly as present in other groups. They are the unique beliefs of nonbelievers. Researchers have shown that beliefs like these are common among secular people in many places around the world (van et al. 2023). They shape nonbelievers’ everyday lives, and they’re aspects of an internally diverse discursive formation, a secular tradition, with a traceable history (Gray 2019; Blankholm 2022).

The secular tradition also includes communities and rituals. For centuries, nonbelievers have formed local communities for people who share their beliefs in places like the United States, Europe, and India (Charlton 1963; Quack 2012; Schmidt 2021). When nonbelievers mark major moments in their lives, such as a marriage or the death of a loved one, they invent rituals that feel authentic to their belief systems. These inventions often resemble secular rituals that were invented in earlier decades or even centuries because they grow from a shared secular tradition, which includes shared beliefs and needs (Schmidt 2021; Engelke 2015; Rejowska 2021). Some nonbelievers have even succeeded in gaining legal recognition as “religious”—usually as “humanists”—in the United States and several other countries (Kaplan 1958; Wine 1985; Olds 1996; American Humanist Association 2019; Tyssens et al. 2024; Weldon 2020).

Secular people are not the only nonreligious people who participate in a tradition that can be traced for at least centuries. Many people who identify as spiritual but not religious are part of what religious studies scholars in the United States call

“metaphysical religion” or the metaphysical tradition (Albanese 2007; Bender 2010; Silk and White 2022; Harris and Roane 2022). This tradition includes religions like Spiritualism and Theosophy that are often overlooked despite institutionalization (Taves and Kinsella 2014). Scholars mapping the terrain of metaphysical spirituality have created many names for its different aspects and sub-traditions, such as esotericism, the occult, New Thought, mysticism, the New Age, and spiritual seeking (Hanegraaff 1998; Hammer 2007; Roof 1999). Its study is not new, but it is growing more organized and coherent.

The diffuse presence of metaphysical religion makes it difficult to measure statistically, in part because it cuts across traditional religions. There are metaphysicals within Protestantism and Catholicism, as well as Judaism and Islam. By being present within and without the world religions, the religiosity of the metaphysical tradition is an immanent critique of the world religions paradigm (Adorno 1997; Cotter and Robertson 2016; see also Modern 2011). The future of the study of the metaphysical tradition demands the identification of distinctive beliefs and practices that can be measured on surveys in addition to being identified ethnographically (Bender 2010; Crockford 2021) and traced historically (Albanese 2007; Hanegraaff 2013). These variables will likely include belief in reincarnation and a multidimensional reality, as well as engagement with astrology, cartomancy, séances, channeling, and other spiritual practices that metaphysicals have developed and adapted for centuries (White 2009, 2018).

As religion declines, the only way to avoid the fallacious simplicity of a subtraction narrative is to look for what flourishes in religion's stead. Sometimes these replacements will resemble traditional religion, and sometimes they will bear little resemblance to churches and denominations. Many Christians today no longer go to church every Sunday, but they're still reading the Bible and engaging with Christianity in other ways (Denton et al. 2020). Many spiritual but not religious people are “unbundling” religion by embracing some things we've long considered religious and rejecting others (Braunstein et al. 2025). Nonbelievers who reject nearly all aspects of traditional religion will remain the least legible among the nonreligious until we begin asking questions that allow them to affirm what they are rather than tell us what they're not.

8 | Conclusions

Secularism and nonreligion are confusing concepts. They mean many things, but not anything, and not nothing. Investigating their meanings, how they developed, and the ends they serve are the best ways to get our bearings. Understanding how different subfields approach secularism and nonreligion—and how those approaches relate to one another—helps us rethink our basic assumptions and overcome our field-specific path-dependency. Though these subfields can seem disparate and even impossible to reconcile, with a broad view, they can inform one another and even strengthen certain arguments in surprising ways.

For example, it is rare for those engaged in the critique of secularism to give more than passing mention to secular people and their fascinating history (see Palmer 2014; Devellennes 2021). Doing so would demand acknowledging secular people's minority status and limited influence, as well as their variety and strange secular-religiosity. The argument that a secular episteme is the root cause of the ills of secularism should give us pause not only because of its shocking simplicity but also because it echoes the anti-atheism that has always been constitutive of Christianity (Whitmarsh 2016; Kors 1990). Marxian skepticism of a liberal world order is grounded in a secular episteme, but it echoes many of the concerns of the critique of secularism. Given Christianity's central role in the development of religion-making secularism, perhaps “Christianism” or “religionism” would have been a more accurate name for the ways in which Europeans effected the world religions and developed religion's governmental management. Perhaps “secularism,” like “religion,” is neither all good nor all bad. Engaging with actual secular people should temper the impulse to see the secular solely as an object of critique and enable scholars to aim their critical efforts at worthier targets.

Inversely, the critique of secularism has much to teach scholars who are trying to understand both secularization and secular people. This is especially true for sociologists with a global focus who are researching nonreligion in contexts like China that have never been majority Christian (Fitzgerald 2007; Sun 2013). The critique of secularism explains well the failure of religion's categories to capture life in regions at the periphery of Europe's influence. They were never “religious” in the same way Christians are, so religion's Christian-derived concepts were always going to mis-fit (Blankholm 2022). The same insight applies to the religious mis-fit of Jewish people (Biale 2005; Batnitzky 2011) and people of Asian descent in the U.S. and Europe (Jeung et al. 2015). If social scientists of religion and nonreligion were to read scholars working within the critique of secularism more carefully and generously, they would gain powerful new ways of understanding not only their object of inquiry but their own role in constituting it (Hurd 2015).

Above all, a sober analysis of the semantic sediment of secularism and nonreligion offers an opportunity to free ourselves from the boring quagmire of language games. Far too much scholarship revels in the prestidigitation of declaring this person actually “religious,” that thing actually “secular,” or this tradition in fact “spiritual.” When we play these category games, we damn or praise by association. This game of purity politics relies on implicit notions of pollution and contagion, and it's a harmful dead-end for an otherwise sophisticated genealogical method (Blankholm 2020). To the chagrin of the Enlightenment critique of “religion” and the post-colonial critique of “secularism,” both concepts are shot through with internal contradictions and cannot possibly contain all that is bad and nothing that is good. Understanding secularism and nonreligion means refusing simple analyses, despite the allure of their elegance. It also includes getting our hands dirty by continuing to use the concepts we

inherit, contradictions and all, because it's the language most at hand.

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