

## Call for Papers – International Conference

### »Elusive subjects«: individual secularizing trajectories in nineteenth-century Europe



# IEG

Leibniz-Institut für  
Europäische Geschichte

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Who still believes in the *myth* of secularization? This was the question already posed in 1994 by José Casanova at the beginning of his book *Public Religions in the Modern World*. In a sense, this remains the point of departure for this conference, which, in tackling its subject, requires a preliminary working definition of »secularization«.

Secularization has been one of the most intensely debated issues in the humanities for at least five decades, certainly since Peter Berger's pioneering work *The Sacred Canopy* (1967). There are arguments both for and against speaking of a process of secularization at all, and even those who accept the term debate what form it has taken and whether it involved a long-term, gradual decline or rather a sudden drop in the relevance of religion.

David Nash has rightly noted how this historical debate about secularization has been strongly shaped by the narrative built around the theory itself (2017). This narrative has turned secularization itself into an ideology, even a kind of faith, alternatively serving the agendas of its detractors and its defenders. Despite continuing division between the theory's supporters and opponents, there is now consensus that the initial account of the secularization process – that is, »the progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices in the modern world« – is indeed reproducing a myth (Casanova, 1994). Nevertheless, this does not mean that the secularization theories employed throughout the years have to be discarded *tout court*. We can acknowledge that in modern societies the role of institutional religion is more subtle and less imposing than it previously was, and we can see that religion is often openly subverted or even suppressed. Furthermore, there are points of consensus about some of secularization theory's shortcomings. First, it is predominantly based on Western and Christian societies, leaving out not only non-Western contexts but also non-Christian dynamics within the West (Berger, 1967). Second, regarding the period between the 1950s and the present, secularization is now often described less as a »decline« of religion as such and more as a transformation of religious forms (Brown, 2017). To a smaller degree, it is possible to identify individual trajectories of transition from traditional religion to different forms of spirituality already during the nineteenth century.

A turning point in the scholarly discussion was marked by Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007), which analyzes secularization by starting with Max Weber's famous concept of »disenchantment« as a description of the modern condition. In one way or another, all scholars of secularization now have to confront Taylor's postulation of three phases (and types) of »secularity«: 1) increasingly secularized public spaces; 2) declining belief and practices; and 3) transforming conditions of belief. Without arguing that these three forms of secularity also reflect a chronological sequence, this conference wishes to concentrate

on the third type, aiming to explore alternative, non-institutional forms of belief in the nineteenth century that did not lead to complete atheism or agnosticism.

Clearly, secularization is not a uniform process but instead consists of various modes and mechanisms that cannot be subsumed under a single all-encompassing paradigm. On the contrary, the trajectories of individuals have to be taken into consideration to single out commonalities and differences among the diverse experiences of this phenomenon. Already in 1967, in his attempt to define modern secularization processes, Thomas Luckmann formulated the concept of »invisible religion«. The modern quest for salvation and personal meaning, he argued, had withdrawn to the private sphere of the self. Without going as far as Luckmann in diminishing the role of institutions and groups, this conference acknowledges the fundamental importance of individual trajectories (Dobbelaere 2002; Taylor 2007) in any complete depiction of secularization's diverse modes.

Thus, this conference aims to investigate modern and/or secular intellectuals whose religious allegiances changed over time, from the religious community of origin to other existential and religious identities. Aware that »the religious« and »the secular« cannot be as clearly separated as some scholars would like to believe (Asad, 2003), we aim to investigate how the trajectories of individual people demonstrate the different religious options that were available: in many cases, they sought out a reformation, transformation or criticism of the original religious tradition with which they had identified; in other cases, they ended up rejecting that tradition completely. Whatever direction this complex relation took, we are interested in understanding how these »elusive subjects« (Armani-Schwarz, 2003) reinvented their religious heritage in consonance with a changing society that was increasingly influenced by industrialization and science.

We invite scholars to consider the following themes, as reflected in individual religious trajectories:

- The impact of modern science on traditional religions;
- The rise of a liberal state, which stressed a separation between Church and state;
- The growth of religious pluralism;
- The impact of so-called *Ersatzreligionen*, redemptive ideologies, or new ideologies such as Saint-Simonism, theosophy, universal religion of humanity, and so forth;
- The perception of modernity and its relationship to the religious community.

To apply for the conference please send an abstract (max. 200 words) and a CV to the organizers, Prof. Cristiana Facchini, University of Bologna, [cristiana.facchini@unibo.it](mailto:cristiana.facchini@unibo.it), and Dr. Alessandro Grazi, Leibniz Institute of European History, [Grazi@ieg-mainz.de](mailto:Grazi@ieg-mainz.de), by 15 September 2019.

The conference organization will reimburse travel expenses and accommodation to the participants. A selection of the presented papers will be published in an edited volume.