

Negating Religion:

Meaning, Nihilism, and the Possibility of the Unreligious

April Sachs

Religion 412: Sociology of Religion

Ray Gingerich

April 12, 2004

Outline

I. Introduction

Question: Is it possible for humans to be unreligious?

II. Definitions and Answers

A. Secularization and Religion, Traditionally

B. Larry Shiner and the Meanings of Secularization

C. Alternative Forms of Religion

D. Thomas Luckmann and Invisible Religion

III. The Absence of Meaning

A. Nihilism as the Opposite of Religion

B. Nihilism and Depression

IV. Concluding Answers...And a Few Last Questions

Towards the end of the twentieth century, it became clear that the so-called secularization theory was a myth. Religion was not, as the theory claimed, a dying phenomenon; in fact, it seemed that it might even be on the upswing. The theory, sociologists decided, was “a product of the social and cultural milieu from which it emerged,”¹ and as such was more of a doctrine than a theory. The questions that sociologists now posed began to be focused not so much on the demise of religion as on the various unfamiliar forms it was assuming. To what extent were people actually religious, perhaps without even recognizing it? Increasingly, sociologists—for example, Robert Bellah, Thomas Luckmann and David Loy—have begun to describe alternative forms of religiosity that don’t look like traditional religions, but perform many of traditional religion’s functions. In view of such descriptions, it becomes increasingly valid to ask not whether people are becoming unreligious, but whether it remains possible for them to be unreligious.

In order to answer this question, it is first necessary to define what one means by religion, so that we know what religion is not. An overview of the various definitions of the roughly opposing term “secularization” will also be a useful tool here. So first we will discuss several of the various ways religion and secularization have been defined, answering our question, “Is it possible for humans to be unreligious?” in light of each succeeding definition. The last and broadest definition will pose the most difficulties for our answer, meriting a discussion of its own, and that discussion may raise a new set of questions altogether—questions perhaps worthy of further research.

¹ Hadden, 22.

Definitions and Answers

Secularization and Religion, Traditionally

The origin of the word “secularization” is one of the few things about it that is relatively unmuddled. “Secular” comes from the Latin *saeculum*, meaning an age or the spirit of an age. It comes to us in the sense of “the world,” that which does not lie within the jurisdiction of religion.² It is from this sense that the most common uses of the word secularization are derived: secularization as a society drawing away from religious authority and adopting a more rational, scientific outlook on life.³ In this sense, it is seen as religious decline; as a society becomes more and more secularized, it becomes less and less religious.

In the past, sociologists typically used definitions of religion which were quite limited in scope. These definitions were substantive: they tried to identify what sociologists thought was the “substance” or “essence” of religion. This ranged from “belief in Spiritual Beings” to a focus on the sacred. But substantive definitions often measured religiosity by criteria which were inherently biased towards the Western world and its religions; they tended to measure orthodoxy rather than ritual or behavior, assumed that belief in a deity was necessary in a religion, and sometimes even looked for specific beliefs as a measure of orthodoxy in areas where there were multiple, dissimilar faith communities.⁴

Putting these definitions together, it is clear that the first answer to our question must be yes. There are sections of society which are secular; there are many people who are not religious in an orthodox, Western sense. Under some substantive definitions, in fact, major world religions such as Buddhism and Judaism are only doubtfully religious,⁵ although other definitions attempt to steer away from this rather

² Christiano, 59.

³ Roberts, 306.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁵ *Ibid.*

narrow perspective. At any rate, under these definitions, those who claim to be unreligious are understood as unreligious; common sense tells us these are not few.

Larry Shiner and the Meanings of Secularization

In 1967 a sociologist named Larry Shiner brought an important problem to the attention of the scientific world. In a paper called “The Meanings of Secularization,” he outlined the many definitions that secularization had taken on and proposed a solution for dealing with the mess. Although his warnings were not heeded right away,⁶ his paper provides a useful overview of the term secularization and the various ways it is used, which should assist us in our quest.

The first definition Shiner presents is one we have already seen, secularization as religion in decline. The culmination of such a decline would be a society without institutional or personal religion. As Shiner points out, the difficulty of this definition lies in knowing how to measure the status of religion; this in turn depends on the definition of religion. Shiner’s second definition is secularization as conformity with the world, the culmination of this process being “a religious group indistinguishable from society.” This process, he says, might be better termed differentiation. A third definition is secularization as the desacralization of the world; as we continue to explain the world rationally, it loses its mystery and is no longer supernatural or sacred. The culmination of this might not be the complete disappearance of religion, for the sacred might find new means of expression. If so, this would be the first hint of humankind as innately religious that we have seen so far. Shiner’s fourth definition conceives of secularization as society disengaging from religion; this is roughly the idea of separation of church and state. In this case Shiner proposes again the use of the word differentiation in place of secularization. Fifth and last is secularization as the

⁶ Christiano, 59.

“transposition of beliefs and patterns of behavior from the ‘religious’ to the ‘secular’ sphere.” The difficulty here lies with identifying what is transposition and what has arisen out of separate, non-religious origins.⁷

Reading these five definitions (not all of which are strictly relevant to our discussion), we can see that each of them assumes a slightly different definition of religion. Although Shiner cautions us about assuming a polarity of the terms religious and secular, he does suggest dividing religion, like secularization, into three subcategories “appropriate to desacralization, differentiation, and transposition.”⁸ So what is “unreligious” in light of Shiner’s essay, and do such people exist? We don’t find a real definition of “unreligious,” but despite that we can point out some examples of those who would seem to fall in the “unreligious” category laid out here: people with a completely rational, scientific view of the world, people whose religion has become identical with their society, and people who have transferred religious behavior and beliefs to the secular sphere, presumably without their corresponding religious justifications.

Alternative Forms of Religion

So far we have mainly used substantive definitions of religion, but an alternative framework is a functional or structural-functional definition. Under this framework religion is defined by the functions it performs. Thus, if something fulfills the function of a religion, it is a religion. Religion is often seen especially as fulfilling functions of meaning: it helps humans to understand fundamental questions about life and death. It can also fulfill belonging, cultural and structural functions. When religion is defined in this way, it opens up a new range of possible forms for religion to take on; according to sociologist Milton Yinger, this can even include forms which are

⁷ Shiner, 32-39.

⁸ Ibid., 40, 42.

nontheistic or nonsupernatural.⁹

In 1966 Robert Bellah's book *Civil Religion* investigated civil religion in the United States as an important phenomenon not to be ignored in our consideration of the state of modern religion. In many ways civil religion fits quite well under a substantive definition of religion—it incorporates sacred objects like the flag, includes many references to God, and has national heroes or “saints.”¹⁰ On the other hand, there is no well-defined body of beliefs about civil religion. But it does perform certain important functions, like economic safeguarding and keeping the government in check, and there is no doubt that it provides a system of meaning for many Americans, so it qualifies as a religion under a functional definition as well.¹¹

Another good example of a religion that a functional definition uncovers is what David Loy calls “the religion of the market.” In his article of the same name published in 1997, he sharply criticizes what he sees as “an idolatry that undermines...the most important teachings [of all genuine religions].”¹² Our present economic system, he claims, is a religion in that it fulfills certain religious functions. It promises happiness if we only follow its demands: make more money, consume more goods. That its promises are deceptive does not hinder its effectiveness as a religion, says Loy.¹³

So if we define religion as that which provides meaning, we see that many things which do not appear, on the surface, to be religious activities (who would think of capitalism as a religion?), begin to look religious after all. Even people who do not claim to be religious could find themselves engaged in “religion” as long as they have something in their lives which provides them with meaning. Under this definition, the only people who are unreligious are those who have nothing that provides them with

⁹ Roberts, 7-8, 50.

¹⁰ Roberts, 357.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 358-359.

¹² Loy, 289.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 278.

meaning. Whether there are such people is an interesting question which deserves further discussion; we will return to it after we look at one last definition of religion.

Thomas Luckmann and Invisible Religion

Thomas Luckmann's 1967 book *The Invisible Religion* is considered to be one of the most important contributions to sociological theory of its time, and his definition of religion deserves mention here. Luckmann's presentation of religion still falls into a functional definition, but it is so broad that all humans are religious by being human. According to Luckmann, "the organism transcends its biological nature by developing a Self" and this process is fundamentally religious.¹⁴ In other words, religion *is* social processes. So to our question, "Is it possible for humans to be unreligious?" Luckmann provides a very clear answer: No. By their very nature, all humans are religious.

The Absence of Meaning

Nihilism as the Opposite of Religion

Returning now to our functional definition of religion, we will pick up the question of whether there are people who do not have meaning structures, and are thus unreligious under a functional definition. Although it might seem at first that such a position would be untenable, the formal name for a doctrine of non-meaning is nihilism. Nihilism has several definitions: it can be metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, moral, political, or theological; but the definition most relevant to us is simply that nihilism denies the validity of any positive doctrine.¹⁵ It is the denial of the possibility of knowledge and a denial that anything has value.¹⁶

¹⁴ Luckmann, 50.

¹⁵ "Nihilism," 392-393.

¹⁶ Sire, 77.

Helmut Thielicke, writing in the wake of the Holocaust and the (sometimes labeled nihilist) Nazi regime, called nihilism the “absolutization of nothingness.” It is the discovery, he said, that everything is, at best, a “productive lie,” and that Nothing is the only thing left to us. Nihilism’s one truth is that the world is meaningless.¹⁷ It seems fairly clear from this that if there are nihilists, there are unreligious people.

Thielicke described two types of nihilists: those who profess their nihilism to the world (confessory nihilism) and those who hide it, acting as if they were not nihilistic, or even being nihilistic without knowing it (disguised nihilism). We should not often expect people to openly declare their nihilism, he says; more often it will be covered up by creative efforts and artistic expression, an ironic consequence of a confrontation with Nothingness. Thielicke is pointing towards nihilism as the symptom of a growing disease;¹⁸ we want only to ascertain whether one can actually be a nihilist, so we will skip over some of his finer distinctions. However, he does point out that one can never be a pure nihilist. Why? Because as a pure nihilist, one would only have two options: to take one’s life or to go on living. In dying, one becomes a “disillusioned idealist,” not a nihilist; in living, one continues to act, something “which can only be done in the name of purpose or meaning.” Both of these actions contradict the basic nothingness of nihilism; hence, nihilism can only exist “as a possibility and a threat.”¹⁹

It appears, then, that no one can be a true nihilist, at least not without being entered into an insane asylum. True nihilism means not doing anything meaningful; it is impossible to live such a life, and death, contrary to appearances, is not a logical conclusion for a nihilist—even if it is desirable. A limited sort of nihilism is possible, but it cannot be lived without contradictions, and even limited nihilism can create

¹⁷ Thielicke, 25, 27.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30-32, 46. Thielicke also views the two World Wars as collective suicide attempts.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 163-164.

severe psychological problems for its proponents. As James Sire points out in his book *The Universe Next Door*, people can't live with nihilism "because it denies what every fiber of their waking being calls for—meaning, value, significance, dignity, worth."²⁰ To believe in and live a life without meaning is impossible. But how close do we sometimes get?

Nihilism and Depression

If nihilism is the denial of everything, if it is the complete meaninglessness of life and human existence, there are probably people among our own acquaintances who can relate to it, even without knowing its name. They are the many people who suffer from depression, a psychiatric disorder characterized by certain physical and mental symptoms which can sound surprisingly like nihilism, including feelings of meaninglessness, helplessness and hopelessness, and thoughts of death.²¹

According to Pam Comer, administrator of the graduate counseling program at Eastern Mennonite University, it would be misleading to think of depression and nihilism as the same thing. Even people with strong meaning structures can be depressed; certain kinds of strict religion can even contribute to depression. People who commit suicide do it not because they have nihilistic convictions which require such a step of them but because they are seeking a way out of pain. But she agreed that some people with clinical depression might very well have become nihilists without knowing it: for them, everything has lost its meaning.²²

Kim Brenneman, associate professor of psychology at EMU, agreed that depression is mainly a physiological phenomenon and has little to do with belief in anything. However, she pointed out that whether you have healthy or unhealthy

²⁰ Sire, 96. Sire takes nihilism seriously as an important problem in modern society. He argues that nihilism is the logical conclusion of naturalism and explains that existentialism is the attempt to transcend nihilism.

²¹ "Depression," American Heritage.

²² Comer.

meanings can contribute to your psychological health, an example of an unhealthy meaning being the idea that everyone is against you and you must struggle to survive against the world.²³

Other theories of depression attribute it to psychodynamic, behavioral, or systemic causes. Yet another theory is cognitive theory, in which emotional disturbances are thought to arise from “faulty thought processes,” or distorted beliefs about life: a negative view of the world, a negative concept of self, and a negative appraisal of the future.²⁴ This theory would appear to point toward belief (or, perhaps, lack thereof—i.e. nihilism) as a possible contributor to depression.

So while nihilism and depression for the most part appear to have rather different causes, their effects appear to be convergent.²⁵ This is interesting for us and our question about human religiosity, because it appears to point towards a fundamental human need for meaning, which, when left unfulfilled, causes severe physiological and psychological problems.

Concluding Answers...And a Few Last Questions

We have discussed many definitions of religion, and while we have leaned towards a functional definition, we have come to no conclusions about which definition is most helpful or accurate. (That was not, after all, the purpose of this discussion). However, we have discovered an interesting answer to the question we posed. In almost all our definitions, we could point out people who were unreligious, the “invisible religion” of Luckmann being the only exception. Under a functional

²³ Brenneman.

²⁴ Baker Encyclopedia, 337.

²⁵ On the other hand, it is important to remember Thielicke’s warning that we sometimes act as if we believed in certain things, while at heart we are nihilistic, leaving open the possibility for depression in a “disguised” nihilist, which wouldn’t look like nihilism. See also the last two chapters of Harry Ausmus’ *The Polite Escape*, which discuss nihilism through the eyes of three important authors (including Thielicke) and finally through the eyes of Ausmus himself, who concludes that life is worth living despite its essential pointlessness.

definition of religion, we discovered something further: that those who were classified as unreligious—those with no structures of meaning—were also *per se* suffering from the results of that lack of meaning in a manifestation that can look very like clinical depression.

It appears, then, that religion—defined broadly—fulfills the very important role of providing meaning to human lives. But Kim Brenneman's remarks about healthy and unhealthy meaning lead us to another question: Do some religions fulfill that role better than others? Is David Loy correct, for instance, when he condemns the religion of the market for not fulfilling its promises? Is civil religion a shallow substitute for a meaning structure? What about more traditional religions: could some be called more meaningful than others?

These are important questions, and not easy to answer. Further research in this area is probably necessary; it would be highly interesting to discover which religions, if any, provide the most fulfilling meanings. Would a good measure of a religion's meaning be the psychological health of those who believed in it? Such questions are speculative and make many assumptions, but they may well be worth exploring. Yet another extrapolation from our discoveries that could be explored is the possibility that if nihilism is that which claims to destroy every argument and every theory, then the religion that provides the most meaning will be the one that holds up best under close scrutiny.

In conclusion, it seems that religious and unreligious people alike are realities not to be defined away. Whether it is preferable to be one or the other is another question, one that has been answered many times already and will be answered many times more. But meaning seems indubitably better than nihilism, and better a sturdy foundation of meaning than a shaky one. Which foundation is sturdiest? ...but that's another topic entirely.

Bibliography

- Ausmus, Harry J. *The Polite Escape: On the Myth of Secularization*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1982.
- Brenneman, Kim. Personal interview. 7 April 2004.
- Christiano, Kevin J., William H. Swatos, Jr., and Peter Kivisto. *Sociology of Religion: Contemporary Developments*. New York: Altimira Press.
- Comer, Pam. Personal interview. 7 April 2004.
- "Depression." *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. 4th ed. 2000.
- "Depression." *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling*. Ed. David G. Benner and Peter C. Hill. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999.
- Hadden, Jeffrey K. "Desacralizing Secularization Theory." *Secularization and Fundamentalism Reconsidered: Religion and the Political Order*. Ed. Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson Shupe. Vol. 3. New York: Paragon House, 1989. 3-26.
- Loy, David R. "The Religion of the Market." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65.2 (1997): 275-290.
- Luckmann, Thomas. *The Invisible Religion*. London: The Macmillan Company, 1967.
- "Nihilism." *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion, Eastern and Western Thought*. Ed. W.L. Reese. New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980.
- Roberts, Keith A. *Religion in Sociological Perspective*. 4th ed. Canada: Wadsworth 2004.
- Shiner, Larry. "The Meanings of Secularization." *Secularization and the Protestant Prospect*. Ed. James F. Childress and David B. Harned. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970.
- Sire, James W. *The Universe Next Door*. Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press,

1976. 30-42.

Thielicke, Helmut. *Nihilism: Its Origin and Nature—with a Christian Answer*. Trans.

John W. Doberstein. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961.