

Secular Modernity?

SCAR 3SM3

Winter 2023

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Lecture: Thursdays 10:30-12:20, JHE 326H

Tutorial: Mondays 10:30-11:20, MDCL 1009

Office Hours: Thursdays 1:00-2:00, UH 124

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Course Description

Is Modernity Secular? Until the mid-twentieth century, the answer given at universities would have been a resounding “yes,” and the question would hardly have been an appropriate topic for an undergraduate course. Yet in the twenty-first century our confidence in secularism has waned. While many speak of a “return of religion” to public life since 9/11, scholarship has increasingly questioned whether, in fact, religion has not been there all along. If religion has returned, do we live in a “secular age?” If religion was there all along, did we ever? Through history, theory, ideology, and the arts, we will recover a more complicated relationship between religion, the secular, and modernity than usually imagined.

Course Objectives

By the end of the course students will be able to:

- Formulate a complex understanding of secularism, including different definitions and expressions of this idea, today and in the past.
- Argue for Christianity’s role in the making of what we consider secular ideas in the west and recognize some of the challenges non-Christian and non-western cultures and ideas present.
- Appreciate different expressions and locations of spiritual and religious meaning that while not classified as religion when Christianity frames religion, might nonetheless be considered non-secular yet very much a part of modern and post-modern culture.
- Present certain forms of religion and religious expression as distinctly modern, and describe the mechanisms driving such forms.
- Critically read domestic and international news and opinion pieces that relate to the subject of religion and the “return of religion”.
- Voice educated positions on contemporary issues, based on understanding complexity.

Required Materials and Texts

There will be no textbook for this course. Materials (for the most part listed below) will be uploaded weekly to Avenue to Learn. Materials will include sociological texts, philosophical texts, samples of literature, films, literature and film analysis religious texts, political theory, religious studies scholarship, and media analysis of current affairs.

Class Format

“Secular Modernity?” is an in-person lecture course that will take place on Thursdays at 10:30am for a double period, ending at 12:20. The course will also have a tutorial that will take place on Mondays at 10:30am in person.

In general, the course will run as follows:

Each week students will be asked to prepare readings (or sometimes to watch a film) for Thursday’s class. One of these readings will be read together at tutorial, and students will know in advance which one. Thursday’s class will be divided into 50 minute lecture, 10 minute break, 50 minute discussion. Students will sometimes have an opportunity to present materials informally on Thursdays.

Course materials will be uploaded to Avenue to Learn before Friday each week for the following week. Materials will include:

- A checklist to guide you through the week's requirements
- All required reading materials
- Any materials (videos, art) that will accompany lectures

Pending class size and student interest, an online discussion board will be monitored by the instructor and will provide a forum for continuing to discuss course content beyond the classroom.

The course should take 3-4 hours per week, including classes, tutorials, reading, and participating in the discussion board, but not including graded writing assignments. There will be three reading reports due on Fridays in weeks 4, 7, and 10, and one final paper due at the end of the course.

Course Evaluation: Overview

Students will be evaluated based on:

- Participation - 30%
- Reading Reports - 30% (due February 3, March 3, March 24)
- Final Paper - 40% (due April 14)

Course Evaluation: Details

Participation.

The participation grade will be determined by the student's active presence in class and in tutorial, and substantive contributions to discussion. Attendance in class will account for 50% of the grade, with the remaining 50% accounted for by students' active participation and contributions to class discussion. To obtain a high participation grade, students will need to vocalize perspectives and opinions in discussion class (or on the class discussion board depending on the size of the group). Should the class ever revert to Zoom, participation will involve attending with camera on and participating virtually.

Reading Reports.

Personal responses to one or more readings, including both a descriptive and reflective component, will be due in week 4, week 7 and week 10 (all reading reports due by 11:59 Friday). Reports may be video-recorded (+/-2 minutes) or written (1-1.5 double-spaced pages), with at least one written report required. Topics for reading reports will be given at least one week in advance.

Final paper.

The final paper is to be submitted by 11:59pm on Friday April 14. Papers should be 8-10 double-spaced pages in length (12-point standard font), not including bibliography. In their final paper, students will present an answer to the question of whether modernity is secular, approached through a particular lens. More specific instructions will be available the week of April 3. In their final papers, students will be expected to demonstrate an understanding of key concepts they have learned in the course, critically use terms such as "secular" and "sacred," apply different theories, and offer their own voice.

Weekly Course Schedule and Readings

Week 1, Commences Monday January 9 (No tutorial, first class on Thursday January 12)

Course Introduction and Overview

In this introductory class we will consider what is at stake with the question of whether modernity is secular, and why we should be asking this question today and specifically in Canada. I will give a historical and etymological introduction to the secular and the modern, and we will map out the sorts of questions and critiques we will be engaging in the course and discuss interdisciplinarity and what we all bring to the learning.

Week 2, Commences Monday January 16

The Rise and Fall of the Secularization Thesis

In week 2 we will delve into the “secularization thesis”; a once-common understanding of the decline of religion in the west that identified modernity with secularism. What was this common wisdom, where did it come from, and how do we relate to it today?

Readings and Materials:

- Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Double Day, 1967), selections.
- J.C.D. Clark, *Secularization and Modernization: The Failure of a “Grand Narrative,”* *The Historical Journal* 55:1 (2012), 161-194
- Rodney Stark, *Secularization, R.I.P. (Rest in Peace),* *Sociology of Religion* 60:3 (1999)
- Peter Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” in Berger et al. (eds.), *The Desecularization of the World* (Eerdman's, 1999), pp. 1-18.

Week 3, Commences Monday January 23

Into the Post-Secular, A Corrective

In Week 3 we will consider a critical approach to secularism that accepts the terms of the discourse (religious/secular) but finds that the secularization thesis was wrong and that modernity should not be understood as secular. We will consider how this changes our understanding both of the history of ideas and of our current predicament.

Readings and Materials:

- Teresa Bejan, “Evangelical Toleration,” *The Journal of Politics* (2015)
- Jurgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005)

- Daniel Philpott, "Explaining the Political Ambivalence of Religion," *American Political Science Review* 101:3 (2007)

Week 4, Commences Monday January 30

The Corrective in Our World: Religion and the Anthropocene

In Week 4 we will explore a way in which the corrective we studied in Week 3 plays out today, with the intervention of religious approaches, both Catholic and Indigenous, into the climate crisis, and the ways in which religion is understood as relevant for thinking about the Anthropocene in our time.

Readings and Materials:

- Nicolas Howe, *Landscapes of the Secular: Law, Religion, and American Sacred Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), Selections
- Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* (2015)
- Jumbo Wild. Video by Pantagonia in support of Ktunaxa Nation during the court case Ktunaxa Nation v. British Columbia
- Arianne Francois Conty, "Religion in the Age of the Anthropocene," *Environmental Values*, 2018.

Week 5, Commences Monday February 6

Into the Post-Secular as an Epoch

In Week 5 we will consider the approach that agrees with the secularization thesis to the extent that it considers us to be living in a post-secular world: a period in which secularization has been achieved, and in which religion needs to find a new space or mode of being.

Readings and Materials:

- Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 1-22, 423-535.
- Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defense of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford UP, 2011), ch. 1-3.

Week 6, Commences Monday February 13

Into the Post-Secular, Confronting Real-World Mistakes

In Week 6 we will explore the critique of secular modernity which would claim that there is, in fact, no real distinction between the secular and the religious, with all (secular) political concepts being built on theological foundations, particularly sovereignty and nationalism. This approach, represented by Carl Schmitt, will also be critiqued by exploring the persistence of religion and the contemporary challenge religion poses to nationalism. We will look at theological politics in the name of Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism, ultimately returning to critique the secularization thesis for the role it played in our blindness to religion in the twentieth century.

Readings and Materials:

- Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, Selections.
- Talal Asad, "Chapter 6: Secularism, Nation-State, Religion," in *Foundations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 181-201
- Ashis Nandy, "Chapter 6: The Twilights of Certitudes: Secularism, Hindu Nationalism and Other Marks of Deculturation," in *Bonfire of Creeds: The Essential Ashis Nandy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)
- Michael Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions* (Yale University Press, 2015), Part 1, pp. 1-33.

Mid-Term Recess Monday February 20-February 26

Week 7, Commences Monday February 27

Back to Basics: Defining Religion, the Secular, and the Modern

Having critiqued the secularization thesis from different angles and explored the forms of religion that those who argue for the post-secular have presented, in the second half of the course we will take a fresh look at religion in the modern world. Before setting out on this path we will look at some classic texts that defined religion and secularization. What are we looking for, and where are we looking when we seek religion in modernity? Our work this week will provide us with conceptual tools for a deeper engagement with contemporary questions of religion and politics, of religious agendas, and of religious accommodations. We will discuss such key terms as enchantment, the sacred, the spirit, the individual, agency, and bureaucracy.

Readings and Materials (Preliminary List):

- Emile Durkheim, [*The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*](#), Book 1, Chapter 1, (London, 1964 [1915]), pp. 23-47.
- Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 2001), selections.
- Richard Jenkins, "Disenchantment, Enchantment and Re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium," *Max Weber Studies* 1:1 (2000)

Week 8, Commences Monday March 6

Sacred Space

This week we will explore the idea of sacred space in the modern world, asking about the place of such an idea in the West and in the Middle East, and exploring some of the difference this idea, if allowed to enter social and political discourse, demands that we reframe some of our foundational political ideas.

Our discussion this week will relate back to Week 4 and the extent to which we approach natural landscapes as religiously significant if not simply sacred to Indigenous people, and changes towards this approach in the West.

Readings and Materials (Preliminary List):

- Shiner, Larry E. "Sacred Space, Profane Space, Human Space." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1972, pp. 425–36.
- Kamila Klingorová & Banu Gökariksel (2018) "'God was with me everywhere': women's embodied practices and everyday experiences of sacred space in Czechia," *Gender, Place & Culture*, 25:1
- Ron E. Hassner, "'To Halve and to Hold': Conflicts over Sacred Space and the Problem of Indivisibility," *Security Studies* 12:4 (2003)

Week 9, Commences Monday March 13

Television, Cyberspace, and Religion

This week we will explore new forms of religious activity and connections that have evolved over recent decades and accelerated in recent years, from televangelism to online prayer and meditation services during the Covid pandemic. Has new media changed religion, brought people back to religion, changed the way missionary work is done, and/or are there ways in which the changes that have taken place mark secularisation rather than religionization of these virtual spaces. This week may also allow for an experiential or research component, TBA.

Readings and Materials (Preliminary List):

- Christopher Helland, "Online Religion and Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet," *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1.1 (2005)
- Xiao Han, "Digital Merit: A Case Study of a Chinese Buddhist Meditation Group on WeChat During the Early Outbreak of Covid-19 in China," *Journal of Media and Religion* (2022)

Week 10, Commences Monday March 20

Women's Liberation and Activism Through the Veil and Pious Practice

While proponents of headscarf bans have argued that women are oppressed by patriarchal religious requirements, and that their liberation depends on removing these, this has not been the only modern response to veiling. This week we will look at an understanding of women's agency and autonomy – even activism – that sees traditional religious structures including the headscarf and traditional understandings of gender as empowering. To what extent is this form of empowerment uniquely modern, and how does it speak to the questions of the course regarding secularism and modernity?

Readings and Materials (Preliminary List):

- Nilufer Gole, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1996), Chapter 3 (compulsory), chapter 4 (optional)
- Lihi Ben Shitrit, "Women, Freedom, and Agency in Religious Political Movements: Reflections from Women Activists in Shas and the Islamic Movement in Israel," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 9:3 (2013), 81-107
- Wendy Brown, "Religious Freedom's Oxymoronic Edge," in Winnifred Fallers Sullivan (et al.), eds., *The Politics of Religious Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015)

Weeks 11-12, Week 11 Commence Monday March 27, Monday April 3, no class on April 6.

Film as an Arena of Religion

In these two weeks (with no class on April 6 and class instead of tutorial on April 3) we will look at the theory and practice of film as an arena in which religion takes form in modernity, and at the relationship between religion and entertainment in our time. We will look at examples from Hollywood and from Asia, and we may also explore additional entertainment media, depending on student interest and as time permits.

Readings and Materials (Preliminary List):

- S. Brent Plate: "Introduction: World Making on Screen and the Alter," in Brent, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Recreation of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017)
- Stacy Thompson, "Disney Death: Coco, Black Panther, and the Limits of the Afterlife," in *The Routledge Companion to Death and Literature* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2021) ch. 16.
- Jolyon Baraka Thomas, "*Shûkyô Asobi* and Miyazaki Hayao's *Anime*"
- Film Viewings TBA.

Week 13, Commences Monday April 10 (Final class instead of Monday tutorial)

Concluding Reflections, Discussion.

Course Policies

Submission of Assignments.

Assignments will be submitted on Avenue to Learn. Reading reports are due by midnight on Friday in weeks 4, 7, and 10. They should be submitted in PDF format, or video submissions in MP4, AVI, WMV, or MOV format, or as a link to YouTube. The final paper for the course is due before midnight on Friday, April 21.

Grades.

Grades will be based on the McMaster University grading scale:

MARK	GRADE
90-100	A+
85-89	A
80-84	A-
77-79	B+
73-76	B
70-72	B-
67-69	C+
63-66	C
60-62	C-
57-59	D+
53-56	D
50-52	D-
0-49	F

Late Assignments.

Late assignments will forfeit 5% of the grade for that assignment for each day late. Assignments will not be accepted more than a week late.

Avenue to Learn.

In this course we will be using Avenue to Learn. Students should be aware that, when they access the electronic components of this course, private information such as first and last names, user names for the McMaster e-mail accounts, and program affiliation may become apparent to all other students in the same course. The available information is dependent on the technology used. Continuation in this course will be deemed consent to this disclosure. If you have any questions or concerns about such disclosure please discuss this with the course instructor.

University Policies

Academic Integrity Statement

You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behaviour in all aspects of the learning process. Academic credentials you earn are rooted in principles of honesty and academic integrity. **It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty.**

Academic dishonesty is to knowingly act or fail to act in a way that results or could result in unearned academic credit or advantage. This behaviour can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: "Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty"), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university. For information on the

various types of academic dishonesty please refer to the [Academic Integrity Policy](#), located at [the University Secretariat website](#).

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty:

- plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one's own or for which other credit has been obtained.
- improper collaboration in group work.
- copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

Authenticity / Plagiarism Detection

Some courses may use a web-based service (Turnitin.com) to reveal authenticity and ownership of student submitted work. For courses using such software, students will be expected to submit their work electronically either directly to Turnitin.com or via an online learning platform (e.g. A2L, etc.) using plagiarism detection (a service supported by Turnitin.com) so it can be checked for academic dishonesty.

Students who do not wish their work to be submitted through the plagiarism detection software must inform the Instructor before the assignment is due. No penalty will be assigned to a student who does not submit work to the plagiarism detection software. **All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have been upheld** (e.g., on-line search, other software, etc.). For more details about McMaster's use of Turnitin.com please go to the [Office of Academic Integrity website](#).

Courses with an On-line Element

Some courses may use on-line elements (e.g. e-mail, Avenue to Learn (A2L), LearnLink, web pages, capa, Moodle, ThinkingCap, etc.). Students should be aware that, when they access the electronic components of a course using these elements, private information such as first and last names, user names for the McMaster e-mail accounts, and program affiliation may become apparent to all other students in the same course. The available information is dependent on the technology used. Continuation in a course that uses on-line elements will be deemed consent to this disclosure. If you have any questions or concerns about such disclosure please discuss this with the course instructor.

Online Proctoring

Some courses may use online proctoring software for tests and exams. This software may require students to turn on their video camera, present identification, monitor and record their computer activities, and/or lock/restrict their browser or other applications/software during tests or exams. This software may be required to be installed before the test/exam begins.

Conduct Expectations

As a McMaster student, you have the right to experience, and the responsibility to demonstrate, respectful and dignified interactions within all of our living, learning and working communities. These expectations are described in the [Code of Student Rights & Responsibilities](#) (the "Code"). All students

share the responsibility of maintaining a positive environment for the academic and personal growth of all McMaster community members, **whether in person or online**.

It is essential that students be mindful of their interactions online, as the Code remains in effect in virtual learning environments. The Code applies to any interactions that adversely affect, disrupt, or interfere with reasonable participation in University activities. Student disruptions or behaviours that interfere with university functions on online platforms (e.g. use of Avenue 2 Learn, WebEx or Zoom for delivery), will be taken very seriously and will be investigated. Outcomes may include restriction or removal of the involved students' access to these platforms.

Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities who require academic accommodation must contact [Student Accessibility Services \(SAS\)](#) at 905-525-9140 ext. 28652 or sas@mcmaster.ca to make arrangements with a Program Coordinator. For further information, consult McMaster University's [Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities](#) policy.

Requests for Relief for Missed Academic Term Work

[McMaster Student Absence Form \(MSAF\)](#): In the event of an absence for medical or other reasons, students should review and follow the Academic Regulation in the Undergraduate Calendar "Requests for Relief for Missed Academic Term Work".

Academic Accommodation for Religious, Indigenous or Spiritual Observances (RISO)

Students requiring academic accommodation based on religious, indigenous or spiritual observances should follow the procedures set out in the [RISO](#) policy. Students should submit their request to their Faculty Office **normally within 10 working days** of the beginning of term in which they anticipate a need for accommodation or to the Registrar's Office prior to their examinations. Students should also contact their instructors as soon as possible to make alternative arrangements for classes, assignments, and tests.

Copyright and Recording

Students are advised that lectures, demonstrations, performances, and any other course material provided by an instructor include copyright protected works. The Copyright Act and copyright law protect every original literary, dramatic, musical and artistic work, **including lectures** by University instructors

The recording of lectures, tutorials, or other methods of instruction may occur during a course. Recording may be done by either the instructor for the purpose of authorized distribution, or by a student for the purpose of personal study. Students should be aware that their voice and/or image may be recorded by others during the class. Please speak with the instructor if this is a concern for you.

Extreme Circumstances

The University reserves the right to change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances (e.g., severe weather, labour disruptions, etc.). Changes will be communicated through regular McMaster communication channels, such as McMaster Daily News, A2L and/or McMaster email.