Ideas of Secularization in Transatlantic Perspectives

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In cultural, sociological, and geopolitical realms, religion and religiosity have become central issues in the contemporary world. This centrality raises questions about associating modernity with the secular, and also about what we mean by ‘secularism’ or ‘secularization.’ These concepts have been used variously to designate the progressive disappearance of religion and also its transformation into modern institutions, and connoting both emancipation and a nostalgia for lost origins. Today, this ambiguity is less an obstacle than a promise for future theory, since it encourages a promising debate about the modern and its relation towards religion.

Concepts of secularization appear to follow distinct perspectives: While an American debate focuses on the political issue of secularism and on sociological approaches, in Europe the concept is rather related to philosophy and cultural history. Both perspectives should be understood as interrelated and each responds to different historical and contemporary roles of religion in Europe and America, and raises important political questions. The 'neutrality' of the state toward religion, for example, as seen from a juridical or a historical perspective, has different meanings in the U.S. and Europe. No less important are the relations of Europe and the U.S. towards Islam in particular.

The present workshop aims to develop understandings of secularization that will be productive for cultural, political, and legal applications. Beyond a unified theory, secularization may be understood as a discursive construct, and as a series of figurative ideas: including metaphors such as the ‘death of God’ or modern ‘disenchantment,’ topoi such as Mysticism, Nihilism or the Vera Icon, and narratives such as the Weber-Thesis or the afterlife of antiquity. This workshop is intended to facilitate analysis of historical and contemporary issues including: Can ideas of secularization contribute to a fruitful analysis of the relation between religion and modernity? In what ways are secularism and faith integral to modern and postmodern thought? How can we put into productive debate American and the European approaches towards secularization? Does the idea of secularization necessarily cast theological communities as anti-modern?