



# **The SAGE Encyclopedia of the Sociology of Religion**

## **Secular Spirituality**

Contributors: Vincenzo M. B. Giorgino

Edited by: Adam Possamai & Anthony J. Blasi

Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of the Sociology of Religion

Chapter Title: "Secular Spirituality"

Pub. Date: 2020

Access Date: April 9, 2020

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks,

Print ISBN: 9781473942202

Online ISBN: 9781529714401

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781529714401.n415>

Print pages: 737-738

© 2020 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

For the philosopher Charles Taylor, spirituality is grounded in the *lived experience* of being fully human, and the secular age does not necessarily imply the dominance of secularization and the disappearing of the spiritual and of religions. In every society questions such as “What constitutes a fulfilled life? What makes life really worth living?” find specific answers. Taylor’s lived experience is approachable through the social imaginary, involving what Andrew Lincoln called “... an embodied, affective, intuitive and pre-cognitive sense of how things are and of what is appropriate in our dealings with others and the world that is collectively experienced” (Lincoln 2010, p. 75). In the *Secular Age*, the belief in a transcendent source of reality becomes just an option among others, as every individual has to decide on which side he or she stands and navigate to search his or her answer within it. During the past decades, secular spirituality, a quest from meaning detached from religions, has taken different, unexpected, and very surprising forms, linked to (a) the field of exegesis and (b) new trends in sciences and humanities.

For example, in the field of Christianity, the scholar Carlo Enzo conducted a philological study of the Bible in seven volumes, deconstructing with relentless determination the number of layers built upon the first known written documents. In the first book of the series about Genesis, he dismantles any cosmological or naturalistic value of the Holy Scriptures: the Hebrew word *generation*, usually wrongly translated as *creation*, means “developing a new mode of existence.” In fact, biblical writers intended the expulsion of Adam from the garden in Eden just as a metaphor, because Adam is a man “called to educate his human nature.” Moreover, in the Jewish culture, the plural word *Elohim* does not mean *God*: For every people of Israel, it is a path of emancipation and realization of their human potential. In his understanding, secularization cannot be intended as a departure from the sacred, but, on the contrary, it is the complete realization of the original project of those people. So far, the divide between the Christian message, supported by this granular hermeneutical reinterpretation, and the secular spirituality is almost nonexistent, being merely the consequence of the institutionalization of the former. In a more action-oriented deconstruction within the Buddhist tradition, contemplative teacher and artist Stephen Batchelor proceeds in a similar vein.

Secular spirituality is not interested in typical themes like the dialog between science and religion on the origin of life, or on life after death, to return to the fundamental demand for meaning expressed by every sentient being once he or she discovers the limitedness of human existence—a question that opens the search for solutions to face this inevitable suffering. In secular spirituality prevails a pragmatic vision of the practices of every tradition of wisdom, be it religious or philosophical; they are submitted to the test of personal experience and, as far as possible, to that of scientific inquiry of their individual and collective effects. This is why the term has lost ground in recent decades in favor of *contemplative knowledge* and *contemplative practices or methods*: It avoids or suspends a series of dichotomies such as immanence/transcendence, belonging/non-belonging, and believing/being atheist or agnostic, repositioning these experiences among those social practices not grounded on action and reflection but rather on forms of tacit, embodied, and prelinguistic knowledge. Now more than ever, those who practice them often avoid to define themselves by that term, which is mostly used by scholars to classify their experience.

The characteristics of secular spirituality within the realm of scientific and professional domains covers three areas: (1) lay and clinical applications of contemplative practices, (2) the study of consciousness, and (3) new trends in social and human sciences.

## Lay and Clinical Applications of Contemplative Practices

With its 40 years of history up to now, the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Intervention program is among the most enduring and successful initiative in the West, following previous lay *translations* from the Indo-Vedic tradition, such as Yoga and Transcendental Meditation. It is now an industry worth annually more than US \$1B in the United States alone. Through clinical research on the individual effects of these practices, a scientific niche was established, and in 2010, it became an acknowledged and well-funded area of multidis-

ciplinary research, expanding its field of inquiry well beyond the field of health to neurosciences.

Secular contemplative practices are becoming part of the postmodern landscape of everyday life, through the easiest vehicle of diffusion: suffering in its multifaceted appearances and contexts (hospitals, hospices, prisons, schools, workplaces, and communities at large). If there is a rationality, it is beyond believing and/or belonging, and also far from a postmodern “matter of choice” (as in Taylor): It is simply an encounter with a lay relief practice, a compassionate attitude to the human condition.

## The Study of Consciousness

Since the 1994 *Tucson I* conference, “Toward a Scientific Basis for Consciousness,” and inaugural issue of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, efforts have been undertaken in helping to create a truly transdisciplinary platform, in which *subjective* experiences and *objective* studies can meet, disentangling what is widely referred to as the *hard problem of consciousness*. Critical appraisals from life sciences led to an open critique to the foundations of cognitive theory. A more ambitious step followed: the foundation of a contemplative science.

## New Trends in Social and Human Sciences

Various disciplines contribute to the study and application of secular spirituality, such as organizational and business studies and education. *Practical wisdom*, already an arrival point in Taylor’s view, has become the hub of various trajectories of a secularized approach. Recent contributions have also provided the foundations for a contemplative paradigm in sociology. As the current trend toward planetary integration is characterized by “societies of individuals,” enabling them to interact and transact on a peer-to-peer level, some socially engaged scholars and practitioners envision a future commitment in which contemplative knowledge is cultivated beyond any enclosure and experienced as a contemplative commons initiative. Secular practices are usually learned through economic and organizational forms: the market or the voluntary (not-for-profit) exchange. With the birth of the Internet and the emergence of nonmarket social production, knowledge and contemplative practices also find innovative ways of coproduction and self-production. They can be shared and even created on a peer-to-peer basis, opening up traditional religions to freed personal awareness and nurturing a new collective intelligence.

**See also** [Atheism](#); [Meditation](#); [Mindfulness](#); [Secularization](#); [Spirituality](#)

## Further Readings

Batchelor, S. (2017). *After Buddhism: Rethinking the dharma for a secular age*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Bauwens, M. (2007, April). The next Buddha will be a collective. *Spiritual expression in the peer-to-peer era*. *ReVision. A Journal of Consciousness and Transformation*, 29(4), 34–45. Retrieved from [http://realitysandwich.com/1207/next\\_buddha\\_will\\_be\\_a\\_collective/](http://realitysandwich.com/1207/next_buddha_will_be_a_collective/)

Bentz, V. M., & Giorgino, V. M. B. (Eds.). (2016). *Contemplative social research: Caring for self, being, and lifeworld*. Santa Barbara, CA: Fielding University Press.

Enzo, C. (2010). *Il progetto di mondo e di uomo delle generazioni di Israele, Genesi 1–4*. [The project of world and man of the generations of Israel, Genesis 1–4.] Milano, Italy: Mimesis.

Giorgino, V. M. B., & McCown, D. (2018). Life skills for peer production: Walking together through a space of “Not-Knowing.” *Journal of Peer Production*. Retrieved from <http://peerproduction.net/editsuite/issues/is->

[sue-11-city/experimental-format/life-skills-for-peer-production-walking-together-through-a-space-of-not-knowing.](#)

Lincoln & , A. T. (2010, December). Spirituality in a secular age: From Charles Taylor to study of the Bible and spirituality. *Acta Theologica*, 31(1), 61–80. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/actat.v31i1S.5>  
Vincenzo M. B. Giorgino

- spirituality
- secularism
- tradition
- religion

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781529714401.n415>  
10.4135/9781529714401.n415