

Article

Secularization: The Decline of the Supernatural Realm¹

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Abstract: How to define and measure secularization is among the most fervent discussions in the literature on the sociology of religion. The perception of secularization only in terms of change in the social prestige and influence of religion has confined the discussion on secularization to a narrower perspective, both theoretically and empirically. This paper argues that the supernatural realm (of which religion is a part), rather than religion itself, should be at the center of discussions on secularization. Since the term “supernatural realm” is used as an all-embracing concept, the decline in the social prestige and influence of religion-like structures, folk beliefs, magic and so forth are also considered part of the discussions on secularization. This is because Abrahamic or official religions are not the only supernatural entities that have noticeable effects on the daily lives of individuals. The paper also maintains that to hold a discussion on secularization in a comprehensive manner, academic works require “a defined period of time and place” rather a single timeframe because secularization is not the description of a situation but the definition of a process. If secularization is defined as such, the frequency of prayers, the rates of going to church, or changes in the number of believers will not be primal in measuring secularization because of how the supernatural reflects itself on daily practices might be different in different societies or belief systems. Thus, the definition put forward in this paper, based on the supernatural realm, will enhance the understanding not only of radical secularization processes in modern Western Europe (and its offshoots) but also of the secularization processes of modernizing non-Western countries.

Keywords: secularization; supernatural; religion; religion-like structures; folk beliefs; magic

1. Introduction

When the matter of discussion is Christian communities, discussions on secularization tend to focus on the Bible and the Church (Berger et al. 2008; Stark and Iannaccone 1996, p. 267; Voas and Crockett 2005, pp. 15–6). The rate of frequenting church, the number of those who believe in God, in the existence of Hell and Heaven, as well as in life after death, tend to surface in discussions on secularization among Christian communities (Davie 2002, pp. 6–7; Zuckerman 2009, p. 56). On the other hand, when it comes to a community with a Muslim majority such as Turkey, discussions on secularization are based on the faith criteria and Islamic worshipping practices (Kirman 2005, pp. 116, 127, 136). The frequency of the salaah ritual and fasting, the rate of praying, and the changes in the number of people who believe in Allah, the prophet Mohammad, the Qur’an, and in invisible creatures like angels and jinni (Yapıcı 2012, p. 10) are considered significant and at

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times, the only criteria for measuring the degree of secularization in Muslim countries. It is clear that the statistical data on the frequency of worship or the presence of faith are used to indicate whether secularization has taken place or not.

The academia, print and visual media, intellectuals, politicians, students, and a large section of modern society continue to speak of the concept of secularization in terms of religion. The perception of secularization only in terms of change in the social influence of religion confines the discussions to a narrower perspective, both theoretically and empirically. Yet, at the center of the discussions on secularization lies the supernatural realm rather than religion, since the latter is only a part of the former.

Therefore, this study presents a detailed discussion about the concept of secularization in an attempt to challenge, if not change, this established perception. First, the paper discusses in detail the various definitions of secularization after the second half of the 20th century. Then, contrary to these definitions that put religion at the center, a new definition of secularization will be suggested by positing the supernatural realm at the center. Since Abrahamic or official religions are not the only supernatural entities that having noticeable effects on the daily lives of individuals, the problematic aspects of a religion-based approach will be examined in detail. The paper argues that the scope of theoretical and empirical studies on secularization should be extended by means of the extended definition proposed in this paper.

2. Why Should the Concept of Secularization Be Redefined?

Etymologically, the word secularization goes back to the Ancient Roman *saeculum* and the word has been used in different senses since then. First of all, in Ancient Rome and early Christendom, it refers to a long period of time, as in a century or age (Bremmer 2008, p. 432). The word secular was still used in the first half of the 17th century as an adjective to define “long-lasting”. John Donne, a poet from Oxford, used the term in one of his sermons in this way: “If I had a secular glass, a glass that would run an age” (Burnett 1807; Donne 1840). This usage corresponds to *secolo* (Italian), *siglo* (Spanish), *segle* (Catalan), *século* (Portuguese) and *siècle* (French) in the Romance languages of today. For example, the adjective *secular* is still used today to define long-term trends or certain stocks that are not affected by short-term trends. Bremmer (2008, p. 432) argues that the term, which had been used to define a period of time equal to an age, underwent important changes in the early Middle Ages and the notion of *saeculum* was defined by Christian theologians “as the world in which we live, a world that is characterized by sin and the rejection of God”. The contribution of Christian theologians to the concept of *saeculum* in Ancient Rome is rendered by Yehoshua Arieli as follows:

It is a new era [*nova aetas*] structured on the rejection of the belief in the determining force of transcendence as an actor in history as the idea was formulated in the Bible and in the Augustinian scheme of the two cities. It is a new era that denies the claim of the Church to be the lawgiver and foundation of all values, truth, and meaning for man, living in the world, the saeculum, or city of man. (Arieli 1994, p. 205)

To explain the concept of *saeculum*, Charles Taylor also uses ordinary times/higher times or temporal/spiritual distinctions.

People who are in the saeculum, are embedded in ordinary time, they are living the life of ordinary time; as against those who have turned away from this in order to live closer to eternity. The word is thus used for ordinary as against higher time. A parallel distinction is temporal/spiritual. One is concerned with things in ordinary time, the other with the affairs of eternity. (Taylor 2007, p. 55)

Another usage in the history of the word secular is within the canon law for ecclesiastics who abandon monasticism in favor of the “world.” However, these “secular” ecclesiastics did not cut off their ties with the Church. Different from the radical ecclesiastics who shut themselves up in their

monastery and lived in seclusion, these men continued to maintain their relations with the outside world. Hence, they attempted to find solutions to the everyday problems of society from a religious perspective and through dialogue with the people (Casanova 1994, pp. 12–13). Yet another usage, as a noun (*secularisation*) and as a verb (*seculariser*), is found in French in the second half of the 16th century, and refers to the “transfers of goods from the possession of the Church into that of the world of the lay people” (Bremmer 2008, p. 433), that is, “the massive expropriation and appropriation, usually by the state, of monasteries, landholdings, and mortmain wealth of the Church after the Protestant Reformation” (Casanova 1994, p. 13).

The concept of secularization has become the leading issue in the field of sociology of religion, especially since the second half of the 20th century. Notwithstanding that the concept has already found a place in the academic literature since the 1960s, there seems to be no agreement among scholars over what secularization is and what it is not. José Casanova argues the following for the concept on the basis of contemporary usage:

(. . .) the concept itself is so multidimensional, so ironically reversible in its contradictory connotations, and so loaded with the wide range of meanings it has accumulated through its history. The concept’s very range of meanings and contradictions makes it practically non-operational for the dominant modes of empirical scientific analysis. (Casanova 1994, p. 12)

According to Shiner (1967, p. 207), one of the characteristics of the contemporary academic world is a profound disagreement in terms of defining and measuring secularization. While the disagreement referred to by Shiner used to be found between sociologists such as Bryan Wilson and David Martin in the middle of the 1960s, the debates seem to continue unabated today between scholars such as Steve Bruce and Rodney Stark. In these debates, to which other sociologists of religion also contribute significantly², what secularization is and whether it defines the relationship between society and religion (especially in West European countries, but also in the USA and other developed countries) are discussed in detail.

In an environment in which scholars tend to consolidate their positions on issues on the basis of their own and sometimes contrasting definitions, the concept of secularization is in a position akin to that of a servant who has more than one master (Shiner 1967, p. 207). Therefore, it would seem fairly clear that whenever the word secularization is used, it is important to know first of all what the author means by using the concept.

Martin (1965, pp. 169–70) has argued that the concept of secularization was used as an ideology in the 1960s and that for this reason, it should not be used in sociological literature to explain the relationship between religion and society. By contrast, Wilson (1966, p. 11) argued that secularization did not have an ideological aspect but was used to express the decline in the impact of religion in Europe and the USA as a mode of thought-guiding daily practices. The term itself did not support this transformation in relation to the religion–society interaction. Berger (1967, p. 107), in his early writings, uses the term for “the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols. (...) the decline of religious contents in the arts, in philosophy, in literature (...).” Fenn (1969, p. 112) summarizes what had been said of secularization until 1969 as follows: “expropriation of ecclesiastical property; renunciation of powers; declericalisation of structures; deconfessionalising of social services; desacralization of cultures; the de-ideologizing of traditions; the demythologizing of sources (. . .).”

Wilson (1979, p. 277) also stated that religion, having gradually lost its authority, has been reduced to the same status as any other item to be consumed in a consumer society as well as being marginalized in day-to-day activities. In addition, Thomas Luckmann views the endeavoring of people to find solutions for the problems they come across in their daily lives without consulting religion or

² Grace Davie (1994, 2002), Peter L. Berger (1997), José Casanova (1994, 2003, 2007), Mark Chaves (1994), Karel Dobbelaere (1985, 1999), Jeffrey K. Hadden (1987, 1995) among others.

religious figures, the restriction on the control of religion in non-religious areas, and the estrangement of any religious belief from being the dominant culture and means of expression within society and the ensuing confinement of religion to the private sphere (Luckmann 1979, p. 12; Tschannen 1991, p. 398) as hallmarks of secularization.

Lechner (Lechner 1991, p. 1104) emphasizes the concept of cultural pluralism that emerges with rationalization, the formation of different social strata, and the assumption of social tasks by different groups which previously belonged to religious institutions. Chaves (1994, p. 750) argues that secularization should not be understood as the decline of religion, but as the declining power of religious authority. Casanova (1994, p. 19) highlights functionalist differentiation and, just like Lechner, sees social modernization as the liberation of the secular sphere (state, economy, art, science) from the religious sphere. Based on the functional differentiation, Dobbelaere (1999, pp. 231–32) explains secularization on a social level as the autonomization of societal subsystems; the replacement of the traditional society with a complex, pragmatist and modern society; and the loss of the power of religious knowledge in favor of rational knowledge. Finally, Bruce (2002, p. 3) sees secularization as a decline of behaviors and thoughts whose reference point is religion, not to mention, the breakdown in the previously prevalent power of religion, just as many have already pointed out above, in non-religious spheres—economy, health, education, and so forth.

These scholars define the term secularization either as a decrease in religion and religious authority or as the restriction of religion into the private sphere. However, unlike them, there are other prominent scholars who perceive secularization as the complete disappearance of religion, the total disengagement of the modern person from religion. For example, Peter Berger argues the following with respect to the concept of secularization in his late writings:

I think what I and most other sociologists of religion wrote in the 1960s about secularization was a mistake. Our underlying argument was that secularization and modernity go hand in hand. With more modernization comes more secularization. It wasn't a crazy theory. There was some evidence for it. But I think it's basically wrong. Most of the World today is certainly not secular. It's very religious. So is the U.S. The one exception to this is Western Europe. One of the most interesting questions in the sociology of religion today is not, How do you explain fundamentalism in Iran? But, why is Western Europe different? (Berger 1997, p. 974)

Harvey Cox, who is recognized as one of the key theorists of secularization in the 1960s with his book *The Secular City*, later claimed that the theory of secularization had collapsed because there were religious revivals all around the world (Cox and Swyngedouw 2000, pp. 5–6). Rodney Stark and Laurence R. Iannaccone, by contrast, accept the following sentences by F. C. Wallace as the anticipated impact of secularization:

The evolutionary future of religion is extinction. Belief in supernatural beings and supernatural forces that affect nature without obeying nature's laws will erode and become only an interesting historical memory. Belief in supernatural powers is doomed to die out, all over the World, as the result of the increasing adequacy and diffusion of scientific knowledge. (Stark and Iannaccone 1994, p. 230)

Stark and Iannaccone classified Wallace's ideas and opinion of the founding fathers of sociology on religion as a "theory of secularization" despite the fact that the theory of secularization has no such claim. For instance, Simon (1956, pp. 320–21) once argued that religion or clergymen would inevitably lose out to scientists and artists, such that they would be needed no more. Comte (1998, p. 41) also reckoned that religion would entirely disappear due to scientific developments. Since Stark and Iannaccone posited the basis for the theory of secularization on these views, they were then able to harshly criticize it. In this respect, they, naturally, do not even need to refute it because there are people even in the most developed countries who still have faith. And, as opposed to the theory of secularization—that is, as an alternative to the claim that modernization has led to secularization—they

defended the rational choice model of religion. This model argues that the lower degree of religious activity can be explained by the lack of a free market in religious goods as well as a lack of significant competition between the providers of such goods (Finke and Stark 1988, p. 47; Iannaccone 1991; Stark and Bainbridge 1985).

Hadden (1987, p. 589) states that the concept of secularization ostracizes the sacred and that various intellectuals since the Enlightenment have wished for the disappearance of religion. Moreover, many have tried to prove that religion belonged to primitive people and would, therefore, perish completely with modernization. Hadden argues that these hostile sentiments against religion and the wishes for non-religious societies have been sacralized as secularization theory. Therefore, Hadden (1995, pp. 89–97) sees secularization as becoming irreligious and claims that there are totally opposite developments (due to the presence of religious people in modern societies and the religious revivals all around the world) and that the theory of secularization should be seen as an outdated theory.

Although such definitions have prioritized different dynamics (plurality, structural differentiation, institutional loss of authority, and so forth), all of the definitions, without exception, put faith or ritual-practices of a particular official religion at the very center. However, since religion is only one branch of the supernatural, discussions on whether societies or individuals have been secularized or not should be based on their interrelationship with the supernatural rather than religion. Defining secularization in terms of religion has confined the discussions over the term to a narrower perspective, both theoretically and empirically. Along with this, it can be said that sociologists of religion such as Stark, Hayden, Davie, and Berger who define secularization as the extinction of religion due to the modernization process, present a rather crude definition of the term. That decline in power and prestige of religion does not mean that religions have or will become totally extinct.

It should be emphasized that positing institutional religion at the center of secularization discussions and the perception of secularization as a process that vanquishes religion can result in secularization processes going unnoticed in both developed western countries and non-western modernizing communities. Therefore, suggesting a definition that involves religion but with a much wider context and highlighting the process instead of the absolute extinction should lead both theoretical and empirical studies to a different dimension. If this definition is preferred, it may become easier to recognize the processes of secularization experienced in modern or modernizing countries outside Europe such as Turkey, Japan, South Korea, India, and so forth. Therefore, ample evidence from particularly Turkey will be presented to support the claims of this study.

3. What Does Secularization Mean?

I define secularization in general terms as follows: secularization is the relative decrease in the social prestige and social influence of the dominant supernatural realm (that is, religions, folk beliefs, religion-like structures, magic, and so forth) within a defined period of time and in a particular place. To better explain why such a definition is needed, each word used in the definition should be explained in full.

In this article, the concept supernatural *realm* is used as an embracing concept and covers the field of reasoning and thinking on the concepts and events based on belief and intuition rather than experiment and observation. Having attitudes, commitments, beliefs, and approaches with regard to nature without an observable connection to experiences are considered part of the supernatural³ (Steup 2011, pp. 21–22). Since supernatural realms vary across societies, the word “dominant” is used to point out there is no one way or unique experience of the supernatural. Therefore, since religion

³ The author used the concept of metaphysics in his work. Although the term metaphysics or metaphysical realm is also helpful to define secularization, the concept supernatural is preferable since it has no other connotations in the discipline of philosophy, unlike metaphysics.

is only one branch of the supernatural, discussions on whether societies or individuals have been secularized or not should be based on their interrelationship with the supernatural rather than religion.

Here, the phenomenon called *religion* has been used, in the first place, as a paradigm in its entirety based on supernatural references and having an influence on the daily practices, ethical values, aesthetical perceptions, ontological (existential) problems, and the perceptions about social norms of the communities in which they are practiced, as with monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and so forth). Woodhead (2011, pp. 122–23) offers a taxonomy of five major concepts of religion in a social scientific study: religion as culture, identity, relationship, practice, and power. This article argues that these concepts of religion are useful for secularization discussions as long as they are implicitly or explicitly related to transcendental entities. Emile Durkheim's definition will be helpful at this point. "A religion," says Durkheim (Durkheim 2008, p. 46), "is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions—beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community." Such an entity, being an ethical system presenting proper and correct conduct modes, can also function as a social control mechanism and contribute to the maintenance of the social order, thereby encouraging those attitudes and conducts that are socially acceptable (Atay 2012, p. 25).

As much as Abrahamic religions account for a substantial portion of the global population, the concept of religion, as used in this paper, involves not only Abrahamic religions but also primitive tribal religions, Indian religions, Iranian religions, East-Asian Religions, and so forth. In addition, the definition also includes popular religions, meaning "the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion" (Yoder 1974, p. 14). If these religions touch the lives of individuals less than they used to, it means that a secularization process is being experienced. However, if the norms and prohibitions of the dominant religion affect the daily lives of individuals even more, there might well be a process of desecularization at that location.

Here, it should be underscored that the question of whether religion has lost its influence in the discussions on secularization is often assessed through studies based on faith and prayer. In particular, studies on secularization in Western Europe and North America use the rate of frequenting churches and changes in the number of believers in God as the most important criteria (Chaves 1989, pp. 468–69; Davie 2002, pp. 6–7; Voas and Crockett 2005, p. 14; Wolf 2008, pp. 114, 117). It would not be easy to deny that these criteria would be among the vital parameters at the center of secularization discussions in societies where the social visibility and influence of religion are reduced to the rate of frequenting churches and the number of religious individuals. However, when discussions on secularization are reduced to the frequency of praying or the number of religious individuals in society, it may not provide sufficient information to see the bigger picture in terms of the social transformation that non-Christian societies have undergone. As Charles Glock puts it:

The more integrated a religion is into the social structure, the more likely it is that the everyday actions of man are defined by religious imperatives. In Hinduism, [or some other religions like Islam] for example, how a man departs himself from the time that he arises in the morning until he goes to bed at night is defined by customs which have the support of religious authority. (. . .) Expectations about what a person will do as a result of being religious include both avoiding certain kinds of conduct and actively engaging in others. (Glock 1962, pp. 106–7)

The truth in Glock's statement can manifest itself more clearly when we compare present-day Islam and Christianity. For example, unlike Christianity in Western Europe and the USA, Islam today requires being able to regulate many aspects of daily life such as raising children, family relationships, clothing preferences, marriage, friendship, choice of school, living environment, choice of occupation, sexuality, and so forth. In this regard, changes in praying frequency and number of believers may not suffice towards understanding change in the social influence of Islam or other non-Christian supernatural religion that seek to regulate every aspect of daily life among its adherents. Therefore,

secularization studies that are to be conducted in Muslim-majority countries such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and so forth, must involve more than just the frequency of performing Friday prayer, fasting, hajj, and other Islamic practices. What someone has done throughout the whole week, instead of merely performing the Friday prayer, might provide a better insight into secularization debates because frequent praying does not necessarily mean that one's daily life is regulated in accordance with Islam.

For example, with the process of modernization, Turkey has become a country where homosexuality has become more visible and acceptable (Yılmaz 2012, p. 39), flirting has become widespread (Akin and Özvarış 2003, p. 85), the number of people who consider virginity as a symbol of honor has declined (Bayhan 2013, p. 153), extramarital sexual relationships have become popular, and the age of one's first sexual intercourse has dropped to the high school level (Association for Sexual Education Treatment and Research 2007, p. 26; Civil and Yıldız 2010, p. 60). Secular discourse has spread even as far as the Presidency of Religious Affairs⁴ (Özbolat 2014, p. 676); divorce is no longer a taboo (Çayıroğlu 2016, p. 16; Süleymanov 2010, p. 199), tolerance for unmarried couples sharing the same apartment has increased (Yılmaz 2012, p. 39), the traditional Islamic family character has been shattered (Ministry of Family and Social Policies 2011, p. 31), women's clothing has gotten tighter (with veiled women also following this trend (Köse 2006, p. 16), and so forth. These lifestyles clearly frowned upon by Islam, are just as vital as the praying frequency to the secularization debates in Turkey. Otherwise, these issues which can provide important clues about the decline in the social prestige and influence of Islam will likely go unnoticed such that the big picture showing the overall social transformation may not be entirely accurate. That is the reason why taking into account only changes in the frequency of praying or the increase/decrease in the number of non-believers in non-Christian countries may not be a sufficient basis for secularization debates.

A folk belief⁵, on the other hand, is "defined as a strong conviction based on the [supernatural] perception of a cause-effect association between two independent events" (Joukhador et al. 2004, p. 171); it is also inconsistent with the known laws of nature (Kramer and Block 2008, p. 784) and not in harmony with official religions. Rather than based on a particular systematic teaching or written source, the roots of folk beliefs are shaped by changing geographical conditions and lifestyles. In many academic studies on secularization, data from the World Values Survey (WVS) is examined (Klausen 2009, p. 298; Norris and Inglehart 2008). The findings of the WVS certainly provide crucial data for these discussions. However, as the WVS focuses more on the frequency of prayers, the rates of going to church (or other holy places), and the changes in the number of believers, other supernatural entities affecting the daily lives of communities might escape the attention of researchers. In particular, those involved in the discipline of theology tend not to consider folk beliefs as part of the discussions on secularization. When studies are conducted to show that folk beliefs have lost their influence and prevalence (Rysbaeva 2009, p. 150; Yeşil 2013, pp. 158–59), and are thus presented as examples of secularization in society, this claim is often rejected under the presumption that such examples are not part of the institutional religion (Karaarslan 2015, p. 153; Sağır 2015, p. 800). However, the decline in the social influence of folk beliefs that are part and parcel of the supernatural also conjures up secularization, as with all other religions.

For example, when it comes to the impact of these folk beliefs on one's daily life, the experiences of older generations in Turkey may provide a concrete example at this point, since older generations in Turkey exhibit clear-cut differences with regard to the diagnosis of diseases and treatment modalities.

⁴ In 1994, the Presidency of Religious Affairs suggested that the problems in families would be solved if the orders of Islam and Allah are followed. However, this approach was abandoned in 2007, and instead of emphasizing the orders of Islam and Allah, love and mutual understanding were highlighted in the sermons (Özbolat 2014).

⁵ The authors used the concept of superstition instead of folk belief in their works. However, since the term superstition has a pejorative meaning in daily usage and presupposes that there is a true belief (generally the dominant religious belief) and that other beliefs apart from this true belief are considered false, irrational, and incompatible with truth, its usage is not preferred in this article.

The new generation seems to enjoy modern medical facilities much more than the older generation and are thus more inclined to talk about the causes of diseases within the framework of modern medicine rather than supernatural causes. That is why the thoughts and actions of the older generation, for example, punching due to headaches, dying due to bad angels, using salivary juice as an antibiotic, thinking that going to a hospital is a sin, and going to men of religion for dental inflammations are very unfamiliar to the new generation. In a field study related to the social transformation of Alevi communities⁶, some old interviewees mentioned jinn as the cause of diseases such as heart attacks, dying from bleedings, and so forth.

An old interviewee from the Tunceli region: *For example, when I was little I had jaundice and my family believed that it happened because of the birth of my little brother. For them, being jealous of my brother was the reason for having jaundice. (Ertit 2017, p. 240)*

A young interviewee from the Çorum region: *If anyone had a wart on his/her body, they asked my father to spit on those warts. Besides this, he used a razor blade to scratch those warts. Since it was assumed that this healing power was passed on from one generation to another, I would have been supposed to have the same healing power if I had happened to replace my father. I remember my father had to spit at least 10–15 times a week. (Ertit 2017, p. 241)*

Another old interviewee from the Tunceli region: *If someone was discolored, it was said that s/he had been hit by demons. No one knew what a heart attack was. Let's say a woman died of bleeding during childbirth, in those days it was believed that a jinni called "heleke" actually came and took her lungs. Because of that belief, people would wait with the woman for three days after childbirth in order to prevent the jinn from taking her lungs. (Ertit 2017, p. 240)*

Before the spread of Islam into Anatolia, the Anatolian people had their own folk beliefs, some of which still exist today (Şener 2001, pp. 103–9). Folk beliefs still play an important role, particularly in rural areas where the main livelihood is raising livestock. For instance, it was noted in a field study on animals in the Central Anatolia Region that the following beliefs and practices still persist to this day: a snake is burned alive to pray for rain; to have rain, prayers are written on a dry horse skull which is thrown at the riverside; when birds perch on trees in groups, it is assumed that there will be a very harsh and earlier winter; to protect horses or cows from the evil eye, verses from the Quran are written on an egg that is later broken under the animal and the animal is made to drink it; dog or horse skulls are hung on the doors of stables against the evil eye; and colostrum is given to neighbors to protect an animal that has given birth from the evil eye (Sinmez and Aslım 2017, pp. 208–11).

In addition, Ertit (2015, p. 90–91) has compiled the following folk beliefs that still play a role in the daily lives of the Turkish people: pouring lead to recover from a disease (Shaman tradition), holding a Mawlid ceremony after someone is dead, being careful to start with the right foot before walking out the door, seeing each other off by pouring a glass of water, coffee reading or spending large amounts of one's income on fortune telling, avoiding whistling and cutting nails at night, showing money towards a full moon to become rich, mixing water and salt to get purified from evil spirits, the beliefs that walking under a ladder will bring bad luck, children banging heads should spit on the floor, considering that a wish would come true if the cheek where an eyelash fell is known, if a pair of scissors, a knife, or soap is passed from hand to hand it will bring bad luck, hanging pieces of cloth and fabric on trees to make a wish, knocking on wood to avoid bad fate, and so forth. These are among the beliefs that are easily come across in the daily life of Turkish people. Thus, while such beliefs and rituals are not part of the institutional religion in Turkey, if they become less and less prevalent in the lives of the new generations, this process also should be called secularization.

⁶ Alevism is Turkey's second largest denomination after Sunnism. Dictionaries define the word Alevi as 'Ali's supporter, 'Ali's lover or being attached to 'Ali (Moosa 2009).

The reason for using the word *magic* in the definition is due to its prominent role in Weber and Durkheim's sociology. While saying that "those beings that are worshipped and entreated religiously may be termed 'gods,' in contrast to 'demons,' which are magically coerced and charmed", Weber (1978, p. 424) actually attempts to underline the fundamental distinction between religion and magic. However, with regard to the secularization discussion, demons are as part and parcel of the supernatural realm as the gods are. Moreover, Weber (1978, pp. 424–25) also maintains that clergy in Christianity and other religions have magical qualifications. Despite stating that magic in the modern world would degenerate due to modernization, he underscores the similarities shared by clergymen and particularly Hinduistic–Buddhistic ritual-elements and magic (Weber 1958b, p. 255). Just like Weber, Durkheim also underscores the differences between magic and religion. As can be understood from his own statements, both magic and religion need to be addressed in the same fashion in discussions on secularization.

Magic, too, is made up of beliefs and rites. Like religion, it has its myths and its dogmas; only they are more elementary (. . .). It has its ceremonies, sacrifices, lustrations, prayers, chants, and dances as well. (. . .) Demons are also [like gods] a common instrument for magic action. Now, these demons are also beings surrounded with interdictions; they too are separated and live in a world apart, so that it is frequently difficult to distinguish them from the gods properly so-called. (Durkheim 2008, pp. 42–43)

The reason for dwelling particularly on popular religions, folk beliefs, and magic is to discuss the problematic parts of the method used by Stark to claim that the theory of secularization has been refuted. While claiming that Europe in the Middle Ages was not so religious as is commonly presumed, Stark (1999, p. 254) argues that the classical secularization thesis should be moved to the graveyard of failed theories since religion has not lost its influence in Europe despite the process of modernization. According to Stark, Europeans were in the dark about religion in the Middle Ages and people did not attend churches out of motivation (Stark 1999, p. 255). Let us assume⁷ that Stark is right in his claim, namely, that Europe is equally religious in the 21st century as it was in the Middle Ages. In other words, let us accept that Christianity was not as powerful in the Middle Ages as is often supposed and that communities in Europe did not attach so much importance to religion, contrary to the picture we now paint of it. In fact, that does not refute the claim constructed around the theory of secularization. This is because the argument of Stark et al.—that secularization is not related to the "supernatural realm" but to Christianity—is an unfortunate one. In fact, secularization is not only about the decrease in the power of Christianity or other monotheistic religions at the communal level. At the same time, secularization also focuses, as a sphere of interest, on the pagan rituals touching on the polytheistic and multi-symbol daily life of the peoples in Europe stemming from Pre-Christian periods and continuing within Christianity.

If, as Stark puts it, only Christianity springs to mind when it comes to religion, the people who lived before Jesus Christ was born should have been secular individuals. If secularization is limited only to religions established by those descending from the Prophet Abraham, hundreds of small or large spiritual belief systems and ways of life such as Hinduism, Paganism, Shamanism, Buddhism, Jainism, Shintoism, Sikhism, and Bahaim that had gained a place in the world in the past or are still prevailing in some societies today would be ignored. In order to negate the secularization theory,

⁷ It is not easy to agree with Stark's claims with regard to Medieval Europe and Christianity. The position of the Church in the Middle Ages was powerful enough even to initiate war; people were judged and tortured by Inquisition courts; powerful popes could crown kings; thousands of people were killed by churches during the so-called witch hunting; people notified their neighbors to authorities on grounds that they did not live in accordance with the norms of Christianity; art was monopolized by the Church; philosophy was regarded as a discipline put at the disposal of the Church to prove the existence of the Christian God instead of being a discipline that took interest in every sphere of life in the Middle Ages; there was an environment where a religious institution represented the whole of society; and there was no liberty of religion (Hamilton 2003, p. 29; McCabe 1916, pp. 103–4; Sharkey 1950, p. 32; Perry et al. 1989, pp. 183–85).

those who claim that “the Middle Ages was not a Golden Age for Christianity” should examine the supernatural realm (other than Christianity) that prevailed at the time in Europe in terms of its influence on societies.

Instead of Abrahamic religions, a person can deify and worship fire and regulate his/her daily life in accordance with the relations/he establishes with fire. Such a practice does not render that individual more secular than a faithful Muslim or Christian. As Charles Taylor (2007, p. 26) argues, “people who live in this kind of world don’t necessarily believe in God, certainly not in the God of Abraham, as the existence of countless ‘pagan’ societies shows.”

The notion of religion-like structures in the definition has exclusively been used to indicate the structures emerging as a result of the sacralization, deification, and sublimation of the secular domain. The religion-like structures are those that emerge as a consequence of the belief that a political leader, a singer, a fashion icon, a nation, a community, a football player, or even a particular location, possesses supernatural characteristics or powers and the consequential glorification, deification, and sacralization of such entities.

For instances, there are many earthly leaders who have been or are being deified and sublimed, ascribing them a superhuman character. A divine characteristic is attributed to their arguments and they gain a transcendental characteristic. Everything they say is passed from one generation to another over decades or centuries, like the verses of a holy book. Their influence is not limited to the period in which they live, but their ideas offer solutions to problems in a timeless manner. People they lead see such leaders as super-humans who never do evil, make no mistakes, and do not have any human fancies or pleasures. Such leaders can sometimes be given a status that is more sacred and important than the prophets of orthodox religions. Their words can also be passed from one generation to the other just like the verses of a holy book. People can believe, without a time limitation, that the inspirations of these blessed leaders can provide remedies to all kinds of social problems. Additionally, legal sanctions can be imposed or social pressure can be exerted to prevent the status of these leaders from ever being brought into question.

At this point, Weber’s concept of ‘charismatic authority’ can be helpful:

a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman or at least specifically powers or qualities. These are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them, the individual concerned is treated as a leader. (Weber 1947, pp. 358–59)

Weber speaks of prophets, war heroes, magicians, and so forth, as individuals with charisma. With religion-like structures, this paper refers to any worldly entity or worldly leaders who are deified by their followers and disciples just as Weber states, even if they have no religious goal or claim.

For instance, there are more similarities than differences between a prophet and a holy book sent to him, on the one hand, and Mao Zedong and his Red Book, on the other. The power that Mao and his Red Book exercised at the social level in the time of Mao’s rule was superior to that of an earthly leader. Being in a sort of trance, the Chinese people wished that their leader should live “ten thousand years” more.

The visual ubiquity of the portrait, combined with the power attached to the political and personal prestige of the man, contributed to the creation of a feeling of religious adoration not just toward the Chairman, but toward the image itself, which began to share in the godlike nature of its referent. (Lago 1999, p. 49)

It is the outcome of the same motive when Chinese taxi-drivers put up Mao’s picture in their cars to “bring them good luck” and “protect them”, while Muslims, on the other hand, put up the Qur’ān or an amulet in their vehicles to prevent car crashes. That Mao was a leader in this world and the Qur’ān is perceived to be sent from another world does not render the Chinese people who

deified Mao as being more secular. That is because the old gods can make space for new ones and supernatural can gain a place in human lives in different forms and systems (Özben 2015, pp. 37–8; Crippen 1988, pp. 332–33).

Some of the poetry written for Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Republic Turkey, is also similar in this sense. The following quotation is a passage from the renowned poem by Kemalettin Kamu titled “Çankaya”:

Kaaba be for Arabs,
Çankaya⁸ suffice for us!⁹

Behçet Kemal Çağlar, another poet, grants Atatürk the character of a creator in his poem “The Nation on Duty”:

Creator, Oh Creator!
Not four years, not a thousand years
can extirpate your flame in us
your voice just like a gleam carrying us away!
Oh, eternal blue ocean!
Lying there in a piece of marble,
in a handful of soil.¹⁰

Besides, some Muslims state that Atatürk is more important than Prophet Muhammad in their eyes. This is concretely manifested in the statement of a groom candidate who joined a marriage television show which elicited some applause in the studio as well:

However, I forget to mention this as a characteristic of mine. It is an essential part of me. I never compromise on Atatürk’s principles and reforms. If I knew that I would not be committing a sin, I would rank Atatürk after Allah who created and let me live until 63 in good health, I would rank him before the Prophet. Why? That is because it is thanks to Atatürk that I am here, as a Muslim, my name is Basri Özdemir, and my grandmothers and grandfathers had honorable lives in this beautiful country. I owe him even my religion. I would rank him above Muhammad [audience at the studio applauds]. (Haber 7 2013, December 12)

As seen in these examples, Atatürk symbolizes a faultless, great, almighty, supernatural, and divine identity for a particular segment of Turkish society. Thus, much as these political leaders are not part of institutionalized religions and may have even declared war on these institutionalized faiths, if they represent a perfect, almighty, supreme, supernatural, and divine personality for a certain social segment, then the decline in their social prestige and influence falls within the scope of secularization.

However, we need to underscore three points here. First, the aforementioned religion-like structures are called as such because they are deemed sacred, not because they are much loved or respected. Second, as much as Atatürk, Mao or any other earthly leader is sacralized by their followers, this does not mean they have eternal or indomitable power. On the contrary, the fact that relatively few people sacralize them and that they influence people’s daily life less and less compared to the past can also be read in the sense that they, or their ideologies, have become secular. Supposing that the sacredness of Atatürk or Mao is diminishing, we can talk about the conceptualization of the secularization of Maoism or that of Kemalism¹¹. Finally, religion-like structures are not a historical

⁸ Where Atatürk lived.

⁹ In Turkish: “Kabe Arab’ın olsun, Çankaya Bize Yeter”.

¹⁰ In Turkish: Yaradan hey Yaradan!, Dört yıl değil bin yıl geçse aradan, Sensin ateş diye kanımızdaki, Sesin ışık diye önümüzdeki! Ey yanımızdaki, Beş on mermere, bir avuç toprağa sığan, Sınırsız mavi umman hey!

¹¹ The ideas and principles of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the Founder and first President of the Turkish Republic.

conceptualization and can appear at any time. For example, certain behavioral patterns displayed by the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's followers also represent a process of sacralization. Examples include the announcement of a news editor who accepted Erdoğan as the caliph and obeyed him (T24 2013, August 30), an MP's claim that Erdoğan has all the attributes of God (Radikal 2014), and the statement of a fellow party member that he accepts Erdoğan as the second prophet (NTV 2010, February 3).

To sum up the aforementioned, we can borrow Max Weber's concept of "the disenchantment of the world" (1958, p. 117). Weber clarifies the increasing rational consciousness along with scientific developments—that is, the explanation of natural events based on cause-and-effect relationships according to the laws of physics (Morrison 1995, p. 42) and the disappearance of the universal structure interwoven with magic, sorcery, and unknown realities (Hughes et al. 1995, pp. 120–21)—as follows: "(. . .) principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the World is disenchanted" (Weber 1958a, p. 117). While using the concept of disenchantment here, Weber does not refer only to the world of institutional religions.

In parallel, Christopher Partridge also emphasizes that institutional religions should not be at the center of secularization debates in the West any longer, saying that the concept of spirituality should be—at least for today—at the center of secularization debates in the West:

(...) alongside traditional forms of institutional religion that have been seriously damaged, cracks are appearing in the disenchanted landscape and new forms of significant spiritual life are emerging. (Partridge 2004, p. 43)

Although the 1960s was a particularly significant decade for the decline of institutional Christianity, (. . .) the claim that a shift towards thoroughgoing secularization was the end product is less convincing. (. . .) we have noted that the 1960s also saw the emergence of a countercultural idealism in which important and vital forms of alternative spirituality flourished. (2004, p. 101)

As indicated by Linda Woodhead (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, p. 1), many studies have shown that people designate themselves not as religious, but as spiritual. Therefore, individuals saying that they are not religious or not a member of any official religion does not make them de facto secular. Having the discussions on secularization based on official religions alone cannot provide adequate information about the social influence and prestige of the supernatural realm. It is clear that the discussion over whether the West has become secularized or not is well beyond the scope of this paper. However, as is reemphasized by the works of Weber, Woodhead, and Partridge, it should be stated that secularization debates deserve criteria other than the praying frequency and the belief in God.

Lastly, the phrases "relative" and "a defined period of time and particular place", in the definition, are used in order to prevent an absolute understanding. In other words, they are used to indicate the weaker social power of religions, folk beliefs, religion-like structures, magic, and so forth "in comparison to the past" in a "particular place" rather than indicating an absolute value or level. To decide whether any person or community becomes more secular or not, a reference point (time and place) is needed.

David Martin (1978, p. 3; 2005, p. 146) also maintains that "particular historical circumstances" will bring to bear different consequences for each society whenever the process of secularization is in question. More precisely Martin (1991, p. 467) argues that history does not hold a common fate for all societies, by saying that "under conditions A, B, and C, the phenomenon N is associated with Z, but under other conditions, the association may disappear or be crucially modified". Therefore, it should be stated that a comparison of the USA and Europe, which is often resorted to in recent years, seems methodologically problematic in terms of secularization debates. Particularly, the academics claiming that the secularization theory has been refuted seem to justify their claim by comparing the modern USA to modern Europe. For instance, Grace Davie titled her book, published in 2002,

as “Europe: The Exceptional Case”. In this book, especially in the chapter on the USA (“American Activity: A Vibrant Religious Market”), she preferred to compare the USA to Europe instead of its own history (2002: p. 28–29). In addition, in another work, Peter Berger, Grace Davie, and Effie Fokas defended the collapse of the secularization theory as follows: “there have been many reasons for the demise of secularization theory (. . .) but the America–Europe comparison is a big nail in the coffin of the theory” (Berger et al. 2008, p. 141).

The main argument of these studies announcing the demise of the secularization theory is the emptiness of churches in Europe compared to the much livelier religious scene in the USA. In terms of secularization debates, this claim takes us from the center of the debate to quite different dimensions. It is obvious that the relatively lower level of secularization in the USA compared to European countries does not mean that the USA has not become secularized. As Martin asserts, the USA is experiencing its own unique fate, and the discussions of whether or not the USA has become secularized cannot be addressed by comparing it to other countries. To put it in a simpler way, let us consider that there are two friends who have grown taller. It is not plausible to claim that one of them has gotten shorter because he has not grown as tall as the other. The interesting part is that many academic studies seem to show that the USA has become secularized when it is assessed itself (Voas and Chaves 2016, p. 1523). For example, contrary to popular belief, the rate of frequenting churches has been consistently declining in the USA (Barna 2001; Pew Research Center 2012, p.17) and “the number of people who never attend religious services has doubled in two and a half decades, going from 13% in 1990 to 26% in 2014” (Voas and Chaves 2016, p. 1523). As for the rate of those who regularly attend church, this has dropped to 22% in the early 21st century from 40% in the 1960s (Hadaway and Marler 2005, p. 316). While the rate of those with no religious affiliation was 2% in the 1950s (Bruce 2002), it rose to 20% in 2012 (Pew Research Center 2012, p. 9). The higher rate of nonbelievers in Western European countries than in the USA does not indicate that the USA has been de-secularized, but rather that it has become secularized slower compared to Western Europe (Norris and Inglehart 2007, p. 33).

However, these numbers are on the rates of religious affiliation and church frequenting. In parallel to these numbers, the rates of premarital sex and having children out of wedlock have also increased. According to the data obtained through the National Study on Family Development conducted with 12,571 people, 75% of Americans who turned 20 have had premarital sexual intercourse (Finer 2007, p. 73). Furthermore, “by the year 2007, nearly 4 in 10 births were to unmarried women: the proportion of all births to unmarried women was 39.7%, up from 34.0% in 2002. The 2007 proportion was more than double that for 1980 (18.4%).” (Ventura 2009, p. 2). By the year 2015, the percentage of births to unmarried women has increased slightly to 40.3% (Martin et al. 2017, p. 2). In addition, the rate of Americans who approve the legalization of gay marriage (as being equal to traditional marriage) has reached 64% (Gallup 2017, May 15). Therefore, all these changes in the daily life practices and attitudes in the USA demonstrate a rather different picture than the one presented by those claiming a certain level of Christianization (Finke and Stark 1988; Stark 1999). It should be underscored that we can find a quite different picture than the existing one if we attempt to interpret the secularization of the USA by comparing it to Europe instead of assessing it by itself. To overcome this methodological problem, we need a defined period of time and place as indicated in the presented definition.

Although studies that include single timeframes are helpful in terms of descriptions, they are neither usable nor useful for understanding the process of secularization (Bruce 2011, pp. 546–47) because secularization is not the description of a situation but the definition of a process. It may be argued that, for this reason, even a rather faithful community may have undergone a “secularization” process or may have become more secular compared to the olden days. In the same way, it can also be said that a very religious individual may also have been secularized in comparison to former times or may have become part of a more secular life. For example, if a Muslim practices his/her faith less or s/he takes Islamic norms less and less into consideration, the process of secularization should be considered here. Even though a Muslim still has faith in Islam, the process of secularization seems to play a role because Islam is less influential in his/her daily life compared to how it was in the past.

4. Conclusions

If religion rather than the supernatural realm is put at the center of the definition of secularization, the discussions will then be confined to a rather narrow perspective. Abrahamic religions are not the only supernatural entities that affect the daily lives of communities worldwide. Focusing on secularization in terms of the social decline in the influence of religion-like structures, that coincides with the sacralization of the secular domain, folk beliefs which continue to exist despite the dominant institutional-official religion, and all other supernatural beliefs which cannot be explained by the laws of physics, will all lead to an expansion in the empirical studies on the issue. These dynamics can at times be more influential than the dominant official religion and how people go about their daily lives. Therefore, exploring only the impact of monotheistic institutional religions within the scope of secularization would leave such exploration incomplete.

In short, if the supernatural realm is able to penetrate social life and to influence the daily activities more than it did in the past, then it is argued that this society has become less secular. By the same token, if a society distances itself from the supernatural realm, compared to what was the case in the past, then it can be stated that this society is becoming more secular. Thus, the definition put forward in this paper, based on the supernatural realm, might help scholars to explain the relationship between different forms of the “sacred” and human beings under secularization in various parts of the world, not just in Western Europe or its offshoots.

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