

Religion Today
August 26-September 1, 2001
Secularization A Measure of Religious Success
Amanda Porterfield

To hear some people talk, you would think that religion and secularity were enemies, and that secularization was an external force fundamentally antagonistic to religious life. On closer examination, however, the relationship between religion and secularity is friendlier than some people think.

Many ideas and practices that we now view as secular originated or developed in the context of religious life. Proven success within that religious context enabled them to become more widespread. To some extent, then, secularization involves the application, expansion and popularity of ideas and practices outside the religious environment that nurtured them.

For example, protection of individual rights is a fundamental and pervasive aspect of Western culture. You don't have to be religious to believe in individual rights and, in some cases, you may be vulnerable to prosecution, whatever your religious affiliation, if you violate them. The modern concept of individual rights is partly rooted in ancient Greek ideas of citizenship and in Roman law. But the idea of treating equally every individual, regardless of birth or wealth, was not part of republican life in ancient Greece. And it only became part of the legal traditions rooted in Roman law as a result of developments within ancient and medieval Christianity (and to a lesser extent, within Judaism and Islam as well).

This is not to say that ancient or medieval Christians always treated people equally, or even believed they should be treated so. But religiously-inspired Christians, Jews and Muslims who did believe in treating people equally turned out to have a sound, practical idea

that ultimately caught on in Western societies and became part of secular law.

This process evolved further during the civil rights movements of the 20th century. In his efforts to gather popular support for equal treatment of African Americans under U.S. law, Martin Luther King, Jr. repeatedly referred to the biblical stories about God's freeing the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt and Moses' anticipation of the Promised Land. Many Jews identified deeply with the same biblical stories and, motivated by their religious ideals, supported the civil rights movement led by King. Other Americans, such as Malcolm X, looked to Islam as the ultimate religious inspiration for human equality around the world as well as in the United States. Christian, Jewish and Islamic religions played significant roles in the advances made in civil rights during the 20th century.

But religion's success in this regard is best measured in secular terms. While religious people continued to support and advance them, the new laws, social customs, and attitudes that resulted from the civil rights movement stood on their own, independent of religious belief. And that secularization of civil rights is evidence of religion's success.