

Peeking Past the Secular Canopy

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This article critiques the intellectual individualism which has characterized much of the modern secularizing movement using community-based views of scientific epistemology such as those of Thomas Kuhn and Naomi Oreskes. The article ends with some predictions about one way individualism might soften, and how secularism and Christianity might adapt to this change.

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Introduction¹

In the summer of 1988, distinguished scholar of church history Martin Marty came to the little town of Franklin, Indiana, where I was serving as a minister. By a series of coincidences, I was invited to attend a small garden party in his honor and got to meet him. This was right at the beginning of his work with the Fundamentalism Project,² and he said a few words about it to the group. I remember a vague worry at the time that maybe I was one of the fundamentalists being put under the microscope by this project. I also remember keeping my mouth shut.

Many years later, I ran across a lovely set of comments by Peter L. Berger concerning the Fundamentalism Project that reversed my perspective. Berger asked the question why the MacArthur Foundation would fund a multi-million-dollar project to study religious fundamentalism. His words are worth quoting at length:

Two answers came to mind. The first was obvious and not very interesting. The MacArthur Foundation is a very progressive outfit; it understands fundamentalism to be anti-progressive; the Project, then, was a matter of knowing one's enemies. But there was also

¹ I could not be more pleased to be asked to contribute to a *Festschrift* for Dr. Lynn McMillon. I was lucky enough to have Dr. McMillon as a professor when I was an undergraduate Bible major, and when I returned to join the faculty of Oklahoma Christian, he became a trusted and reliable mentor, generous with his time and honest but kind about my shortcomings. He is one of the great ones in the kingdom and a great hero to me personally.

² The Fundamentalism Project was a research effort of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences running from 1987 to 1995 under the leadership of Martin Marty and Robert Appleby. It collated scholarly field work and provided theoretical frameworks for understanding the rise of anti-modernist movements in seven major religions around the world and resulted in several substantial monographs.

a more interesting answer. “Fundamentalism” is considered a strange, hard-to-understand phenomenon; the purpose of the Project was to delve into this alien world and make it more understandable. But to whom? *Who* finds this world strange? Well, the answer to *that* question was easy: people to whom the officials of the MacArthur Foundation normally talk, such as professors at elite American universities. And with this came the aha! experience. The concern that must have led to this Project was based on the upside-down perception of the world, according to which “fundamentalism” (which, when all is said and done, usually refers to any sort of passionate religious movement) is a rare, hard-to-explain thing. But a look either at history or at the contemporary world reveals that what is rare is not the phenomenon itself but knowledge of it. The difficult-to-understand phenomenon is not Iranian mullahs but American university professors—it might be worth a multi-million-dollar project to try to explain that!³

In this quote, Berger captures some ideas that have been nagging at me for a long time. Clearly secularism has established a new consensus viewpoint which unites much of the academics and media globally. Equally clearly, this secular consensus is fragile and faces an uncertain future. For the purposes of this article, I am calling this consensus “the secular canopy,” in imitation of the title of Berger’s own most influential book, *The Sacred Canopy*. In *The Sacred Canopy*, Berger worked to understand the process of secularization, which at the time he saw as inevitable.⁴ His book was an influential articulation of what is known as secularization theory, which assumes that as societies become more scientifically literate and technologically advanced, they naturally become less and less religious. In essence, the ‘sacred canopy’ of faith that binds together a people must fade away.

As indicated by the quote above, by 1999 Berger had famously reversed his position. He elaborated his new view, saying: “The world today . . . is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that the whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled ‘secularization theory’ is essentially mistaken.”⁵ As secularism matures and evidence mounts, the idea that in the face of modernity religion itself must inevitably wither away will itself wither and fade. This is already happening, as the later work of Peter Berger testifies,⁶ and as historians like Rodney Stark have taken increasing delight in showing.⁷ Particular forms of religion

³ Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999), 1–2.

⁴ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990).

⁵ Berger, “Desecularization,” 2.

⁶ Peter L. Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age* (Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2014).

⁷ Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Faith: Why the World Is More Religious Than Ever* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2015).

may wither, but religion keeps changing and reinventing itself and now seems more powerful than ever.

This means that secularism must change to meet the new situation. In this essay, I will attempt to peek past our secular canopy to what comes next for those most intent on keeping faith with secularism. I will focus on some developments in the philosophy of science to illustrate one direction of likely change. And I will conclude with some advice to Christians about what this means for our testimony.

Individualism and the Demand for Authenticity

Charles Taylor's magisterial *A Secular Age*⁸ gives us much to think about as we try to understand our current secular canopy and work to guess what comes next. Taylor explains that, whereas in the past, key Christian beliefs were taken for granted, now those who keep faith with Christianity are always aware of those living out other beliefs and keeping faith with other ideals.⁹ He says those who live their faith feel cross-pressured by their awareness of alternative ways of life.

But Taylor also points out that those keeping faith with the secular consensus face similar cross-pressures.¹⁰ Our secular canopy is not precisely the flip side of fading Christendom, in which lack of religion is assumed in the same way Christian faith used to be. Rather, those most at home in secularism must hold key aspects of their secularism in spite of their awareness of proliferating other religions and spiritualities. As we strain to peek past our current secular canopy, this cross-pressured existence of the secular believer may light a path. The Christian witness of the future, at least in the most secularized cultures, may find success often where the secular canopy is least sheltering, and where those trying to keep faith with secularism look with some envy on what others have to say.

One such place of discontent is, I believe, the modern demand for authenticity. As Taylor articulates it, the demand for authenticity means "each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority."¹¹ As those who comment on Taylor describe it, the demand for authenticity requires each person to choose for themselves what they will believe. To discover that one's beliefs are beholden to others is to fail in the task of being an intellectual grownup. The old motto of the Royal Society, *Nullius in verba* ("Take no one's word for anything"),¹² once the watchword of the

⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007).

⁹ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 3, 12-14.

¹⁰ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 302-303.

¹¹ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 475.

¹² "History of the Royal Society," The Royal Society, accessed August 26, 2021, <https://royalsociety.org/about-us/history/>.

scientific revolution, is an apt symbol of this demand for authenticity under the secular canopy.

But let's be honest: this is a lot of pressure. As lived by modern people trying to keep faith with secular ideals, the fear of being found to have second-hand beliefs is almost worse than the fear that one's beliefs are false. A person must be constantly searching one's epistemology to root out dependence on others. I am under orders to create my own beliefs, and I'm never sure I am succeeding.

Science as Communities of Knowers

The history of the philosophy of science provides a lovely illustration of this tension between the desire to “take no one's word for anything” and the power of thinking with the community. In the early days of the secular revolution, it seemed to many that in the new science of Galileo and Newton, humans had truly discovered a method to let us think for ourselves. The old doctrines of Aristotle and Ptolemy and Galen could be interrogated and often overturned by one individual making their own fresh observations. Those with the courage to see the facts as they are, without preconceptions, revealed new realities. Using the experimental method, each person had the power to pierce the prejudices of the past and birth new truths.

This fine vision of intellectual individualism has not been treated kindly by historians and philosophers of science. Many are convinced this is just not the way science works. Michael Polanyi, for instance, pointed out that training in science is more like a discipleship than a transfer of clearly defined and recognized facts. A great deal of what it takes to be a scientist is tacit knowledge that is less a matter of conscious instruction and more a matter of absorption through working with those more experienced in the field. In order to develop enough to think truly for myself, I must first submit my thoughts to my mentors.¹³

Thomas Kuhn's picture of scientific communities is perhaps the greatest turning point against individualism. In 1962, Kuhn first published *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, the book that injected the term “paradigm shift” into popular culture, but more importantly launched one in the study of science.¹⁴ Kuhn applied the methods of science to the process of science itself by observing how scientists actually go about accomplishing their amazing work. He argued that much of the power of science comes through the development of scientific communities of thought. Within these communities, scientists have general agreement about what their subject matter is like, what kinds of discoveries are to be expected, and how to go about achieving them.¹⁵ These

¹³ For a relatively standard description of Polanyi's thought on this, see for instance Mark T. Mitchell, “Michael Polanyi, Alasdair MacIntyre, and the Role of Tradition,” *Humanitas* 19 (2006): 102-103.

¹⁴ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996). I will be citing from the third edition (1996) throughout.

¹⁵ Kuhn, 10.

agreements provide huge advantages to the scientists working within them, as so many trained minds can be focused sharply on the same set of problems with a common vocabulary and understanding to speed their work. With little effort diverted into arguing about fundamentals, these communities—united under shared sets of beliefs and values, which Kuhn called “paradigms”—provide the structure for most of the day-to-day progress of science.¹⁶ Kuhn illustrates the advantages of such a structure by commenting on the individualism of the science of optics before Isaac Newton:

Being able to take no common body of belief for granted, each writer on physical optics felt forced to build his field anew from its foundations. In doing so, his choice of supporting observation and experiment was relatively free, for there was no standard set of methods or of phenomena that every optical writer felt forced to employ and explain. Under these circumstances, the dialogue of the resulting books was often directed as much to the members of other schools as it was to nature.¹⁷

While individual scientists could certainly express their individuality in this condition, and Kuhn says some creative work was done, “the net result of their activity was something less than science”¹⁸—quite the deflating critique of intellectual individualism. Kuhn’s emphasis on the community of knowledge has entered into the mainstream of the history and philosophy of science, even as some other aspects of his thought, such as his relativism, have been discounted. Naomi Oreskes is a professor of the history of science at Harvard most well known for her work exposing bad science used to deny climate change, etc.¹⁹ In *Why Trust Science?*, Oreskes points out that “reliance on empirical evidence alone is insufficient for understanding the basis of scientific conclusions and therefore insufficient for establishing trust in science. We must also take to heart—and explain—the social character of science.”²⁰ She replies to the critics of community-based views by adding, “Scientists who were offended by the ‘social’ turn in science studies got it wrong: much of what we identify as ‘science’ are social practices and procedures of adjudication designed to ensure—or at least attempt to increase the odds—that the process of review and correction are sufficiently robust as to lead to empirically reliable results.”²¹ And she quotes with approval Helen Longino: “Socializing cognition is not a corruption or displacement of the rational but a vehicle of its performance.”²² For

¹⁶ See Kuhn’s discussion of the progress made possible when those exploring electrical phenomena coalesced around the paradigm provided by Benjamin Franklin’s work; see Kuhn, 18ff.

¹⁷ Kuhn, 13.

¹⁸ Kuhn, 13.

¹⁹ Naomi Oreskes and Eric M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

²⁰ Naomi Oreskes, “Why Trust Science? Perspectives from the History and Philosophy of Science,” in *Why Trust Science?*, ed. Naomi Oreskes (Princeton: Princeton University, 2021), 57.

²¹ Oreskes, 57.

²² Helen Longino, *The Fate of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2001), 106-7.

Oreskes, as for many others, the engine of scientific credibility is the consensus of the community of experts.

So here is how things stand. As a consumer of science, I can do some work on my own in checking both the credentials and motives of the scientific community making a specific pronouncement, but in the end, I must put an appropriate level of trust in the community.²³ Even more, if I am a scientist, I must appropriately submit my beliefs to my community if I am ever to be in a position to make progress in improving either my own beliefs or the beliefs of that community. Thus, in science at least, the old dream of following some individual path of knowledge is dead. What then of the secularist demand for authenticity, in which each individual must choose their own beliefs? If even in the hardest of the hard sciences one must be guided by a community to think effectively, what hope for other areas of life?

Peeking Past the Secular Canopy

Here is where we can perhaps peek past our secular canopy. My own view is that the demand for authenticity will slowly pass away. The requirement that individuals determine for themselves what they will believe will itself be increasingly recognized as an illusion. I suspect we will come to adopt more mature ways of thinking about how individuals are formed by and flourish within intellectual communities.

I believe it will become more common to think that we become intellectual adults not by simple acts of casting off what our culture has taught us, but by complex acts of appropriate submission to the best our communities of thought have produced. We may test to some extent the communities to which we submit ourselves, looking for systemic prejudice or endemic failure of theory to match lived experience. But such testing will always be partial and rushed, and in the end, we can't help but submit our understanding to one or more communities as we struggle toward adult levels of growth. Only by such acts of submission can our characters be formed to the levels necessary for us to take our place as fully functioning members of the community. Even if we find ourselves critiquing aspects of our community's beliefs, it is only because our community has built us into beings capable of such critique, using the footing provided by the other aspects of what the community has provided. I want to stress that it is not irrational for us to place this level of faith in our communities. Given human intellectual limitations, this is the only way we can reach whatever level of rationality we manage to attain. We are smart because we are social.

²³ See Oreskes' chapter titled "Reply" in *Why Trust Science?*, 221-222.

Conclusion: What about Christianity?

What does this mean for our Christian witness? I think Christians can find themselves fitting more comfortably into this future. To state the obvious first, intellectual individualism is a large component of the Enlightenment movement to de-credentialize Christianity. When the mood is “Take no one’s word for anything,” Christians are put on their back foot trying to explain their confidence in traditions and Scripture. As our culture adopts a more mature view about how much humans depend on multi-generational communities of thought to think well, Christianity will look less odd. Maybe even better, many Christians in and after the Enlightenment have tried to adjust our self-descriptions to fit intellectual individualism. I’m hoping that as our surrounding intellectual culture matures away from it, so may we. If we have eyes to see it, Christian believers can recognize with gratitude that we have always been enjoying this nurturing by the church communities that have trained and equipped us. We are already living where our secular friends will be moving soon.

Finally, the community view of faith and practice allows for a longer time frame for development than an individualist viewpoint can tolerate. And it allows a decoupling of error from evil in a way that the individualist viewpoint tends to obscure. When I am more aware of how fully I am being trained to think, believe, and practice by my community, then even when I reach the place of offering critique and correction, I may have a richer understanding that I stand on the shoulders of those I now turn to judge. I may also gain a vision that someday those I am currently equipping will one day climb up on the gifts I struggle to provide and be in a position to correct me. I find this a hopeful view. I can see my vision of God’s will as partial, “as in a murky mirror,” but I can also hope that my efforts will live beyond me and that those who build the community after me will see and do better.

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