

Speaker 1:

Thank you for calling 1-800-REL-HELP. Your question is very important to us. A scholar will be with you shortly.

Speaker 1:

Every question is an important one, and the scholars on call at 1-800-REL-HELP are eager to provide information on your requested topic.

Speaker 1:

Thank you for choosing 1-800-REL-HELP for answers to your most burning questions about religion. Our scholars are more than well equipped to answer any questions you may have.

Brook:

Thank you for calling one 1-800-REL-HELP. This is Brooke. How can I help you?

Speaker 3:

Hey, I need some help. I keep hearing this word secular and I don't know what it means. I thought it meant something like not religious, but then why do they keep talking about it in my Religious Studies classes?

Brook:

Hey, that's a great question. You and your Religious Studies professors are both right. Secular does kind of mean not religious, but it also belongs in Religious Studies classes. So let's figure out how that's possible.

Brook:

Let's think about religion and secular, not as opposites, but as twins.

Speaker 3:

What do you mean by that?

Brook:

Well, first of all, secular and religion have a lot in common. Like religion, secular is a term that refers to different things in different times and places. It does not describe an unchanging cross-cultural reality, but always requires further context. For example, in the United States, when we think of the secular, we might think about the separation of church and state. England, however, still has a national church, the Church of England. So the separation between religion and secular is not the same. Those are different varieties of the secular.

Speaker 3:

Okay, but what is the secular?

Brook:

I'm getting there. You can't have secular without religion. To define the secular you always have to also define religion. And as you might have heard, that's a big question. In fact, we even started using the word secular at the same time we started naming world religions like Christianity or Islam or Buddhism. Once you start defining what is Christian or Buddhist or Muslim, you also need a word for what lies outside of those boundaries. And all that happened only in the 19th century, which is really not that long ago.

Speaker 3:

That is so long ago.

Brook:

Okay, that's fair. But the word secular is even older than that. Way back when, even before the 19th century, the word secular was used by monks.

Speaker 3:

Wait, what?

Brook:

Yes. If you were a monk, living in a monastery, or a nun living in a nunnery, off in the country somewhere, you were called a regular monk. But if you were a monk or nun who just worked in a church in a town, not off in the country somewhere, you were called a secular monk. Confusing, right?

Speaker 3:

Definitely.

Brook:

It gets worse. Later on, people used the word secular to talk about land or property or buildings that used to be owned by the church and then got transferred to the government, like in France after the French revolution. So in that case, secular would be more like the formerly religious. What you still can't separate, the religious from the secular.

Speaker 3:

I think I'm getting it, but I'm still confused why people don't just say atheist.

Brook:

It's a good point. So atheism means not believing in God, but that's only the twin of religion if you define religion as belief in God. But, as you know, religion can have many different definitions in many different contexts. Sometimes it's more important what religious people do than what they believe. So in that case, it wouldn't really make sense to be an atheist.

Speaker 3:

But it would still make sense to have secular.

Brook:

That's right. Now you're getting it.

Speaker 3:

Okay, good. I think I'm getting it, but I want more examples.

Brook:

I have one. Mark Twain.

Speaker 3:

Isn't he the guy who wrote Huckleberry Finn? I had to read that in high school.

Brook:

That's the one. But Mark Twain is also famous for making fun of religion. People call him a skeptic or maybe even an atheist. He said things like, "Perhaps your religion will sustain you, will feed you. I place no dependence in mine."

Speaker 3:

It sounds like he wanted nothing to do with religion.

Brook:

It does, right? But consider this. Mark Twain's autobiography is absolutely chock full of lines like that. There's more than 80 references to God. He once wrote a book called Adam's Diary, and then years later he wrote another one called Eve's Diary. But one time he wrote a story about people dying and going to heaven.

Speaker 3:

And what's your point?

Brook:

My point is, Mark Twain was obsessed with religion. Like that story about going to heaven. He thought it would make religious people angry. He sent it to a magazine to publish, but they turned it down, not because it was too blasphemous, but because it was too Godly. That is, it was too obsessed with religion for a magazine that wasn't religious. The magazine thought their readers weren't religious enough to care about something that made fun of religion.

Speaker 3:

Hmm.

Brook:

Secular is like that. It's like land that used to be owned by the church now being owned by the government. It's a monk moving out of the monastery and into town. It's Mark Twain, writing a story that is both obsessed with and hostile to God. The secular and religious are twins, inseparably intertwined, and reliant on one another for their existence. Wherever religion goes, the secular goes too.

This transcript was exported on Nov 10, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

Speaker 3:

Yeah, I'm finally get it. Thanks.

Brook:

Anytime. And thank you for calling 1-800-REL-HELP.

Speaker 1:

1-800-REL-HELP is an American Examples Production in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama and is funded by a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation.

Speaker 1:

This episode was produced by Brook Wilensky-Lanford, Jack Bernardi, and Erica Bennett. A video version of this podcast is available on YouTube. Just search American Examples. Find out more about American Examples at our website, [americanexamples.ua.edu](http://americanexamples.ua.edu). Also, follow the Department of Religious Studies on Twitter and Instagram at the handle StudyReligion, or on Facebook at [facebook.com/reo@ua](https://facebook.com/reo@ua).

Speaker 1:

If you enjoyed this episode, please subscribe to our podcast on Spotify or Apple Podcasts, and give us a rating and review.

Speaker 1:

Music credits to [www.bensound.com](http://www.bensound.com).

Speaker 3:

Help?