

The idea that religion gradually ceases to be the guiding authority in the lives of individuals and in societies as they become more modern has roots in the intellectual and institutional heritage of the Enlightenment. But even in Enlightenment thought, there was never just one understanding of the relationship between the progress of humanity and the future of religion. Only a few prophets of religion's decline—Karl Marx being the most notable among them—dared to predict that the world of the future would be a world without religion. Others, like Thomas Jefferson, did not speak of, or look forward to, the end of religion as such, but predicted that human enlightenment would be accompanied by a rational form of religious knowledge and experience. The history of the idea of secularization, in other words, has been a complex one and has involved a number of different, nuanced views.

While the idea of secularization was not the property of the social sciences alone, the full embrace of a causal relationship between progress and religious decline happened precisely in the social sciences, which took this assertion to its theoretical heights in the form of secularization theory. The traditional version of secularization theory involved a two-fold claim: that modernization is a universal process that has similar features everywhere and that secularization is inseparable from modernization. From its earliest days, this secularization theory was thus inseparable from the sociological conceptualization of modernity. The decline of religion as a disenchantment of the world, Max Weber declared a century ago, was one of the unintended consequences of the Protestant Reformation and constitutive of the general processes of modernity. Due to this intimate connection between the notions of secularization and modernity, the crisis of secularization theory occurred not only because of empirical evidence that came in the form of religious revivals around the world, but also because of a problem in its own conceptual foundation.

As a result, for almost two decades now, social scientists have been divided into two camps: those who want to discard secularization theory altogether and those who want to preserve some part of it for limited use. Many agree that secularization theory still works (only) in Western Europe. Others suggest that secularization has occurred in the United States as well, not simply as a result of the general processes of modernization—industrialization and urbanization—but as a consequence of the actions of concrete historical agents. On the other side of the Atlantic, Paul Heelas proposes that, due to the rise of New Age spirituality in Western Europe, it is not only secularization but sacralization, too, that characterizes European religious life. Still others, who view secularization as a process of individualization and privatization of religion, read this New Age spirituality as ultimate proof of secularization processes.

The claims in the secularization debate very much depend on one's definition of both religion and secularization. Attempting to introduce some conceptual clarity and empirical accuracy into the debate, José Casanova suggests that secularization should be thought of as a three-fold phenomenon—the decline of religion, the differentiation of the secular spheres, and the privatization of religion. He is right, of course, but there are other ways in which secularization could be conceptualized; for example, as a weakening in the authority of the faith that is still embraced or as the re-symbolization of ancient creeds in ways that accommodate the modern world. Each one of these sub-theses should be empirically and separately studied in the context of concrete historical cases.

Arguably the most important realization that came out of the secularization debate was that the questions of what religion is and what it ought to be are mutually intertwined in our contemporary thinking of religion, just as they were in the times when secularization theory was born. The disentanglement of these two questions is vital if we are to see that what is at stake in the secularization debate is not just the destiny of the social sciences, but, much more importantly, our appreciation of the place of religion in the contemporary world. How are we to understand the different roles that religion plays in different societies and at the same time preserve our ability to conceptualize this as a problem? How should we approach the relationship between modernity and secularity while being aware that there is no single modernity, only multiple modernities? How might we understand secularization in a time and world after secularization? Religion today has not only survived the modern world, but even thrives in some senses. That said, as Peter Berger observed some decades ago, “something still happened.” The old secularization theory may not explain exactly what did happen, but it is pressing that we continue to try to make sense of it all. Given the nature of events unfolding in the world, much is at stake in how we address such questions.

—T.H.R.