

Secularization: A Bibliographic Essay

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Today, most people think that something has happened regarding the importance of religiosity in everyday life since the nineteenth century, but nobody is quite sure how to generalize it, or even if it can be generalized. This has been especially troubling for social scientists, who make a living configuring large-scale theories of society that propose to have predictive capabilities. Is it simply—as the “classic theorists” of secularization said a century ago—that when a society becomes modern it becomes secular too? Does modernity necessarily imply secularity?

There is certainly something appealing to the formulation, and it became a chief preoccupation of social scientists and theologians of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, many of whom quickly became busy celebrating the death of God, the rise of the secular city, and the general triumph of secularization theory. Europe and America seemed to be throwing off the shackles of that old-time religion, becoming increasingly secular as they became more and more “modern.” The secular age had arrived.

Things did not turn out as these advocates had envisioned they would. Continued religiosity became a nagging problem. Countries like the United States were witnessing something of a *return* to religion during the last quarter of the twentieth century. This glaring problem led to a flood of criticism in the 1980s and 1990s, suggesting that the theory had been wrong and that it was the simple-minded creation of secular hopefuls wishing for a godless future. The tone of many of these critics was just as self-righteous and triumphant as the theory’s proponents had been two decades prior. Secularization theory seemed to be in tatters. But still, wasn’t there something to it?

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Reconfiguring what is left of secularization theory has been one of the major projects of historical sociologists during the past decade or so. Their new theories are filled with possibility, but they are also complex—so complex, in fact, that one cannot help but wonder if the social scientists are trying a bit too hard. And one senses a bit of anxiety that if the whole theory turns out to have been bunk, then the life and times of secularization theory will be turned over to historians, who might just see it as yet another example of the glaring flaw of the social sciences (namely, its disregard for history). Furthermore, secularization theory emerged at roughly the same time as the field of sociology, which was, at root, preoccupied with the meaning of modernization and crafting the theory of modernization. Along with bureaucratization, rationalization, and urbanization, secularization constituted a basic part of what it meant to be modern. Is it too far fetched to think that sociology, modernity, and secularization all need each other to survive? If secularization is tossed aside as an unreliable component of what it means to be modern, what might fall away next? And if rationalization, bureaucratization, and urbanization prove unreliable predictors too, is there anything left of classical sociology? Do all large sociological theories need to be left behind? The answers to these questions hinge, of course, on what secularization means.

Classical Theories of Secularization

At its most basic, the classical theory of secularization contends that as a society becomes increasingly modern (usually as knowledge expands through the processes of scientific rationality), religion becomes less and less important to that society. Those following Weber claim that rationalization and the scientific perspective made belief in the supernatural impossible, with religion falling victim to the power of science. Others, following Durkheim, have stressed the decline of control by religious institutions over the important institutions of society. Either way, there is an evolutionary cast to the idea: as people “advance” technologically and scientifically, they no longer need the magic of the past to offer explanation or meaning. The idea that Western societies have moved away from religious or divine authority dates back to the 1600s, but it was Weber who in 1910 gave us the term “secularization.” His phrase about the increasing “disenchantment of the world” has come to signify all that secularization could mean: the decline in importance of things mystical. There is great irony in the fact that the word is Weber’s, because he was no positivist and in fact has been the single most important figure in describing the worldly significance of religion in modern sociology. For an excellent anthology of many of the key texts on the early sociology of religion, see Birnbaum and Lenzer’s edited volume.

- Birnbaum, Norman, and Gertrud Lenzer, eds. *Sociology and Religion: A Book of Readings*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1969.
- Comte, August. *The Positive Philosophy*. New York: Calvin Blanchard, 1858.
- Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology*. New York: Macmillan, 1915.

- Freud, Sigmund. *The Future of an Illusion*. 1928. New York: Norton, 1975.
- Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. 1848. New York: International, 1948.
- Spencer, Herbert. *The Principles of Ethics*. 1897. Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1978.
- Troeltsch, Ernst. *Protestantism and Progress: A Historical Study of the Relation of Protestantism to the Modern World*. 1911. Boston: Beacon, 1958.
- Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. 1904–5. New York: Penguin, 2002.

Institutional Secularization

Secularization's first widely accepted meaning was essentially the process of separation of church and state. More specifically, it meant the confiscation of some of the Catholic Church's property after the Reformation (then, the same transfer in many Catholic countries after the French Revolution). One can find this definition of secularization in nearly every dictionary in Europe, despite the fact that this is the most forgotten usage of the term. Along similar lines, over the course of the nineteenth century, several institutions like the state and the university were "secularized," meaning they were no longer controlled by formal religious bodies. This kind of secularization was usually a direct result of the rise in authority of scientific reason, and hence its occurrence within academies of higher learning has been most noted (and studied). Since these definitions are dissimilar, and do not take into account today's most common usage of the term, readers should consult the article by Sommerville for clarifying the definitional problems.

- Dahrendorf, Ralf. *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1959.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. 1962. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.
- Marsden, George M. *The Soul of the University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Marsden, George M., and Bradley J. Longfield, eds. *The Secularization of the Academy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Sommerville, C. J. "Secular Society Religious Population: Our Tacit Rules for Using the Term Secularization." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37.2 (1998): 249–53.

Secularization as Individual Disbelief

From the late nineteenth century to the present, the word "secularization" has gained the most traction by signifying a decline in religious practices within modern societ-

ies. There is considerable evidence that those who proclaimed a rise of disbelief in the modern world (that is, the classical theorists and their champions) created straw men out of the past, suggesting that previous eras were more religious than they really were. Nevertheless, there is a small collection of good books that offer historical grounding to the rise of unbelief as a “live option” in the realm of epistemology.

- Asad, Talal. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Carter, Stephen L. *The Culture of Disbelief*. New York: Basic, 1993.
- Chadwick, Owen. *The Secularization of the European Mind in the 19th Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.
- Febvre, Lucien. *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century*. 1942. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Jacoby, Susan. *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*. New York: Metropolitan, 2004.
- Thomas, Keith Vivian. *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. New York: Scribner, 1971.
- Turner, James. *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985.

Second Generation Theoreticians

Voltaire and Hume were perhaps the most famous philosophers to assert that religion was a mere holdover from the pre-scientific age and that as scientific knowledge expanded, religion would occupy a smaller and smaller part of our lives. From an intellectual perspective, this idea was revived forcefully at the beginning of the twentieth century by thinkers as diverse as Robert and Helen Lynd and H. L. Mencken. From a sociological perspective, however, working out secularization theory was largely a 1960s phenomenon, a celebration of the secular city with the understanding that modernity and secularization were proceeding along just fine. Some (such as Wallace) advocated this position forcefully. Others (Berger, Luckmann) were more careful in their deliberations, suggesting that some variety of secularization had arrived but that religion had not yet been dislodged from being a primary source of moral authority. Nevertheless, they all acknowledged that secularization theory seemed to be holding true.

- Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1967.
- Cox, Harvey. *Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*. New York: Macmillan, 1966.
- Dobbelaere, Karel. “Some Trends in European Sociology of Religion: The Secularization Debate.” *Sociological Analysis* 48.2 (1987): 107–37.
- Luckmann, Thomas. *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*. New York: Macmillan, 1967.

- Wallace, A. F. C. *Religion: An Anthropological View*. New York: Random House, 1966.
- Wilson, Bryan R. *Religion in Secular Society: A Sociological Comment*. London: Watts, 1966.

Critics of Secularization Theory

Early critics of secularization theory (Shiner, Martin, Greeley) were mostly ignored. But by the 1990s, it became evident that religion just wasn't going away; critiques of secularization theory proliferated. Perhaps most surprising was Peter Berger's reversal, from being one of the most thoughtful advocates of secularization theory in the 1960s to flatly stating in 1999 that the "whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled 'secularization theory' is essentially mistaken" (2). Rodney Stark and Andrew Greeley were some of the more persistent critics, often using polling data in the U.S. as their ammunition. The central claim of the critique is that, if secularization is defined as the decline of religious beliefs and practices in modern societies, the theory of secularization is bunk. Not only has religion persisted (and the evidence is incontrovertible) but the theory also implies that the past was more religious than today, which, it turns out, is not so easy to prove. Of course, these critics were mainly looking at behavioral data and did not consider institutional secularization (as in the marginalization of religious institutions from a reality-defining role), cultural secularization (the transformation of mythic and symbolic markers), or social secularization (faith as a source of social solidarity and division). Ignorance of these aspects of secularization complicated these critiques and, as we will see, allowed for numerous scholars to critique the critiques in an attempt to rebuild secularization theory.

- Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Bellah, Robert N., et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Society*. New York: Harper, 1985.
- Berger, Peter L., ed. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999.
- Caplow, Theodore, Howard M. Bahr, and Bruce A. Chadwick. *All Faithful People: Change and Continuity in Middletown's Religion*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.
- Greeley, Andrew M. *Religion in Europe at the End of the Second Millennium*. New Brunswick: Transaction, 2003.
- ---. *Unsecular Man: The Persistence of Religion*. New York: Schocken, 1972.
- Martin, David. "Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularization." *Penguin Survey of the Social Sciences*. Ed. J. Gould. Baltimore: Penguin, 1965. 169–82.
- Shiner, Larry. "The Concept of Secularization in Empirical Research." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 6 (1967): 207–20.
- Stark, Rodney. "Secularization, R.I.P." *Sociology of Religion* 60.3 (1999): 249–73.

The Rise of Orthodoxy and the Persistence of Religion

The secularization theory received another series of blows from scholars examining the rise of orthodoxy and the persistence of religion in a global context. If the world was presumably becoming more and more modern, religion was supposed to be going away. The problem was that it wasn't. In fact, more orthodox religions were growing. Fundamentalisms and Pentecostalism proliferated throughout the world. The rise in awareness of these manifestations served as perhaps the final nail in the coffin of secularization theory, at least in its original formulation.

- Bulka, Reuven P., ed. *Dimensions of Orthodox Judaism*. New York: KTAV, 1983.
- Cox, Harvey. *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the 21st Century*. Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1995.
- Freston, Paul. *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa and Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Gittelsohn, Natalie. "American Jews Rediscover Orthodoxy," *The New York Times Magazine*. 30 September 1984: 41–71.
- Hunter, James Davison. *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983.
- Jenkins, Philip. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Martin, David. *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.
- ---. *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.
- Marty, Martin E., and R. Scott Appleby. *The Glory and the Power: The Fundamentalist Challenge to the Modern World*. Boston: Beacon, 1992.
- McGuire, Merideth. *Pentecostal Catholics*. Philadelphia: Temple, 1982.
- Weaver, Mary Jo, and R. Scott Appleby. *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

Attempts to Formulate a New Theory

Not everyone is ready to give up on secularization theory. And indeed, some of the most thoughtful of the critics (Martin) have pulled reversals similar to that of Berger. The tactic of the "new believers" is to salvage the idea behind the theory but to soften its predictive capacity, or to shift the definition of secularization by emphasizing different aspects of what secularization means. Some (Bibby, Finke and Stark) have suggested that because most of the critics work in the U.S., challenges to secularization theory are merely utterances of "American exceptionalism." What really needs explaining, they contend, is why there is so much religion in the U.S., and to do so they use "supply-side theory": religion persists because supply can easily adapt to demand.

On the other side of the Atlantic, scholars have pointed out that many of the strongest advocates of secularization theory are European (Luckmann, Wilson, Dobbelaere, and Berger in 1967), and thus secularization is a uniquely European phenomenon, extant nowhere else in the world. Some (Norris and Inglehart) have argued that the “European exception” is attributable to the generous welfare states in Europe, which have created security and therefore limited demand for religious bodies. Meanwhile, some scholars (Chaves) have tried defining the problem away by limiting the definition of secularization to the decline of religious authority (but not individual belief). The most persuasive attempts to recreate a theory have come from those (Martin, Casanova) who have gone a long way toward forcing us to reconsider what we mean by secularization and whether we aren’t better off thinking in terms of “multiple modernities,” where no single rule holds true for every society. Once we accept variation and change, we can begin to understand historical differences in the processes of secularization.

- Bibby, Reginald Wayne. *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada*. Toronto: Irwin, 1987.
- Bruce, Steve. *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.
- Chaves, Mark. “Secularization as Declining Religious Authority.” *Social Forces* 72.3 (1994) 749–74.
- Finke, Roger, and Rodney Stark. *The Churching of America, 1776–1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988.
- Martin, David. *A General Theory of Secularization*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1978.
- Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Casanova, José. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Scott, David, and Charles Hirshkind, eds. *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006.
- Seligman, Adam. *Modernity’s Wager: Authority, the Self, and Transcendence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Smith, Christian, ed. *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- Stark, Rodney, and William Sims Bainbridge. *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.
- Stark, Rodney, and Roger Finke. *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Books on the Secularization Debate

At the very least, present-day theorists of secularization agree that modernity can be defined in numerous ways and that the original inception of secularization theory needs complicating. Perhaps it is time to take the tools created by the critics and the re-formulators, work out the history of what has happened concerning religion in each “modern” society, then come together in ten or twenty years and see what we come up with at that point. Perhaps there is yet to arise a new theory of secularization? For useful guides to the modern debates, see:

- Bhargava, Rajeev, ed. *Secularism and Its Critics*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Bruce, Steve, ed. *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Swatos, Jr., William H., and Daniel V. A. Olson, eds. *The Secularization Debate*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.