

Sacred and Secular

RELIGION AND POLITICS WORLDWIDE

Pippa Norris
Harvard University

Ronald Inglehart
University of Michigan



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The Secularization Debate

THE SEMINAL SOCIAL thinkers of the nineteenth century – Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud – all believed that religion would gradually fade in importance and cease to be significant with the advent of industrial society.¹ They were far from alone; ever since the Age of the Enlightenment, leading figures in philosophy, anthropology, and psychology have postulated that theological superstitions, symbolic liturgical rituals, and sacred practices are the product of the past that will be outgrown in the modern era. The death of religion was the conventional wisdom in the social sciences during most of the twentieth century; indeed it has been regarded as *the* master model of sociological inquiry, where secularization was ranked with bureaucratization, rationalization, and urbanization as the key historical revolutions transforming medieval agrarian societies into modern industrial nations. As C. Wright Mills summarized this process: “*Once the world was filled with the sacred – in thought, practice, and institutional form. After the Reformation and the Renaissance, the forces of modernization swept across the globe and secularization, a corollary historical process, loosened the dominance of the sacred. In due course, the sacred shall disappear altogether except, possibly, in the private realm.*”²

During the last decade, however, this thesis of the slow and steady death of religion has come under growing criticism; indeed, secularization theory is currently experiencing the most sustained challenge in its long history.

Critics point to multiple indicators of religious health and vitality today, ranging from the continued popularity of churchgoing in the United States to the emergence of New Age spirituality in Western Europe, the growth in fundamentalist movements and religious parties in the Muslim world, the evangelical revival sweeping through Latin America, and the upsurge of ethno-religious conflict in international affairs.³ After reviewing these developments, Peter L. Berger, one of the foremost advocates of secularization during the 1960s, recanted his earlier claims: *"The world today, with some exceptions . . . is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled 'secularization theory' is essentially mistaken."*⁴ In a fierce and sustained critique, Rodney Stark and Roger Finke suggest it is time to bury the secularization thesis: *"After nearly three centuries of utterly failed prophecies and misrepresentations of both present and past, it seems time to carry the secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories, and there to whisper 'requiescat in pace.'"*⁵

Were Comte, Durkheim, Weber, and Marx completely misled in their beliefs about religious decline in industrialized societies? Was the predominant sociological view during the twentieth century totally misguided? Has the debate been settled? We think not. Talk of burying the secularization theory is premature. The critique relies too heavily on selected anomalies and focuses too heavily on the United States (which happens to be a striking deviant case) rather than comparing systematic evidence across a broad range of rich and poor societies.⁶ We need to move beyond studies of Catholic and Protestant church attendance in Europe (where attendance is falling) and the United States (where attendance remains stable) if we are to understand broader trends in religious vitality in churches, mosques, shrines, synagogues, and temples around the globe.

There is no question that the traditional secularization thesis needs updating. It is obvious that religion has not disappeared from the world, nor does it seem likely to do so. Nevertheless, the concept of secularization captures an important part of what is going on. This book develops a revised version of secularization theory that emphasizes the extent to which people have a sense of existential security – that is, the feeling that survival is secure enough that it can be taken for granted. We build on key elements of traditional sociological accounts while revising others. We believe that the importance of religiosity persists most strongly among vulnerable populations, especially those living in poorer nations, facing personal survival-threatening risks. We argue that feelings of vulnerability to physical, societal, and personal risks are a key factor driving religiosity

and we demonstrate that the process of secularization – a systematic erosion of religious practices, values, and beliefs – has occurred most clearly among the most prosperous social sectors living in affluent and secure post-industrial nations.

Secularization is a tendency, not an iron law. One can easily think of striking exceptions, such as Osama bin Laden, who is (or was) extremely rich and fanatically religious. But when we go beyond anecdotal evidence such as this, we find that the overwhelming bulk of evidence points in the opposite direction: people who experience ego-tropic risks during their formative years (posing direct threats to themselves and their families) or socio-tropic risks (threatening their community) tend to be far more religious than those who grow up under safer, comfortable, and more predictable conditions. In relatively secure societies, the remnants of religion have not died away; in surveys most Europeans still express formal belief in God, or identify themselves as Protestants or Catholics on official forms. But in these societies the importance and vitality of religion, its ever-present influence on how people live their daily lives, has gradually eroded.

The most persuasive evidence about secularization in rich nations concerns values and behavior: the critical test is what people say is important to their lives and what they actually *do*. As this book will document, during the twentieth century in nearly all postindustrial nations – ranging from Canada and Sweden to France, Britain, and Australia – official church records report that where once the public flocked to Sabbath worship services, the pews are now almost deserted. The surveys monitoring European churchgoing during the last fifty years confirm this phenomenon. The United States remains exceptional in this regard, for reasons explained in detail later in Chapter 4.

Despite trends in secularization occurring in rich nations, this does not mean that the world as a whole has become less religious. As this book will demonstrate:

1. The publics of virtually all advanced industrial societies have been moving toward more secular orientations during the past fifty years. Nevertheless,
2. The world as a whole now has more people with traditional religious views than ever before – and they constitute a growing proportion of the world's population.

The Thesis of Secularization Based on Existential Security

The classic version of secularization theory clearly needs to be updated; but to simply reject it entirely would be a major mistake, for it is correct in some major respects. Stark and Finke conclude: *“What is needed is not a simple-minded theory of inevitable religious decline, but a theory to explain variation.”*³² We agree. Our theory of secularization based on existential security rests on two simple axioms or premises that prove extremely powerful in accounting for most of the variations in religious practices found around the world. The core axioms and hypotheses are illustrated schematically in Figure 1.1. What is the underlying logic of our argument?

The Security Axiom

The first basic building block of our theory is the assumption that rich and poor nations around the globe differ sharply in their levels of sustainable human development and socioeconomic inequality, and thus also in the basic

living conditions of human security and vulnerability to risks. The idea of human security has emerged in recent years as an important objective of international development, although the concept is complex and multiple definitions exist in the literature.³³ At its simplest, the core idea of security denotes freedom from various risks and dangers.³⁴ The traditional view focused upon using military strength to ensure the territorial integrity and security of nation states. During the last decade this view was revised as analysts began to recognize that this definition was excessively narrow, with many other risks also contributing to human security, ranging from environmental degradation to natural and manmade disasters such as floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, and droughts, as well as the threat of disease epidemics, violations of human rights, humanitarian crisis, and poverty. The wide range of dangers means that the concept of human security can become so broad and overloaded that it can lose all coherence and practical utility, as well as becoming difficult or even impossible to gauge with a single composite measure. Nevertheless, the core idea of human security, α, β , irrespective of the specific nature of the risks, is one that is widely recognized as important to well-being, and we regard the absence of human security as critical for religiosity.

The inhabitants of poor nations remain highly susceptible to premature death – above all from hunger and hunger-related diseases. They also face sudden disasters from drought or flood, or weather-related emergencies. Poor nations have limited access to the basic conditions of survival, including the provision of uncontaminated water and adequate food, access to effective public services offering basic healthcare, literacy, and schooling, and an adequate income. These countries also often face endemic problems of pollution from environmental degradation, conditions of widespread gender inequality, and a legacy of deep-rooted ethnic conflict. Lack of capacity to overcome these difficulties arises from corruption in government, an ineffective public sector, and political instability. Poor nations often have weak defenses against external invasion, threats of internal coup d'état, and, in extreme cases, state failure.

Where poorer agrarian economies develop into moderate industrial societies, and then progress further to becoming more affluent postindustrial societies, this process brings broadly similar trajectories generally improving the basic conditions of human security. The process of industrialization and human development helps lift developing countries out of extreme poverty, greatly reducing the uncertainty and daily risks to survival that people face, as documented in the extensive literature on development published by the United National Development Program and the World Bank.³⁵ The

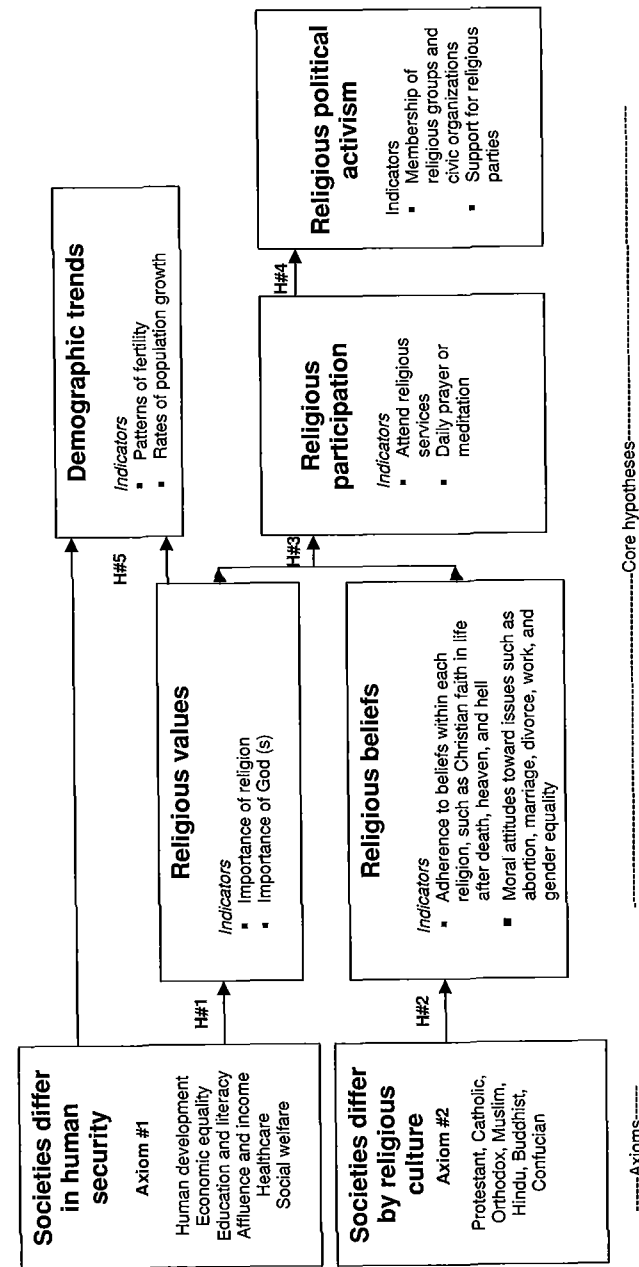


Figure 1.1. Schematic Model Explaining Religiosity

move from subsistence rural farming to moderate-income manufacturing generally helps to lift the most vulnerable population out of dire poverty and commonly improves standards of living, bringing urbanization, better nutrition, sanitation, and access to clean water. More developed societies also usually have better hospitals, trained healthcare professionals, access to basic drugs and medicine, and public services reducing infant and child mortality, immunization programs, family planning, and more adequate prevention and treatment against the ravages of HIV/AIDS. Schooling, and the essential literacy and numeric skills, become more widely available for boys *and* girls. This development, combined with the diffusion of mass communications, gradually creates a more informed and politically aware public. The expansion of the professional and managerial service sectors brings middle-class employees access to health insurance, pensions, and greater material assets. Meanwhile, the growth of the welfare safety net, and more effective delivery of government services as societies develop, ensures the less well-off against the worst risks of ill health and old age, penury and destitution. For all these reasons, the first stage of societal modernization transforms the living conditions for many people, reducing their vulnerability to sudden, unpredictable risks.

Yet economic development is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to create human security. In many developing nations, pockets of deep-rooted poverty often remain among the least well-off sectors. In Mexico, Colombia, or Brazil, for example, extreme poverty exists among residents in urban favelas, shantytowns, and isolated rural villages, along with a growing bourgeoisie. Conditions of socioeconomic inequality are critical for widespread conditions of human security; otherwise growth only enriches the affluent elite and the governing classes, a common pattern in many mineral and oil-rich nations such as Nigeria, Venezuela, and Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, there is an important distinction to be drawn between our account and some simpler and more mechanical versions of modernization theory. Although we believe that human development and conditions of economic equality usually generate growing levels of security, this generalization should be understood as probabilistic, *not* deterministic; situation-specific factors make it impossible to predict exactly what will happen in any given society. We believe that the public generally gains conditions of greater security during the process of modern development, but this process can always be momentarily halted or temporarily reversed, even in rich countries, by particular dramatic events such as major natural disasters, experience of wars, or severe recessions. Even the most affluent postindustrial nations may experience a sudden widespread resurgence of insecurity; for

example, fears of terrorism arose sharply in the United States, especially for residents on the East Coast, immediately after the events of September 11, 2001.³⁶ Another example is the recent experience of Argentina, a country rich in agricultural and natural resources, with a well-educated workforce, a democratic political system, and one of South America's largest economies. But economic growth experienced a sudden crisis; a deep recession was the prelude to economic collapse in 2001, leaving more than half the population living in poverty. The country struggled with record debt defaults, a ruined banking system, deep cynicism about politics, and currency devaluation. Formerly middle-class professionals who lost their savings and their jobs – teachers, office workers, and civil servants – suddenly became dependent upon soup kitchens, bartering, and garbage collections to feed their children. Through modernization, we believe that rising levels of security become increasingly likely to occur. But these changes are not mechanical or deterministic; specific events and leaders can hinder or advance the pace of human development in a society.

The Cultural Traditions Axiom

The second building block for our theory assumes that the distinctive worldviews that were originally linked with religious traditions have shaped the cultures of each nation in an enduring fashion; today, these distinctive values are transmitted to the citizens even if they never set foot in a church, temple, or mosque. Thus, although only about 5% of the Swedish public attends church weekly, the Swedish public as a whole manifests a distinctive Protestant value system that they hold in common with the citizens of other historically Protestant societies such as Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Finland, Germany, and the Netherlands. Today, these values are not transmitted primarily by the church, but by the educational system and the mass media, with the result that although the value systems of historically Protestant countries differ markedly and consistently from those of historically Catholic countries – the value systems of Dutch Catholics are much more similar to those of Dutch Protestants than to those of French, Italian, or Spanish Catholics. Even in highly secular societies, the historical legacy of given religions continues to shape worldviews and to define cultural zones. As a distinguished Estonian colleague put it, in explaining the difference between the worldviews of Estonians and Russians, “We are all atheists; but I am a Lutheran atheist, and they are Orthodox atheists.” Thus we assume that the values and norms in Catholic and Protestant societies, for example orientations toward the work ethic, sexual liberalization, and democracy,

will vary systematically based on past historical traditions, as well as varying in Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Orthodox, and Muslim societies, even among people living in these societies who do not adhere to these faiths or feel that they belong to any church, temple, or mosque.

Conclusions

Three important conclusions flow from this study. First, we conclude that due to rising levels of human security, *the publics of virtually all*

advanced industrial societies have been moving toward more secular orientations. We demonstrate that "modernization" (the process of industrialization, urbanization, and rising levels of education and wealth) greatly weakens the influence of religious institutions in affluent societies, bringing lower rates of attendance at religious services, and making religion subjectively less important in people's lives.

The overall trend is clear: within most advanced industrial societies, church attendance has fallen, not risen, over the past several decades; moreover, the clergy have largely lost their authority over the public and are no longer able to dictate to them on such matters as birth control, divorce, abortion, sexual orientation, and the necessity of marriage before childbirth. Secularization is not taking place only in Western Europe, as some critics have claimed (though it was first observed there). It is occurring in most advanced industrial societies, including Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and Canada. The United States remains an outlier among postindustrial societies, having a public that holds much more traditional worldviews than that of any other rich country except Ireland. But even in America, there has been a lesser but perceptible trend toward secularization; the trend has been partly masked by massive immigration of people with relatively traditional worldviews (and high fertility rates) from Hispanic countries as well as by relatively high levels of economic inequality; but when one controls for these factors, even within the United States there has been a significant movement toward secularization.

Nevertheless, it would be a major mistake to assume that secularization is triumphantly advancing and that religion will eventually disappear throughout the world. Our second conclusion is that *due to demographic trends in poorer societies, the world as a whole now has more people with traditional religious views than ever before* – and they constitute a growing proportion of the world's population. Rich societies are secularizing but they contain a dwindling share of the world's population; while poor societies are not secularizing and they contain a rising share of the world's population. Thus, modernization does indeed bring a de-emphasis on religion within virtually any country that experiences it, but the percentage of the world's population for whom religion is important, is rising.

The differential fertility rates of religious and secular societies is by no means a sheer coincidence; quite the contrary, it is directly linked with secularization. The shift from traditional religious values to secular-rational values brings a cultural shift from an emphasis on a traditional role for women, whose lives are largely limited to producing and raising many children, first under the authority of their fathers and then their husbands,

with little autonomy and few options outside the home, to a world in which women have an increasingly broad range of life choices, and most women have careers and interests outside the home. This cultural shift is linked with a dramatic decline in fertility rates. Both religiosity and human development have a powerful impact on fertility rates, as we will demonstrate. The evidence suggests that human development leads to cultural changes that drastically reduce (1) religiosity and (2) fertility rates. Rising affluence does not automatically produce these changes, but it has a high probability of doing so, because it tends to bring about important changes in mass belief systems and social structure.

Lastly we predict, although we cannot yet demonstrate, that *the expanding gap between the sacred and the secular societies around the globe will have important consequences for world politics, raising the role of religion on the international agenda*. Despite popular commentary, this does not mean that this situation will necessarily generate more intense ethno-religious conflict, within or between nations. In the aftermath of 9/11, and U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, many commentators believe that these events reflect a deep-rooted clash of civilizations, but we should not assume a simple monocausal explanation. In recent years, many protracted civil wars have been settled through negotiated settlements, including in Angola, Somalia, and Sudan. The most reliable independent estimate of the number and severity of incidents of ethnic conflict and major wars around the globe suggests that a sizeable “peace dividend” has occurred during the post-Cold War era. The Minorities at Risk report estimates that the number of such incidents peaked in the mid-1980s, and subsequently declined, so that by late-2002 ethnic conflict had reached its lowest level since the early 1960s.⁴¹ We do believe, however, that the accommodation of divergent attitudes toward moral issues found in traditional and modern societies, exemplified by approval or disapproval of sexual liberalization, women’s equality, divorce, abortion, and gay rights, provides an important challenge to social tolerance. The contemporary debate over these issues is symbolized by the potential schism within the Anglican Church surrounding the consecration in the United States of Canon Gene Robinson, an openly gay bishop. Cultural contrasts between more religious and more secular values will probably fuel heated debate about many other complex ethical questions, such as the legalization of euthanasia in the Netherlands, the enforcement of strict Sharia laws for the punishment of adultery in Nigeria, or the availability of reproductive rights in the United States. Nevertheless we remain strictly agnostic about whether cultural differences over religious values will inevitably generate outbreaks of protracted violence, armed hostilities,

or international conflict, an important issue well beyond the scope of this study.

Notes

Chapter 1

1. For a discussion, see Steve Bruce. 1992. *Religion and Modernization*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 170–194; Alan Aldridge. 2000. *Religion in the Contemporary World*. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press. Chapter 4.
2. C. Wright Mills. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 32–33.
3. It should be noted that in this book the term *fundamentalist* is used in a neutral way to refer to those with an absolute conviction in the fundamental principles of their faith, to the extent that they will not accept the validity of any other beliefs.
4. See, for example, Peter L. Berger. Ed. 1999. *The Desecularization of the World*. Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center. P. 2. Compare this statement with the arguments in Peter L. Berger. 1967. *The Sacred Canopy*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
5. Rodney Stark and Roger Finke. 2000. *Acts of Faith*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. P. 79. See also Rodney Stark. 1999. “Secularization, RIP.” *Sociology of Religion*. 60(3): 249–273.
6. For example, Roger Finke claims: “The vibrancy and growth of American religious institutions presents the most open defiance of the secularization model.” Roger Finke. 1992. “An unsecular America.” In *Religion and Modernization*. Ed. Steve Bruce. Oxford: Clarendon Press: P. 148.
32. Rodney Stark and Roger Finke. 2000. *Acts of Faith*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. P. 33. Others also argue that traditional secularization theory needs revising, proposing that it implies not the decline of religion per se, but rather, more narrowly, the declining scope of religious authority at the individual, organizational, and societal levels of analysis. See D. Yamane. 1997. “Secularization on trial: In defense of a neosecularization paradigm.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 36(1): 109–122.
33. United Nations Development Program. 1994. *New Dimensions of Human Security*. New York: Oxford University Press; Gary King and Christopher J. L. Murray. 2001. “Rethinking human security.” *Political Science Quarterly*. 116(4): 585–610.
34. *Oxford English Dictionary*.
35. For summaries, see the annual reports: United Nations. 2002. *Human Development Report 2002*. New York: United Nations/Oxford University Press; World Bank. 2002. *World Development Report, 2002*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.
36. See the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. 2002. *Americans Struggle with Religion’s Role at Home and Abroad*. News Release by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, March 2002. Available online at: <http://pewforum.org/publications/reports/poll2002.pdf>. See also Pippa Norris, Montague Kern, and Marion Just. Eds. 2003. *Framing Terrorism*. New York: Routledge.
41. Monty Marshall and Ted Robert Gurr. 2003. *Peace and Conflict 2003*. University of Maryland, Center for Systemic Peace/ Minorities At Risk. Available online at: <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/pc03web.pdf>. See also the *Minorities at Risk* project website for updates at: <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/mar/>.