

An Examination of the Secularization Theory over the Past 50 Years

Over the last fifty years, more and more attention has been put on a theory that could explain the direction of human civilizations for the future. This theory is known as the Secularization Theory and states that over time, technology and science will make discoveries that are mutually exclusive with religion, and people will begin to lose religiosity. Theorists attribute the loss of religiosity with the lack of governance and authority religion will be able to demand in the face of scientific discover. After all, if innovation can, once and for all, invalidate the historic claims of the Abrahamic religions, Western civilization will have no reason to promote spirituality for social or cultural purposes. While this theory has many supporters, critics are plentiful and express their discontent with the theory. Specifically, those against the Secularization Theory point to the ambiguity of the trend; simply stating that X will cause Y is tempting, but does not predict or control for any other possible variables. Due to this, many critics has disagreed with the umbrella term of Secularization while agreeing with some of the main points at the foundation of the Theory. The Secularization Theory is black and white at the surface, but under the hood lies a complex web of sub-theories that, as a whole, make up its entirety. Ultimately, time will tell whether Secularization will occur at the global level, but a comprehensive understanding is necessary to have an informed stance on either side of the debate.

Support from Sociologists of Religion regarding Secularism did not come until the 1950s and 60s, but the term was used much earlier than that. In fact, it was coined by Max Weber in

1930 and remained relatively untouched for the next 25 years (Swatos and Christiano, 209-210). What ensued from the 50s until now was described as a “muddling” of the word, creating a thick blanket of ambiguity around the core message. Much like we see in politics today, sociologists were torn and became increasingly polarized on their view. This difference between beliefs could be considered a false-dichotomy due to the lack of clarity surrounding the word “Secularization”; since sociologists did not take the time to define the theory in clear, understandable manner, many researchers had a “faith based” belief or disbelief in the theory, rather than an empirical one that can be supported by data (Swatos and Christiano, 210). Most researchers actually agreed with the core message—that modernity will cause a decline in religion—but the result of this decline, in this case, complete Secularization, is the debated topic at hand.

Since the 1950s, support for Secularism has declined amongst scholars for several reasons. The following is not a comprehensive list of every case against the theory, rather a few key points/explanations for the case against Secularism. To start, the core aspect of Secularism can be falsified through an inspection of religious institutions. Christianity, of course, is the main religion targeted by the Secularism debate, which is understandable considering its popularity and rejection of modern scientific practices. However, Christianity had a distinguishable moment where modernity changed the beliefs of the religion. While each sect still believes in the fundamental parts of Christianity, the Protestant Reformation provides for a case against Secularism. Martin Luther was responsible for creating Protestantism and incorporating more modern teachings and beliefs due to what he called “corruption” in the Roman Catholic Church (Bradshaw 42). Secularism and Protestantism still remain mutually exclusive (due to the atheism of Secularism), but the process of modernizing a religion could be used to thwart the Secularization Theory; if all (or at least some) religions modernize themselves, can complete

Secularization occur? This question can be expanded through a closer look at Judaism. It is monotheistic like Christianity, but many followers, especially in the West, consider themselves to be Jewish without necessarily believing in a God. Jewish political elites and orthodox Jews have made no attempt to try to separate themselves from “Reform” Jews that may or may not believe in God. This reforming process can be directly related to modern technology and scientific discovery, yet individuals prefer to have dissonant beliefs over giving up their cultural faith.

Another case against Secularism was touched on earlier: Not everyone has the same definition of Secularism and because of it, some agree with certain aspects while denying others. One of these aspects is differentiation which states that each aspect of life will become more specialized as time goes on. For example, instead of religion fading from the public eye, religious institution will instead become more religious and separate themselves from other comparable subject areas such as philosophy and history. Many subjects today intertwine with nearly every other subject, yet differentiation is generally accepted amongst the sociology community. Differentiation, if true, will actually make people more polarized in their beliefs rather than everyone adopting the same beliefs (Swatos and Christiano, 221). Skeptics might ask “wouldn’t this create more tension and, in turn, more disagreement?” What looks like an obvious “yes” is actually not so according to many that disagree with Secularization. These scholars point toward a different aspect, pluralism, to explain the lack of disagreement that will take place once society is “differentiated”. Pluralism is the idea that two or more ideas can exist and be respected at the same time, even if they directly juxtapose each other. The term “mutually exclusive” has been used multiple times but those that believe pluralism will exist rather than Secularization believe that nothing is mutually exclusive and, if something is, it is worth turning the other

cheek. Like many philosophers and few politicians believe, only complete cohesiveness amongst the different cultures of the population will result in a future Utopia.

Pluralism not only seems more accepting, but even more pragmatic than the Secularization Theory, since it does not require every individual to have the exact same ideology. Regardless, there is evidence to suggest that the Secularization Theory, in parts or in whole, is true. Dr. Jim Eckman states that those who express their religious identification as “none” has only gone up since 1950; at 2% back then, it has soared to 20% in just 70 years. In the context of this statistic, Eckman goes on to quote Michael Gerson who wrote “Though the nones are varied, and occasionally confused, their overall growth has been swift and unprecedented. This has occasioned scholarly disagreement over the causes. Clearly, the social stigma against being religiously unaffiliated has faded . . . the decline of religious conformity is itself a major social development, requiring some explanation.” As Gerson states in the second sentence, there is scholarly disagreement over the causes of Secularization, but it is undeniable that people, overall, are becoming less religious and less inclined to identifying with a religion. This decline in religiosity does not necessarily mean that everyone will eventually be non-religious but it does point to some kind of cultural a social shift in America.

As previously mentioned, the overall trend points toward Secularization, but is this comprehensive of everyone’s views? Identifying who is participating in this religious shift can be difficult, but Eckman provides a simple explanation: In America, there is increased polarization in politics, resulting in the Democratic Party favoring non-religious candidates/policies while the Republican Party prefers religiosity. Since both started as favoring religiosity, this religious decline of the Democratic Party explains why, in the United States, politics and social life have become more polarized. This theory would favor pluralism rather

than Secularization since Republicans show no sign of slowing their religiosity and Democrats are becoming increasingly secular. Unfortunately for American politics, polarization currently opposes the idea of pluralism or coexistence. Polarization implies that there are two separate ideologies and a rational actor cannot actively support both. Instead of encouraging legislation and culture that encourages Secularization, a more pragmatic route exists in supporting the coexistence of different creeds and cultures so all individuals have an opportunity to participate and feel accepted in the public eye.

Despite anyone's partisanship on the subject, the Secularization Theory is a complex idea that can pioneer the way for future civilizations if the population agrees that technological advancement disproves religion. Additionally, the last fifty years provides for most of the support and sub-theories that dominate the topic, considering it is a relatively new idea. While scholars were more in support of Secularism in the mid-1900s compared to today, a sizeable minority remains in favor of Secularism. The biggest threat against Secularization theorists is the idea of plurality; different religions, cultures, ethnic groups, and lifestyles can exist and thrive simultaneously without negatively affecting each other. Sociologists see this potential social environment as the pinnacle of acceptance and maturity of human nature and one that we as humans should pursue instead of a widespread dismissal of religion. In conclusion, current trends indicate that atheism, agnosticism, Secularism, and religious indifference is significantly increasing as a whole, but this is only true for a portion of the population, not all encompassing. The Secularization Theory can remain a relevant long-term theory to explain what may happen several thousand years from now if technological innovation continues to grow exponentially, but not as a catalyst to a global theological change; Secularism is, at best, imminent in the long term and at worst, a misleading trend. Until then, Secularization will most likely continue to

grow amongst the liberal-leaning population without affecting those who are content with their current religious beliefs.

Works Cited

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