

Non-assessed essay question:

**“ALTHOUGH SECULARISM EMERGED
IN RESPONSE TO THE POLITICAL
PROBLEMS OF WESTERN CHRISTIAN
SOCIETY IN EARLY MODERNITY –
BEGINNING WITH ITS DEVASTATING
WARS OF RELIGION – IT IS
APPLICABLE TO NON-CHRISTIAN
SOCIETIES EVERYWHERE THAT HAVE
BECOME MODERN.”**

Discuss.



Introduction – The Secularization Debate and a Paradigm Shift

The most important sociological thinkers of the 19th century, those who gave birth to the discipline of sociology, men such as Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Herbert Spencer, believed unequivocally that the effects of the Enlightenment would gradually contribute to the demise of religiosity in society. To varying degrees, they were all staunch proponents of secularism – the systematic erosion of religious practices, values, and beliefs. The “death” of religion therefore became the conventional position in much of the social sciences during most of the twentieth century.

A massive proliferation of scholarship in the sociology of religion materialized as a result, especially during the 1960s. Academics such as Peter Berger, David Martin, Steve Bruce, and Bryan Wilson took on the secularist mantle and developed a systematic and holistic secularization thesis, one which sought to explain the dramatic decline in religious practice and belief among the populations of the West – and particularly for the noted drop in religiosity in Western Europe.

Simply put, these authors traced the decline of religion in this geographical area to the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and to the political problems of Western Christian society in early modernity – beginning with the devastating wars of religion which lasted roughly from 1618 to 1648 and culminating in the Westphalian nation-state system. Furthermore, they posited that the transformation of Western European medieval agrarian societies into modern industrial nation-states led to the individualization, fragmentation, differentiation, and privatisation of society.

In turn, this had a dramatic effect on the degree to which individual European citizens professed that religion was important in their lives. On the whole, industrialization brought with it a series of social changes – the fragmentation of the life-world, the decline of community, the rise of bureaucracy, technological consciousness – that together made religion less arresting and less plausible than it had been in pre-modern societies. That is the conclusion of most social scientists, historians, and church leaders in the western world.” However, the positions espoused by secularists such as Berger, Wilson, Bruce and Martin during the 1960s have recently come under intense scrutiny, and this for a number of reasons. Firstly, scholars such as Rodney Stark, Lawrence Iannacone, and Roger Finke have suggested that it is time to do away with the secularization thesis and relegate it to the sidelines of sociological analysis.

“After nearly three centuries of utterly failed prophecies and misrepresentations of both present and past”, we are reminded, “it seems time to carry the secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories, and there to whisper *‘requiescat in pace.’*”

This position has also recently been supported by Peter Berger himself, who, in a shocking *volteface*, recanted on all his earlier claims. “The world today, with some exceptions,” he writes, “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.”

Jeffrey Hadden, on the other hand, stresses that we need to “desacralize” secularization theory because the assumptions underlying it constitute a doctrine and do not hold up under close examination. Finally, Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris have mentioned in their latest book that the secularization thesis is in need of serious revision, for it is overly Eurocentric and fails to attest to the fact that the rest of the world continues to be overwhelmingly religious, despite having felt the effects of considerable modernization.

It is obvious, as Inglehart and Norris remind us, “that religion has not disappeared from the world, nor does it seem likely to do so.” For them, “talk of burying the secularization theory is premature.” Rather, “we need to move beyond studies of Catholic and Protestant church attendance in Europe... and the United States... if we are to understand broader trends in religious vitality in churches, mosques, shrines, synagogues and temples around the globe.”

Therefore, as we can see, the entire secularization debate has been centred almost exclusively on the West. The vast corpus of scholarship has failed, with some exceptions, to address the reality that while the vast majority of non-Western societies accept and strive to modernize, they in no way wish to westernize, and therefore secularize.

Given this fact, can one legitimately claim that secularization is applicable to non-Christian societies everywhere that have become modern? In other words, is the secularization thesis still relevant, given that the overwhelming majority of the world’s population adheres to some form of non-western religious tradition and has not embraced secularism to the same extent as Western Europe or other industrialized nations? This essay strives to answer these two questions.

It concludes, for those who like an indication of their final destination, that secularism is inapplicable to non-Western societies and is rather irrelevant outside the West and this for two reasons. 1) While the vast majority of non-Western societies have embraced modernization, they wholeheartedly reject Westernization and secularization.

For instance, while all the political ideologies of the last century have been developed in the West – one thinks here of liberalism, socialism, anarchism, corporatism, Marxism, communism, social democracy, conservatism, nationalism, and fascism (among others) – the West has never generated a major religion. Therefore, it is extremely naïve and presumptuous on the part of the West to believe that secularization – an ideology which stipulates that religion is in decline and is premised on the Westphalian separation of religion and politics – can and should naturally take root in non-Western societies which have modernized.

The Western belief that modernization produces heightened levels of secularization fails to account for the durability of religious practice in non-Western societies. 2) As Inglehart and Norris indicate, various societies and nation-states modernize at different speeds and in different ways. Despite trends in secularization occurring in rich nations, the world as a whole has become more religious. In terms of religiosity, therefore, increased polarization between western and non-western societies is the norm. While the public of virtually all advanced industrial societies have been moving toward more secular orientations during the past fifty years, the world as a whole has more people with traditional religious views than ever before – and they constitute a growing proportion of the world's population.

In general, poorer societies facing higher levels of socioeconomic risk and vulnerability are much more likely to remain highly religious than affluent societies where a strong-social security net reduces economic and social risk and minimizes the need for individuals to find solace in the supernatural.

One of the prevailing myths in social science literature today stresses that because the vast majority of non-Western societies have embraced modernization, they must subsequently Westernize and secularize as a result. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. As previously alluded to, in roughly the first half of the twentieth century, many Western intellectual elites assumed that economic and social modernization was contributing to a withering away of religion as a defining element in human existence.

On the whole, modernizing secularists hailed the extent to which science, rationalism, and technology were gradually eliminating the superstitions, myths, irrationalities, and rituals that constituted the core of existing religions. It was believed that the emerging non-Christian societies which developed along western lines (i.e. those that became more tolerant, pluralist, rational, pragmatic, progressive, and humanistic) would also become more secular.

However, the predictions of western secularists failed to account for one vital point – that being that religion in non-western societies still matters despite modernization. The Western belief that modernization produces heightened levels of secularization is flawed because it is contradicted by the durability of religious practice in non-Christian societies, especially in the latter decades of the twentieth century. As a number of influential authors have pointed out, the decades of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have been fundamentally altered by a global resurgence of religious fervour throughout the world particularly in non-western countries.

This resurgence has involved the intensification of religious consciousness and has led to the rapid growth of religious fundamentalism – a doctrine rooted in vehement opposition to westernization (not necessarily modernization) and which perceives the West as being morally decadent and in a state of overall cultural decline.

In the Muslim world this fundamentalism is intimately associated to a profound disillusionment with secularism and, when coupled with weak economic growth, has allowed fundamentalists to increase their support from three main societal groups:

1. young university students and intellectuals;
2. traditional middle class professionals such as merchants and traders; and
3. rural migrants in large cities. Furthermore, the religious reaffirmation rejects moral relativism and self-indulgence and instead stresses the need for order, discipline, work, mutual help, and human solidarity. The return to religion at this current temporal juncture can also be attributed to the inability of some to cope with the psychological, emotional, and social trauma brought about by modernization.

On the whole, in the absence of a defining ideological-cum-political worldview and in response to the perceived failures of modernity and its related value

system of secularism, hyper-materialism, individualism, relativity, and rationality, individuals in many parts of the world have returned to religious and cultural explanations in their search for meaning and identity. In fact, Gilles Kepel goes so far as to state that during the 1970s the entire trend to secularization and toward the accommodation of religion with secularism went into reverse...[and] a new religious approach took shape, aimed no longer at adapting to secular values but at recovering a sacred foundation for the organization of society – by changing society if necessary... This approach advocated moving on from a modernism that had failed, attributing its setbacks and dead ends to separation from God.

As we can see, during the second half of the twentieth century both economic and social modernization proceeded alongside a global religious resurgence which pervaded almost every continent and which involved individuals returning to, reinvigorating, and giving new meaning to the traditional religions of their communities.

In recent years, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Orthodoxy have all experienced new surges in commitment, relevance, and practice by casual believers. During the last three decades we have been witnesses to a “return of the sacred” which has not only been felt in non-Christian societies but is also evident in the West with the rapid rise of the neoconservative Christian right in the United States and evangelicalism in Latin America.

2. The second reason why secularism is inapplicable to non-Christian societies is related to the depth at which the process of modernization has occurred in various non-Western countries. On this note, the work of Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris is particularly telling. To begin with, the authors use evidence accumulated over twenty years from the World Values Survey and the European Values Survey to argue that the world is at least as religious as it was several decades ago and religious traditions are becoming stronger than ever worldwide.

Based on this initial premise, they deduce that the traditional secularization thesis needs updating and they advance a new theory of secularization, based on what they call “existential risk.” Inglehart and Norris trace the growing irrelevance of religion in the modern world to the fact that people can take security for granted.

The more secure people become in the developed world, the more they loosen their hold on religion; religion, meanwhile, retains its authority among the less secure but faster-growing populations of the less developed world.

Moreover, for both authors the world in general is becoming more religious especially when the type of measurement used is population. Areas with high existential risk have a birth rate far above the replacement level; areas with lower risk are closer to, and sometimes even below that rate. Overall, the religiously observant population is increasing faster than the secular population.

Furthermore, the authors stipulate that religion is far from dead, and it certainly hasn't disappeared – even in Western Europe, Canada, and Australia, where the evidence for its demise is most powerful. Proof of this trend can also be noted in the United States where evidence indicates that America is more secular than we have been led to believe.

On the whole, the general premise behind the claim for an existential risk examination of secularization proposed by Inglehart and Norris is that those countries that have experienced modernization to its fullest (i.e. where modernization has permeated all aspects of individual and societal existence), are the ones in which religious belief and expression are in decline (i.e. in the West).

The opposite is also the case: where societies have not experienced modernization to the same degree as the West, individuals face greater risk (i.e. through natural disasters, economic hardship, disease, and political instability) and traditional religious values are at least as strong as they were a century ago, if not more.

The conclusions drawn by Inglehart and Norris are therefore quite similar to those reached by Kepel in that they indicate quite clearly that secularism has failed to take root in non-Christian societies and that the world remains overwhelmingly religious. Despite increased modernization there seems to be no dominant trend toward a weakening of religious institutions and lower rates of attendance at religious services in poorer societies throughout the globe. On the contrary, "it would be a major mistake to assume that secularization is triumphantly advancing, and religion will eventually disappear throughout the world."

Inglehart and Norris conclude that there was too much of an unacknowledged secularist bias in secularization theory. The still-potent role of religion in the global south maintains its salience because much of this area remains mired in pre-modern and traditional lifestyles and has failed to adapt to modernity at the same speed and to the same degree as the West.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that secularism – which is an offshoot of the Reformation and Enlightenment and emerged in response to the political problems of Western Christian society in early modernity beginning with its devastating wars of religion – is inapplicable to non-Christian societies for two reasons.

First, while non-Western societies do not reject modernization outright they do fundamentally reject the notions of secularization and westernization associated to the spread of modernity. As a result, what the last several decades teach us in relation to non-Christian societies is that modernization has not been paralleled by a diminution of religion but rather by an intensification religious practice and belief which has shaped all facets of human existence. Second, the work of Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris illustrates that the degree to which modernization implants itself in given societies is of crucial importance in determining the pace and depth at which secularization can take root. Generally, in those richer Western societies where modernization is deeply entrenched secularism is extremely prominent.

Conversely, in poorer non-Western societies where modernization has failed to create higher standards of living levels of religious adherence are much higher and secularism relatively absent. More importantly, the inability of secularism to flourish in non-Christian societies has severe repercussions, especially for the trajectory of world politics in the decades to come. As Inglehart and Norris indicate, 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.”

The resurgence of religion in the non-Christian world is paralleled by a simultaneous demographic population explosion, especially in the Muslim world.

On the other hand, Western Europe is massively secular and is currently confronted with a severe demographic crisis. In short, this means that coping with largely Muslim immigration from the near East is now and will continue to be the biggest single challenge for European domestic politics at the turn of the century. This is ultimately the reason why religion or, in the case of Western Europe the lack thereof, still matters.