

Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society

Kasselstrand, Isabella, Phil Zuckerman and Ryan T. Cragun. *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2023, 242 pages.

In the 1980s and 1990s, one of the biggest names in America in the sociology of religion was Rodney Stark, Professor of sociology at the University of Washington. He wrote a number of books in which he totally rejected the idea of secularisation, for example in *The Triumph of Faith: Why the World is More Religious than Ever* (2015). Stark argued that religion addresses fundamental human needs that are always in demand. Where religion declines, it is because the 'religious firms' have become lazy and are not fulfilling those human demands. He explained that religious firms which have some form of monopoly, such as the national churches of some European nations, have indeed become lazy. This explained the low levels of religious vitality in Europe, he said. Stark's views were supported by a number of other prominent sociologists.

Beyond Doubt sets out to show that Stark and his colleagues were completely mistaken. Secularisation is occurring around the globe

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as a result of modernisation. The authors explain that economic surplus leads to the specialisation of roles in society, and the differentiation which the authors define as ‘the separation of religion from various aspects of societies, institutions, or individuals’ (p.25). Along with differentiation is a social process of rationalisation, which they define as ‘the ordering of society based on technological efficiency, bureaucratic impersonality, and scientific and empirical evidence’ (p.26). Modernisation has to do with the extent to which differentiation and rationalisation are occurring in society, and as differentiation and rationalisation occur, so religion is moved out of many processes and institutions in society.

The authors have gathered general evidence for secularisation around the globe. The World Values Survey between 1981 and 2020, and the European Values Survey between 1981 and 2020, show that in almost every one of the 100 countries involved in the surveys, religion has declined over the period measured. They use three measures of religion: belief, behaviour (such as religious attendance) and belonging. Only in a few countries has there been an increase in religious attendance. These countries include a few North African countries, and republics of the former Soviet Union. The authors argued that the increase in attendance in those republics was a result of the previous low levels of religion which had resulted from suppression by anti-religious regimes. In

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reality, they said, the underlying trends of modernisation would still lead to secularisation. Case studies of Norway, Chile, South Korea and the United States showed that similar patterns of secularisation were occurring in quite different socio-economic contexts.

The authors argue that human beings are not naturally religious, noting there have always been groups of people who have rejected religion. Increasingly, the authors note, in secularised societies people will not be opposed to religion, but indifferent to it. It will just cease to be a set of beliefs and practices which concern them. It will be something to which people will give no attention, just as we no longer debate whether wagons pulled by oxen are good or bad (p.117). People will raise their children, attend life-cycle rituals, make ethical decisions, and engage in communities without any reference to religion.

Much of the book is well supported by empirical data and shows conclusively that in many countries around the world, there are currently strong signs of decline in religiosity. My major problem with the book is the narrowness of its theory, arguing that the *only* significant factor in the decline of religion, as measured by religious belief, behaviour and belonging, is modernisation as measured by the extent of differentiation and rationalisation. Indeed, the authors make no attempt at empirical measures of differentiation and rationalisation and occasionally revert to Gross

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National Product instead. Rather than acknowledge that government regulations, either pro- or anti-religious, can make a difference to religious beliefs, practice and belonging, they suggest such repressions only lead to 'artificial secularisation', which then reverts to its natural state when repression is lifted, as has happened in Russia.

Similarly, they note how in many countries around the world, religion has been linked to ethnicity and used in ethno-nationalistic movements. That is now occurring in Russia, and has occurred in Poland, Ireland, Iran and Afghanistan, for examples. This they explain in terms of de-differentiation (p.142). Yet many aspects of these societies, such as the health system, technology, trade, transport, and so on, remain differentiated, even in terms of the authors' limited account of differentiation.

They admit that the revelations of abuse in religious organisations may have had an impact on the rapid secularisation that has occurred in Ireland in recent decades (p.143). However, they fail to acknowledge that such failures of religious institutions can play a role in secularisation. Indeed, they do not really take seriously the argument put forward by Inglehart that secularisation has occurred because of major changes in personal and social values around personal fulfilment, which are contrary to the traditional values espoused by many religions around pro-fertility. Although they refer to Inglehart's *Religion's Sudden Decline: What's*

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Causing it, and What Comes Next, there is no serious engagement here.

Modernisation, in terms of differentiated social systems and rationalised bureaucratic and technological processes, is a major factor in secularisation and has certainly led to many aspects of society emerging which make no reference to religion. It is certainly arguable that such processes have led to religion being focused on personal and family life as Luckmann (*The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*, 1967) argued in the 1960s. However, the theory fails to explain the quite sudden decline of religion in most parts of the world in the last few decades, a phenomenon better explained by Inglehart (2021). Underlying this failure is the attempt by the authors to spin every example to their theory, rather than acknowledging that religion does play diverse roles in different societies, and modernisation occurs in somewhat different ways, leading to the fact that differentiation and rationalisation are just two of the processes affecting religious decline.

This book is important in refuting Stark and his colleagues, and providing a summary of what is occurring around the world in relation to religion. Its description of a secular society as one in which religion becomes irrelevant rather than being anti-religious is a helpful contribution. As the book notes several times, there is no argument here that religion will disappear, even though it will

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diminish in importance. For those in Christian ministry, this book provides no comfort or future directions, but provides the backdrop against which patterns of ministry must be developed. It does shine a light on what many societies around the world now look like. Given that fact that for most people religion is not on their radar, churches are now challenged to find new ways in which we can contribute to the lives of others, creating societies which are inclusive and respectful and in which life is meaningful.

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