

Secularization and the impotence of individualized religion

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The secularization paradigm combines two things: an assertion about changes in the presence and nature of religion, and a collection of related explanations of those changes. It is not a universally applicable scientific law, but a description and explanation of the past of European societies and their settler offspring. Contrary to often repeated caricatures, it is not a simple evolutionary model and does not imply a single uniform future--but it does suppose that there are "socio-logics" to societal changes. Some changes go together; others do not. For example, feudal societies can have effective state churches; culturally diverse liberal democracies cannot. And that is not an accident. As I show below, it can be explained by fundamental features of the latter sort of society.

A full elaboration of the secularization paradigm with sufficient data to convince the open-minded (some people are beyond persuasion) needs at least a book and it took me three. (1) All I can do here is offer a few illustrative facts, elaborate one part of the explanation, examine in some detail one alternative to the secularization paradigm, and request that the reader make the charitable assumption that I will have dealt with the obvious criticisms in other places.

Secularization

In 1851 about half the population of Britain attended church regularly. Now it is about 8 percent. Statistical data on religious beliefs are available only for the last fifty or so years, but they show a similar trajectory to that of church attendance. There has been a steady decline in the popularity of orthodox Christian beliefs. On the existence of God, Britons now divide pretty equally between four positions: belief in a personal creator God, belief in "a higher power or life-force," the wonderfully vague "there is something there," and atheism or agnosticism. Baptism was once universal and so widely held to be essential that in the Middle Ages midwives were taught a simple formula to baptize babies thought unlikely to survive until the arrival of a priest. Now fewer than one-third of babies are baptized. In 1971 over two-thirds of weddings were religious; now it is less than one-third.

There is no need to labor the point: anyone familiar with European societies will be aware of the drastic decline of organized religion. In Holland, the percentage of the adult population describing themselves as having no denomination rose from 14 percent in 1930 to 39 percent in 1997 and 42 percent in 2003. (2) An overwhelming majority of Swedes (95 percent) seldom or never attend public worship, and Hamberg finds no evidence of revival in a situation that she describes as follows:

the share of the population who adhere to Christian beliefs or who devote themselves to such traditional religious activities as prayer and church attendance declined in Sweden during the twentieth century ... data indicate a decline not only in the prevalence of religious beliefs but also in the saliency of these beliefs. (3)

Even in the U.S., routinely held up as the great exception, churchgoing is...

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Both the sociology and the cognitive science of religion seek to explain the acquisition of religious beliefs. In this article, I offer an account of the acquisition and distribution of religious ... Further, I argue that the connection between action and belief can help produce an improved account of secularization and non-theism, defined here as the lack of explicit belief in the existence of non-physical agents.

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Iannaccone, Laurence R. 1991. "The Consequences of Religious Market Structure: Adam Smith and the Economics of Religion."

Rationality and Society 3: 156–177. Inglehart, Ronald, and Baker, Wayne E.. 2000. In sociology, secularization (or secularisation) is the transformation of a society from close identification with religious values and institutions toward nonreligious values and secular institutions. The secularization thesis expresses the idea that as societies progress, particularly through modernization and rationalization, religious authority diminishes in all aspects of social life and governance.