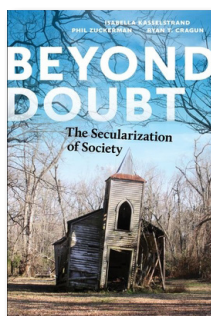


## BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

### Religious Diversity, Secularization, and Indifference

***Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society.*** By Isabella Kasselstrand, Phil Zuckerman, and Ryan T. Cargun. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2023. 227 pages. \$30.00 (paperback). ISBN 9781479814282



As the title of the book suggests, its theses are: “The evidence for secularization is clear. Secularization is happening. Secularization is real. It’s beyond doubt” (169). The authors argue the book offers “a simplified, coherent, and testable version of secularization theory” (168), and they offer substantial evidence to support it. The book addresses a recent trend in North American sociology of religion in which scholars like Rodney Stark and Laurence Iannaccone cast doubt on the feasibility and data behind secularization theory and dismiss it as “unscientific philosophizing” (165), empirically unsupported, and as an ideologically driven polemic. The authors admit that while religion has not disappeared and they do not expect it to disappear, religion is certainly waning in modernized societies more than ever before. The evidence, the book contends, is clear.

### Structure and Definitions

While chapter one provides an intuitive and clear summary of secularization theory with well-reasoned definitions and propositions, it also includes acknowledgment and responses to the most pressing and relevant critiques and challenges to the theory. Chapters two and three report and reflect on substantial empirical evidence. Chapter two takes a broad view of over 100 societies in the world, presenting evidence that demonstrates secularization as a process advancing with modernization. Chapter three

examines four societies as particularly interesting and powerful case studies of secularization: Norway, Chile, South Korea, and the United States. Chapter four addresses the question of whether “being secular is unnatural” (97-114). The authors argue that no, it is not, since 1) there have always been nonreligious people throughout history, 2) a large number of people today are not religious, 3) a growing number of societies are increasingly secular, and 4) when children are raised as nonreligious, they tend to remain nonreligious. Chapter five, among my favorites, comes alive by presenting “lived secularity,” or in other words, it provides “a multi-faceted portrait of what secular life actually looks like in highly secularized contexts” (116). Chapter six addresses common societies posed as exceptions to secularization—namely, Ireland, Poland, predominantly Muslim countries, and Russia—and concludes that not only are these not exceptions but that they actually support secularization theory. According to the authors’ research, no such exceptions have been found. Chapter seven concludes the volume with honest challenges, limitations, and critiques of the book, as well as charting open questions, needs, and avenues for further research, data, and theorizing.

Helpful to the overall thrust of the book are the authors’ clear definitions and propositions, especially given the notoriously fraught and contested terms “religion” and “secularization.” Put simply, the authors define religion as “the amalgamation of ideas, rituals, practices, symbols, identities, and institutions that humans collectively construct based upon their shared belief in the supernatural” (9). They define secularization as “the process of shifting from beliefs, values, and behaviors rooted in the supernatural to beliefs, values, and behaviors rooted in the natural” (22). All definitions are limited by design and function, and of course language problems abound in all fields and subfields. With the proposed definition of religion, it is unclear what qualifies as *supernatural*, or *natural* for that matter; however, the authors do attempt to delineate them to some degree in a later chapter. The authors define religiosity, especially for the sake of measuring it, under the common matrix of the three Bs: belief, behavior, and belonging. If secularization refers to the process whereby beliefs, values, and behaviors shift from being rooted in the supernatural (that is, religion) to being rooted in the natural (that is, nonreligion), then there ought to be a clear way to measure them. A lingering question is how open the authors are to considering broader measures of religiosity, especially since most of the data presented on belief centers on the question of “belief in God,” a tenet certainly familiar to Christians, Muslims, and Jews. However, outside of Christians and Muslims, it can be argued that belief in God is not central or essential to being religious, even among Jews. To their credit, the authors recognize that

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many critics of secularization operate with a much broader – too broad, for their tastes – definition of religion, to the extent that, in their view, the word becomes useless and meaningless. For similar reasons, other scholars critical of secularization suggest that religion is not in decline, but rather religiosity (how religion is expressed through belief, behavior, belonging) is simply changing. The authors convincingly argue that the common pattern of religion in modern societies is more of change *and* decline, not *just* change.

### **Secularization Theory**

The book provides a very useful and simple understanding of secularization as a process resulting from differentiation and rationalization. In other words, differentiation and rationalization are two elements of modernization that most directly contribute to secularization. *Differentiation* refers to the “separation of religion from various aspects of society, institutions, or individuals” (25), and *rationalization* refers to “the ordering of society based on technological efficiency, bureaucratic impersonality, and scientific and empirical evidence” (27). In short, the theory proposes that “the greater the differentiation of the societal, institutional, or individual levels, the more likely secularization is to occur” (26); likewise, “the more rationalization that exists at societal, institutional, and individual levels, the greater the likelihood of secularization” (27). Central to the success of this book’s argument is its upfront, clear, consistent, and focused definition of secularization. Without this precise definition, cracks in the argument’s foundation would become more apparent and widen.

In so doing, chapter one plays an essential role in setting the tone, leaving very few aspects unexplored, especially given its precision and economic page count. The authors wrestle with most of the relevant challenges and criticisms of the theory. However, it leaves the reader wondering about the need to seriously engage with the general argument that the category and concept of “religion” originate from Western European scholarship; the argument that it was imposed on the rest of the world’s cultures, worldviews, and ways of life, and then used to measure religiosity through these Western metrics of belief (in “God”), behavior (“Church” or “service” attendance), and belonging (to an affiliated community or institution). This issue does not negate the theory; in fact, it may support it, but the reader is left wondering whether, like the category of religion, the theory of secularization was also imposed on or wedged into the analysis of non-Western societies.

This concern becomes more pressing in the ensuing chapters that present the data, which reveal the often Western-centric, and more precisely, Western Protestant Christian-centric nature of most of the data. The reader may wonder, as they progress through the text, whether the authors will address the perception that much of the data seems to come from societies that were, are, or at one time experienced, a Christian majority or a Christian boom in population. I had hoped the authors would address a common critique, viz., that secularism as a concept is a product of the Western religious world; that it comes from Western European Protestant Christianity, and therefore cannot be understood apart from Christianity; that secularism is “a particular iteration of Protestant Christianity...an offshoot from Christianity...something that Christianity does...another permutation of Christianity that is part of the story of Christianity.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, this critique challenges the hard and fast binary between secularism and religion and asks whether secularism grows out of a particular religious context (a Christian context), and whether religion – Christian religion – makes secularism possible in the first place.

To their great credit, the authors offer strong evidence of secularization outside the Christian West, with brief reference to Arab Barometer surveys, which found “the majority of fifteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds in eleven Middle Eastern and North African countries were not religious” (147). These included Iraq, Egypt, Yemen, Sudan, Palestine, Morocco, Lebanon, Jordan, Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria. A deeper dive into the data about *rationalization* and *differentiation* in these and other modernized MENA societies would be fascinating for a future volume and would go a long way to demonstrate non-Western instances of secularization. Similarly, the authors briefly mentioned China and the difficulty of measuring sincere religiosity in Chinese society but provided reasons to believe that secularization theory applies to China as well.

### **Complicating Secularization**

Is it possible for an individual and society to be both secular and religious simultaneously? This question becomes relevant in the case of measuring the religiosity of post-Christians or cultural Christians, who celebrate major life cycle religious events such as marriages, funerals, Christmas, and Easter, and find deep meaning in them, yet do not hold core supernatural beliefs. The

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1 Donovan Schaefer, “Is Secularism a World Religion?” interviewed by Christopher R. Cotter, The Religious Studies Project (podcast audio), November 28, 2016.

authors suggest that those who fall into this secular-religious category are ultimately deemed secular or non-religious. Can an individual authentically be considered both, and if so, should they be recognized as expressing another way of being religious, no less authentic or sincere? That is, they express a secular way of being religious. Do we want to deem a secular Jew ultimately as secular and not Jewish? Strong cases could be made for both.

In the chapter that addresses possible exceptions to the theory of secularization, one common scenario is religion functioning as a cultural defense in some modern societies where religion is finding “something else to do” beyond its traditional roles or functions. For example, in the Republic of Ireland, the authors show that religion strengthened “the national, political, and cultural identities of both Catholics and Protestants during the Troubles” (142). However, the question remains: does this “something else to do” negate its authenticity as religion? Does it negate its religiosity? Can religion have multiple roles and functions at the same time, thus fulfilling both traditional roles and additional ethno-nationalistic functions? These interesting questions can help complicate the secular-religious binary in constructive ways and invite further exploration from scholars of secularization. These questions would likely not challenge secularization theory but might actually support it.

### **Relevance for Interreligious Studies**

Perhaps most relevant to the readers of this journal, and scholars of interreligious studies, is the authors’ proposition that the greater the religious pluralism (i.e., the greater the religious diversity) “of an individual’s social network and contacts, the greater the likelihood that this individual will secularize” (34). In other words, greater religious diversity in modernized societies that grant freedom *of* religion also grants freedom *from* religion, the latter of which is increasingly exercised as societies become more secularized.

Furthermore, the data presented in the book show evidence suggesting that advanced stages of secularization lead not to a widespread increase in individuals identifying as atheists or holding antireligious attitudes, but rather holding an indifference to religion. In highly secularized societies, religion has lost much of its authority and power and hence no longer presents the perceived threat it once did. In other words, highly secularized societies and citizens are more likely to be indifferent to and ignore religion since it has minimal or no impact on one’s day-to-day life. The authors propose that “the end stage of secularization is not widespread irreligion but rather

widespread religious indifference” (120). A scholar of interreligious studies or a practitioner interested in civic religious pluralism (that is, energetic engagement with religion) and dialogue might argue that an atheist/agnostic, religiously “indifferent,” or non-religious person might still be interested in religion, rather than indifferent to it, because they recognize that religion matters to other people (friends, family, coworkers, etc.), and those other people matter to them.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, religion for these secular individuals can still play a role or be of some interest in their day-to-day life. The authors’ insightful analysis opens the door for further exploration and research on how secular individuals engage with religion in their social interactions and communities, thus inviting investigation into the complex ways secular and religious identities intersect and encounter one another.

*Beyond Doubt* is well-researched, well-argued, and well-written; it is also engaging, accessible, and filled with relevant data. The presentation is particularly impressive, given the challenge of maintaining a cohesive and personal style across three authors. This work stands out as essential reading for any student or scholar interested in seriously engaging with the theory and data of secularization. Its insightful analysis and comprehensive approach make it a significant contribution to the field, as it offers valuable perspectives and invites further exploration into the complex interplay of secular and religious identities.

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2 See Hans Gustafson, “From Indifference to Engagement: A Secular Response to Religious Diversity” in *Beyond Dialogue: New Paradigms in Interfaith Discourse*, eds. Daniel Ross Goodman, Elaine Jean Lai, and Anthony A. Lee (SUNY Press, forthcoming).