

Isabella Kasselstrand, Phil Zuckerman, and Ryan T. Cragun. *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society*. New York: New York University Press, 2023, 227 pp. ISBN. 9781479814282 (paperback).

Has religion weakened and diminished? In the nineteenth century, theorists and thinkers predicted the demise of religion's influence on society and its eventual disappearance. However, Rodney Stark and his colleagues argued otherwise, stating that secularization is unfounded nonsense and a falsified myth.

Now, in *The Secularization of Society*, sociology professors Isabella Kasselstrand, Phil Zuckerman, and Ryan T. Cragun utilized four decades of empirical data to illustrate that secularization is real. Religion has weakened and diminished, and secularization has occurred as predicted. People today are less religious than previous generations regarding belief, behavior, and belonging. The authors call these attributes the three Bs of religiosity. Later in the review, I will explain what the authors mean by belief, behavior, and belonging.

In six chapters, the authors systematically present evidence for the decline of religion – or religiosity – in society. An introduction and conclusion bracket the six chapters. Most helpful to readers in the introduction is the background for the different theories and definitions regarding religion and secularization and the main components of secularization theory. The conclusion summarizes the book's main arguments and contains some of the authors' predictions about religion and secularization. Religion will continue to fade but not disappear, they contend.

Chapter 1 focuses on secularization theory. As societies modernize and people adopt modern sensibilities and values, they move away from religiosity and toward secularization. Two elements of modernization contribute to secularization: differentiation and rationalization. Differentiation is the separation of religion from aspects of societies, institutions, or individuals. "Rationalization refers to the ordering of society based on technological efficiency, bureaucratic impersonality, and scientific and empirical evidence" (p. 27). Some mechanisms contributing to secularization include religious pluralism,

existential security, and religious transmission from parents to children. To critics of secularization theory who assert that religiosity increases and decreases in cycles of supply and competition and that religiosity is not declining but people are “doing religion” differently, the authors contend that these arguments are unconvincing amid empirical data.

In Chapter 2, the authors present a global overview of the current levels and changes in three key interrelated dimensions of religiosity: belief, behavior, and belonging. Belief refers to people accepting supernatural beliefs, values, and doctrines. Behavior concerns how people express their religious beliefs, e.g., attending religious services or performing rituals. Belonging is about membership and identification with a religious organization. Drawing from cross-national survey data, the authors illustrate that the decline of religiosity is not limited to Europe but is global. They observe that the more modernized a group is the less religious it is. Here, the authors show the connection between economic development and secularization.

Chapter 3 examines additional religiosity measures, such as belief in life after death, heaven, hell, miracles, and spirituality, with Norway, Chile, South Korea, and the United States as representative samples. These countries represent four continents with distinct sociocultural contexts but with notable trends of significant declines in religious belief, behavior, belonging, and other examples of religiosity within and across generations regardless of cultural and geographic differences. Widespread rapid secularization in these countries is beyond doubt due to modernization.

Chapter 4 argues against the notion that religion is a universally innate, natural phenomenon and that secularity is unnatural. The authors counter the stated notion by illustrating four points. First, atheism, agnosticism, and irreligion are not new, modern phenomena. There have been secular people throughout recorded history as shown in Indian, Chinese, Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Islamic writings. Second, a significant proportion of the world’s population today is not religious. The authors argue that secularization theory critics appear to ignore the evidence. Third, although most people in the world are religious, a growing number of countries have a nonreligious majority. And fourth,

an increasing number of children raised in nonreligious families results in the possibility of religiosity evaporating.

In Chapter 5, the authors examine the multi-faceted portrait of secularity in highly secularized contexts. They propose that with secularization ultimately comes religious indifference, where religion and irreligion become non-issues. Whereas religion may provide a framework for finding meaning and purpose, how do secular people accomplish the same? Secularity does not imply leading a meaningless and immoral life. Secular people find meaning and purpose through family, organizations, and social groups. Also discussed in the chapter are life-cycle rituals, secular child-rearing and socializing, aging, and coping with crises.

Chapter 6 explores three possible exceptions scholars proposed that may impede secularization: cultural defense against external threats, government restrictions/artificial religiosity, and forced secularization/artificial secularization. The authors propose that these exceptions are not exceptions but lower levels of differentiation, resulting in lower levels of secularization.

The authors offer a relevant and timely discussion of the decline of religiosity and secularization in the wake of modernity. Writing lucidly and convincingly, they successfully defend secularization theory by providing a “theoretically sound and empirically rigorous” analysis of declining religiosity today.

In the United States, for instance, the constant news of church closures, consolidations, declining church attendance across generations, and fewer young people believing in God and attending church in the last few decades indicate a troubling trend of religiosity, the very point made in the book. Moreover, the sex abuse crises, clericalism, and the church leadership’s detachment from the ordinary faithful have led to a measurable loss of trust, faith, and religious beliefs.

I agree with the authors’ assessment: “Secularization is happening. Secularization is real. It’s beyond doubt” (p. 169). The Catholic Church, for example, has been aware of the spread of

secularization, particularly in Europe, and its implications. It has taken steps to rekindle Europe's shrinking faith and loss of Christian identity. Pope Benedict, for instance, made reviving Christianity a priority of his papacy. He called for the re-evangelization of the continent and created a new dicastery, the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, dedicated to re-evangelization. Re-evangelization also happens under Pope Francis in the form of pastoral accompaniment and response to youth and young adults. In his 2019 post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis challenges church leaders to make the Church more welcoming to them, make room for their voices and concerns to be heard, and work to regain their trust. However, the Catholic Church's efforts in re-Christianizing Europe have not turned back the secular tide or the Church's fading influence in Western Europe. As demonstrated in the book, the secular tide is undoubtedly spreading beyond Europe. A reversal is unlikely.

Secularization is real. *Beyond Doubt* is an illuminating must-read for religion students and those involved in religious-based ministry.

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