Is Religion Dying? Secularization and Other Religious Trends in the World Today

Jayeel Cornelio

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in the Indian Context (Oxford, England; Bern, Switzerland; and New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 17–43 (for its background and an analysis of it).


64. Hans Küng, Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic (London: SCM), xv.

65. As a humanistic response, this answer goes back at least as far as the seventeenth century and the Scottish philosopher David Hume (see Terence Penelhum, "David Hume," in The Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Religion, ed. Chad Meister and Paul Copan [London: Routledge, 2010], 138–47).

66. The way in which every major religion speaks of God or ultimate reality as ultimately unknowable and claims that ultimately its own language is partial and flawed is particularly picked up and emphasized by Schmidt-Leuke in his presentation of the pluralistic hypothesis (Schmidt-Leuke, "Pluralisms," 85–86).

67. This is certainly not the only interpretation of this passage (Quran 5:48, Sahih International translation), and various other translations are available; see http://quran.com/5/48–48.

68. For two different stances on this, see, on the one hand, Nicholson, Comparative Theology, 71, 194, and 284 n. 105, n. 106, and, on the other, Hedges, Controversies, 178–79.


FURTHER READINGS


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Jayeel Serrano Cornelio

INTRODUCTION

Is religion dying? The significance of this question to many is immediately demonstrated by the fact that it generates a long list of Google results, ranging from online forums to blog accounts. And apart from passionate critics, those who have something to say about the question include religious leaders, academics, and policy makers. Media outfits also devote attention to this question by providing space to experts in the study of religion. A very recent entry comes from Bass, who argues that religion is at a crossroads today whether it dissipates or renews itself. To her, either way is a choice for religion, with the succeeding generations looking back to ours as a watershed with far-ranging consequences.

Bass' attitude reflects a sense of urgency over the future of religion. Perhaps resonating with her are those who devour what they see as consequences of religious negligence: moral breakdown, the disintegration of the family as a social institution, pornography, and materialism. This lamentation, however, runs in contrast to the triumphalism of a particular brand of secularism that calls for the eradication of the religious in public life. Casanova describes this as "secularist secularity" whose lobbyists believe that "being liberated from 'religion' [is] a condition for human autonomy and human flourishing." Reinforcing this is the increasing prominence of "New Atheism" that champions a militant attitude against those who profess religion (see Volume 2, Chapter 5).

Rightly or wrongly, the question "is religion dying?" readily unravels the tensions in the public sphere. No wonder those who wish to address it objectively have to carefully explain themselves. Herein lies the main controversy
or "discontent" concerning the supposed dying state of religion.\(^7\) Sentiments toward religion are surfaced by the question.

Without doubt, the question is important—and controversial—to the public and also to students of religion who have engaged the question from various angles and disciplines. The central idea that this question underpins is secularization, which broadly argues that religion is expected to fade away from social significance as societies undergo modernization. From this perspective, religion, in other words, is dying a natural death.

It is not, however, as forthright as it seems. For many observers, the geographic relevance of secularization is a crucial source of controversy. The question on the death of religion appears, for example, to be rather a public concern in advanced societies, mostly in the West, where cathedrals are increasingly empty. In the non-West, perhaps the main problem of the public sphere, if any, is that it may be too religious. This distinction is verified by Norris and Inglehart's recently updated work on "global religiosity.\(^8\) Although belief in God is very high across societies around the world, there are statistically significant variations between agrarian, industrial, and post-industrial societies with regard to religious participation, values, and beliefs. Agrarian societies are consistently high in these areas. Therefore, as opposed to the experience of the West, the rest of the world appears to be, in the words of Peter Berger, "furiously religious."\(^9\)

The controversies manifested in these incessant debates clearly demonstrate to us that the question remains far from being answered with finality. Claims by social scientists that secularization, as a theory, needs to be put to rest once and for all may not be giving due credit to the merits of divergent analyses.\(^10\) Also, there is a tendency for both the supporters and refuters of the death-of-religion thesis to accuse each other of hiding their ideologies behind purported sociological facts. In another work, Casanova, for example, has questioned the value judgment that sees secularization as "normal" and "progressive."\(^11\) In discussing secularization, then, Wilson has felt the necessity of articulating the sociologist's position of neutrality: "To put forward the secularization thesis as an explanation of what happens in society is not to be a secularist, nor to applaud secularity; it is only to document and to illustrate social change."\(^12\)

This attempt at clarifying matters informs, too, the thrust of this chapter. In what follows, I wish to unravel for the reader the layers of complexity of the concept of secularization. The idea of secularization has a long history, and so generations of scholars have tried to define, describe, and comment on it. I have tried to the best of my ability to include in this chapter the many thinkers in the study of secularization from the classics to the contemporary. As a result of their scholarship, we are in a better position now to assess the merits of secularization and in so doing be able to define our own convictions over the fate of religion in the world today. So as to avoid redundancy with other theoretical overviews of secularization, I have drawn from the most recent scholarship of some of these thinkers. Also, the other contribution that this chapter makes is that it reflects on the limitation of the question above and offers an alternative to it. To ask whether religion is dying limits the potential answers we can get and may in the end be ideologically infiltrated.\(^13\)

Before I proceed, I need to make clear here that the ideological infiltration may be due to the confusion between secularism and secularization. As Taylor puts it, "we think of 'secularization' as a selfsame process that can occur anywhere. . . . And we think of secularist regimes as options for any country."\(^14\) Secularism is not a neutral word, and its definition is historically and politically contingent, with varying attitudes toward the presence of religion in civil and public life.\(^15\) Suffice it to say that secularism is a framework by which institutions are established and governed using a "secular imaginary" of being without recourse to religion.\(^16\) Social space may be afforded in a secularist regime but with careful management of religious presence. Secularization, which is the topic of this chapter, speaks mainly of an empirical trend concerning the decline of religion; thus the question, is religion dying?

The first section offers a brief historical overview of the concept of secularization and how it has become a master narrative in thinking about religion and modernization. The master narrative, however, can be problematic and has been contested in terms of what secularization really means and whether it is indeed a linear process. To address these problems, I then present the different nuances by which the concept of secularization has been clarified and explained. But again, because of its status as a master narrative, its relevance to the vibrant state of religion in other societies has been called into question. From there on, I would suggest that perhaps the question "is religion dying?" needs to be rephrased to allow other analytical possibilities. The last section deals with the "coexistence thesis" in which secularization is just one of the trends concerning religious change in the world today.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The concern about the fate of religion in the hands of modernity has been, from its origins, one of the key tenets of sociological thought. Although the forerunners of sociology all anticipated the decline of religion, they did not offer a clear definition of secularization. What they did was to describe the condition of a decline in religion that paralleled social change in terms of urbanization and industrialization.\(^17\) In this section, I will discuss the ways in which secularization pervaded the thought of early sociologists and how even among contemporary observers it continues as an inherited model.
Secularization as Master Narrative

We can discern from their writings that what the early sociologists generally observed is the weakening significance of religion to social institutions and the life of individuals. It is this association between processes of modernization and secularization that has served as a master narrative in the sociology of religion. Comte, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim are considered here.

Although they were observing the same phenomenon, their attitudes toward religious decline were varied. As a discipline of the Enlightenment, sociology could be expected to actively entertain the removal of religion. Indeed, August Comte, the "father of sociology," has argued that history has arrived at a positive stage whose empirical-scientific paradigm replaces theology and metaphysics. As an Enlightenment thinker, Comte celebrated the looming death of religion as he also saw the key role of sociologists in shaping the secular future of society. In this manner, sociology was envisioned to be in opposition to theology. Marx could also be said to have adopted a militant posture against religion but with a different motivation. Given his critical view of capitalism, Marx called for a conscious eradication of religion as the "opium of the people" for being a massive obstruction to genuine class consciousness. One, however, can argue that Marx had discernible sympathies for the role of religion in social life in describing religion as "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless situation."

It is perhaps this sympathetic stance that seems more evident in the works of Weber and Durkheim. In the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Weber also lamented society's imminent disenchantment. Although its virtues of hard work and industriousness facilitated the rise of capitalist enterprise, the transcendence of religion (in particular, Calvinism) no longer had any central role to play in the process of modernization: "In the field of its highest development . . . the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to be associated with purely mundane passions." For Weber, however, the decline of religion entailed the dehumanizing tendencies of "iron cage rationality." In describing the people of this stage, Weber here resonates with Marx's rhetoric: "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart." Put differently, the intensification of instrumentality and bureaucracy as the guiding principle of social life could only mean that the space for aesthetics, emotions, and the subjective is shrinking.

A similar sense of apprehension is evident in Durkheim although for a different reason. Given his interest in social order, Durkheim saw religion as the underpinning value for society's cohesion. But as society became more complex because of structural differentiation, the influence of religion over the different institutions of society could only be expected to wane. Durkheim's attention therefore was on the moral force of religion that could only be found in the collective. And now Durkheim's dilemma is as to what will serve as the social foundation of shared morality: "There can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas which make its unity and its personality." The decline of religion was critical to both Weber and Durkheim. Whereas Weber was concerned about the increasing control of instrumental rationality over social life, Durkheim was anxious about the loss of a moral imperative. Whereas Weber was concerned that the cost of modernity was the subjective human experience, Durkheim saw that the subjective might be gaining too much of a foothold—the problem of anomie. In other words, the decline of the religious necessarily entails the decline of the collective, leaving the individual to the personal and subjective. Transpiring here is a crucial paradox, which might offer some sense of hope to Durkheim. As society becomes more complex, the decline of religion would have to be replaced with a new form aligning with the modern mind-set, which could be in the rituals of the nation-state, for example: "A day will come when our societies will know again those hours of creative effervescence, in the course of which new ideas arise and new formulae are found which serve for a while as a guide to humanity."

Secularization as the Inherited Model

Regardless of the attitudes, it is this general anticipation of the decline of religion that seems to have been "inherited," as Wilson puts it, by generations of sociologists who succeeded the classics. Reflecting these points, the inherited model pertains to the waning significance of religion to politics, the economy, and other aspects of the social system. In this elaboration, whether religion will continue to be important to individuals is not of paramount concern to the sociologist. What matters is that secularization in terms of the loss of the influence of the religious institution over the affairs of society is a general pattern in various places, however gradual or fast it might be: "As the degree of technical, economic, and political changes occurring in Western societies is experienced elsewhere and comes to characterize other cultures, we can expect to see a recession of the influence of religion there." It is in this manner that the inherited model becomes a key master narrative for the study of religion.

Historical accounts are typically invoked, for example, to illustrate the standard model. In discussing this, Martin refers to what he considers as a "handy historical tripod" with the legs of the Middle Ages and the Victorian period as the historical peaks of religiosity. From these periods,
one could only see decline in terms of religious beliefs and practices. Indeed, a historical approach, as will be seen later, has been the attempt of many sociologists and historians to demonstrate the validity of the thesis. What is different about the standard model, however, is that it has attempts at linearity, and this is what makes it a master narrative. As Vinceti, Sharma, and Aune demonstrate, the correlation between secularization and industrialization is taken to have universal applicability.\textsuperscript{32} It is noteworthy that this "one-directional" rendering of secularization parallels the evolutionary thinking of the Enlightenment, which is also responsible for such developmental processes of industrialization,\textsuperscript{33} modernization, and urbanization.\textsuperscript{34} And because the rest of the world is adopting the developmental model of the West, the global decline of religion, so the narrative goes, can then be anticipated.

The master narrative that is the secularization thesis informs several key thinkers in the sociology of religion, but in varying degrees: the young Peter Berger, Bryan Wilson, and Steve Bruce. Although they approach secularization in different ways, they resonate with each other in terms of their views on the general tendency for the social significance of religion to decline.

Writing in the mid-twentieth century, the young Berger described religion as a "sacred canopy" whose ideas and practices serve as legitimating mechanisms for the operations of everyday life.\textsuperscript{35} In the mind of an individual, religion is the worldview that makes social life manageably coherent and possible. Continuous religious socialization is that which keeps the canopy from falling apart. The frailty of the canopy, however, is gradually unraveled by the pluralistic conditions of modernity wherein, because of migration, scientific advancement, and the spread of alternative ideas, a claim to a monopolistic religious worldview is no longer tenable.

It is important to note here, however, that Berger has recanted this position at the turn of the century. Seeing the global resurgence of religion in the form of conservatism and revivalist movements, for example, Berger admits that modernization can also provoke "powerful movements of counter-secularization."\textsuperscript{36} He argues, for instance, that religion affords "certainty" in a religiously diverse environment.\textsuperscript{37} In contrast to the claims of secularization, what happens, therefore, is that although diversity undermines the taken-for-grantedness of religious beliefs and practices, it remains possible "to hold beliefs and to live by them," as Berger puts it in a festschrift in his honor.\textsuperscript{38}

Bruce, a staunch defender of the secularization thesis, finds Berger's recantation to be "curious" and "unnecessary."\textsuperscript{39} He asserts that what he subscribes to, which he finds in the original thought of Berger, is that there is a pattern that suggests that institutional religion is bound to be insignificant. It is in this manner that Bruce echoes Wilson. And it is an irreversible pattern insofar as "the conditions required to construct, sustain, and reproduce across generations a shared supernatural word-view are destroyed by individualism and pluralism."\textsuperscript{40} In a very recent and highly readable work, Bruce\textsuperscript{41} argues that such processes of modernization as industrialization, social and structural differentiation, and increasing diversity are not hospitable to the sustained presence of institutional religion. The decline of religious power in society can only lead to the decline in the importance of religion to the modern individual. As a result, religious socialization becomes difficult to accomplish, and hence, the perpetuation of religion for the next generation is ultimately threatened. That is why Bruce is more convinced than Wilson that privatized religion "fails to make the group lost by ... traditional religion."\textsuperscript{42}

What these statements suggest is that even if Bruce may not be claiming the universality or inevitability of secularization, he is instrumental in reinforcing to a certain degree the master narrative: if modernity involves pluralism, structural differentiation, and even increased individualism, then religion in the context of modernity will be increasingly insignificant. It is a qualified master narrative, as it were. True enough, a claim he makes about the rest of the world is that as it modernizes, religious life is merely undergoing transition whether it is the United States or Asia. The idea is that "if other places modernize in ways similar to the European experience, then we can expect the nature and status of religion also to change in similar ways."\textsuperscript{43}

Although this claim might be controversial, a compelling study by Norris and Inglehart does demonstrate the seeming reliability of the master narrative.\textsuperscript{44} Drawing from global surveys spanning decades, they claim that modernization, which increases levels of human security in terms of finding education, health care, and general welfare, "greatly weakens the influence of religious institutions in affluent societies."\textsuperscript{45} For these authors, human security is the critical condition that makes demand for the religious untenable in the long run. Conversely, levels of religiosity in terms of church attendance and beliefs are very high in poorer societies where human security is evidently challenged. Echoing Bruce's qualifier, they point out that global religion, however, is not fading away in the foreseeable future because of demographic trends that show, for example, high fertility rates in poorer and thus religious societies. Even now, the total number of those who profess religion outweighs those who do not.

**NUANCING SECULARIZATION**

The previous section recounts various ways by which the death of religion, in varying degrees, occupies the theoretical articulation of key thinkers in the sociology of religion. The inherited model, so to speak, argues that
with modernization comes the weakening significance of religion. However, as seen earlier, divergences between the thinkers are evident with regard to its pace, its fundamental cause, its impact on the individual, and even its desirability. Although secularization is now considered by many as an "unfashionable theory," as the title of Bruce's recent work puts it, its validity and significance have not been fully quashed in the literature. This is even if specific empirical evidence has been lodged against the theory, a point I will return to in a later section.

It is important to recognize that as a master narrative, the "death-of-religion" thesis disregards divergent experiences. That secularization narratives disregard difference according to gender, for example, has been tackled by Vincett, Sharma, and Aune in their landmark text on women and religion. They argue that attendance figures demonstrating religious decline are predominantly masculine. They show that women have exhibited high religiosity and are even engaged in contemporary alternative spiritualities. Also, the master narrative has the tendency to explain away the sustained presence of religion or of new religious forms as final gaps for transcendental air. Contesting this tendency, Hervieu-Léger offers an astute discussion on the nature of modernization as in effect not hostile to all at religion. The tension inherent to modernity between an envisioned ideal future and the ways to get there affords space for the religious imagination. The presence of religion, then, is not necessarily antimodern or a tragedy waiting to happen.

Such a critical attitude toward secularization does not have to reject the idea completely. In another important work, Hervieu-Léger herself, for example, attempts to explain the various processes that have led to the dismantling of traditional community formations in France that has led to the decline of Catholicism. She does not argue, however, that religion as a phenomenon is bound to be completely insignificant. Along similar lines, Turner argues that secularization remains an applicable concept in spite of the prominence of fundamentalism and religion in the public sphere. In the context of the "differentiation of spheres of activity in modern societies between religion, the economy and the polity," religion will always have to compete with other agencies in articulating, explaining, and dealing with reality. Hence, religion becomes commodified in popular culture, for example.

What these statements suggest is that religion, whether in terms of institutional leadership or everyday practice, can sometimes lose or otherwise. Here, the narrative is no longer master and it is in this light that other thinkers elaborate the nuances of secularization. In this section, I spell out the different ways in which the idea of secularization has been elaborated by seminal thinkers. Although adopting different approaches, these thinkers share a common denominator in not giving a straightforward answer to the question, "is religion dying?" Instead, what they offer are nuanced ideas that have direct implication on the secularization narrative: the definition of religion, levels of analyses, and historical contingency.

Defining Religion

One crucial matter that has not been discussed in this chapter so far is what we mean by religion. Having a clear definition of religion will allow us to be more or less clear, too, about its condition in the world today. If it is indeed dying or otherwise, how do we know?

In his introductory book on religion and everyday life, Hunt calls attention to two broad approaches in defining religion: substantive and functional. A substantive approach generally revolves around the essential aspects or what religion is mainly about. In this sense, religion is about beliefs, practices, and traditions grounded in a conviction that a transcendental or supernatural reality exists. The thinkers discussed earlier have clearly dealt with religion in this manner. Adopting a substantive definition provides a narrow scope to assess religious decline. By looking at such indicators as religious attendance, belief in doctrines, participation in rituals, or frequency of prayer, the observers recounted earlier have been able to say that there is a general trend of decline.

This is not easily the case though when one follows a functional approach. This approach pays attention to what religion fundamentally does. Functionally, religion is an experience of shared beliefs and ideals that form and reinforce group solidarity. Societies and small communities, even if non-religious in the substantive sense, have to subscribe to and enact shared values if they are to survive. State rituals and community festivals demonstrate this. From a functionalist view, one can then argue that even if institutional religions may no longer be relevant, individuals are still perpetuating the religious. Hence, secularization in terms of the death of religion is not even a question in this framework.

The point here is that to be able to assess the contemporary state of religion, one has to be clear about what exactly is being referred to. Different definitions offer different depictions. However, this does not mean that the substantive approach, which Hunt supports, is necessarily superior. The substance of a religion can also cover many aspects and dimensions. And a decline in a specific practice, for example, may not be seen in another. With this in mind, the question "is religion dying?" now becomes "which aspects of religion are dying?" In this view, religion cannot be taken as a whole. This is another issue that the master narrative overlooks.

The other point that these definitions implicitly deal with concerns the origin or source of religion. If one begins from the assumption that to be religious is an inherently human desire, then religion—whether in its
Levels of Analysis

For Dobbelare, secularization can be analyzed at three levels: societal, organizational, and individual. Societal secularization refers to how religion, in the process of modernization, has lost its influence over how the social system is to be run. This is the same as the process of functional differentiation discussed by sociologists such as Bruce and Wilson. Reflecting its trajectory in the West, the religious institution has been replaced by secular institutions with specific functional mandates over health, welfare, and education, for example. That the social system has become secular does not mean the end of religion. The same can be said about organizational secularization. Religious transformation can take place within religious organizations, and certain processes can be described as secularization without necessarily implying decline. In terms of ethos, for example, Dobbelare suggests that religious institutions and even new religious movements have adopted a this-worldly approach by encouraging their members to exercise social justice or to be in touch with the inner self. The transformation lies in the deemphasis of a high divine being and in the appeal to universal values. Finally, individual secularization pertains to how individuals no longer feel obliged to follow a set of doctrines or be subject to institutional religious practice or membership. Transformation is seen not in terms of the loss of the importance of religion to the individual but in how people can fluidly construct their religious identities.

The value of Dobbelare’s analysis is in demonstrating first that the processes of secularization are different at each level. But collectively they can be related to each other. Societal secularization, for example, has an effect on how people think and go about their daily lives to the effect that some areas do not have to be decidedly religious. Second, Dobbelare demonstrates that secularization is not necessarily tantamount to religious decline. In fact, he argues that “secularization and sacralization are the result of actions by collective actors and not mechanical evolutionary processes.” At the very least, these processes suggest the transformation of religion taking place in different ways.

It is these two themes concerning secularization that Casanova picks up in thinking about the increasingly public character of religions in the modern world. He suggests that secularization became a loaded concept because the experience in Europe has been that the three levels of secularization seemed to have taken place all at the same time. The differentiation of social institutions coincided with the decline of religious beliefs and practices and the privatization of religion away from the secular and democratic processes. Although these three levels may be connected to each other, they cannot be taken to mean the overall decline of religion. In particular, Casanova challenges the view of secularization as the privatization of religion in that history has seen the public engagement (or deprativization) of religion in the experience of Christianity in the United States and Poland, for example.

Here we see that although neither Dobbelare nor Casanova rejects secularization, they do not subscribe to its general applicability or linearity concerning the death of religion. Instead, they reconfigure the concept to present its heuristic value as multidimensional. They also agree that because secularization at its core is about societal differentiation, they welcome the possibility that religious institutions can contest their privatization and that individuals can remain religious in novel ways.

Historical Contingency

Secularization as a model has been widely developed in the discipline of sociology. Observers from other disciplines such as history, theology, and anthropology, however, have challenged its reliability to assess and describe
the general trajectory of religion. These nuances have challenged secularization as a general model in various ways.

To treat secularization as a linear process fails, in the first place, to recognize that processes between secularization and sacralization exist. Martin, who draws from the history of ideas, does endorse the irreversibility of structural differentiation. But, to him, this does not mean that religion is relegated to social insignificance. He argues that the contestations over nature, nation, and the autonomy of religion reveal the dynamic processes of secularization and sacralization. Although secular discourses are used to explain nature and nationhood, metaphors of religion have still been employed by poets, for example in admiration of nature, and by civic leaders to speak of national renewal. Finally, the autonomy of religion is contested by the example of Evangelicalism. Although it emphasizes interiorized forms of piety, the evangelical ethos, as seen in the United States, enters the various spheres of health care, leisure, and even entertainment. Secularization, then, is not necessarily a unidirectional process. Interestingly, this, too, is a view shared by Smith, who offers a controversial claim that the observed levels of religiosity in the West today are in fact very similar to those in the Middle Ages. He challenges the view that secularism is fundamentally devoid of religion. Smith highlights the sustained belief in God and the renewed interest in ethics, charity, and doing good to argue that "secularism in the West is a new manifestation of Christianity." In other words, a religious transformation—and not decline—is taking place. This then directly counters the claim that the Christian character of Britain has effectively died.

To adopt secularization as a master narrative disregards, too, particular geographic and historical conditions shaping religious change. This is why Davie contends that the propositions of secularization and its various levels, for example, need to be worked out "case by case and country by country." Brown's claim that Christianity in Britain has effectively died, for example, is based not only on declining indicators of piety but also on changing moralities, especially since the 1960s.

Although it may be valid in Britain, this story, however, is not indicative of the fate of religion elsewhere. Turning the master narrative on its head, Berger, Davie, and Fokas argue that the condition of religion in Europe is not in fact the model. In view of what they consider to be the religiosity of the rest of the world, Europe becomes the exception. To them, the United States clearly demonstrates that modernity is not inimical to religious life. They suggest that competition among religious groups and the importance of churches as social spaces for immigrants are two important conditions keeping religion alive. Indeed, this sense of competition is what Stark and Finke believe to be the main driver of religious vibrancy in the United States. Adopting a rational choice approach, they point out that the abundance and diversity of religious supply ensure that demand is being addressed. The assumption is that demand for the religious is constant. In view of this, religious vibrancy necessarily thrives in a milieu of religious diversity.

Asia, too, becomes interesting as it is now the site of exemplary projects of modernity that employ a secularist agenda adopted from the West. But as Bubenand and van Beek show in their recent volume, a secularist agenda that disregards the presence of religion is not always successful. What becomes evident in Asian societies is that secularism has varieties in which religion plays roles in shaping politics, governance, and the national imagination. An urban community in Bangkok, for example, uses Buddhist rituals and the defense of sacred sites to challenge attempts of the state, which invokes Buddhist values too, to evict its households. In the Philippines, in contrast to the experience of Catholicism in some European societies, the Church has been instrumental in the democratizing process. It is behind, for example, the successful attempt to depose the authoritarian regime of Marcos in the 1980s. Records show, too, that the Catholic Church has been partnering with civil society organizations in encouraging human empowerment. Another interesting case is Singapore, which for a long time has been ranked the most globalized country in the world in terms of such indicators as trade, capital movements, and technological advancement. The Singaporean state has taken a strong stance against the presence of religion in the public sphere. Because of conflicts engendered along ethnic and religious lines, religion has been viewed as necessitating public management. But in spite of this sense of antagonism, religious life tends to be vibrant in Singapore, with more than 80 percent of its population adhering to a religion, for example. Paradoxically, the state is also ready to obtain the support of religious institutions "to inculcate good citizenship, temper the rough edges of secular life by providing a moral anchor, and encourage industriousness...."

In discussing the sustained presence of religion in other parts of the world such as Asia, one has to be wary about the problem of Orientalism (see Volume I, Chapter 11). Orientalism assumes the backwardness of Eastern societies (the Orient) from the perspective of Western history. In this view, religious life does not suggest premodern sensibilities. More than anything, the earlier illustrations indeed suggest that secularism has varied trajectories in other societies where religion plays an important role.

In his influential text on the relationship between religion and modernity in India and Britain, van der Veer takes the historical problem further by arguing that other religions have different understandings of their relationship to the state and society. Indeed, secularization presupposes that the religious can be separated from the secular in the first place. But this is a uniquely Christian discourse derived from Latin Christendom's distinction between the spiritual/religious and the temporal/secular/profane. That is
why until today religious priests are those who are in the monastery or a particular congregation while their secular parish-based counterparts are with the ordinary laity. In the wake of the Protestant Reformation, secularization meant leaving the monastic life to serve in the world or giving up monastic properties. Islam, in contrast, does not have this dyadic distinction, which explains its influence in economic life such as banking and in everyday life in terms of dietary restrictions, for example. In addition, other religions have different forms of piety, which makes measuring religiosity more problematic. Church attendance or frequency of prayer do not necessarily reflect piety in, for example, Buddhism or Hinduism. Without regard for religious particularities and sociohistorical conditions, using secularization as a theoretical lens commits the Orientalist problem of imposition. Here it pays to be reminded that “religion” is a concept exported to the rest of the world as a colonial category with specific cultural baggage from Christianity. Clearly, then, these views challenge the attempts of Norris and Inglehart to come up with a global picture of secularization based on varying levels of human security.

ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS: RELIGIOUS TRENDS

In discussing ways in which secularization has been nuanced (in terms of definition, level of analysis, and historical validity), the previous section has already touched on some of the problems of employing the death-of-religion thesis as a master narrative. The master narrative becomes irrelevant in light of social and geographic specificity, the different trajectories of secularism, and the multidimensionality of secularization itself. But generally, these analyses still welcome the usefulness of secularization as a descriptive idea. A common denominator, for example, is what we may consider their minimalist view that it is first and foremost about structural differentiation.

At this point, one can imagine that the death-of-religion thesis has been losing its influence. In fact, Bruce, who remains to defend it, admits that it is unfashionable. Broadly, I see two possible explanations for this.

First, discussions on secularization have been generally confined to the West and among Western observers. In this case, the question “is religion dying?” may in fact be of interest only to these scholars. One case after another from the United States and Europe is employed to support and refute the conventional secularization thesis. As Casanova puts it, “an impasse has been reached in the debate” and one needs to “adopt a more global perspective.” For this, one is easily reminded of, for example, the rise of Pentecostalism in Latin America and Africa, the emotionally charged expressions of Islam in different parts of the world, the demographics of Roman Catholicism shifting to the Global South, and the growth of reformist Buddhism in East Asia. This does not include the surge of interest in religion brought about by religious violence and 9/11. Indeed, my observation is that for researchers embedded in the non-West, the vibrancy of religion in the media, public life, schools, government, and other social institutions makes it impossible to even think about the question at hand.

Second, secularization is a concept derived from the historical experience of Christianity in Europe. Therefore, it is too limited to capture the dynamic ways by which religions are unfolding in other societies. Globalization appears to be a key process here, with religions having to face challenges of increasing diversity, migration, urbanization, and conflict. Drawing from Wilson, Tschannen suggests that the survival of religion depends on its ability to foster communities. In a globalizing world, community formation is not hampered at all. The rise of online religion, for example, shows that mediated piety is possible, seen in the participation of connected individuals from different continents. New forms of online evangelism demonstrate the virtualization of spiritual experience. As a process, globalization also means the spread of ideas, issues, and ethical problems. Indeed, Casanova is right in suggesting that the need for religious responses to global issues will be greater.

On one hand, the forms of religious response we see can reek of pessimism. Robertson, for example, feels that as a result of 9/11, the world has entered what he calls a “millennial phase” in which the theme of imminent disaster has pervaded religious and political rhetoric at a global scale. But on the other hand, global issues are engendering coordinated humanitarian responses, too. Today, we are seeing the emergence of transnational religious philanthropy, exemplifying the feasibility of global communities forming around specific causes. Also, because of global conflict involving religious groups, there will be a greater need for policy makers to engage religion as a resource for concerted action.

These considerations unravel for us the limitation of secularization as a concept to capture the complexity of religious transformation in the world today. Demerath captures this sentiment very well in arguing that “focusing on the fate of old forms of religion may deflect attention from new forms of the sacred.” Here, I suggest that “is religion dying?” which is a question steeped in the historical specificity of the condition of religion in Europe, must be modified to entertain other analytical possibilities. Instead, we must ask a broader question: what can we say about the condition of religion in the world today? With this question, secularization becomes only one of the possible answers. Here I adopt the coexistence thesis proposed by Woodhead and Heelas in suggesting that different religious transformations are taking place parallel to each other. Whereas Martin suggests that secularization is not a linear process with tensions existing between secularization and sacralization (or the return of religion), the coexistence thesis proposes that various trends are operating simultaneously in the world.
today. Apart from secularization, the other three discussed here are as follows: sacralization, detraditionalization, and universalization.

Sacralization

Sacralization, a concept that has cropped up a few times above, turns secularization on its head by arguing that religion is in fact experiencing, more than anything, resurgence in modern times. In fact, this could be the default situation for global religion. Although it might indeed be the case that indicators of religiosity vary depending on levels of human security as Norris and Inglehart contend, they also admit that because of demographic conditions, there are by default more religious people in the world than there are otherwise. But this is a banal point to argue sacralization.

Sacralization, as a trend, can be more interesting in how its varied processes encourage religious upsurge. Three processes have been identified by Woodhead and Heelas: growth, dedifferentiation, and intensification. Growth takes place because of conversion, especially among those without previous religious affiliation. This may be the case in particular among women converting to Islam in the West. Islam's appeal lies in how it encompasses various spheres of everyday life and fosters community. Facilitating sacralization by conversion, too, is online religion, which I briefly mentioned earlier. Indeed, the new face of online evangelism lies in the ability of the Internet to bring together seekers and online missionaries through which conversion can take place. Dedifferentiation is what Casanova considers privatization, in which religious institutions are finding a role once again as actors in civil society. Religions, in other words, can resist their marginalization brought about by structural differentiation. They see themselves as having important contributions to make in policy-making or community mobilization, for example. In the twentieth century, liberation theology in Latin America has demonstrated the Catholic Church's potential in shaping political structures. This, of course, has had lasting impact on Catholicism in other developing societies in Asia. Finally, sacralization also involves the process of intensification. Broadly, this refers to how individuals with nominal religious affiliations are imbuing a more committed outlook with implications on their religious behavior or piety. In their study of American religion for the post-Boomer generation, Flory and Miller have noticed that there are young people who are reclaiming or rediscovering emotional affinity with traditional religiosity associated with orthodox forms of Anglicanism, for example. The shift is triggered by disillusionment with what they feel to be the ephemeral nature of contemporary religions in the form of "megachurches," for example.

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Detraditionalization

Another trend shaping religion today is detraditionalization, which, broadly speaking, is the process by which religious authority is transferred from traditional sources that are normally external to the individual to the authenticating mechanism of the self. The traditional sources of authority include the scriptures and the religious institution itself as having the official promulgating and interpretive entity. The view, too, of God or a divine being as high and unreachable reflects the external authority of religious tradition. In the context of detraditionalization, individuals do not feel constrained to submit to such forms of authority. I mention three possible varieties of detraditionalization: the "weakening" of tradition, the "consumerization of religion," and religious "individualization."

Some of the key facets of liberal Christianity include the way it challenges scriptural authority and the transmitted knowledge concerning God and his ways. In many ways, liberal Christianity is in direct contrast to the evangelical view that the Bible is to be taken literally and as the final authority over one's life. It is in this sense that liberal Christianity "weakens" the tradition as known and received in conservative Christianity. This disposition overlooks the exclusivist claim of traditional Christianity in terms of, for example, Christ's unique role in salvation history. Megachurches are an interesting case of the consumerization of religion. At one level, they can be seen as conservative in theology, and this is to be expected since many of them align with Evangelicalism. But at another level, megachurches tend to be very detraditionalized and contemporary with their approach to "doing church." In the United States, for example, Miller documents how these "new paradigm" churches downplay theological language to make Christianity understandable to the public. In Singapore, whose megachurches harbor thousands of members, individuals are drawn to spectacular forms of worship in huge auditoriums that make use of an ensemble of light and music. In South Korea, which is home to the biggest churches in the world, preachers, while conservative in orientation, are invoking prosperity theology and political power. All these examples point to how even conservative institutions can employ detraditionalization in the form of religious consumerization. Finally, religious individualization clearly reflects the process of detraditionalization in that here one sees the self as the final arbiter of what is authentic. Here the distinction between religion and spirituality begins to make sense. Religion can be distinguished as that which embodies traditions and the institution tasked to maintain them. Spiritualities of life, on the other hand, are heavily deinstitutionalized forms of connecting to the inner self. In the West, such Eastern practices as yoga and meditation appeal to a small but still significant proportion of individuals. Individuals are moving away from religious traditions toward
alternative forms of spiritual experience. I note here, however, that religious individualization does not have to take place outside religious institutions. In my research, I have argued that "indwelt individualization" is possible in which religious actors can reflect on their faith and see the importance of certain beliefs and practices depending on how they surface authenticity within them.116 That is why it is possible to encounter young people professing to be Catholic without necessarily going to Mass because to them participating in a voluntary initiative demonstrates their religion better.

**Universalization**

The final religious trend discussed by Woodhead and Heelas is universalization, primarily grounded in the "ethic of humanity," which is "premised on the idea that ethnic, gendered or national differences should not be allowed to disguise the fact that—essentially—we are all humans."117 In this way, this development is also a form of detraditionalization. Traditional religions, by invoking an authority external to the human being, tend to be exclusivist. With universalization, differences are downplayed in favor of that which unites us all—our humanity.

Interestingly, this sense of inclusivity is how religion can contest diversity. As argued earlier, diversity can be detrimental to religion as it fosters different ways of viewing reality (see Volume 1, Chapter 8).118 In this light, the monopoly of truth by a religion is irrevocably challenged. Universalization, however, presents itself as a creative way of transcending difference by emphasizing what is common to all. Perhaps the fact that this resonates with Buddhist ideals makes Buddhist organizations in East Asia successful.119 The temples, for example, are becoming instrumental in administering welfare, and there are other movements such as Soka Gakkai and Tzu Chi whose appeal to the diasporic Chinese lies in their humanitarian efforts in the region.120

Universalization as a trend, interestingly, is not only reshaping religious institutions. Even at the level of everyday religion, the ethic of humanity appears to be a conviction more important than fundamental beliefs that separate religions from each other. In the United States, for example, Ammerman observes that the pervading understanding of Christianity among many Americans (and liberals in particular) sees the Golden Rule as the most important principle of religious life.121 In this regard, Golden Rule Christianity rejects exclusivism based on specific doctrines that consider Christianity, for example, as the only true religion. The ethical turn is also seen in the emergence of religious nongovernment organizations such as World Vision and Christian Aid, which see their primary purpose in caring for the needy around the world. There is no strong ethos of proselytism in such organizations. Finally, under universalization can also be included activist organizations that fight for human dignity, environmentalism, and even animal rights. Even if they may not have a substantively religious foundation, these organizations imbibe a para-religious morality that shapes their worldview and social action.122 It will be remembered in the earlier discussion that the functional aspects of religion are sustained under the premise that religious inclination is a human universal. From this vantage point, the ethical turn toward humanity is the pinnacle of humanity's search for the transcendent, which, paradoxically, rests within us. Bentham, hence, is justified in challenging the critics of religion as follows: "You hold that religions are products of the human mind that have done much harm through dividing people from one another. Will you also concede that they have also done good, through uniting people and through inspiring outstanding creativity?"123

**CONCLUSION**

So, is religion dying? In view of the earlier comprehensive discussion, any straightforward answer will not do justice to the complexity of the presence of religion—in its various forms—in the world today. A careful answer, I believe, would be: it depends. Answering this controversial question depends on several factors recounted earlier: what we mean by religion and which one we are dealing with, its historical and geographic conditions, the level of analysis being employed, and even whether such variables as gender and age make any difference to the observations we offer. Indeed, the thorough nuancing of secularization made by generations of scholars clearly points to the controversies generated by the theory concerning its validity and historical veracity.

But it also has normative tendencies. The concept of secularization has been controversial as it served as ammunition between secularists and religious devotees engaged in what appears to be an endless and exasperating exchange of "facts." Historical and statistical data have been read in different ways to refute each other's claims. This reveals the discontent some people may have about secularization.124 Social scientists, therefore, have carried the burden of justifying their role and presence in studying religion in the most neutral manner possible (see Volume 1, Chapter 2).125 This attempt, of course, is not always successful, as when researchers are treated with suspicion by religious individuals, for example.

The endlessness of the controversies surrounding the supposedly dying state of religion can mean, at least to me, that perhaps the question is constraining. The earlier discussion has recounted how the idea that religion is dying has predominantly confined its articulation within the experience of religion in the West. Well known, for example, has been the debate as to which one is anomalous to the secularization thesis—Europe or the United
States. Furthermore, the question "is religion dying?" is also limiting with regard to the answer it elicits—either yes or no. Religions are necessarily complex and their fortunes throughout history cannot be simply reduced to a simple linear process implicit to this question. As mentioned earlier, one has to take into consideration processes of globalization, the unfolding of novel global ethical dilemmas, the continuing significance of religion in the public sphere, the transformations of religious institutions, the emergence of New Religious Movements, and even the development of alternative forms of individual religiosity. Perhaps, a question that welcomes other analytical possibilities be asked instead: what can we say about the condition of religion in the world today?

For this, I have drawn from the work of Woodhead and Heelas, who suggest that there are at least four trends concerning contemporary religious change. Secularization is only one of them. The others, as elaborated earlier, include sacralization, detraditionalization, and universalization. Manifesting themselves in varying degrees, each of these trends may be present at the various levels of the religious institution and everyday religion. And they take place parallel to each other—the coexistence thesis.

But this question on the condition of religion is important not only because it entertains new ways of understanding the religious life in the here and now. If secularization is simply one of the trends coexisting with the others, researchers can also entertain the possibility of the sustained (but yet again transformed) presence of religion in the future. Two analytical directions crop up: one concerning the social nature of religion itself, and the other its future.

Following Wilson's train of thought, Tschannen suggests that the continuity of religious life depends on the "continuity of community." On one hand, religious communities can still be formed as spaces within highly rationalized and individualistic societies. But they will be marginal relative to the mainstream. On the other hand, religion can maintain social significance if societies can maintain strong communal culture as they undergo technological advancement. The Durkheimian assumption is that religion is necessarily of a communal nature where religious socialization takes place and for religion to proceed in this manner is an uphill battle given the individualizing tendencies of modernity.

This dilemma, as we have seen, is gradually being entertained in the emergent literature on detrationalization and spiritualities of life. And one quick answer might be to speak of contemporary religion as being that of the individual alone, as in Sheilasm. But the question also concerns the changing social aspect of religion. In other words, how is the nature of religion as a communal activity changing relative to individualization? I have touched on these issues in my work on the virtualization of spiritual experience and on the reflexive spirituality of Catholic youth.

Other emergent areas needing exploration include the religiosity of transnational movements, migrants and their religious rootedness, the religiosity of the socially excluded, and religious socialization outside religious institutions.

The other analytical direction resulting from the coexistence thesis concerns the very future of religion. Although the social sciences do not have the privilege of absolute accuracy, being able to ask and theorize about the future of religion is a worthwhile endeavor especially because of the implications on governance, religious leadership, social welfare, and public morality. Indeed, the diversity and uneven presence of religious persuasions around the world is accompanied by tensions over what cultural values are to prevail within a religion itself and the society at large. Battles, for example, are being fought over the traditional issues of homosexual marriage (see Volume 2, Chapter 3), abortion, and divorce and the new bioethical issues engendered by scientific advancement in procreation, medical treatment, and the possibility of living forever (see Volume 3, Chapter 4). Another issue, of course, is the formation of communities in an increasingly multicultural environment. To say that these matters are purely secular in the future would be a mistake. Both students and followers of religion today are therefore called upon to reflect on the future of religious leadership and membership, the institution, theology, practice, and religion's ultimate relevance.

NOTES


33. Wilson, "Secularization."
37. Ibid., 11.
40. Ibid., 100.
42. Bruce, "The Curious Case of the Unnecessary Recantation."
43. Ibid., 201 (italics in the original).
44. Norris and Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular."
45. Ibid., 25.
46. Bruce, *Secularization."
47. Vincent, Sharma, and Aune, "Women, Religion and Secularization."
51. Ibid., 150.
52. Martin, *On Secularization."
57. Ibid.
60. Amaranasingam, "Introduction."
61. Dobbelarae, *Secularization."
62. Ibid., 192.
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118. Woodhead and Heelas, Religion in Modern Times, 386.


121. Kvaah-Pearce, State, Society, and Religious Engineering.


123. Benthall, Returning to Religion.

124. Ibid., 171.

125. Warner, Secularization and Its Discontents.

126. Wilson, Religion in Sociological Perspective.

127. Berger, Davie, and Folks, Religious America, Secular Europe?


129. Woodhead and Heelas, Religion in Modern Times.


136. Norris and Inglehart, Sacred and Secular.


139. Casanova, “Rethinking Secularization.”

FURTHER READINGS


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