

Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide
Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart
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2004 (285 pages)

Secularization theory is the “master model of sociological inquiry,” Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart note in their important new book, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*. The pioneering sociological system-builders—Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim—all believed that religion was destined to become increasingly less significant with the rise of industrial modernity. In recent years, this view has come under serious attack based primarily on two frames of reference: the growing influence of Islamic fundamentalism and the continuing vitality of religion in the United States.

In *Sacred and Secular*, Norris and Inglehart (of Harvard University and the University of Michigan, respectively) respond to the recent critical backlash against secularization theory, drawing mainly on twenty years’ worth of cross-national data from the World Values Survey. They strikingly conclude that the persistence of religion in many countries today, far from “carry[ing] the secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories,” as one critic declared, actually verifies its core intuition: that religion and social development are inversely related. To understand what the data actually tell us about secularization, however, certain basic assumptions of the theory need to be substantially revised.

In the opening chapter, they provide a brief review of the dominant versions of secularization theory, “cognitive” and “functionalist.” The cognitive view, descended from Weber, emphasizes the rise of science in competition with religious belief systems. Durkheim laid the groundwork for the functionalist approach in his classic study, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). Here, religion is destined to “lose its purpose” as more effective modern institutions supplant its historical role in meeting human needs, particularly in education and social services.

Norris and Inglehart agree with critics such as Peter Berger and Rodney Stark that classical secularization theory was too general and empirically weak. Nevertheless, substantial new data show that the theory is essentially correct, if still in need of further conceptual refinement. They argue that the varied decline and persistence of religion in the world today is most strongly correlated with differing levels of “existential security.” Essentially, religion persists where people bear high levels of risk due to inequality, poverty, and inadequate social provision by the state. Conversely, more equal, less impoverished societies, especially those with comprehensive welfare provisions, have become increasingly secular by every relevant measure. The authors’ complex regression analyses show these correlations to be very robust across more than seventy countries—agrarian, industrial, and postindustrial.

The one seeming anomaly among highly developed countries, that is, the United States, is in fact no such thing, the authors show in part 2 of the book—a series of case

studies. High levels of religious belief and participation in the United States are consistent with trends in other leading countries, if seen in light of existential security. Although sometimes exaggerated (particularly in the Gallup polls, they argue), U.S. churchgoing is still higher than in most European countries. More strikingly, the level of belief in God, the afterlife, and other religious concepts remains as high or higher today in the United States than it was forty years ago. In 2001, fully 94 percent of Americans said they believe in God, a level comparable to that of Brazil or India. In contrast, only 46 percent of Swedes said they believe in God.

Americans' religious exceptionalism is best explained, the authors argue, in light of its social welfare exceptionalism. Contrasted with Europe, the United States is something of a ready-made case for this approach. As is well-known, among leading countries, the United States is the most unequal, underinsured, and poverty-ridden. It ranks highest among fourteen OECD countries on the GINI coefficient scale, the most widely accepted inequality measurement. At the same time, the United States has the highest amount of prayer—slightly more than Ireland, which ranks second on the GINI coefficient scale. United States social spending, as a percentage of GDP, is among the lowest of thirty countries documented in the most recent OECD social expenditure database. Only Ireland, Korea, and Mexico spend less. More than eighty million people are uninsured or underinsured, and nearly fifty million have incomes below 125 percent of the poverty line—a huge pocket of likely existential insecurity in the Norris-Inglehart model.

As they point out, cross-national comparisons of this type must be buttressed at the individual level. Thus, they also show that both daily prayer and the feeling that “religion is very important” follow a consistent downward slope as income rises in the United States: “The poor are almost twice as religious as the rich.” Secularization, they conclude, is not a deterministic process, “but it is still one that is largely predictable, based on knowing just a few facts about levels of human development and socioeconomic equality in each country.” The activities of particular churches, the effects of legal changes, or the political influence of religious leaders may be periodically relevant, but existential security is the most forceful long-term influence on religious trends.

Certain cases do not appear to fit the existential security model as closely as the United States and Ireland do, with their high inequality and low social spending. For example, France ranks at the very bottom of the prayer scale, yet is far from being the most equal country. Italy is third highest on the prayer scale, below the United States and Ireland, while holding its own toward the low end of the inequality scale. Austria, Spain, Germany, Belgium, France, and the Netherlands are all at least marginally less equal than Italy, yet significantly *more* secular. Maybe the French Revolution's anti-clerical legacy, or the Vatican's lasting influence in Italy, helps to explain these variations.

The most important alternative to secularization theory, the religious market model, fails in light of cross-national evidence, the authors argue in chapter four. Associated primarily with Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, the religious market model assumes that

demand for religion is relatively constant, with variations in a society's religiosity resulting from configurations and changes in the "supply" of religion. The highly deregulated, pluralistic religious landscape in the United States is a supply-side marvel that drives religious "consumption" by creating and expanding markets for religious products. Norris and Inglehart point to empirical evidence that contradicts religious market theory, in addition to methodological problems in its use of economic competition measures such as the Herfindahl Index. Poland, Ireland, and Italy, as well as some Latin American countries, display high religious participation under strong Catholic monopolies. On the other hand, the Netherlands, Australia, and Great Britain combine fairly high religious pluralism with very low participation. The Netherlands and Great Britain, however, also have high levels of church-state cooperation, including public funding of religious schools and service organizations. The substitution effects of welfare spending may be an area where secularization theory and the religious market approach can be partially reconciled. This is the argument of an important recent paper by Anthony Gill and Erik Lundsgaarde, published in *Rationality and Society* (16:4, 2004).

Sacred and Secular also responds to another prominent thesis—the idea that a “clash of civilizations” is the next stage in world history after the Cold War—first proposed by Samuel Huntington in the early 1990s. Some have argued that the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, clearly verified this idea. The view that Islam teaches hatred for the West, particularly for its democratic traditions, is sometimes heard in the conservative media today. Norris and Inglehart show that this is not true. Their data indicate that Muslim populations are generally as supportive of democratic ideals and political methods as people in the West. If there is any clash of civilizations with the West, it lies in Muslim attitudes toward gender equality and sexual liberalization, of which they strongly disapprove. The authors draw no political conclusions from this, but it is interesting to note that conservative religious supporters of President Bush may have more in common with the Islamic threat often imputed in the war on terrorism than they assume.

Sacred and Secular is a major refinement of secularization theory based on massive cross-national evidence. It will be open to criticism, as all grand theories are, until further tested by multivariate analysis that can help disentangle potential cognitive and functional dimensions of the existential security that the authors find to be so strongly correlated with religious decline. Further theoretical consideration of factors potentially affecting both supply and demand for religion, such as welfare spending, is also needed. More generally, *Sacred and Secular* is a welcome antidote to the careless ideological pronouncements of American religious exceptionalism that often populate the airwaves and some academic settings. America's other great exceptionalism—its poverty, inequality, and welfare risk—may be the real religious story after all.

—Lew Daly

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