Debates on Secularisation and Religion in International Politics

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ABSTRACT

Religion's historical association with violence and extremism has long been a concern in international affairs. The belief that religious differences can spark conflicts has led governments to worry about the potential destabilising influence of religious entities and ideologies in contemporary politics. While the prevailing view emphasises the separation of religion from politics, an increasing number of scholars are challenging the established secularist perspective on religion's role in international relations. This work contributes to the ongoing reevaluation of religion's role in politics by addressing three key questions. First, it explores the dominance of secularisation in international relations and the various traditions of secularism that have influenced international political norms. Second, it examines the crisis within the secular orientation of international relations, marked by the diminishing privatisation of religion and the clear division between religion and politics. Finally, it delves into emerging alternative perspectives that challenge secularist hegemony in international relations, shedding light on the distinction between religious and secular processes, institutions, and states and the implications of this differentiation for politics. In pursuit of these questions, the work advances three central arguments. First, it suggests that the Peace of Westphalia did not eliminate religion from politics but rather established a secular discourse rooted in Western Christianity. Second, the work argues that secularism shapes specific conceptions of religion and politics, enforcing a separation between the two. As

secularism is inherently influenced by politics, the boundaries it creates between the secular and the religious are subject to change and contestation. Consequently, secularism and religion are not fixed categories, and their relationship to politics remains dynamic and adaptable.

INTRODUCTION

The traditional viewpoint in the field of International Relations asserts that religion and politics were closely intertwined in medieval Europe, particularly from 1517, on the eve of the Protestant Reformation, to 1648, the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia (Philpott, 2000). This significant treaty effectively resolved religious conflicts in Europe by relegating religion to the private sphere and separating it from politics. Consequently, it established the public sphere as autonomous, giving rise to the prevailing discourse of secularism in international politics. The Peace of Westphalia is widely acknowledged as the cornerstone of the modern state system, marking the moment of secularization in the international arena (Hickey & Hickey, 2020).

Modern international politics can be traced back to the principles of Westphalia, with the separation of religion and politics forming a fundamental premise in the field of academic International Relations. The dominant theories in the discipline, including Realism, Neorealism, Marxist traditions, Liberalism, and Constructivism, tend to view religion as a private matter with limited influence on state behavior (Sandal & Fox, 2013). They prioritize factors such as power, technology, and geography as the primary determinants of state actions, often overlooking the role of religion.

However, the failure of International Relations theories to grasp the complex relationship between religion and politics, as well as to explain the recent resurgence of religion, can be traced back to a fundamental assumption: that the Peace of Westphalia definitively privatized religion and secularized politics. These theories exclude the possibility of religion playing a role in modern politics, rooted in the belief that Westphalia established a clear separation between religion and politics, forming the foundation of modern international politics. Consequently, they maintain that the boundaries between the religious and the secular are fixed and unchanging.

This work aims to reevaluate the division between religion and the secular within international politics by reexamining the consequences of Westphalia. It addresses three critical questions: first, how secularization came to dominate International Relations and the various traditions of secularism that shape international political norms; second, why the secular orientation of International Relations is facing a crisis, marked by the erosion of the privatization of religion and the clear separation of religion and politics; and third, if there are ongoing efforts to challenge the secularist monopoly in International Relations, what alternative perspective can elucidate the distinction between religious and secular processes, institutions, and states and the implications of this demarcation for politics.

In exploring these questions, the work presents three key arguments. First, it contends that the Peace of Westphalia did not eliminate religion from politics but instead established a secular discourse deeply rooted in Western Christianity. Second, the work argues that secularism shapes specific conceptualizations of religion and politics while enforcing a division between the two, with both secularism and religion undergoing ongoing transformations and contestations. Current global trends, characterized by the role of religion in fueling conflicts and the resurgence of religious influences, call for a reevaluation of the relationship between religion and politics and a reexamination of the assumptions rooted in Westphalia.

THE SECULARISATION DEBATE

The topic of secularization as a theoretical concept emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries, focusing on the ongoing debate regarding whether secularization, defined as the increasing separation of religion from politics and public life, and its relegation to the private sphere, was genuinely occurring in the modern world or merely an illusion (Bruce, 2011). This long-standing debate, now over a century and a half old, has been sustained by the emergence of significant social and political changes in recent times. Certain aspects of this discourse pose intriguing and realistic challenges that offer valuable insights into the evolving role of religion in the early 21st century.

To delve into the study of religion in international politics, it might be advantageous to revisit the classical secularization debate. Four broad strands of social thought have significantly shaped the contemporary theoretical and analytical category of secularization. These strands encompass structural differentiation, empiricism and scientific ideas, liberal thought, and Marxism.

1.   **Structural Differentiation**: This perspective suggests that civilizations and cultures undergo various stages of evolution, involving the transformation of functions and meanings from simplicity to complexity. This evolution has significant consequences for religion, as its role in the public sphere diminishes, and it takes on a more limited function of legitimating the prevailing societal model. As a result, religion transitions from a central role in society and politics to a separate institution governed by secular or non-religious authorities (Koenig, 2005).

2.   **Empiricism and Scientific Ideas**: Empirical and scientific ideas challenge the tenets of religion, exposing its inconsistencies and weaknesses. Thinkers like David Hume, in "The Natural History of Religion," critique religious beliefs as irrational in the face of life's uncertainties. Similarly, Charles Darwin, in "On the Origin of Species," offers an alternative perspective on human origins through evolution and natural selection, undermining traditional theological beliefs.

3.   **Liberal Thought**: Influential liberal philosophers such as John Locke and John Stuart Mill emphasize autonomous political orders and individual rights in society. Locke argues for the natural right of individuals, promoting freedom of choice in various aspects of life, including religion (Marwah, 2015). By the mid-19th century, Mill advocates for a liberal state that refrains from imposing any particular religion on its citizens and maintains neutrality toward all faiths (Marwah, 2015).

4.   **Marxism and Hegelian Idealism**: A combination of Hegelian idealism and Marxist materialism contributed to the secularization of religion. Radical Hegelians argued that religion presented obstacles to the realization of human rationality and the spirit of Christianity (Toscano, 2010). Marxists, on the other hand, viewed religion as a tool of the ruling classes to oppress the working classes. They believed that religion would lose its hold when class-based hierarchy and exploitation were eradicated, as in a socialist society. Marxism-inspired state socialism and communism played a significant role in diminishing the power of religion in the public and private spheres (Toscano, 2010).

5.   **Freudian Psychology**: Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis asserts that religion is a "neurotic by-product" resulting from the conflict between the conscious and unconscious aspects of the mind (Setzer, 1974). Freud suggests that religious beliefs are insights into the responses generated by psychological conflicts, and individuals can outgrow

their neurotic dependence on religion through maturity and rationality (Setzer, 1974). Scientific ideas also foster anti-religious sentiments in individuals and collectives.

The contemporary debate on secularization primarily revolves around two schools of thought. On one hand, proponents argue that the modern world is characterized by secularization, reflecting the progressive decline of religion's influence in the public sphere. On the other hand, there is the perspective that religion is not retreating from the public sphere; instead, its significance continues or, in many cases, experiences a revival.

RELIGION IN DECLINE

The discourse on the gradual decline of religion in society encompasses various nuanced perspectives. Furseth and Repstad (2006) collectively categorise these perspectives as moderate theories of secularisation, distinguishing them from more extreme theories. Extreme secularisation theories, rooted in the works of 19th-century sociologists like August Comte (1798–1857), proposed a linear societal progression through distinct historical stages, ultimately culminating in a modern era characterised by scientific explanations supplanting religious ones (Umotong, 2011; Umotong, 2013). However, this rigid form of secularisation is now considered outdated in contemporary social sciences (Harp, 2010). A more widely accepted viewpoint is the moderate position, which acknowledges that while the significance of religion may be gradually diminishing, it is unlikely to completely vanish. This perspective suggests that as various sectors of society progressively free themselves from the influence of religious institutions, religion's grip on society naturally weakens.

Esposito (2010) underscores the role of social diversity as a catalyst for religious change during the transition from the mediaeval to the modern period. Social diversity played a pivotal role in two ways: firstly, as societies became more diverse in terms of racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups, no single religion could serve as a unifying force. This diversity contributed to the separation of state and church, a significant consequence of social plurality. Secondly, within religions themselves, schisms emerged, leading to the fragmentation of religions into sects and denominations. The Protestant Reformation, for instance, challenged the longstanding dominance of the Catholic Church, ushering in an era of religious competition and fragmentation.

This tendency towards fragmentation is not unique to mediaeval Christianity, as other traditional religions also faced similar challenges (Umotong, 2014). With individuals granted the freedom to choose their ultimate beliefs, society adopted a consumer-oriented approach towards religion. Religious institutions and leaders played a strategic role in expanding and consolidating their congregations.

Norris and Inglehart (2004) categorise moderate theories of secularisation based on economic theories of demand and supply:

1. **Demand-side Theories**: These theories focus on the behaviour of the masses and explain how industrialization and modernization have gradually eroded religious beliefs and practices, despite efforts by religious leaders. Rationalisation theories emphasise the rise of reason and science during the Enlightenment, rendering religious teachings redundant. Functional differentiation theories argue that the expansion of the welfare state replaced the core social responsibilities of religious institutions with those of non-religious organisations.

2. **Supply-side Theories**: These theories concentrate on the behaviour of religious institutions. Rational choice theories posit that religious change is determined by the active supply of religion by these institutions rather than public demand. Religious market theories suggest that competition among various religions leads to

rivalry between religious institutions, indirectly preserving individual freedom of choice in religious matters.

While no single theory dominates the discussion on secularisation, the conceptual frameworks they offer lead to four key ideas—rationalisation, differentiation, modernization, and pluralism—that contribute to our understanding of the influence of religion in the public sphere. These ideas form the backdrop against which theories of secularisation or religious change are debated. Therefore, any argument for the continued significance of religion in contemporary times must engage with these debates.

Rationalisation: Loss of Faith

Rationalisation is a systematic process characterised by the methodical pursuit of efficient relationships between means and ends, and at times, this pursuit may prioritise efficiency as an end in itself (Rod et al. 2015). In industrialised and advanced industrial societies, rationalisation encompasses several dimensions:

1. It engages in intellectual challenges against the foundations of divinely revealed knowledge, including concepts like heaven, hell, and the afterlife. It also questions the legitimacy of interpreters and custodians of sacred truths, such as theologians and religious leaders.

2. Rationalisation reevaluates the efficiency of well-established institutions and organisations considered sacred, such as churches, monastic orders, and religious brotherhoods. It raises doubts regarding the capacity of religious entities to compete with secular counterparts, such as religious schools versus non-religious schools or religious charitable organisations versus secular ones.

3. It portrays religious concepts as 'mystifications' and 'false consciousness,' thereby undermining the cultural underpinnings of religious beliefs, including individual and communal rituals and ceremonies infused with religious symbolism.

In all these respects, rationalization erodes religious beliefs and practices that are held as intrinsic values or as ways of life justified by sacred tradition. Consequently, rationalisation ultimately leads to a secularising influence (Umotong, 2020). Max Weber articulated the primary statement regarding the secularising impact of rationalization (Roth, 2014). Weber contended that there existed a direct relationship between the decline of religion and the general process of rationalisation in modern societies. He proposed that the ascent of capitalism and industrialization, along with the emergence of a bureaucracy grounded in reason and regulation, had triggered a shift in societal attitudes from those based on religious values to ones rooted in rationality. Weber maintained that this transformation in attitudes was, for the most part, an inevitable progression(Roth, 2014). While religion might retain some influence, especially during periods of instability, there was no room for religion to reclaim a central role in modern societies (Roof & McKinney, 1987).

The demand-side theories of secularization, as advocated by Weber and Durkheim, have undergone thorough scrutiny and critique by scholars. Isaac Balbus (2014) succinctly summarises Weber's rationality thesis of secularisation:

> Industrialisation brought with it a series of social changes — the fragmentation of the life-world, the decline of community, the rise of bureaucracy, technological consciousness — that together made religion less arresting and less plausible than it had been in pre-modern societies.

That is the conclusion of most social scientists, historians, and church leaders in the western world (p. 176).

Critics of Weber's thesis raise three central concerns. Firstly, they challenge Weber's assumption that rational thought and religious lifestyles are inherently incompatible. Many scholars argue that there is no inherent incompatibility between religion and rationality. They contend that scientific inquiry and rational thinking can coexist within a framework rooted in religious values (Koshul, 2003). In fact, a scientific outlook can serve functions analogous to those of religion, such as reinforcing faith in the laws of nature or divination through sciences like astrology. There is even a phenomenon known as 'cyber-religion,' characterised by the emergence of technology enthusiasts. Furthermore, Weber's analysis lacks a systematic examination of why religion no longer holds a central role in modern society and why reason and instrumentality have become predominant.

Secondly, critics point out that rationality, defined as efficient means-end relationships, is context-dependent and may not be suitable for all situations. When rationality leads to perilous or destructive outcomes, it cannot be considered a satisfactory foundation for social and moral order (Breen, 2016). For instance, systematic mass persecution, such as the Jewish Holocaust by the Nazis, required rational planning and rational means for its execution (Umotong, 2021). In such cases, the pursuit of rationality led to inhumane ends. Therefore, the evaluation of rationality's 'rationality' must consider the goals it serves. If rationality leads to dehumanisation, there is a chance that religious values can reassert themselves in response.

Thirdly, Weber's central postulation focused on the growing role of Protestantism in the Western world, triggered by the Industrial Revolution (Delacroix & Nielsen, 2001). Since these historical events occurred centuries ago, it is challenging to empirically assess their contemporary validity. The evidence of secularisation through rationalisation is primarily based on claims about the replacement of religious thinking and behaviour with rational, goal-oriented ideas and practices. For instance, the prominence of scientific thinking in fields like medicine, education, engineering, and astronomy is often viewed as a sign of declining religious influence (). However, global evidence suggests otherwise. In many societies where science is actively pursued, religious influence remains significant, contradicting the notion that rationality invariably leads to secularization. In essence, secularisation is more of a taken-for-granted ideology than a set of systematically interrelated propositions (Delibas, 2006).

Differentiation: Loss of Function

The differentiation perspective considers societies as complex integrated systems comprising various social institutions and processes. These systems undergo differentiation when facing internal conflicts or external pressures, resulting in the specialisation of functions within societal institutions and processes. Differentiation theories aim to understand the conditions under which one or more institutions influence the overall system's development, examining the regulation of relationships between different institutions and how the system maintains its integrity when interacting with other systems. Concerning religion and secularisation, questions related to functional differentiation have prompted significant discussions. In advanced industrial societies, religion is perceived to have shifted from its traditional role of prescribing ideal values for personal and social conduct to legitimising the entire social order. It has become less effective in fostering communal identity and binding various social institutions together.

The concept of religion losing its purpose due to functional differentiation in societal evolution originates from Emile Durkheim's work in 1912 (Umotong & Udofia,

2021). Durkheim argued that religion encompasses not only a set of beliefs but also a set of actions, including rituals and ceremonies associated with various life events and seasonal changes (Dillon, 2003). These rituals and ceremonies play a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion, stability, and the overall benefit of society. Durkheim posited that industrialised societies have undergone functional differentiation, resulting in the emergence of specialised institutions and individuals to address the diverse needs of society (Turner, 2003). Consequently, religion has lost several of its social functions, remaining, at best, a repository of spiritual and moral values.

Scholars, including Thomas Luckman, Peter L. Berger, Bryan Wilson, Peter Beyer, Steve Bruce, and Karel Dobbeleare, further developed Durkheim's ideas. They argued that, as societies progress, various social sectors gradually free themselves from religious control. Each sector operates according to its own unique logic, be it economic, scientific, or political, leaving little room for the influence of the invisible or divine hand.

Peter Berger's perspective on this debate evolved over time. Initially, he asserted that traditional religious institutions were declining with the advancement of modernization, predicting that religion would become a strictly private matter. He viewed the relationship between religion and politics as a matter of legitimation (Hjelm & Zuckerman, 2013). Historically, religion served as the instrument to legitimise the social system, making the institutional setup meaningful and acceptable for individuals. However, globalisation de-instrumentalized religion, causing it to retreat from the public sphere into the private realm. In later works, Berger retracted this position and suggested that modernization could create conditions in which religion experiences a resurgence, countering secularization. He argued that religion could serve as a force for social unity, collective action, and political mobilisation, even in modern societies (Hjelm & Zuckerman, 2013).

Similarly, Bryan Wilson (2016) emphasised that secularisation is characterised by changes in public attitudes towards religion. As religion loses its role in legitimising political power, diminishes in cultural importance, and is no longer relied upon to interpret natural and worldly events, a pervasive mood of secularisation emerges. Religion becomes a private matter, and any attempts by individuals or social institutions to influence individual beliefs are viewed as unwarranted interference in private affairs.

Analysing globalisation, Beyer (2007) argued that religious movements have two probable responses to globalisation, depending on the nature of the religion. Some sections of traditional movements, such as Catholicism or Islam, react against globalisation, resisting global forces to preserve old identities. Liberal theological movements, like religious environmentalism, embrace global culture and celebrate globalisation and diversity. In the context of globalisation, many religious traditions, both old and new, can find fertile ground for renewed influence in public life.

Dobbeleare (1987) creatively attempted to synthesize various demand-side theories of secularization initiated by the works of Weber and Durkheim. He proposed a model of secularisation consisting of three analytically distinct but interconnected dimensions: laicization, religious change, and religious involvement. Laicization refers to the declining importance of religion in society. Religious change involves alterations in theology, religious institutions' orientation, and individual beliefs. Religious involvement pertains to shifts in the relationship between individuals and religious institutions. While laicization is considered the most critical aspect of secularisation, it is not a one-dimensional or irreversible process.

The functionalist or functional differentiation theory, once dominant in the academic debate on societal development during the 1950s and 1960s, gradually lost favor. Functionalists asserted that, like religion, secularisation is a complex yet unified phenomenon requiring a clearer conceptual definition or a more precise specification of

a measurable reality. They argued that societies progress along a singular path of socio-economic development, culminating in the creation of modern secular democracies. Critics countered that collectives, such as communities, societies, nations, and states, do not follow a single historical path of progress but experience multidimensional transformations. This may include a potential loss of the social functions of religious institutions due to functional differentiation in society. However, this does not necessarily imply the loss of the moral and spiritual function of religion, which could, in fact, become more significant.

In alignment with critics of the rationalisation theory of secularisation, critics of functionalism argue that if functional differentiation indeed indicates a decline in religion, one might expect the affluent European countries to be the least religious. Yet, the existence of diverse patterns of religiosity in these countries suggests otherwise. Analysing church attendance in Europe, Smith (1991) noted that claims about a significant decline in religious participation are based partly on exaggerated perceptions of past religiousness. While participation may be low today in many nations, it is not necessarily due to modernization, rendering the secularisation thesis irrelevant. Hadden (1995) added that the secularisation thesis gained popularity during the 1950s and 1960s because it aligned with the evolutionary functional model of modernization. Claims of secularisation persisted not due to empirical evidence but due to the neglect of contradictory evidence. This is evident in the way religion continues to play a role in politics, highlighting that secularisation has not unfolded as initially predicted.

Modernisation: Loss of Tradition

Modernization, as defined by Beckford (2003), represents a multifaceted configuration of social, legal, economic, political, and cultural processes aimed at strengthening states in an increasingly coordinated international system, promoting economic productivity and power at national and international levels, applying theoretical knowledge and practical skills to enhance productivity, establishing democratic forms of politics and government, emphasizing education and freedom of thought and expression, favoring urban centers for residence and work, and nurturing notions related to individual subjectivity, dignity, and rights (Beckford, 2003; Ignatius & Umotong, 2022). According to Beckford's definition, modernization involves a critical evaluation of traditional sources of authority, a belief in reason, a pursuit of freedom, and dynamism across various life domains. Given the historical connection between religious and political authority in ancient and mediaeval times, Beckford argues that modernization has resulted in the destabilisation of religious authority in favour of political authority. In essence, modernization has led to secularisation.

Wallis and Bruce (1989) also propose a strong causal relationship between modernization and the decline of religion. They contend that religion has lost its capacity to legitimise the political, social, and moral order with the advent of modernization. Modernization has further contributed to the privatisation of religion. In summary, regardless of individual levels of religiosity and attempts to mobilise religious sentiments in politics, society, and the economy (Ishamali, 2022; Ishamali, 2023), religion's overall presence and influence are waning. They go on to argue that unless religion visibly regains control over some major social institutions in the future, the ongoing trend towards secularisation due to modernization will persist. However, they clarify that the decline of religion is not universally applicable, nor is it an inevitable outcome. The decline of religion can be reversed in cases where religion plays a significant role in defining collective identity, such as in communities fighting for their physical or socio-cultural survival.

Pluralism: Loss of Monopoly

Pluralism signifies a state characterised by competition in shaping comprehensive meanings for daily life. This competition typically emerges after a historical phase where it was either minimal or absent, indicating that pluralism is a consequence of a historical process of de-monopolisation (Walker, 2002). Initially, the view on the relationship between religious pluralism and secularisation held that pluralism encourages competition, eroding religious faith and ultimately leading to secularization. The origins of religious pluralism in the West are often traced back to the 16th century, coinciding with the Protestant Reformation, which fragmented Western Christianity and gave rise to diverse sects and denominations emphasising alternative beliefs. This event marked the end of the monopolistic control of a single church, sowing seeds of doubt and mistrust (Beneke, 2008).

Religious market theorists, drawing on supply-side economic market theories, argue that the presence of multiple churches, sects, and denominations compels religious organisations and leaders to invest increased time, energy, and resources in attracting individuals and communities to their congregation. This results in a religious marketplace marked by open competition. As individuals encounter several absolute truths vying for adherence, they begin to explore and compare, becoming less inclined to wholeheartedly embrace a single religious perspective. Diversity and competition promote self-criticism, doubt regarding the authenticity of religious traditions, and an increased interest in interpretation and epistemology (Fergusson, 2011).

The concept of pluralism first emerged in the United States, where religious de-monopolization was driven by historical events that forced various religious congregations to coexist in a social system without dominance by any single group. When multiple congregations compete for religious consumers and none can monopolise the religious market, they often adopt a strategy of ensuring that the competition remains open. This is typically achieved by reducing political support for religious congregations, resulting in the privatization of religion and the establishment of religious freedom and tolerance. In cases where religious tolerance is legally mandated, laws constrain the religious expression of individuals and groups, further promoting the privatisation of religion and reducing religious involvement in the public sphere (Stychin, 2009).

Dreher (2016) argues that a religious market orientation, whether historically driven or legally imposed, is not the sole condition leading to pluralism; rather, the primary global historical force behind pluralism is secularization. Secularisation involves the progressive liberation of societal sectors from the dominance of religious meanings and institutions. This process inherently results in pluralism, even when there is minimal institutional diversity, as individuals have a minimal choice between adhering to or rejecting the previously dominant religious tradition. Pool (2002) adds that religious diversity has a secularising effect in liberal and egalitarian societies, where religion cannot be imposed but must be chosen by individuals, and often it is not chosen at all. Thus, pluralism exists not only in countries like the United States and Western Europe but also in developing nations as more people liberate themselves from traditional religiosity.

Debates surrounding the religious market approach have persisted for decades. While earlier views suggested that pluralism and competition lead to secularisation, more recent arguments propose that pluralism and competition actually invigorate religion and increase religious mobilization. Some theorists argue that organised religion thrives most in an open-market system characterised by diversity and competition. The greater the pluralism, the more religion becomes integrated into the public sphere.

Advocates of the causal relationship between pluralism, competition, and religious growth, such as Finke and Stark (1988), argue that the link is not straightforward. They

compare it to the liberal market orientation, where competition among industries increases resources and energy spent by rival sectors. They illustrate the point by contrasting the continued vitality of religion in the United States with the stagnation of religion in Northern Europe, particularly in Scandinavian countries. In the United States, constitutional separation of church and state, religious freedom, and a diverse religious landscape have contributed to religion's continued significance. However, in Scandinavian countries where state support and regulations favour national or established churches, religious participation and enthusiasm are diminished, mirroring the effects of monopolies in economic markets (Finke and Stark, 2000).

Other theorists suggest different explanations for the relationship between pluralism and religious growth. Some argue that religious diversity leads to an increase in gross religious consumption because a variety of faiths cater to various demands among religious consumers. In a pluralistic environment, religious creeds may become conflictual, leading to higher religious involvement as groups orient themselves in opposition to others. Despite debates, some empirical findings appear inconsistent with the supply-side hypothesis that pluralism fosters religious participation. For instance, in Southern Europe, where the Catholic Church holds a monopolistic position, many other congregations remain strong. Critics argue that the supply-side thesis is only supported in limited cases and mostly in modern contexts (Chaves and Gorski, 2001).

In summary, various theories of secularisation depict a transition from a religious era to a secular era in public affairs. These theories provide different insights into the multifaceted process of historical development, emphasising various aspects of reality.

RELIGION IN TRANSFORMATION

An alternative perspective to the secularisation thesis posits that the decline in conventional forms of religious participation, beliefs, and practices should not necessarily be interpreted as an indicator of secularization. Rather, this decline suggests that religion is undergoing a transformation, manifesting in new and diverse forms across different social strata (Beckford, 2003). It challenges the notion that all aspects of faith, spirituality, and belief are disappearing from modern society; instead, it suggests that religion is evolving and exerting influence in novel ways that differ from its traditional manifestations (Beckford, 2003). In essence, secularisation encompasses the waning of traditional religious beliefs and the erosion of religion's authoritarian power. However, religion, which is deeply ingrained in individuals' understanding of life, death, and the afterlife, cannot diminish unless these fundamental questions cease to preoccupy human thought (Kokosalakis, 2020). Religion is changing, but a significant aspect remains consistent, providing a stable context within which change occurs. Thus, the term metamorphosis of religion' more accurately characterises the religious transformations taking place since the mid-20th century. All the evidence suggesting the decline of religion merely underscores the dynamic nature of religion; it does not definitively indicate a societal shift towards or away from religion (Hadden, 1995).

There are three primary lines of argument that aim to explain the phenomenon of religious change, particularly in terms of the transformation of the shape and character of religion. One widely accepted argument is Davie's (1990) 'believing without belonging' thesis. This perspective contends that rates of people's engagement with religious congregations, especially in Western Europe, have decreased. However, this decline does not imply an abandonment of faith but rather a reduction in church attendance and involvement in religious community activities compared to the past. Dawson (2013) argues that unless individuals' religious views are continuously shaped by collective worship and participation in religious congregations, they tend to develop unorthodox

and individualistic beliefs. In this argument, Gill reflects the spirit of early and mid-20th-century theories concerning the transition from particularistic to universalist values and from collectivism to individualism. Rugar (2020) observes that while non-religious voluntary organisations struggle to maintain their membership, religious organisations continue to attract followers and maintain a significant role in the public sphere. Hence, in matters of religion, 'believing' and 'belonging' need not be synonymous, and thus, when religion is said to be declining, it is not disappearing but rather'redirected'.

Rugar's attempt to challenge classical secularisation theories with the 'believing without belonging' concept is not without criticism. As Davie argues that statistics showing a decline in religion do not necessarily represent evidence of secularisation, other scholars contend that the evidence Davie provides to support the metamorphosis of religion is not conclusive proof of a shifting balance between belief and belonging. For instance, it remains unclear how Davie's claim that the number of subscribers to central Christian doctrines is decreasing while subscribers to non-canonical religious views are increasing relates to a rise in 'believing without belonging.' Additionally, scholars find the comparison between religious institutions and non-religious voluntary organisations to be asymmetric because many Western European countries provide state support and constitutional privileges to churches. Furthermore, there are religious congregations in Western Europe that demand both belief and belonging. For example, conservative evangelical and Pentecostal churches emphasise the integration of belief and practice and, when necessary, implement disciplinary measures to maintain conformity and deter dissent (Beckford 2003).

The second significant argument within the transformation of religion perspective is Hervieu-Léger's (1986, 1993, 1999) thesis, which emphasizes that the disintegration of the Roman Catholic Church's organizational structures, particularly the religious orders and the priesthood, signifies a restructuring of religion, though not necessarily a shift towards secularism. This argument posits that the diminishing authority of religious institutions, in the context of modernity, has created an environment in which individuals are compelled to construct their own meanings of life freely and individually. In other words, the weakening of collective morality has granted "a substantial degree of freedom" to individuals. However, these choices do not represent a radical departure from the past but are informed by collective memory—a wealth of religious and cultural memories transmitted across generations. Consequently, contemporary individual faith, though independently acquired, retains characteristics of earlier religiosity.

The third important argument against the classical secularisation thesis is the assertion that even if formal religious organisations have receded from the public sphere, unofficial forms of religion continue to play a significant role. This suggests that religion has not declined but has adapted to meet the evolving needs of modern society. Historically, the demarcation between official and unofficial forms of religion has not been fixed; its placement has depended on the struggle between religious leaders, secular authorities, and the public interest. In modern society, unofficial religion refers to expressions of religion that coexist with or overlap with formal religion. Unofficial religion is not merely a secondary form of religion but represents a distinct worldview, the influence of which may appear to increase as participation in formal religion declines. The resilience of unofficial religion and its continuous evolution in the rapidly changing socio-political conditions of the 21st century are considered by some theorists as evidence that the term'metamorphosis of religion' better describes the contemporary religious changes associated with secularisation (Howland, 2019).

Limitations of Secularisation

Most theories of secularisation share two common threads. First, they assume a unilateral trajectory of social change in post-Enlightenment Western Europe. This implies that all advanced, functionally differentiated modern societies follow a singular path that progressively marginalises religion. While specific conditions may slow down this marginalisation, they are believed to be incapable of preventing the eventual decline of religion. Consequently, all modern societies are expected to eventually become institutionally irreligious. Second, these theories have primarily focused on Western Europe and, in some cases, narrowed their scope to North Western Europe. This focus conveys the idea that post-Enlightenment Europe represents the "lead societies," and all other societies are moving towards approximating the condition of Western Europe (Thornhill, 2011).

The first assumption leads to a relative neglect of the historical complexity inherent in the process of societal development. Often, manifestations of religion are treated as epiphenomenal, signifying that they are merely byproducts or secondary to other, more substantial factors. By overlooking the historical context of social change and relegating religion to an epiphenomenal role, secularisation theories overlook significant details that could offer valuable insights into the discourse on secularism. For example, movements in the Baltic and South Caucasus regions over the past two decades, including countries like Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, have sought to reinvigorate national identity by reviving elements of local tradition, such as language. Simultaneously, these movements aim to recover religious traditions suppressed during communist rule. Consequently, these endeavours encompass both nationalist and religious objectives. Nevertheless, when analysed through the lens of social movements, they may appear primarily as nationalist projects, with religion viewed as only one aspect of nationalism (Gorski & Türkmen-Dervişoğlu, 2013).

Focusing primarily on Western Europe results in two consequences. On one hand, it neglects the processes of modernization occurring in non-Western societies. On the other hand, it tends to regard Western Europe as the epitome of modernity, rendering other cultural areas, particularly those with a strong religious presence, as stuck in time and lagging behind in the race for modernization. For instance, the Middle East and North Africa regions oscillate between secular tendencies influenced by European ideals and religious voices advocating for the dominance of Islam in all aspects of life. In countries like Turkey, Egypt, and Tunisia, a continuous struggle exists between those advocating for secular values in governance, law, education, etc., and those striving for Islamic morality to shape public institutions' policies. In Sudan, this struggle involves those favouring Islam with a minimum pluralistic outlook and those advocating for an unwavering Islamic orientation of the state and society. In many Islamic countries worldwide, post-Enlightenment secularism is often perceived as an alien ideology representative of European colonial domination, while Islam is viewed as native and integral to the region's history. In the modernization era, when no one can afford to be left behind, these countries may be seen as desiring to modernise in their own way—by incorporating a triumphant religion rather than submitting to foreign control by importing external ideas (Gorski & Türkmen-Dervişoğlu, 2013).

Therefore, the study of the impact of religious nationalism in modern secular states highlights the necessity to dissect secularism and examine its varied historical trajectories and intricate relationship with religion within diverse historical and political contexts. To continue this investigation into religion and secularism, the following two subsections are dedicated to identifying the broad processes influencing religious change

in modern societies and assessing how these processes can be transformed, mitigated, or intensified by specific historical conditions in various cultural regions. Additionally, they explore the trends of religious change in non-Western societies, assessing the extent to which they have adopted the European secular model and the extent to which they have forged their own paths (McCrea, 2010).

DEBATING RELIGION AND SECULARISM IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

It is imperative to grasp two prominent aspects of secularization that significantly shape the Western political and moral framework, thereby influencing the Western perspective on the Islamic world. These two facets are "laïcité," which regards religion as a hindrance to political affairs, and "secularism," which views religion as a wellspring of identity that contributes to conflicts in global politics.

Laïcité: Political Separation of Religion and Politics

The term "laïcité" originated in France during the late 19th century and initially revolved around the idea of removing ecclesiastical influence from elementary education (Davis, 2020). This concept emerged as a response to the power struggle between the church and the state during the French Revolution and was primarily associated with France and other Catholic nations. In its most extreme forms, laïcité took the form of radical anti-clericalism, or laicism. However, in the early 20th century, it evolved to signify the formal separation of church and state, a separation that was legally formalised in France in 1905. Today, laïcité is primarily understood as the exclusion of religion from the realms of power and politics within modern societies, leading to the privatisation of religion and a decline or potential disappearance of individual religiosity (Ferrari, 2022).

On the other hand, secularism traces its origins to Protestant countries and has its roots in the Treaty of Westphalia (1648–1649). This treaty aimed to resolve the church-state conflict by nationalising Christianity to reduce the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church. In Protestant nations, religion was made subservient to the authority of the state, with the belief that modernity would lead to progressive secularisation without necessarily causing a sharp discord between societal growth and the diminishing role of religion in social and political spheres. Presently, secularisation denotes the desacralization of the world, but it does not necessarily require a complete separation of government and religious institutions in society (Ferrari, 2022).

Laïcité represents a political choice employing authoritarian and legal means to define the place of religion in society. It is imposed by the state, which then organizes public spaces to minimize the visibility of religion. Chatterjee characterises laïcité as a coercive process employing the legal powers of the state, the disciplinary powers of the family and school, and the persuasive powers of the government and media to produce secular citizens who accept the confinement of religion to the private domain (Hurd, 2009). Asad argues that laïcité aims to confine religious traditions to a space where they cannot threaten political stability or the freedoms of free-thinking citizens (Selby, 2012).

In the context of international relations, laïcité leads to two primary outcomes. Firstly, it aims to regulate the definitions of the political and the religious while seeking to exclude religion from politics. Consequently, laïcité shapes the political domain as one linked to public authority, public interest, tolerance, and justice, serving as the reference point for constructing the religious domain. Secondly, by delineating specific spaces for the secular and the sacred, laïcité excludes alternative models that challenge the established secular order, concepts, and practices of international politics. The stigmatisation of non-secular forms of politics as irrational, undemocratic, and potentially violent in international relations contributes to strong political reactions,

including the rise of religious fundamentalism. Hurd suggests that laïcité, in its intolerance for nonconformists, inadvertently exhibits the same theocratic tendencies it seeks to counter. Thus, laïcité is not the antithesis of theological discourse but rather represents a distinct form of theological discourse in its own right.

SECULARISM: DECLINE OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES IN SOCIETY

Secularism is a societal process in which religion gradually diminishes in significance in the lives of individuals. People no longer base the meanings of their lives and daily experiences on religious beliefs, even if they continue to hold such beliefs. In the advanced stages of secularisation, religious beliefs may eventually fade from society. It is important to note that secularism is not inherently anti-religious or anti-clerical, as pointed out by Zebiri (1998).

DeNicolo (2014) characterises this form of secularism as "Judeo-Christian secularism," which is rooted in Western, Christian, and later Judeo-Christian identity, values, religious beliefs, historical traditions, and political practices. This perspective is built on the idea that the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment did not permanently sever the connection between Western politics and Christianity. Christianity continues to be a defining element of Western civilization and provides the moral foundation for political life by establishing an ethical consensus crucial for the functioning of popular government.

Hurd (2008) suggests that this version of secularism initially emerged in early America, where the religious beliefs of the Protestant majority shaped a particular understanding of modern democratic politics. Ferrari (2022) observes that in 19th-century America, there was no explicit requirement for the division of society into religious and secular spheres. Instead, religion and government were competing centres of institutional authority, with each implicitly recognising the preeminence of the other in certain matters. Policies articulated in religious terms were accepted both legally and socially. However, with the influx of immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it became common for the government to present public policies in a secular manner to gain electoral advantage. This transition led to the emergence of a more civic form of religion, although Protestantism continued to influence policymakers in the background.

Hurd (2009) further argues that, during the 19th and 20th centuries, Euro-American politics established Protestantism as the common foundation for Western civilization. Over time, as the American population diversified, this common foundation began to incorporate Catholic and, after World War II, Jewish influences. By the end of the 20th century, Judeo-Christian secularism had become the backdrop for both domestic and international politics. Notably, figures like John Stuart Mill relied on Judeo-Christian secularism to seek a unified cultural and political identity for Western civilization.

Davis (2020) describes this arrangement as "common ground" secularism, aiming to disassociate politics from religion while preventing the state from favouring one religious sect over another. This approach to the separation of church and state was rooted in the American conception, maintaining a uniform identity based on common doctrines shared by all Christian sects, resulting in peaceful coexistence while also defining who belonged to the political community (Ishamali & Ibiang, 2023).

This concept of secularism differs from laïcité, which seeks to exclude religion from discussions of power and authority in politics to establish an independent ethical framework. In contrast, secularism endeavours to accommodate religion, particularly

Judeo-Christian traditions, by arguing that religion is beneficial for democratic politics by providing a shared foundation for public assumptions.

However, it is important to note that the concept of secularism in the Islamic world also warrants consideration, given that Islam is a significant factor in both cases discussed in this study. The study acknowledges the ongoing academic discourse in international relations regarding the limitations of the conventional secularisation thesis as well as the resurgence of religious identity and beliefs in politics. Nevertheless, the discipline tends to uphold the idea that secularisation is uniquely Western and Christian, with the secular West serving as the standard for the proper relationship between religion and politics. This perspective marginalises and delegitimizes non-Western and non-Christian viewpoints on religion and politics, implying that non-Western societies must adopt Western forms of secularism when democratising.

Hurd (2009, p. 49) notes that "more than any other single religious or political tradition, Islam has come to represent the 'non-secular' in European and American political thought and practice." Islam is often depicted as anti-modern, anti-Christian, and theocratic, which are not coincidental representations. The central question pertains to whether it is Islam in particular or religion in general that poses a challenge to Western secularism. The fact that Western secularism has strong Christian roots is evident. Therefore, it remains to be explored whether Islam inherently resists secularism or if Islamic polities have followed developmental paths that allow for alternative arrangements between Islamic institutions and state politics.

ISLAM AND SECULARISATION: IS ISLAM INIMICAL TO SECULARISATION?

Casanova (1994), in his study titled "Public Religions in the Modern World," argues that the transition of religion from the political sphere to civil society, driven by processes of political secularization, does not necessarily lead to the privatization of religion. Instead, this shift creates a fundamental condition for the emergence of modern "public religions," such as contemporary Christianity and Islam. Drawing on theories of an undifferentiated public sphere within civil society, Casanova posits that when public religion enters the public sphere of civil society to influence political practices, worldviews, and normative issues, it can no longer be considered privatized. Current trends in the Western world, the Islamic world, and elsewhere suggest a "deprivatization" of religion.

Hurd (2009) contends that in the field of international relations, the distinction between public and private, religious and political, and secular and sacred is often interpreted through Western secular perspectives. According to Casanova's viewpoint, the politicisation of Islam, the emergence of Islam as a public religion, or the deprivatization of Islam, and religious resurgence in general are approached in two ways: political secularisation seeks to engage and transform political Islamists both politically and economically, while social secularisation aims to isolate actors and movements drawing on Islamic references through diplomatic and economic measures.

In their extensive analysis of religion and politics in the Islamic world, Lane and Yavuz (2004) argue that, except for Turkey, religion and politics have not been distinctly separated throughout the Muslim world due to three structural factors. First, Islam does not adhere to the formal separation of religion and politics commonly observed in Christianity. Historically, both political power and religious authority resided in the same figure, the caliph, who upheld the religious code of conduct and governed subjects as equals in terms of religion. Second, the Islamic civilization did not undergo a gradual process of secularisation as seen in Europe, which followed either a Protestant evolutionary path or a Catholic revolutionary path. Instead, the Islamic world remained

rooted in what was referred to as "oriental despotism." Third, Islam has historically exhibited "caesaropapism," wherein the relationship between political and religious powers in the Islamic world involved compromise rather than contestation, in contrast to the West. This caesaropapism has contributed to resistance against secularisation.

Platteau (2008) adds that, despite these factors, Islamic polities should not be categorically labelled as religious because Islam does not prescribe the specific form of the state. Even though Islam is the state religion and Sharia serves as a fundamental source of legislation, the state retains the authority to legislate norms that may not align with Sharia. Secular elements are evident in various aspects of politics, including the constitution, composition of political parties, tribunal operations, and formal legal and administrative procedures. Moreover, rational and utilitarian principles guide the economy, and secular aesthetics are reflected in art forms such as movies, music, novels, and paintings. Lane and Redissi argue that Islamic polities can potentially separate religion and politics, except when hindered by religious conservatism, misinterpretation of holy scriptures, or resistance to embracing the modernity associated with secularism. Thus, an intellectual movement within contemporary Islam favours a secular society.

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING ISLAM AND POLITICS

Despite ongoing efforts to disentangle religion from the state and society while simultaneously depoliticizing religion, it is evident that in Islamic societies, as well as in multicultural Western European settings with significant Muslim populations, religion and politics maintain intricate connections. In these diverse contexts, characterised by multifaceted interactions and complex strategies, religion and politics coexist in various forms (Maussen, 2006).

Scholars have put forward approaches to better comprehend this complex interplay between religion and politics in modern Islamic societies and multicultural environments with a substantial Muslim presence. These approaches aim to move beyond the secular-sacred division of laïcité and the Christian liberal perspective of secularism. One particularly valuable approach for examining the dynamic coexistence of religion and politics is Casanova's (2019) theoretical framework of the de-privatisation of modern religions. Casanova's framework highlights three forms of de-privatisation, each shedding light on the presence of religion in the public sphere of civil society:

1. Traditionalist Response to Modernity: Religion enters the public sphere to safeguard traditional values and practices against the challenges posed by the modern state and market. While this form of religious deprivation may reflect a traditionalist response to modernity, it can still have a significant impact. By engaging in public debates on various issues, religious groups compel modern societies to reevaluate their normative structures. This form may lead to both potential dangers and compromises as religions interact with modern norms. An example of this phenomenon is Turkey's decision to lift the longstanding ban on wearing headscarves.

2. Challenging the Norms of the State and Market: Religion enters the public sphere to question and contest the claims and functions of two powerful institutions—the state and the market. It does so by challenging the intrinsic norms on which these institutions operate, as these norms often disregard traditional moral values. Religion reminds individuals and states to consider the "common good" in the context of national security, nuclear doctrines, and market practices. It underscores the need to regulate market activities to minimise ecological, social, and human harm. In a globalised world where

the "common good" extends beyond national boundaries, religion plays a crucial role in shaping public discourse.

3. Counterbalancing Individualists Modern Liberalism: Religion seeks to preserve the "common good" against the individualist perspective of modern liberalism, which reduces it to the sum of individual rational choices. By reintroducing issues of private morality into the public sphere and emphasising the importance of interpersonal and inter-subjective norms, religion prompts modern societies to reconstruct their moral foundations. This process contributes to the rationalisation of traditional norms and traditions of religion.

Casanova argues that recognising the de-privatisation of religion allows scholars to broaden their understanding of modernity. This perspective challenges the conventional view of a single Western secular modernity and encourages the consideration of multiple modernities. Islamic traditions, with their unique practices and public discourse, shape civil society and institutions in Muslim countries, leading to distinct paths of modernity. Despite their differences from Western modernities, these experiments in Muslim modernity strive for political reform, a stronger civil society, democratisation, and liberalization. The prevailing perception of the West as secular typically stems from two perspectives: the secularisation thesis, which posits the decline of institutional Christianity, and the absence of religion from the public sphere, suggesting that secularism has triumphed. These perspectives reflect the dominant literature in the social sciences on religious decline and have become fundamental assumptions in academic discourse. International relations have also been influenced by these assumptions, which hinder a deeper and clearer understanding of the religious and secular identities that shape global political relations.

Standard historical accounts, upon which secularization theories are built, depict the classical period as characterized by religious paganism, with only a few exceptional figures displaying secular inclinations. The Graeco-Roman era is often considered too pagan and distant in history to offer any relevant legacies for modern times. In contrast, the late Middle Ages witnessed the height of religious fervour, with nearly everyone being devout practitioners of the Christian faith. During this period, the only alternative to religious devotion was heresy, which was met with severe consequences, including excommunication, social and political ostracism, or worse.

The Reformation crisis and the subsequent Peace of Westphalia marked the conclusion of religion's influence in the public sphere through the formal separation of the church and the state, a process that had been unfolding since the time of the Reformation. As the Enlightenment era emerged, Western society saw a transformation in the intellectual and scientific climate, leading to a shift from theological dominance to the rule of reason. People began to relinquish their faith in the supernatural, and religious leaders no longer held the same social and political authority as they did during mediaeval times.

However, the conventional understanding of the origins of secularism presents challenges. It suggests a wave-like trajectory of religious change from the classical era through the mediaeval period to the modern era, a narrative not entirely supported by empirical data from sociological studies or current developments in global politics. An alternative narrative posits that the Enlightenment marked a shift from theological to scientific ideas, but the historical interplay between religious and secular concepts before and during that period was much more intricate, defying a linear path towards progressive secularisation.

CONCLUSION

Secularization theories are often based on the misconception that the medieval era was characterized by exceptionally high religious fervor, which gradually declined during the Enlightenment due to advancements in science and technology. However, revisiting the secularization debate prompts us to question whether the concept of "decline" accurately reflects contemporary religious behavior and historical developments (Gorski, 2000).

First and foremost, the notion of decline is a relative one, assuming that previous centuries witnessed more religious activity than the present. The narrative that emerges challenges this belief, suggesting that a significant transformation occurred in Western Europe that continues to shape the secular landscape of the West. This transformation did not occur at the Treaty of Westphalia, as is commonly believed, nor during the Enlightenment, which is often seen as the period when the West transitioned from Christian faith to secularism.

Instead, this transformation took place in the post-Enlightenment decades, during which traditional, doctrinal Christianity gave way in the public sphere to an ethical version of the faith. This ethical version professed ideas like liberalism, individualism, humanism, progress, and tolerance, which were initially conceived by so-called secular philosophers but retained elements of Christian influence. Over time, these ideas evolved to the point where they are no longer distinctly Christian. Today, they constitute the foundational principles of Western secular identity and morality, remaining uncontested in the West while facing increasing challenges from non-Western perspectives.

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