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Against the Tide

Mission Amidst the Global Currents of Secularization



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Against the Tide: Mission Amidst the Global Currents of Secularization

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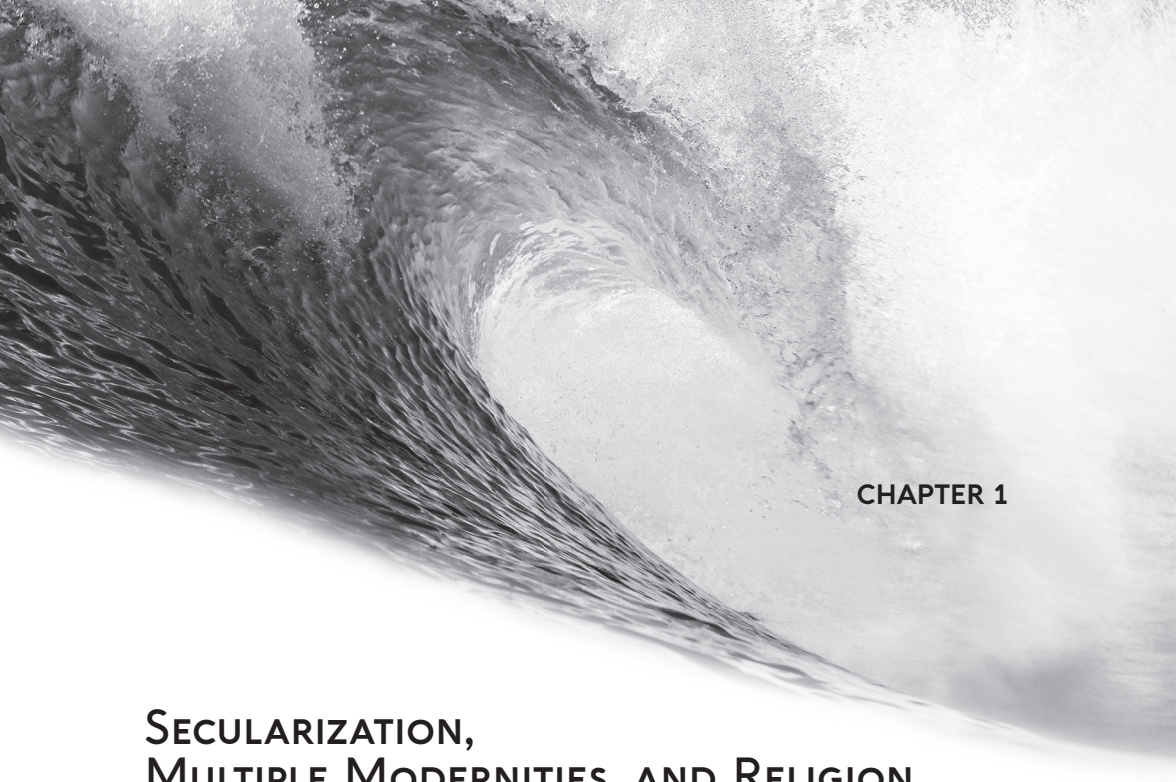
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CHAPTER 1

Secularization, Multiple Modernities, and Religion

Harold A. Netland

Let's begin by acknowledging the obvious: The world of the twenty-first century is very different from the world of the twelfth century. We have Twitter—they did not. Seriously, one way to depict the contrast between then and now is to say that the twelfth century was premodern, whereas we live in a highly modern world. Our world has been shaped by modernization and is characterized by modernity.[1] This has implications for those involved in Christian mission. If we are to be effective in making disciples of Jesus Christ today, we need to have some understanding of how modernization has affected the ways in which people think and live in particular contexts.

But what do we mean by modernization and modernity? We might think of modernization as the ongoing process of social and intellectual transformations that developed from the emergence of science, industrialization, the market economy, and the increasing dominance of technology in all of life. Modernization began around the fifteenth century in Europe and since then has spread globally. Modernity, in turn, can be thought of as the ways of living and thinking that grow out of modern-ization

1 I do not make a sharp distinction between modernity and postmodernity.

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and the powerful intellectual movements of the past four centuries. These include, but are not limited to, the European and American Enlightenment movements. Intellectually, modernity is characterized by critical inquiry in all domains of life.

From the sixteenth century onward, modernization has been accompanied by globalization. Globalization involves increased interrelatedness among peoples worldwide, across traditional boundaries in politics, economics, culture, and religion. Most areas of the globe today are being affected by modernization and globalization. Although there are certain commonalities in the ways that societies worldwide undergo modernization, there are important differences as well. Modernization is not uniform in its manifestations. This has led many to follow Shmuel Eisenstadt in speaking of "multiple modernities" as a result of modernization (Eisenstadt 2000).

Modernization and globalization have significantly affected religion, both on the individual and the social institutional levels. One way to think about the religious changes brought about by modernization is in terms of the notion of secularization. Always controversial, the concept of secularization is often misunderstood, and since the dawn of the twenty-first century it has been regarded by many as having been refuted. In what follows I will first distinguish three concepts—secularization, secularism, and the secular. Then I will briefly contrast what we might call the classical secularization thesis with more recent understandings of the impact of modernization on religious commitments. I will then turn to the question of Asian societies and ask whether secularization can be a helpful way of thinking about transformations in religion in Asia.

Secularization, Secularism, and the Secular

It is important to keep the terms *secularization*, *secularism*, and *secular* somewhat distinct (see Casanova 2011). *Secularization* refers to an empirically observable, historical process of social, intellectual, and cultural change such that traditional religious patterns are modified in significant ways. There is, of course, much debate over just what these changes amount to, but for now the important point is that secularization, if it is occurring, is a process of social transformation that is in principle discernible by careful observation and collection of data. Whether secularization is happening is an empirical question to be answered by responsible investigation of the relevant evidence. One's personal feeling about this process of change—whether positive or negative—is an entirely different matter.

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Secularism, on the other hand, is a way of thinking and living—an ideology or worldview. As typically used, secularism refers to a way of thinking that is opposed to religious commitments. So secularism is often understood as maintaining that this world is all that there is; there is no transcendent reality. Whether secularism as a worldview necessarily follows from secularization is a controversial and disputed question.

The term *secular* is used in multiple ways. Minimally, the secular is whatever is distinguished from the sacred or the religious. In some cases, "secular" is closely aligned with secularism, so that to be secular is to embrace secularism as a way of thinking and living. This use of "secular" clearly opposes the secular to the religious. But there are other uses of the term as well.

A key component of secularization is the idea of differentiation—resulting in, for example, a clear separation of institutions in education, health care, and government from religious legitimation and authority. Where this occurs, we say that these institutions are secular. One can acknowledge differentiation in this respect without necessarily embracing secularism. A secular education or a secular government need not be hostile to particular religious traditions. A properly secular government, for example, might be one that is impartial in its treatment of religious or nonreligious perspectives. Whether one favors a secular government or educational system, in this sense, depends in part upon one's location. Many American Christians are unhappy even with this notion of secular government or secular education, since they are convinced that Christian values and assumptions should be reflected throughout the government and educational system. Christians in Japan or India or Iran or Pakistan, by contrast, often wish for a more secular government—that is, one that is genuinely impartial and does not favor any particular religious tradition.

Secularization

Although there is no single theory about secularization, there was a dominant way of thinking about modernity and secularization in the 1960s and 70s. We might call this the classical secularization thesis. It maintains that modernization inevitably results in secularization, with secularization being understood as the observable decline of religion. It is expressed in Peter Berger's influential 1967 work, *The Sacred Canopy*. Berger argued that "secularization has resulted in a widespread collapse of the plausibility of traditional religious definitions of reality" (1967, 127).

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Steve Bruce is probably the most influential current defender of the classical thesis today, and he insists that modernization does involve a measurable decline in religion in three areas: popular involvement with churches; the scope and influence of religious institutions; and the popularity and influence of religious beliefs (1996, 26). Drawing heavily upon data from Europe, and Great Britain in particular, Bruce claims that secularization is clearly occurring and that similar patterns can be expected in other modernizing societies. Significantly, according to Bruce, the end point of secularization is not atheism but religious indifference (2002, 42).

But by the 1980s and 90s the classical thesis was being subjected to trenchant criticism. Critics charged that the evidence simply does not support the widespread and inevitable decline in religion that the classical model predicts. Even Peter Berger observed that "The world today is massively religious, is *anything* but the secularized world that has been predicted (whether joyfully or despondently) by so many analysts of modernity" (1999, 9). Writing in 2002, Berger acknowledged that the older model could no longer be sustained: "It is fair to say that the majority of sociologists dealing with religion today no longer adhere to the equation of modernity and secularization" (2002, 291). Critics pointed out that advocates of the classical thesis tend to consider only developments concerning Christianity and the West, ignoring data on modernization and religions in Asia, Latin America, and Africa.

Thirty-five years ago, sociologist James Davison Hunter quipped that at the heart of secularization is the fact that "being religious is not as easy as it used to be" (1983, 4). The intervening decades have shown that lots of people in modern societies are still highly religious, so perhaps Hunter's observation needs some modification. I suggest that what the notion of secularization is trying to capture is the fact that being religious *in traditional ways* is not as easy as it used to be. Modern people are often still religious, but the ways in which they understand and express religious commitments today are different.

Many Christians enthusiastically embraced Berger's very public rejection of the classical secularization thesis, taking this as decisive refutation of secularization itself. But this, I think, is to misunderstand Berger's position. What Berger rejected was the idea that modernity necessarily brings about decline in religion and that this process works out in much the same way wherever modernization occurs. In his later writings, especially in his last book, *The Many Altars of Modernity*, Berger makes clear that there is something to the notion of secularization but that we need to rethink what

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it is and how it works. "I am now prepared to concede that the secularization theorists are not quite as wrong as I previously thought" (2014, xii).

Berger argues that in thinking about secularization we should give much greater prominence to the notions of pluralization and pluralism in modern societies. "Our main mistake was that we misunderstood pluralism as just one factor supporting secularization; in fact, pluralism, the co-existence of different worldviews and value systems in the same society, is *the* major change brought about by modernity for the place of religion both in the minds of individuals and in the institutional order" (ibid., ix). This, in turn, has a relativizing effect on individuals and societies.[2]

Similar themes are found in the recent work by the Canadian philosopher and historian Charles Taylor. In his massive and influential study, *A Secular Age*, Taylor draws extensively upon both intellectual and social history to tell the story of a transformation in the "social imaginary" of Western Europeans over the past five hundred years. As Taylor sees it, one way to get at the magnitude of these changes is to raise the following question: "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?" (2007, 26).

Two components of Taylor's rich and complex answer to this question are especially significant.

First, Taylor provides a multifaceted account of intellectual and social changes over five centuries, resulting in a shift away from living in conscious awareness of a transcendent dimension to a "this worldly" or "immanent frame" for thinking and living. Whereas in earlier times there was a conscious awareness of the spiritual or transcendent dimension, the secular age is marked by loss of the transcendent dimension. "The crucial change here [which secularization brought about] could be described as the possibility of living within a purely immanent order, that is, the possibility of really conceiving of, of imagining, ourselves within such an order, one that could be accounted for on its own terms, which thus leaves belief in the transcendent as a kind of 'optional extra'—something it had never been before in any human society" (2011, 50–51).

2 "Pluralism relativizes and thereby undermines many of the certainties by which human beings used to live. Put differently, certainty becomes a scarce commodity. . . . Modernization unleashes all the forces that make for pluralism—urbanization, mass migration (including mass tourism), general literacy and higher education for increasing numbers, and all the recent technologies of communication. . . . [M]ost of our contemporaries are aware of the fact that there are different ways of life, different values, different worldviews" (Berger 2014, 9, 15).

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