

Voices: The myth of secularism

March 22, 2017

An article titled “The Future of Secularism” in *Evolutionary Psychological Science* turned a few heads recently. The article dealt with the “secularization hypothesis,” which theorizes as society develops and scientific knowledge becomes more widespread, interest in religion declines and secularity increases.



Jake Raabe

The article claims the “secularization hypothesis” fails because it does not take into account birthrates. Religious people tend to have more children than nonreligious people, so secularity actually will decline in the next century.

This conclusion was not terribly surprising or interesting, despite a few hyperbolic claims made by scattered Christian bloggers about “the death of secularity.” Nevertheless, it got me thinking more about the idea of secularization.

There is a worldview, a narrative behind the “secularization hypothesis” that I daresay most Americans, religious and nonreligious alike, agree on. Back in the olden days, there was only religion. Then, sometime in the 18th or 19th century, science displaced religion as the primary way to

understand the world. Now that society is enlightened, religion is on its inevitable way out. Look at the decline of religion in America and Europe. With a rational alternative to religion, people are leaving houses of worship in droves. Both religious and secular people alike seem to agree on this narrative, disagreeing only on if it is good or bad.

Unconscious acceptance

Despite its almost unconscious acceptance by most here in America, this way of thinking is deeply problematic for several reasons.



First, it is not clear religion actually is in decline in America, as exemplified by [the work of a Baylor research group](#). Much was made about the rise of the “Nones” when the Pew Research Center came out with its [most recent survey](#) of American religious affiliations, but this likely was misleading, as the Baylor group found. Many who claimed to have “no religion” on the survey also gave the name of a congregation they attended regularly. It seems a significant number of “Nones” in this survey may have been evangelicals who took the maxim “Christianity is a relationship, not a religion” to heart.

Darker issue

More problematic than not reflecting reality, the “secularization hypothesis” has a darker issue at its core. Although debates continue on the state of religion in the United States and Western Europe, religion is flourishing worldwide, and secularism is [declining](#).

Christianity isn’t declining; its population centers are shifting, with significant growth in Africa and Asia. In fact, by the year 2050, Pew

estimates, an incredible 40 percent of the world's Christians will live in Sub-Saharan Africa, with Christianity remaining the world's largest religion. This is far from the decline so often talked about by Christians and non-Christians alike in America.

The secularization hypothesis assumes as societies develop, they become less religious, but secularism is all but unknown in places like Sub-Saharan Africa. Are we to assume these places are "less developed" because their populations are highly religious? That seems to be the implication of this idea. Sub-Saharan Africa has major cities, computers, the Internet, electricity, running water and so forth. Far from the way most Americans picture the continent of Africa, it is one of the rapidly growing economic regions on Earth. Assuming the continent is somehow "not developed" is rooted in a deep misunderstanding of what the continent actually looks like. This leads to the dangerous assumption that all countries should look like the United States.

Myth, not hypothesis

The secularization myth is every bit as prevalent in the American church as it is in general society.

I think of the popularity of the God's Not Dead films, which present Christianity as a small, persecuted group fighting against the overwhelming powers of secularity. This simply is not the case—probably not in the United States, and certainly not worldwide. We've assumed this faulty worldview and consequently have become bitter and defensive when we need not be. Assuming things are dire when they really are going well sabotages our witness to the world and insults the work of the God who continues to add to our numbers daily.

The "secularization hypothesis" is being recognized continuously as the "secularization myth." It simply doesn't reflect reality, especially on a

global scale.

It's a great time to be the church. Let's start acting like it.

Jake Raabe is a student at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary in Waco, Texas.